Louis MacNeice and the Writing of the Mind

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A dissertation submitted to the School of English at the University of Dublin, Trinity College, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

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ALEXANDER JONES
Summary

This thesis explores the influence of psychology and philosophy of mind on the writing of Louis MacNeice. This challenges current thinking on MacNeice’s treatment of selfhood and consciousness, which has previously been read in metaphysical terms. Textual and archival evidence demonstrates the extent to which MacNeice was engaged, both directly and indirectly, with psychological theories and contemporaneous debates about the relationship between the mind, the self, and the other. Over the course of four main chapters, each dealing with a separate psychological theme or concept, the thesis seeks to reorient MacNeice as a writer of the mind by positing psychology as an intervening frame of knowledge that mediates between his philosophical education and his experience of the world. In so doing, this research expands the current critical view of the networks, discourses, and intellectual milieus that MacNeice was connected to. Resultantly, it is argued that MacNeice’s psychological poetics offer a means by which our understanding of his relationship to modernism more generally can be deepened.

The introduction establishes the aims of the thesis and its place in current critical discussions. It is noted that MacNeice demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards psychology throughout his writing, and so the thesis aims to explore how psychology clashed with different ways of understanding the mind to build up an individual, distinctly MacNeicean, set of ideas about the mind.

The first chapter is themed around irrationality. It begins by looking at MacNeice’s juvenile collection of poetry, *Blind Fireworks* (1927), in the context of contemporaneous debates about the role of British classics education in moulding the rational subject. His writing evidences an irrational counter-strain to this thinking, which goes on to influence his translation of *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (1936). Archive evidence demonstrates that MacNeice’s later translation of *Goethe’s Faust* (1951) was influenced by his reading of Jung in the thirties. This leads to a discussion of the radio as a young broadcast medium that relied on psychological discourses for its own self-understanding. As a result, *The Dark Tower* (1946) and the unpublished play *The Careerist* (1946), are given novel readings that take advantage of this context. The chapter closes by considering how the development of parable in these plays informs the lyric parables of MacNeice’s later career.
The second chapter examines the garden and the sea in MacNeice's poetry, which are described in 'Experiences with Images' (1949) as being among those images he is likely to use 'instinctively'. It is argued that instinct in this case is being used by MacNeice to circumscribe a set of poetic significances tied to childhood and the unknown self. This means that the garden and the sea can be read as indicators of unconscious activity within the poetry, which in turn challenges existing readings of both images in purely metaphysical terms. Each image is examined in turn, and then a final section briefly looks at the importance of instinct to the later parable poetry.

The third chapter examines the psychology of spatiality in MacNeice's poetry. It begins by looking at how MacNeice contests psychology with Aristotelean teleology in his thirties work that examines the spatial navigation of Birmingham, Iceland and the Hebrides. The lesser-examined work Zoo is argued to bear similarities with Freud's Civilization and its Discontents, which reflects on the depiction of the individual and the anxious pre-war crowd in Autumn Journal. The pre-war travel sequence 'The Coming of War' is seen to combine discourses of travel literature with war anxiety. Finally, the chapter examines MacNeice's poetry of Blitz London in the context of the crosscurrents of psychological discourses during wartime. Throughout, the chapter argues that different frames of knowledge root MacNeice's exploration of self and society in the mind.

The final chapter uses Jean-Michel Rabaté’s concept of ‘haunted modernity’ to examine the mental workings of time, memory and haunting in MacNeice's post-war poetry. It will be demonstrated that MacNeice is positioned at the end of a discourse about time and the mind that stretches back to Henri Bergson's durée, and that the rupture in his work between the past and present creates a haunted poetics. Sections examining Holes in the Sky (1948), Ten Burnt Offerings (1952), Autumn Sequel (1954), and Solstices (1961), will read the temporal breaks of the poetry in the contexts of British declinism, MacNeice's radio work and idealist philosophy. It is argued that, over the course of these collections, MacNeice evolves a series of ideas about the community of the mind that allows him to cope with being haunted by deceased friends and his own loosening grasp on a cohesive sense of self. The chapter ends by looking at his attempts to form a communal self out of his memories of the war.
A concluding coda briefly summarises the original contribution of the thesis, stating that the thesis contributes to an understanding of MacNeice’s place in his intellectual milieu and modernism more widely.
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‘Thank you to anyone else who I might have met in my wanderings’.
For my parents

and

for the late Shirley Jones
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INTRODUCTION

In his unfinished memoir, *The Strings are False* (1965), Louis MacNeice recalls an anecdote from his time studying Classics at the University of Oxford when his then-fiancée, Mary, visited a neurologist:

On the first day of Greats, my final examination, Mariette was sent to see a prominent neurologist who allegedly told her I was mentally unsound; I had a psychosis and would sooner or later commit suicide. But why, she asked, would I commit suicide? Because I had a psychosis. But how did he know I had a psychosis? Because people who commit suicide always have psychoses. Unable to answer this logic, Mariette asked if it wouldn’t be a good idea for him to see me. Quite unnecessary, he answered; he knew all about me that he wanted to. Besides, he had read one of my poems.¹

A year later, this incident informed the plot of *Roundabout Way* (1932), MacNeice’s only published novel, for which he adopted the pseudonym Louis Malone. The plot revolves around Devlin Urquhart, a stand-in for MacNeice himself, who flees his education to become a gardener.² In his absence, he is diagnosed with acute psychosis ‘bound to end in suicide’ by Sir Randal Belcher, a London psychologist who is running a campaign for mental and spiritual purity, after discovering a paper written by Urquhart that opens: ‘Intolerance is the salt of life’.³ Belcher is aligned in his purity campaign with Reverend Bilbatrox, and together the pair represent the ways in which the forces of society suppress the individuality of the novel’s picaresque hero. The language of psychiatric diagnosis becomes akin to the branding of a heretic. This suggests a negative attitude towards psychiatry, and a

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¹ Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 128-9. Mariette is the name given to Mary throughout the memoir.
mocking scepticism of its ability to say anything substantial about the internal life of subjects whom its practitioners have not even encountered. This is echoed later in *Strings*, when MacNeice writes that psychoanalysts ‘are on long-term view destroyers because they are only concerned with saving your life for you’.4

However, this is only one side of the novel’s engagement with psychology. A dream sequence in the second chapter appears to endorse the idea that Devlin’s unconscious is full of abstract images that can be parsed for meaning:

Suddenly he was slipping into the house which had appeared from nowhere, and gliding through doors to the tune of Gunter’s record, and pushing back Victorian curtains and slipping between screens, there at last in a room where there was a table with a pot of tulips on it, he found a girl standing; and it flooded his mind at once that this was his own life’s lady.5

This comes just after a passage with a vaguely Freudian air: ‘But as he lay in bed he felt lonely – Hogley was no comfort. He wished his mother was alive. Not his father though’.6 There is a tension here between a dismissive attitude towards psychology, broadly understood, and a traceable sensitivity to its importance in building the drama and character of the novel.

This is a dynamic that can be traced across MacNeice’s *oeuvre*. In 1937’s *Letters from Iceland*, co-written with W. H. Auden, MacNeice pits psychology against Aristotle in terms of their value in describing the liberation of travel: ‘Aristotle’s pedantic phraseology / Serves better than common sense or hand to mouth psychology’.7 But in *Strings* he records that psychoanalysis had proven useful in his attempts to contradict Plato during his time at Oxford:

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4 MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 171.
5 MacNeice, *Roundabout Way*, 27.
6 Ibid., 26.
Reading Plato for examination purposes I was reacting against the view that reason dominates instinct, soul body, and subject-matter form, and found support for my attack on these three Platonic tenets in the psychoanalysts, D. H. Lawrence and the Post-Impressionist painters respectively.\(^8\)

MacNeice’s intellectual networks and influences also do not provide a clear picture of psychological influence. There is an irony in MacNeice allying D. H. Lawrence with psychoanalysis against Plato, as Lawrence had previously published two attempts to counter Freud with his own, singular psychological theory: *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. In the former title, he mocks the Freudian model of the unconscious: ‘Is it true? Does the great unknown of sleep contain nothing else? No lovely spirits in the anterior region of our being? None! Imagine the unspeakable horror of the repressions Freud brought home to us’.\(^9\) He is also suspicious of the curative promises of therapy: ‘Psychoanalysis is out, under a therapeutic disguise, to do away with the moral faculty in man’.\(^10\) On the other hand, MacNeice’s friend W. H. Auden saw psychoanalysis as being part of the bedrock of modern thought: ‘Freudianism cannot be considered apart from other features of the contemporary environment, apart from modern physics with its conception of transferable energy, modern technics, and modern politics’.\(^11\) Psychology in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, do not appear to have a clear or consistent presence in MacNeice’s writing and thought. In light of this, it is

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\(^8\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 127. Emphasis mine.


\(^10\) Ibid., 8.

curious that a few months before his death Freud should be so present, and
important, in MacNeice's Clark Lectures.

In those lectures, which were titled *Varieties of Parable* (1965) and
posthumously collected and published by Cambridge University Press, MacNeice
attempts to take in a sweep of different kinds of parable writing from Edmund
Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) up to the works of Samuel Beckett and
Harold Pinter. He theorises the shifting relevance and form of the parable and posits
a modern variety ‘which on the surface may not look like a parable at all. This is a
kind of double-level writing, or, if you prefer it, sleight-of-hand’.12 He later explains
that this concept of ‘double-level writing’ explicitly comes from Freud: ‘This
question of double-level writing brings me to a distinction which, thanks to Freud
in particular, was very fashionable when I left school in the 1920’s, the distinction
between “manifest” and “latent” content’.13 Here, he is referring to Freud’s theory of
the ‘dream-work’, which is the process by which the latent thoughts that inform a
dream are transformed into the images that are manifest to the dreamer.14 The
importance of this to his ideas about parable are put into relief through comparisons
with other, similar formulations: ‘We also kept harping on the distinctions between
“statement” and “suggestion” and between “denotation” and “connotation”, but the
manifest-latent one went deeper than these’.15 There is something in particular
about psychoanalytic dream theory that provides MacNeice with an ideal language

13 Ibid., 3.
Press, 1961), 170. See also Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. IV, *The Interpretation of
Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. V, *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and On
for conceiving of a parable aesthetic. Significantly, it is not merely the case that MacNeice is recalling phrases he heard in his youth, as might be suggested by the way that he phrases this memory. Later in the lectures he cites *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) directly, and shows sympathy for psychoanalysis more broadly.\(^{16}\) Furthermore, these glosses are backed up in his notes for the Clark lectures, in which he dedicates a page of a notebook to notes on Freud, including direct quotations from *The Interpretation of Dreams* that do not come up in the lectures as published but clearly informed his thinking.\(^{17}\) For the older MacNeice of *Varieties of Parable*, psychoanalysis is not merely a way of understanding the mental self, but a way of reading texts psychologically.

MacNeice’s critics have written extensively of the importance of parable to the late poetics, often characterising it as being key to the late flourishing of his last three collections after the relative critical disappointment of *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952) and *Autumn Sequel* (1954). Terence Brown writes: ‘In MacNeice’s later poems, such interior landscapes, dream experiences, become more frequent (perhaps as his interest in parable becomes greater). Yet disturbingly one cannot quite put a meaning to them. They are strangely suggestive, but not explicit’.\(^{18}\) For Peter McDonald, the parable theorised in *Varieties of Parable* is a productive development of the problems of identity from MacNeice’s thirties poetry: ‘Between the 1930s and the 1960s, parable became one of MacNeice’s most successful changes in phrasing’.\(^{19}\) Robyn Marsack is just as positive: ‘With *Solstices* (1961) and

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{17}\) Notes for Clark Lectures, 1963, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. 10641/24, Folder 1. One example is: ‘The dream dispenses with the representation of logical relations’, the equivalent passage to which can be found in Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, 312-13.


The Burning Perch (1963) he has found his voice: most of the poems are taut, concentrated; landscapes of dream and nightmare reach beyond one man’s experience, occasionally attain a mythical strength'.\(^{20}\) So too is Alan Gillis: ‘The dream-logic parable poems in Solstices and The Burning Perch are compelling in their warped isolation, electric in their pessimism’.\(^{21}\) In contrast, Xavier Kalck resists the centrality of parable as a paradigm for understanding the late poetry in his study focussed on The Burning Perch: ‘overstating the importance of parable, the risk is great of neglecting the full range of MacNeice’s poetry’.\(^{22}\) Such resistance indicates the extent to which the superiority of MacNeice’s parable poetry has become a critical truism.

While the presence of Freud in Varieties of Parable, and MacNeice’s oeuvre more widely, has been noted by some critics, this is usually in passing. Edna Longley notes that MacNeice’s ‘Romantic view’ that ‘poetry begins in childhood’ was ‘given fresh licence by Freud’.\(^{23}\) Richard Danson Brown offers a Freudian reading of ‘The Truisms’: ‘The tall tree is a Freudian symbol of the father’s posthumous potency and the son’s subjection of that power’.\(^{24}\) However, the extent of MacNeice’s own awareness of this presence, or his engagement with Freud, is not discussed. Longley notes that in Modern Poetry (1938), MacNeice attacks ‘determinist critics’ who offer Marxist or psychological readings of poets as exemplars merely of a generalised contemporary milieu:

\(^{21}\) Alan Gillis, “‘Any Dark Saying’: Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties’, Irish University Review 42.1 (Spring/Summer 2012), 105-123: 105.
\(^{24}\) Richard Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009), 126.
It may be true that any contemporary poet is a mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist, but, as mouthpieces alter what you put in them, it is helpful to consider the shape of the mouthpiece itself. [...] Psychology and economics must both be taken into account. We have not reached a stage where one can be subsumed under the other.  

This has been influential on critical attitudes towards the psychological in MacNeice’s work. He consistently shows a sceptical attitude towards total identification with ideologies throughout his thinking: ‘[Man] cannot live by bread or Marx alone’. This has been used to set him apart from his contemporaries, especially other thirties poets such as Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis. This is the aim of Danson Brown’s *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (2009), for example. He contrasts MacNeice with Spender and Day Lewis: ‘MacNeice’s central interest was with poetry itself: he never puts politics on an equal footing with poetry, nor does he try to adapt his faith in poetry to the exigencies of any competing ideology’.  

As a natural consequence of criticism that explores MacNeice’s complex political non-commitment, the other popular ideology of the thirties poets, psychoanalysis, is perhaps assumed to also be spoken for. As the examples above show, psychology and psychoanalysis came under scrutiny, and occasionally ridicule, from MacNeice in such a way that precludes the possibility of proving a hitherto unacknowledged dedication to Freudianism. Again, what remains to be answered is how Freud, and the wider field of psychology, is so present between *Roundabout Way* near the start of his writing career and *Varieties of Parable* at the very end. Indeed, MacNeice’s occasional dismissiveness suggests a far more

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26 *MacNeice, The Strings are False*, 78.  
27 Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice*, 42.
interesting picture of his overall contact with psychology. This thesis seeks to
navigate his manoeuvres around identification, and the ability of his work to take
what he needs from different discourses of mind while maintaining a certain
distance.

Another important reason for the current marginalisation of the
psychological in studies of MacNeice is that his advocates have had to represent him
on two different fronts where he was once at risk of being sidelined. As Terence
Brown records, critical opinion of MacNeice was once very low in comparison to
Auden. He quotes from Anthony Thwaite’s *Contemporary English Poetry* (1961): ‘His
work is very readable [...] But he seldom has much depth or penetration, and his
general lightness of tone is more that of the professional entertainer than it is with
Auden’. Longley writes that this an attitude was enforced by a whole strain of
criticism: ‘The very titles of the following books marginalize MacNeice: Francis
Scarfe’s *Auden and After* (1942), Samuel Hynes’s *The Auden Generation* (1976), the
MacMillan Casebook *Thirties Poets: ‘The Auden Group’* (1984)*. Alongside this was
a parallel strain that sought to rescue his reputation as a poet of intellectual depth.
William T. McKinnon’s *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis
MacNeice* (1971) and Brown’s *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (1975) both explore
the metaphysical influences in MacNeice’s work, particularly the classical
formulation of the One and the Many that underlies so much of the philosophy that
he read as an Oxford undergraduate. These provided a springboard for thinking
about MacNeice as a more serious poet than he was credited. They are an important

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bedrock for the work of this thesis, as the metaphysical enquiries of the poetry frequently intersect with more psychological concerns, as will be discussed.

Some subsequent critics shifted focus to excavating his significance among his contemporaries from a political point of view. This includes Longley’s *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (1988) and Danson Brown’s *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s*. As mentioned above, these studies explore what it means to write political poetry in the thirties without categorising oneself. Longley looks beyond the label of ‘intensely serious without political enthusiasm’, which adorns the jacket of *Poems* (1935), to explore the way that MacNeice’s poetry is engaged in the class politics of the thirties. The political dimension of MacNeice’s writing is also important to any consideration of the psychological, offering a background to his engagement with discourses of mind that cannot be ignored. Longley’s work offers something of a blueprint for thinking through MacNeice’s reaction to a milieu that he has an ambivalent attitude to, which, as previously hinted, is as relevant to Freud as it is to Marx.

The other front on which MacNeice has required advocacy is his place in Irish literature. Derek Mahon once asserted that MacNeice ‘had no place in the intellectual history of modern Ireland’, though Tom Walker has offered qualification to this simplified statement: ‘he was not a Joycean exile either’. A parallel strain of criticism has developed to try and place MacNeice in a wider Irish literary context, though, as Walker goes on to note, this has resulted in his reputation befalling a similar fate to some of his immediate Irish contemporaries, like Patrick Kavanagh,

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30 Ibid., 43.
Austin Clarke, Denis Devlin and John Hewitt. ‘MacNeice’, he writes, ‘is often represented as an enabling stepping stone’, between ‘a seemingly distant yet overbearing point of origin (Yeats, James Joyce, the Literary Revival, modernism)’, and ‘the productive near-present, in the shape of those poets who came to maturity in the 1960s, such as (in the case of MacNeice) Derek Mahon and Michael Longley’.

Walker’s own study, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (2015), offers a corrective to this, arguing that MacNeice’s work engages more directly with his Irish contemporaries and the issues of regionalism, identity and history that they were concerned with. This builds on the insights of Peter McDonald’s *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (1991), in which he explores the interactions between MacNeice’s Auden generation and Irish contexts, and the minor place of the poet in each of these respective contexts. The concerted effort of the criticism to uncover the true depths of MacNeice’s place in Irish literature has done much to reveal his unique, complex place in a national canon. However, to balance this, Brown has claimed that, since ‘the best recent criticism of MacNeice […] has been somewhat Hiberno-centred’, this means that ‘the English MacNeice has been rather neglected’. Such a MacNeice begins to re-emerge from a consideration of the psychological presences in his writing, which implicates a number of different British contexts, including his education, his literary contemporaries, and his broadcast work at the BBC.

Building off a body of criticism that has made the compelling case for MacNeice as a writer of depth who operates across the boundaries of different contexts, the present thesis argues that he is a writer who is deeply concerned with

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the workings of the mind. Through novel close readings of a range of his works, from his poetry, to his prose and radio plays, it will be demonstrated that psychoanalysis, and psychology more broadly, runs as a vital thread through the entire length of his writing life. This will be backed up with new archival findings which make explicit certain engagements with psychology that enable renewed appraisal of his oeuvre. As mentioned above, it will not be the aim of the thesis to explicate an uncritical approval of Freudianism on MacNeice's part. Instead, it will be argued that psychology modifies, and often clashes with, his background in philosophy. When MacNeice was an undergraduate student he studied Greats and Mods at Oxford University, during which he was immersed in the classical metaphysics of Aristotle and Plato, priming an independent interest in Heraclitus. As mentioned above, Brown and McKinnon have explicated the importance of the One and the Many as important undercurrents in MacNeice's thought. At the same time, he was also reading lots of idealist philosophy from figures such as Immanuel Kant, George Berkeley, F. H. Bradley and Giovanni Gentile. Between these two philosophical traditions of enquiry, MacNeice was deeply engaged in questions about the relationship between the mind and reality, and also between the mind and the self, apart from his engagement with psychology. As a result, the title of this thesis, *Louis MacNeice and the Writing of the Mind*, is deliberately broad to suggest its wide remit. It is not just MacNeice's engagement with psychology that is of interest to the current study, but also metaphysics and philosophy.

This thesis proposes a shift in the narrative of MacNeice’s poetic development by offering greater depth to current understandings of the intellectual threads that influenced his writing. It is well understood that his poetry forges connections between metaphysical concepts and the everyday experience of
modernity, implying the classical in the modern and the scholarly in the ordinary. By positing psychology as an intervening force that informs and modifies the transmission of philosophy in a modern body of writing, a fuller picture of his engagement with contemporaneous ideas about the self, the soul, and society can be revealed. Freud, Jung, and broader, popular psychologies of the early twentieth century will be seen to interact with Aristotle, Plato, Heraclitus, Kant, Nietzsche and Gentile at different times. While some of these interactions in the texts will dismiss psychology, such as in the passage from *Letters from Iceland* quoted above, at other times psychology will be revealed to be central to MacNeice's writing practice. What unifies these disparate presentations of philosophy and psychology is evidence for a thoroughly modern pre-occupation with the mind throughout the writing, illuminating a path from his earliest to his last writing that has heretofore remained unexplored.

Furthermore, this thesis will contribute to an understanding of, as Brown terms it, the 'English MacNeice'. By contextualising MacNeice's writing within a modernist psychological milieu, connections will also be forged between MacNeice, the high modernist writers that influenced him, and the London-centric literary world that he was contemporaneous with. Important figures in this vein are Auden, Spender and Lawrence, who have already been mentioned. T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Virginia Woolf and W. B. Yeats will also be vital contact points in this study, and figures such as Geoffrey Grigson, Michael Roberts, David Gascoyne and Edwin Muir will be seen to provide context and contrast to MacNeice's own psychological engagements. MacNeice's radio work for the BBC is also crucial to understanding the development of his psychological aesthetics. It will be demonstrated that the relatively new field of radio drama utilised ways of understanding itself that were
drawn from psychology, and it will be shown that this can be traced in both MacNeice’s drama, and his paratextual writing about radio. This research builds on a recent increase of critical interest in MacNeice’s radio work from critics such as Barbara Coulton, Amanda Wrigley, Ian Whittington, Melissa Dinsman and Emily C. Bloom. Whereas the focus of these studies has been historical, contextual, and sometimes focussed on production or audience reception, this thesis will ally their observations with close readings of the way that the mind is made explicit and implicit on the air. From this, a new appreciation of MacNeice as a transmitter of psychological ideas into a popular British imaginary emerges.

The thesis engages with a spectrum of approaches to psychoanalytic literary analysis, as befitting a writer whose own engagements were multifaceted and ever-shifting. There is a substantial body of critical literature from critics such as Maud Ellman, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Shoshana Feldman, Leonard Jackson and Harold Bloom that adapts psychoanalytic theory as a model for interrogating the meaning of texts. While this work does provide a solid basis for thinking through texts

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productively with psychoanalysis, in the case of MacNeice such attempts inevitably run up against his occasional disavowal of its figures or ideas, as mentioned above. Rather than adapt psychoanalytic theory for the investigation of texts, the approach of this thesis takes up evidence of MacNeice’s own interpretation of psychoanalysis. Where the thesis embarks on exploring the unconscious operations of texts, it does so on the author’s own signal, which is taken from his critical writing, his contexts, and archival evidence. MacNeice is no mere analysand in this study, nor are his texts. Instead, the approach taken here realises him as a sensitive, occasional self-analyst who draws on different frames of knowledge for understanding the self in a way that links back to, and builds on, previous criticism of his writing of selfhood and identity. This hews closer to the historicist analysis of critics such as Lyndsey Stonebridge and Matt ffytche, whose work situates psychoanalysis firmly as part of the intellectual contexts from which various authors were drawing.36 The impact of the Freudian psychoanalytic method on psychology, and on wider fields of thought, is rooted in the various specific incongruities of how his ideas were disseminated, including factors such as medium and translation. When discovering the impact of Freud on a writer one must ask, as ffytche does: ‘But what Freud?’37 This applies equally to the other theorists of mind that will recur in the analysis: what Jung, Klein, Gentile, Nietzsche, Kant, Aristotle and Plato?

The thesis makes a contribution to the wider field of modernism studies by offering MacNeice as an alternative figure in the history of psychology’s impact on modernist culture. Popular writers in research on psychological and psychoanalytic

reception and transmission in literature are figures such as Auden, Eliot, Woolf and Lawrence, as well as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, May Sinclair and Katherine Mansfield. MacNeice is a figure who is surrounded by writers who have been productively read in psychological terms, covering both his influences and his contemporaries. Since these writers provide some of the links whereby MacNeice can be said to be in contact with psychology, there is a strong case for fitting him alongside them in this way. For instance, in the context of the poets who came to popularity alongside MacNeice in the thirties, Auden famously wrote that Freud engendered ‘a whole climate of opinion’. Spender combined Marxism and Freud in his critical writing, for instance The Destructive Element (1935). Yet, full accounts of the different discourses of mind in the work of the thirties poets remain to be written. John R. Boly has complained of the assumption made by early Auden critics that the influence of psychoanalysis on his work must be Freudian, when the reality is more complex.

This thesis avoids assigning significance to single sources of psychological influence, and thereby expands the means by which psychological readings of the thirties poets may be conducted. Affinities can be seen between MacNeice’s political ambivalence and a corresponding attitude towards psychoanalysis, insofar as he demonstrates no commitment to a psychoanalytic

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creed but nevertheless can be seen to be using its concepts to understand his own writing. Throughout the thesis, MacNeice will also be placed in relation to a literary inheritance from the high modernists who he read as a young man. The way that the mind is written in Woolf, Lawrence and Eliot shapes his own writing of it, giving him both connections to psychology and permission to react to it non-dogmatically. MacNeice can therefore be seen as a figure who extends the picture of modernist psyche, testing the writing of mind that he inherits from his literary forebears through the anxiety of war and the trauma of a post-war world.

The thesis also contributes to our understanding of the importance of the mind in Britain's idea of itself throughout the mid-century. The arc of its argument, which connects MacNeice's juvenilia to the late flourishing of parable in his work, builds on McDonald's observation of the same connection.\textsuperscript{41} He states: 'MacNeice's interest in what "makes the dialectic of the dream concrete" was distinct from surrealist or Freudian interests, but in the 1930s it was almost impossible to raise the topic at all without involving these to some extent'.\textsuperscript{42} This study goes further to show that psychoanalytic presences did not just inform a kind of background radiation in MacNeice's writing. Instead, psychoanalysis will be seen to form part of a series of active clashes between itself, metaphysics and philosophy in the texts. This broadens our view of how the mind was being written in the twentieth century by considering how literature places psychoanalysis next to other models of thinking about the mind. Furthermore, the time period covered by MacNeice's career, which includes the build-up, event, and aftermath of catastrophic war, connects the mental thread of his work to contemporaneous psychological concerns.

\textsuperscript{41} McDonald, \textit{The Poet in his Contexts}, 154.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 160.
at several points. For instance, anxieties about the development of war in the thirties will be connected to ideas at intellectual and popular levels about the behaviour of the crowd during wartime. Psychological readings of MacNeice’s writing during the Second World War itself are in dialogue with recent work by Allan Hepburn and Beryl Pong on the spiritual and mental aspects of war literature.43

Each of the chapters in the thesis examines the development of MacNeice’s writing of the mind through the lens of a particular motif or psychological concept. Chapter one looks at the presence of the irrational in his work. It starts by looking at the clash between psychoanalysis and British classics education in the earliest days of MacNeice’s writing career. He attests that psychoanalysis was very popular when he left school to study at Oxford. It will be argued that his first published collection, *Blind Fireworks* (1927), written while he was still an undergraduate, utilises psychoanalytic concepts to carve out an individual reaction to the curricula of his degree that resists contemporary efforts to reposition the study of the classics as the means of forming the ideal subject. The chapter will then look at two of MacNeice’s translations, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (1936) and *Goethe’s Faust* (1951). These works are separated by two decades, their original languages and the medium of their reproduction. What unites them is divergence from previous translation choices that emphasises the mind as the seat of irrationality. These two sections will bridge the focus on the classics in *Blind Fireworks* and MacNeice’s original post-war radio plays. The unpublished play *The Careerist* (1946) provides a clear, psychoanalytically-informed picture of the mind. This will be contextualised by the provenance of radio drama as a discipline in psychological discourses, which

will in turn inform a novel reading of *The Dark Tower* (1946). Finally, the chapter will examine the parable poetry of MacNeice’s later years, arguing that their dream-logic operations owe more to the origins of radio drama than previously appreciated.

One of the major ideas that will be established in chapter one is the centrality of the unconscious in MacNeice’s ideas about how to write the mind. This will be picked up in a slightly different vein in chapter two, which is themed around instinct. In the 1949 essay ‘Experiences with Images’, MacNeice identifies some images that he says he uses ‘instinctively’ in his poetry. After a discussion of the different ideas of ‘instinct’ that are informing his language, the chapter will go on to examine the use of two of these images, the garden and the sea, in his early poetry leading up to the publication of that essay. Throughout, an idea of what it means to use an image ‘instinctively’ will be sketched out, and it will be argued that ‘instinct’ as a concept allows MacNeice to circumscribe a set of poetic significances that are tied to ideas about childhood and the realisation of a self unknown to the self. Furthermore, the chapter will consider the psychological import of these images in relation to their metaphorical readings. As critics have pointed out, the garden’s sense of enclosure represents the limits of knowledge and perception, and the sea connotes infinity and the unknown throughout MacNeice’s use of them. These meanings appear to oppose each other, but the commonality between them is a concern with the limits of the human mind. They denote connected struggles to still the passing moment and to embrace unknowability, both of which are undermined by the incapability of the mind to meet the desires of MacNeice’s poetic speakers. In sections dealing with each image, the chapter will discuss how psychology provides the terms on which these metaphorical operations can be made, and in doing so will answer how
MacNeice can speak of them in terms of instinct in 1949. This will involve examining the interactions that psychology has with MacNeice's education in both art and the classics.

The final two chapters will between them take a chronological look at MacNeice's spatio-temporalities through a psychological lens. The third chapter will look at the psychology of spatiality from the thirties through to the Second World War. Then, the fourth chapter will look at time and memory, picking up from just after the war until the sixties poetry. Of course, space is important in the post-war poetry, and time is a prevalent concern pre-war. The logic behind structuring these chapters like this is that using the end of the war as a turning point allows for an examination of particular psychological presentations of space and time to be realised.

In the third chapter, the psychological relation between self and other is seen to be critical to MacNeice's negotiation of space. It compels him to go travelling abroad, and it structures the movement of the poet's eye through the city. The chapter will start by contextualising MacNeice's negotiations of urban and rural space in his thirties poetry and travel writing within the political poetics of the *New Signatures* writers, such as Auden and Spender. These two figures provide the means by which MacNeice is exposed to psychological perspectives on the experience of movement itself and on the psychology of the crowd. With regards to the former, D. H. Lawrence is also a point of influence that allows for a re-evaluation of MacNeice's urban poetics as a writing that is aware of the mind throughout its impressionistic perambulations. With regards to the psychology of the crowd, Aristotelean teleology provides a counterpoint to a thirties concern with herd behaviour in the wake of widespread anxiety about the onset of war. This will also
be central to the second section, which looks at the prose non-fiction work *Zoo* (1938) alongside *Autumn Journal* (1939) as texts that reflect and transmit contemporaneous ideas about the behaviour of the crowd. It will be seen that they draw on concepts of a dark, animal unconscious within the mind of man that draws together psychoanalysis and evolutionary biology. A discussion of the sequence poem 'The Coming of War' will then tie these strands of travel, the crowd, and the Aristotelean *telos* together as MacNeice makes a knowingly futile attempt to escape the war by taking a road trip around Ireland. Finally, an examination of poetry written during the Second World War will look at how the changed space of the city stages the curious mental state of Londoners during the Blitz, connecting MacNeice’s work with Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and the state of wartime psychology.

Chapter four looks at poetic depictions of post-war time and memory from the late forties up to the final collections. It will be demonstrated that MacNeice’s poetry during this period is temporally characterised by a widening faultline between the relentless advance of the present and an accumulation of memories, contextualised by a renewed interest in the long-term psychological damage caused by warfare and British declinism. MacNeice’s work that deals with time and memory in this period tests the legacy of high modernism’s own interwar time obsession, and particularly the influence of Henri Bergson’s *durée* that centres time internally, in the mind, rather than externally. Using Jean-Michel Rabaté’s concept of ‘haunted modernity’, it will be argued that the rupture between past and present in the post-war work manifests a haunted poetics, where the ghosts that stalk the poems are not just those of deceased family and friends, but of past selves that struggle to be reconstituted back into a coherent self. An examination of MacNeice’s poetry from the immediate post-war period will explore these concepts in the figures of returned
soldiers, calling back to ideas in the third chapter of the telos, or end purpose, of the individual. The next three sections then look at MacNeice’s infamous ‘middle period’, the fifties. In Ten Burnt Offerings the struggles of memory are widened to become historical and even metaphysical. These struggles will be read alongside similar ideas in Eliot’s Four Quartets to place MacNeice in post-war discourses about British decline. A section on Autumn Sequel will then examine how these previously mentioned time ruptures begin to widen, with consequences for the conception of a holistic self that places psychology at the heart of the poem’s negotiations with MacNeice’s own poetic past, as well as his BBC work. Finally, the chapter looks at the return to lyric through the memory poems of Solstices (1961), and examines how the poetics of haunting, time and memory are used to explore the possibilities of mentally conceiving the ideal community.

What emerges from this study is a poetics of mind that receives a diverse range of traditions of thinking about the mind and fashions them into a highly individualised foundation of concepts, terminologies and discourses that can be used to explore the possibilities and limitations of experience itself. These investigations ultimately lead back to central questions in MacNeice’s work about the nature of selfhood. By revealing the mind as a key factor in the formulation of these questions, this thesis aims to renew our understanding of where MacNeice fits in with twentieth century anxieties about how the self interacts with the other, what the self is made of, and what lurks underneath its conscious operations.
CHAPTER ONE

IN TWO MINDS: THE IRRATIONAL IN MACNEICE’S POETRY AND DRAMA

The twentieth century is the age of the debatable motive, an age occupied with the problem of whether, and to what degree, our thoughts derive from a conscious industry, or result from concealed desires.¹
— Glenn Gould

The irrational subject

The irrational was central to a modern concept of the unconscious mind. Matthew Thomson writes that the advent of psychoanalysis represented an existential challenge to Victorian ideas of mind and morality with ‘a model of the self in which individual will – such a central theme in Victorian ideology – was no longer in command’.² If the mind of man was not entirely in conscious control of its own operations, then a conceptual void was left in which the rational could no longer account for mental life holistically: ‘It also exploded the idea of a purely rational, utilitarian, psychological subject, acting according to a calculus of pleasure or pain, as a hedonistic fiction’.³ The development of the unconscious reorientated the irrational as a core mechanism of man’s mental makeup. No longer a sign of a defect in one’s character, it was now a sign, within certain contexts, of compromised mental operations that were a subject for examination under the aegis of psychopathology. Modern histories of psychoanalysis trace its key tenets and ideas

³ Ibid., 61.
in nineteenth-century German idealism, or in different philosophical lineages that can be traced back to Cartesian dualism.\(^4\) However, it is important to bear in mind that, as Rick Rylance notes: ‘psychoanalysis has contributed to its share of the popular myth that there was no psychology before Freud’s’.\(^5\) Psychoanalytic ideas of the unconscious were popular enough to obscure their own origins, which aided the reputation of psychoanalysis as something that was shockingly new and truly of its age.

Another important aspect of the psychoanalytic unconscious is that it was seen to realign the relationship between irrationality and immorality: ‘Presenting an acute conflict between human instinct and the conventions of civilization, Freudianism raised the dangerous prospect of blame shifting to the Victorian moral code itself’.\(^6\) This was a particularly important aspect of the popularity of psychoanalysis in Britain in the wake of the First World War, a historical flashpoint that seemed to lay bare the brutal hypocrisies of civilization. As Graham Richards writes: ‘Proposing an instinctual basis for all human behaviour and casting the rational civilized conscious ego as an insecurely stabilized late product of these primeval unconscious forces, the scientific appeal and plausibility of psychoanalysis by 1918 is hardly mysterious’.\(^7\) The irrational was central to the way that the post-war West understood itself. It was not just a concern for the individual, but for society as a whole, and civilization as a concept.


MacNeice suggests a distrust of the rational self in *The Strings are False* with references to a disdain for ‘Common Sense and Science’ in both his school and university years. He often frames this as an idiosyncrasy in an Oxford context: ‘It puzzled [our instructors] that young men who obviously had a keen sense of logic should occupy themselves so much with the byways of the Unconscious’. This attraction to the unconscious was always qualified by an understanding of older models of the conscious mind that privileged the operations of logic. As his undergraduate essays demonstrate, key figures in this light were F. H. Bradley, Immanuel Kant, and George Berkeley. This is a significant aspect of the dynamics of irrationality in MacNeice’s later work; its contrarian nature is a departure from, and therefore relies on, his traditional education. It is not just the advent of psychoanalysis and modernist writing of flux that works its way into his writing, but the influence of philosophy of mind from his education as well. This opens up the possibility for reappraising his works that demonstrate a reliance on the irrational, and contextualising them within a wider shift in the early twentieth century towards the popularization of irrationality as a model for human behaviour. In early and late poetry, as well as drama for the stage and radio, irrationality is used variously in dialectic with rationality, as a driver of dramatic tension, and as a key for the reader or listener into the psychological nature of the work. While critics have often kept discussion of irrationality in MacNeice to his later work, particularly in light of *Varieties of Parable*, a full consideration of the intellectual contexts in

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9 Ibid., 119.  
which he was developing and utilising the irrational in his earlier work allows for his placement in wider discourses as both a receiver and transmitter of psychological thought, particularly in a British context.

‘A poet like a pale candle’: British Classics education and Blind Fireworks

MacNeice’s education in the classics came at a time when their purpose and relative primacy in schools and universities was becoming hotly contested. Certain voices among the pre-eminent classicists of the day, including S. H. Butcher, Marlborough alumnus and Professor of Greek at the University of Edinburgh from 1882-1902, and the writer William Archer, criticised the prevailing focus on the programmatic teaching of grammar as dull and lifeless.\textsuperscript{11} This was a view reflected by some of MacNeice’s fellow students at Marlborough. For instance, the writer Beverley Nichols went so far as to say that the subject was taught ‘as though it were not merely dead but as though it had never lived at all’.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, MacNeice himself professed a similar view, in similar words, in a 1949 review of Gilbert Highet’s \textit{The Classical Tradition} for BBC radio: ‘The schoolmaster who teaches Latin or Greek only too often would seem to be teaching algebra; he’s so much obsessed with syntax and accents that you’d think the Greeks – or the Romans – were never alive’.\textsuperscript{13} The comparison with algebra hints at a view that there was an over-rational methodology to the teaching of the classics that goes against the source material itself.

\textsuperscript{12} Miranda Carter, \textit{Anthony Blunt: His Lives} (Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2001), 22.
According to Christopher Stray, such objections generated a reactionary defence of the Classics as a discipline whose main aim was the disciplinary formation of an idealised subject: 'For many classicists, [grammar] remained the backbone on which the edifice of culture was later erected'.

A widespread, rigid focus on grammar and syntax served ideological ends. This also accounts for a growing emphasis on Latin over Greek as the field sought to consolidate its place in British culture in the wake of educational reform. Classicist and educational reformer J. W. Mackail contrasted Latin’s ‘realisable standard of human conduct’ against Greek’s ‘unrealisable ideal of [...] intelligence’, thus positioning Latin as an important symbol of the ‘constructive and conservative’ forces of life in a time of change.

As Stray summarises:

Latin thus offered a route out of the impasse between liberty and order, the classical tension of liberal democracy. To learn Latin was to learn order, both intellectual and social [...] To focus on Greek, by contrast, was to head for the infinite, for what was beyond immediate realization, without learning the lessons of discipline and order.

While MacNeice and his fellow Marlburians may have chafed at the deadening grammatical focus of their teaching, there was nevertheless a view among the field that Greek in itself opened a pathway towards something other than Latin's strict rigor.

In Canto IX of Autumn Journal MacNeice, then a lecturer in Classics, retained a dim view of the subject as an institution, characterising the Oxford or Cambridge don as a figure who: ‘Chewing his pipe and looking on a lazy quad / Chops the

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14 Stray, Classics Transformed, 255-256. 15 Ibid., 242-243, 250. 16 Ibid., 244.
Ancient World to turn a sermon / To the greater glory of God’. The speaker expresses doubt toward the rationale underlying the Classics as a discipline for making the ideal rational subject. Rather than a paragon of British virtues, the Greeks are a variety of figures so vast as to resist cohesion and identification. They are ‘the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists, / The careless athletes and the fancy boys’, who can only truly be appreciated in their own contexts: ‘It was all so unimaginably different / And all so long ago’. The poem advocates a distanced view of the Greeks that resists Victorian attempts to draw a traceable line between the two civilizations. Rather than a blueprint for society, the classics hold interest for the individuals that populate their stories.

The germ of these sentiments can be found in his attitudes as a student. By the time he had finished his undergraduate studies, MacNeice had published a volume of poetry with Victor Gollancz, *Blind Fireworks*. Its classical figures sometimes appear to be held at a distance and cordoned within their contexts, but at other times the young poet attempts to use them to realise a deeply personal, modern mythology. Later in life, he came to regard this collection, with some justification, as juvenilia. While a few of its poems stand among his more significant later works, much of it is characterised by a practised undergraduate cynicism. In subsequent selected and collected volumes of his work, the presence of the volume is pared down, and often mixed in with selections from *Poems* (1935). In Peter McDonald’s edition of MacNeice’s *Collected Poems* (2007) the whole volume is restored, but is relegated to an appendix.

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19 For more on the way that the status of *Blind Fireworks* as juvenilia has been historically reflected in the editing of selected and collected editions, and McDonald’s own editorial justification for
In ‘A Classical Education’, the undergraduate MacNeice acknowledges that ‘The well-oiled heckling Greeks have left their anchors / To rust on the pier-head among the pushing groundsel’, but then goes on to ask: ‘Why, then, do I loiter round these chartered sanctuaries...?’

The classics maintain a ghostly presence in the poem, haunting the porticoes:

Will no one shake a rattle at these crows,  
Or take a little trowel and carefully cover  
The painted skulls? And yet one might suppose  
On a windy night their teeth were chattering  
In frivolous phalaecians or stern hexameters;  
Or, groping among the mortuary porticoes,  
Might hear a heart mark time, or possibly find  
A poet like a pale candle guttering  
On a worn window-sill in the wind.

The echoes of this haunting come through in the poem’s own irregular rhyme. While there is no rhyme at the start of the poem, the latter half rhymes ‘crows’ with ‘suppose’ and ‘porticoes’, ‘chattering’ with ‘guttering’, and ‘find’ with ‘wind’. The possibility of hearing classical presences is developed through the poem’s own belated rhyme scheme. Furthermore, the poem also weaves together different alliterations and assonances, including ‘t’, ‘c/k’, ‘m’, and ‘p’ sounds. In combination with the focus on single-syllable words in the last three lines, this creates a strong rhythm suggestive of those mentioned in the text itself. Finally, haunting is inscribed into the metre. The poem references phalaecians, a form of hendecasyllabic verse in Greek and Latin literature which utilises the choriamb: ( — — — ), or more simply

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collecting the volume as an appendix, see Peter McDonald, introduction in Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, xxvi-xxviii.

*MacNeice, Collected Poems*, 641.
a trochee followed by an iamb. The poem is written in regular pentameter with iambs throughout, but the occasional inverted or substituted foot generates a choriamb out of the resources of modern verse, allowing classical metre to operate subtly in the background. This can be seen at the end of the fourteenth line: ‘possibly find’; and again at the end of the final line: ‘window-sill in the wind’. These metrical manoeuvres chime neatly with the idea of these poets and chattering skulls as presences registered only faintly. One can ‘suppose’ they hear classical metre, or ‘might hear’ a heartbeat. An uncertainty runs through the poem as to whether these ghosts come back to life on their own powers or through the concerted mental efforts of the student who, embedded in his learning, hears them everywhere. Much of MacNeice’s classics-inflected work maintains this tension, between the knowledge that ‘It was all so unimaginably different / And all so long ago’, and the will, beyond conscious thought, to bring them back.

Given the conservative nature of classics teaching at the time, this represents a radical departure from the status quo, locating the importance of the classics in the mind rather than in society. The sense of haunting also carries through to the lack of declaration to close the poem. The interest here is in the transference of the textbook rhythms of classical metre to the felt rhythms of the heart. The young MacNeice is concerned with how forms of classical literature can be incorporated into the modern self rather than how classical ideas structure, perpetuate, and justify modern society. That he writes this in terms of things being personal, internalised and hidden indicates the terms on which he sought to diverge from dominant ideas of classical education.

21 M. L. West, *Introduction to Greek Metre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 77, 86. In classical notation, as above, — is a long syllable and ‾ is a short syllable. In modern notation the choriamb can be understood as stressed-unstressed-unstressed-stressed.
Indeed, in the foreword to *Blind Fireworks* MacNeice admits to employing ‘an esoteric mythology’ throughout the collection, which inconsistently uses various mythological and historical figures in different roles: ‘For instance, Pythagoras is, for me, not the historical Pythagoras, but a grotesque, automatic Man-of-Science, who both explains and supports the universe by counting, having thus an affinity to Thor the Time-God’.22 Pythagoras appears in ‘A Lame Idyll’, in which this arithmetic worldview is tested by the appearance of Adonis and Persephone. His counting is associated with the marking of time: ‘Dropping impartially the minutes from his finger-tips / While on his bald head the weary rain drips’. This objective, mathematical viewpoint isolates him from worldly experience. The arrival of Adonis and Persephone, referred to by her Roman name of Proserpine, contrasts the stone imagery associated with Pythagoras’s exactitude – ‘the granite window’, ‘the stone beard’ – with more ecstatic imagery such as: ‘First from cloudbursts white swans came, / And crawling mud flowered into flame’. The mixture of Greek and Roman names here serves a couple of purposes. The Roman ‘Prosperpine’ allows a rhyme with ‘wain’ near the end of the poem, a choice of word which, in itself, attests to the poem’s forced grandeur of diction. It also highlights ‘A Lame Idyll’ as a space for working through classical ideas and images, as if to example the value nodded to by ‘A Classical Education’. The ‘Lame’ of the title gives the poet room to employ his taught imagery how he will by admitting to a deliberate naivete from the start. While it certainly comes from MacNeice’s education, the poem disavows expertise in favour of personal meaning, taking the fruits of MacNeice’s Oxford studies and poetically repurposing them. Indeed, the poem’s recasting of its *personae* according

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to his private mythology allows ‘A Lame Idyll’ to explore ideas of death, the infinite, and the rational against the irrational that would come to characterise a considerable portion of his later work. Adonis and Persephone’s arrival heralds an apocalyptic turn, as Pythagoras hears Charon, ‘the voice of the dumb commissionaire’, who ferries souls to the underworld: “Your time is finished and the seal is set, / Gather up, gather up, gather up yet”. In myth, Adonis was sent to live with Persephone in the underworld for one-third of the year; Persephone, likewise, ruled the underworld with Hades for between one-third and one-half of the year after being abducted.23 Their coming to the surface world marks the passage of time and the change of the seasons, which in the context of the poem offers an alternative to Pythagoras’s counting. Rather than time being measured, it is experienced; a purely rational, arithmetic view of life becomes obsolete in the face of death.

This is a relatively simple, early form of some of the ideas about the infinite that would appear later in poems like ‘Ode’, in which the speaker’s own ‘love of that infinite / Which is too greedy and too obvious’ is contrasted against the hope that his son grows up with an innate sense of limitation: ‘let his Absolute / Like any four-walled house be put up decently’.24 In the earlier poem, the final lines draw the perspective towards the horizon: ‘The universe fades in the upper distance; / It is no more, though it was once’. In ‘Ode’, this fading is developed into evidence of the natural limitations placed on the infinite by the senses: ‘God is seen with shape and limit / More purple towards the rim’. Here, the look towards the infinite represents a defeat for the rational perspective against which MacNeice was railing at the time.

24 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 33.
As chapter two will argue, there are mental concerns at work in ‘Ode’. The present relevance of this is that Pythagoras, after letting the universe pass him by, now finds his gaze turned upwards too late. The young poet here seeds his later ‘love of that Infinite’ by making a tragedy of its opposite. The inevitability of death necessitates that life should be experienced rather than measured, because a rational attitude which counts life away cannot bring it back once it is gone.

In his attempts to craft a private mythology from the material of a classical education, MacNeice is following here in the footsteps of W. B. Yeats, whose own esoteric mythos had long provided his work with a singular mystical and metaphysical bent. ‘A Lame Idyll’ bears certain hallmarks of Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming’, including its apocalyptic overtones and visions of the universe. The message against the purely rational also echoes the earlier Yeats poem ‘The Realists’:

Hope that you may understand.  
What can books of men that wive  
In a dragon-guarded land,  
Paintings of the dolphin-drawn  
Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons  
Do, but awake a hope to live  
That had gone  
With the dragons?\(^{25}\)

Here, myth, ‘sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons’, is an essential resource of the writer, whose work exists to provide ‘hope to live’, a sense of purpose or wonder that exists beyond the real. Brian Arkins summarises that for Yeats myth ‘constitutes a traditional body of belief that allows us to get away from the

The reductiveness of realism is the downfall of Pythagoras in ‘A Lame Idyll’. MacNeice did not just receive the framework of the private mythology from Yeats, but also a particular approach to myth and a set of ideas about their application to the contemporary situation, with both poets using classical material to advocate for the importance of the unreal and non-material in one’s account of everyday experience.

As a source of thinking about myth, Yeats carries certain psychological connections. Arkins, for instance, has connected Yeatsian symbolism to Jung:

Yeats, as the famous three doctrines in his essay ‘Magic’ (1901) indicate, was clearly drawn to the earlier, symbolist explanation of myth, put forward by Jung and others: detached from history, myth represents, by means of symbols, structures considered to be universals, to be archetypes, and, since symbols (as opposed to signs) have very great flexibility, does so in a way that is particularly attractive to the creative writer seeking to explore the endless complexities of the world.

The doctrines from ‘Magic’ to which Arkins refers are as follows:

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

Symbols here operate as archetypal images, a core tenet of Jungian psychology which can be described as archaic, universal concepts that are highly developed forms from the collective unconscious. As Arkins describes, myth is useful to Yeats

26 Brian Arkins, Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), 77.
27 Ibid., 76.
29 For a summary of the mystic, religious and mythic background to Jung’s concepts of archetype and the collective unconscious, see C. G. Jung, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 9.1, The
because it acts as archetypal image; its presence in his poetry allows him to speak
to humanity on a universal level through symbols. When MacNeice writes
mythology into his own juvenile work in a Yeatsian mode he is also writing from a
Jungian standpoint, but at a remove. This connection was being made before the
writing of Blind Fireworks. In his review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, titled ‘*Ulysses,*
Order, and Myth’, T. S. Eliot writes that Joyce’s choice to structure his modern novel
on Homer’s *Odyssey* ‘has the importance of a scientific discovery’.\textsuperscript{30} He exalts this
attitude towards mythology as distinctly modern, and implicates Yeats and
psychology in its development:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between
contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which other
must pursue after him. […] It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats,
and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first
contemporary to be conscious. […] Psychology (such as it is, and whether our
reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology and *The Golden Bough* have
concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago.
Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I
seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for
art[.].\textsuperscript{31}

Even as Eliot entertains dismissing psychology, he gives it a central place in the
background of a vitally modern approach to myth as a conduit between the present
to the past. As a result, Joyce becomes, as Leon Edel writes: ‘the funnel for certain
psychoanalytic concepts which were spread to a whole generation of writers which
never read Freud or Jung, but used Joyce’s discoveries’.\textsuperscript{32} In implicating Yeats with

\textsuperscript{30}T. S. Eliot, ‘*Ulysses, Order, and Myth’*, repr. in Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*
(London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 175-78: 177.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 177-78.

\textsuperscript{32}Leon Edel, ‘Psychoanalysis and the “Creative” Arts’, in *Modern Psychoanalysis: New Directions and
Perspectives*, ed. by Judd Marmor (1968; Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1995),
626-641: 636.
Joyce as writers who have discovered this mythical method, Eliot ties Yeats’s modernist credentials to his connection with concurrent intellectual developments, including psychology. MacNeice had read Yeats, Eliot and Joyce extensively by the time he came to write *Blind Fireworks*, with each writer mediating a route of access to psychoanalytic concepts of an universal, unconscious symbolic corpus. MacNeice’s early use of myth combines a reaction to British classical education with the juvenile aping of a modernist mythic method. Between these, there is a push away from rational subject formation and a pull towards a second-hand idea of psychological depths that the classics can access through literature.

This can be inferred from his foreword to *Blind Fireworks*. He notes that his Pythagoras is ‘not the historical Pythagoras’. Instead, he abstracts a universal meaning from the man, hence the mathematician becomes a symbol for the ‘automatic Man-of-Science’, for rationality in general. Part of the appeal here for MacNeice is not just in the body of Greek mythology itself, but in the process of mythologizing. This is how the historical Pythagoras can be made to sit alongside Adonis, Persephone and Charon, through his reduction to archetype that allows the poem to work as a mythic re-telling. Mythology becomes a poetic procedure for explicating these early metaphysical ideas, and Greek civilization is potent material for that procedure.

This esoteric mythologizing makes much more explicit connections with psychoanalysis in the poem ‘Neurotics’, which in its very title is engaging with discourses of psychopathology and diagnosis. The poem is dominated by imagery of
fire, which started ‘In Bluebeard’s chamber, the door Helen undid’. A ‘group of perverts’ are seen huddled together:

Orestes gathers
The darkness with his fingers, and Attis
And Hamlet and De Sade and Origen
Flicker in the blood-light.

The blending of so many figures from Greek myth, folklore, literature, and history here is an appeal to something common and universal under the umbrella label of ‘neurotic’. MacNeice is attempting to engage productively with psychoanalytic terminology as a way of tying a number of distinct ur-narratives together with regards to sex, violence, and madness. Attis castrates himself when Cybele, from whose castrated genitals Attis was created, appeared at his wedding, causing him to go mad. The early Christian theologian Origen is also said, in a disputed account, to have castrated himself after a literal misreading of Matthew 19:12: ‘there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’. In Aeschylus’s Orestia, Orestes kills his mother, Clytemnestra, in vengeance for the murder of his father, Agamemnon, which causes him to be targeted by the Furies, who drive him to insanity. The Marquis de Sade gave his name to the term sadism on account of stories about his violent sexual tendencies. Hamlet, by the time ‘Neurotics’ had been written, had already been subject to a highly influential psychoanalytic reading by Freud in his 1900 The Interpretation of

33 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 625.
Dreams, in which his hesitation to revenge his father by killing his uncle was interpreted as a complex manifestation of the conflict in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. Freud hypothesises that this is because Claudius, the uncle who has killed Hamlet’s father and married his mother, has fulfilled Hamlet’s own unconscious desires:

Hamlet is able to do anything – except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.38

This interpretation was then expanded upon by the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a friend of Freud, in his essay ‘The Oedipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery: A Study in Motive’, which was published by *The American Journal of Psychology* in 1910.39 Hamlet’s presence in ‘Neurotics’ indicates that this interpretation was popular enough by the late 1920s that his place among the perverts requires no qualification. The poem as a whole, in its psychopathological framing, and in its juxtaposition of different source material, appears to rely on certain psychoanalytic modes of thinking about mythology, specifically the binding of the classics to later exemplars of western culture in order to thread a cultural history of the irrational. The poem buys into the idea that a dark view of the human mind is manifest in the cultural touchstones of western man by collapsing those touchstones into a single allegory. The identification of the speaker with this group

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allows the poetic voice itself to complete this genealogy: ‘But we are left / Pinned by a burning rafter’.

The figures trapped by the fire contrast with mythic and legendary figures associated with movement or escape. For instance, Aeneas was a Trojan hero whose flight from Troy makes up the narrative of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the ‘questing Galahads’ evoke the medieval fantasy play of MacNeice’s childhood. Saint Christopher, or ‘Christophoros’ here, is the patron saint of travellers, who carried the child Christ across a river.40 Earlier, Cybele is seen on the other side of the river Scamander, shaking a cymbal that marks her celebrations. Given the psychoanalytic influences at work here, Cybele’s epithet of the ‘Great Mother’ carries connotations of the Jungian archetype of the Mother.41 But the contrast of entrapment and escape, which is framed in psychological terms, anticipates MacNeice’s later engagement with the late 1930s vogue of travel writing, which he took as an opportunity to explore the possibilities and boundaries of travel as a way of realizing selfhood. The germs of those ideas are here: the ‘weltering closet’ is an allegorical spatialization of each character’s neuroses, which trap and doom them. Movement itself is associated conversely with a cleaner mental state.

This Yeatsian inheritance entails an interest with the irrational not just as the subject matter of thought, but also as form. The apotheosis of Yeats’s private mythologizing is the esoteric work of mystical philosophy *A Vision*, which was first published privately in 1925, with a second edition published in 1937 with substantial differences. It represents an attempt to synthesise a cohesive theory of the relation between the mind and the universe through the employment of symbols

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40 For a version of the Saint Christopher legend, see M. R., ‘Saint Christopher. Cum Notis Variorum’, *The Irish Monthly* 15.166 (April 1887), 216-223.
such as the intersecting gyres and the twenty-eight Phases of the Moon, and concepts such as the four Faculties of man: Will, Mask, Creative Mind, and Body of Fate. In 1939, when writing his study on Yeats, MacNeice notes Yeats’s disavowal of psychology in *A Vision*, stating:

He would have thought it an indignity that a man’s life should be conditioned by a word of his nurse’s overheard when he was in a pram. If life is to be conditioned by accidents, the accidents must be supernatural.\(^{42}\)

Yet, in a footnote to this observation, MacNeice offers a brief Freudian interpretation of ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’:

In a very late poem, however, *The Circus Animals’ Desertion*, he seems to admit the Freudian conditionings of Art –

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can...\(^{43}\)

Furthermore, in an endnote to a passage discussing Yeats’s use of Gaelic mythology in his poetry, MacNeice triangulates a connection between psychoanalysis, mythology and *A Vision*:

Thomas Mann in a lecture on ‘Freud and the Future’ maintains that Freud has encouraged the creative writer in his habit of ‘regarding life as mythical and typical’ [one usually connects this attitude more with Jung] and of looking for ‘a fresh incarnation of the traditional upon earth’. Yeats in *A Vision* [...] attempted – to the point of absurdity – to work out such a mythology of types in his classification of human individuals. Cuchulain, Clytemnestra, Parnell, Oscar Wilde, all became types for Yeats, all became myths.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 199-200.
Psychology is not central to MacNeice’s reading of *A Vision*, or his appraisal of its place in a broader understanding of Yeats’s work. Yet, these notes demonstrate the way that MacNeice employed psychology as a frame within which Yeats could be understood. Furthermore, there is evidence of an understanding of the contours of psychoanalysis at least sophisticated enough to identify Mann’s erroneous attribution of Jungian ideas to Freud. It is also significant that this connection runs counter to Yeats’s own assessment of psychology’s relation to his work. In both Yeats and Jung, MacNeice identifies the desire to systematise a universality of mind through a symbolic corpus, positioning the elder poet among the broader intellectual developments of the time. In doing so, he identifies mythologization as a process that is conducted in a psychological context. This reflects back on MacNeice’s own procedures of mythologization in *Blind Fireworks*. ‘Neurotics’ identifies the poetic speaker with a psychological type that traces a lineage through a miniature Western canon. The Classics become the bedrock for understanding the reach of modern psychology, and modern psychology becomes a way of contextualising and reviving the Classics.

Just as with psychology, both versions of *A Vision* are works of philosophy that attempt to disavow philosophy: ‘Having the concrete mind of the poet, I am unhappy when I find myself among abstract things, and yet I need them to set my experience in order’.45 Yeats ultimately relies on idealist philosophy in order to explicate his own system of the objective and subjective in relation to time and space. Yet, as Matthew Gibson observes, Yeats’s grasp on idealist thought can be loose at times, such as when he misattributes the ideas of Immanuel Kant to George

On a basic level, Idealist philosophy contends that reality is mentally constituted, and that things exist only insofar as they are perceived. This proves especially useful as a framework for Yeats to develop mystical ideas of the universe that begin from the mind, as in the single cone of space and time which, as Gibson explains, has its roots in Giovanni Gentile’s reading of Kant. This applies also to the terminology of the system. In the 1925 version of A Vision, Yeats explains in a footnote to a section on the ‘Four Faculties’ of man that he changed what was called ‘Ego’ in the automatic script into ‘Will’ in the text proper: ‘for “Ego” suggests the total man who is all Four Faculties. Will or self-will was the only word I could find not for man but for Man’s root’. The term ‘ego’ here is clearly indebted to the Kantian concept of the thinking subject, and possibly to the transcendental apperception that is the condition of self-knowledge. On the level of the vocabulary of the system, Yeats is thinking here in idealist terms. Yet, as Gibson goes on to note, the 1925 version of the text was merely ‘groping towards an expression of an idealist epistemology’, simply because ‘he had not as yet read enough philosophy to give shape to the ideas expressed in the automatic script’. It was not until the 1937 version that he was able to more specifically use Kant, via Gentile, to frame his ideas.

MacNeice is quick to make note of Yeats’s philosophical weaknesses in A Vision:

> Being unable to accept the established religions or to understand the professional philosophers, he had begun with a vague predilection for psychic experiences which he could not co-ordinate and ended by producing

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47 Ibid., 318-319.
a system which professed to be a blueprint for reality but was actually a sop to his own conscience; hating scientists and rationalists he set out to be scientifically irrational.\footnote{MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, 112-113.}

In characterising A Vision as an inherently irrational text, he is connecting its esoteric symbology to the search for an ontology beyond the immediately and materially explicable. This is why he sees A Vision as a bizarre, weak text; there is a contradiction in its attempt to make a system of the mystical. Yet, for the purposes of the younger MacNeice of Blind Fireworks, the mythologizing procedure of A Vision provides a crucial framework for the employment of ideas from a classical education that challenges the disciplinary goals of the institutions from which he was learning it. As the notes from The Poetry of W. B. Yeats show, psychoanalysis proves crucial to making A Vision useful to a poetry of the irrational by suggesting itself as a framework within which the irrationality of Yeats could be understood and explicated, acting as both context and hermeneutic.

Kant and Gentile are explicitly present in the 1937 version of A Vision in a way that they were not in the earlier version, because Yeats’s reading was insufficient. MacNeice, on the other hand, was well-read in idealist philosophy on account of his studies. In Strings he mentions finding problems with Aristotle’s concepts of energeia and kinesis, where the former is significant and absolute movement and the latter is relative movement:

[R]eality, rescued from the One, is traced back to the infima species but not to the individual unit [...] Aristotle allows that what is energeia from one angle may be kinesis from another; but in that case, I thought, kinesis should also be a permanent principle, whereas Aristotle supposes a highest grade in which mind thinks only itself and this he exempts from kinesis. Complete fusion of subject and object; a full stop; death. Being opposed to this full stop, it will be seen that I was ripe for Marx whose basic thesis, translated into
Aristotelian, is that *energeia* can only be achieved by the canalisation and continued control of *kinesis*. But, Marx being then hardly known in Oxford, I had resort to the flashy dynamic idealism of Gentile's *Mind as Pure Act*.52

What MacNeice was searching for was a metaphysical individualism, which suited the temperament of an undergraduate aesthete in Oxford. He was drawn to Aristotle because he placed emphasis on knowing the nature of a thing in the actions that it takes which move it towards its final cause, but he complains here that Aristotle does not go far enough. Idealist philosophy, specifically Giovanni Gentile's *Theory of the Mind as Pure Act*, can do what Aristotle cannot: it can explicate a metaphysics that places reality itself with the individual. Gentile's philosophy moves away from Berkley by arguing that the 'I', or thinking self, cannot be an object of its own thinking: 'The true thinking activity is not what is being defined but what is defining'.53 The mind must be thought of not as an object, but instead as a process. Therefore, the mind is in a state of continual *becoming*, a continual pure act. Following from this, he recalibrates traditional idealist concepts of reality as being mentally constituted by concluding that, since the mind is a process in a state of continual becoming, external reality as an object must be resolved into the thinking subject.54 This is why, according to Gentile, the natural sciences fail to explain the essence of reality; they make the category error of conceiving of the object outside of their observations.55 In conceiving of the individual mind as the seat of reality in a state of continual becoming, Gentile's idealism is able to do what Aristotle cannot

52 MacNeice, *Strings*, 125-126.
54 Ibid., 10.
55 Ibid., 16.
for MacNeice. It reifies subjectivity and individuality to the point of disavowing the possibility of knowing other people.\textsuperscript{56}

It is this inability to know the Other that leads to Gentile's distrust of psychology in general:

\begin{quote}
[T]he psychologist [...] presupposes his object as other than and different from the activity which analyses it. [...] This means that whatever appearance of spirituality it may have, the reality in its fulness, in what it truly is, escapes the analysis of the psychologist.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Psychology, in this view, makes the same mistake as the natural sciences by considering the mind of another as an object outside the subjective view of the observer, and denies the thinking self its true state of continual becoming. The danger here, for MacNeice, is that this view of the other entails a solipsism that discounts engagement with the community. Idealism is able to complete a view of becoming left unfinished by Aristotle, but psychoanalysis can be seen to still offer a highly valuable conceptual framework for conceiving of the mind, both of self and other, as an object that can be pointed to. As mentioned earlier, the title of the poem ‘Neurotics’ makes use of psychoanalytic discourses that, as in Gentile's description, assign object status to the mind of the other as a way of making it examinable.

The poem ‘Impermanent Creativeness’ hints at influences from both idealism and psychoanalysis, combining them in a way that admits the mind's continual becoming and its hidden, unknown depths. Throughout the poem, several images build up a series of metaphors for the mind. The first is a spider: ‘The spider’s belly-
mind creates / Thoroughfare on thoroughfare’. The creation of roads, or the ‘thoroughfare’ here, comes up again and is explicitly associated with the mind:

Over asphalt, tar, and gravel
My racing model happily purrs,
Each charted road I yet unravel
Out of my mind’s six cylinders.

The mind is like a car engine from which the road ‘unravels’ in a process that comes from the same vehicle that then moves across it. This shows the influence of Gentile’s idealism. The mind’s continual becoming is not only emphasised by the sense of the car’s constant movement, but also in the song-like tetrameter and ABAB rhyme scheme which creates a steady pace throughout. In the following stanzas, however, this scene is troubled:

Shutters of light, green and red,
Slide up and down. Like mingled cries,
Wind and sunlight clip and wed
Behind the canopy of my eyes.

Yet all the time on the window-pane
Shadow fingers grope the trees
Grope, groove, grope again
After unseen fatalities.

Again, this is explicitly mental, as ‘Behind the canopy of my eyes’ suggests the mind creating connections between sense data independently of perception. There is a subtle suggestion of distress here, as the ‘Wind and sunlight’ are clipped and then joined together rapidly in a way that is compared to ‘mingled cries’. Then, the poem shifts back to a previously used image of tree branches hitting a window. At this point, the trees and the window are ‘wed’ to the car on the road, and it is implied

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that they are part of the same overall picture of the mind. The trees hint at some hidden interiority beyond the window, which is described in terms that call back to the car: ‘unseen fatalities’. The constant creation of the mind in a state of continual becoming must, according to ‘Impermanent Creativeness’, incur missed connections, clashes, and even something akin to trauma. There is a hint of psychoanalysis here that modifies a parallel influence from Gentile’s mind as process, creating a poetically important model of the mind that allows for both its creative power and its shadowy, unknowable undercurrents.

Indeed, the poem’s title suggests the relevance of this psychological model for writing itself. The clipping together of different kinds of sense data suggests a prototypical version of the phenomenology that would go on to generate a poem like ‘Snow’, for instance. Meanwhile, the constant groping of the trees against the window suggests the persistent reaching for something ineffable and inaccessible, which will become apparent in the discussion of MacNeice’s poetics of instinct in chapter two. The mythical method that is worked through in *Blind Fireworks* generates connections, via psychology and philosophy, to differing models of the mind which take root at the start of MacNeice’s writing career and branch out across his *oeuvre*. For the purposes of the present chapter, this attempt at a modern engagement with myth and the classics, inflected by psychology, develops through the *Agamemnon* translation, which bridges the mythical method and a later radio method.

*A new self-glory and madness*: The *Agamemnon* translation

MacNeice’s negative views of the Classics as an institution perhaps account for certain aspects of his 1936 translation of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, his first, and
only completed, attempt at classical scholarship during his time as a lecturer. It was,
as MacNeice notes in his preface to the published version of the play, specifically
written for stage performance, which entailed sacrificing ‘the liturgical flavour of
the diction and the metrical complexity of the choruses’, with the aim that ‘the play
emerges as a play and not as a museum piece’.\textsuperscript{59} The kind of translation that he
hoped to realise can be seen in contrast with the kind that he dislikes. This is
summarised by his scathing review of Gilbert Murray's translation of \textit{The Seven
Against Thebes} (1935), also by Aeschylus: ‘Professor Murray is our leading Hellenist
and no one would impugn either his scholarship or his enthusiasm. But as a verse-
translator of the Greek dramatists he is, though readable, neither a good translator
nor a good poet’.\textsuperscript{60} He speculates that ‘the non-scholar may translate better than the
scholar’, because ‘His Greek original is so real to a scholar like Professor Murray that
it is probably never out of his mind, and so he cannot see what the English looks like
just as English’.\textsuperscript{61}

If Murray represented the way that Aeschylus could be suffocated beneath
scholasticism, then Friedrich Neitzsche provided the background for new
possibilities in approaching the dramatist. Of particular relevance for the
\textit{Agamemnon} translation is a passage from \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} (1886) in which he
contextualises Aeschylus among his peers, relaying a view attributed to Sophocles
that Aeschylus ‘did the right thing but unconsciously’.\textsuperscript{62} This is contrasted with the
rationality of Anaxagoras, Euripides, and Plato, noting that the latter ‘places [the
poet’s creative power] on a par with the gift of the soothsayer and the oneiromancer,

\textsuperscript{59} Louis MacNeice, trans., \textit{The Agamemnon of Aeschylus} (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 8.
\textsuperscript{60} Louis MacNeice, ‘Translating Aeschylus’, repr. in Alan Heuser, ed., \textit{Selected Literary Criticism of
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 10.
since the poet is capable of writing only once he is unconscious and all reason has left him’. Nietzsche offers MacNeice a way of viewing Aeschylus that lends credence, with an emphasis on creative possibility rather than absolute accuracy, to a translation project that favours the play’s underlying irrational elements as a way of bringing it to life in English.

As Paul-Laurent Assoun notes, Nietzsche’s concept of a strict divide between the conscious mind and the instinctive (Instinktives) can be traced to a lecture on ‘Homer and Classical Philology’ (1868). In The Birth of Tragedy, the Conscious is aligned with Apolline forces of order and form, while instinct is associated with Dionysiac ecstasy. Yet, as Assoun points out, the Unconscious is not a formal category by this stage in Nietzsche’s development: ‘More than the Unconscious itself, it is to be unconscious with respect to instinct that Nietzsche valorizes’. It is more of a state than a locus of certain mental activity. Nevertheless, this lays the groundwork for his later development of an Unconscious from which the genuine self, unaffected by conscious censorship developed in response to the herd, is supposed to emanate.

MacNeice acknowledged that The Birth of Tragedy was ‘perverse and historically upside-down’, but still found value in it for offering him a view on the Classics that he was not getting from his Oxford studies: ‘It made the Greeks seem much more human because it made them as gloomy as the moderns and as orgiastic as D. H. Lawrence. “Up Dionysus!” became my slogan’. This observation about the book’s ahistorical usefulness was made by Nietzsche himself. In 1886 it was

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63 Ibid., 64.
65 Ibid., 110-111.
66 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 110.
reissued with a short preface entitled ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’, in which he commented that although he found the book to be ‘badly written, clumsy and embarrassing’, he nonetheless noted that it had ‘a strange knack of seeking out its fellow-revellers and enticing them on to new secret paths and dancing-places’.\(^{67}\)

MacNeice’s chant of ‘Up Dionysus!’ perhaps reflected a conscious attempt to join in on this revelry.

Ironically, in light of the warning in his review, MacNeice was a scholar when he began his own efforts at translating *Agamemnon*, having been employed as an assistant lecturer in Classics at the University of Birmingham since 1930.\(^{68}\) Despite this, his attempt has been deemed a success. Peter McDonald writes that MacNeice’s *Agamemnon* ‘is often cited as one of the most important twentieth-century versions of Greek tragedy, by classicists as well as by admirers of MacNeice’s own poetry’.\(^{69}\)

In trying to bring the play to life, and out of the museum, MacNeice makes certain translation choices that continue the thread of psychological influence in his undergraduate engagements with the classics.

In the play, Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, in revenge for his infidelity and the sacrificing of their daughter, Iphigenia, in a bid to claim good fortune in his campaign against Troy. It is then revealed that the murder plot was the idea of Aegisthus, Clytemnestra’s lover, who has his own reasons for wanting revenge on Agamemnon’s house. Agamemnon and Aegisthus are cousins; the father of the latter, Thyestes, was tricked into eating his own children by the father of the former, Atreus, after

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\(^{67}\) Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5.

\(^{68}\) Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 141-142.

Thyestes seduced Atreu's wife. *Agamemnon* starts in the middle of a legacy of familial revenge that spans generations, passing down what MacNeice terms 'a logic immanent in the blood' to successive sons. Yet this statement is immediately qualified: 'But the cause of the crimes, not only of the first link, the first crime, but present in every one of them, is the principle of Evil which logic cannot comprehend'. The tension that drives the play, according to this preface, is that evil is seen to come from both rational and irrational sources. On the one hand, each crime in the chain has its own internal logic: Aegisthus plots Agamemnon's death *because* Atreus fed Thyestes his own children. On the other hand, the entire schema of this chain of events has at its underlying 'cause' this idea of a 'principle of Evil'. There is a cleave suggested here between the way that each action in the chain is justified and the actual, if incomprehensible, illogical motivations that lead one to murder one's kin.

The possibility that MacNeice viewed this tension psychologically is suggested by the inclusion of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, in 'Neurotics', as discussed earlier. In *The Libation Bearers*, the next play in Aeschylus's *Orestia*, he kills Clytemnestra in revenge for Agamemnon's murder, and is pursued by the Furies for his part in the chain of crime. Psychopathology has, by this point, already informed a poetic view of one part of this chain, hinting at its wider relevance. The concept of dual motivations, with one remaining unknown to the person who commits the evil act, bears a similar topography to the Freudian concept of the sublimation of desires. The idea of evil expressed in the preface also echoes MacNeice's philosophical background. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere*

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71 Ibid.
Reason, Kant proposes that human morality can be characterised fundamentally as a clash between moral laws, which one incorporates into oneself, and the ‘incentives’ of one’s ‘sensuous nature’ (‘Sinnlichkeit’), which one also incorporates ‘according to the subjective principle of self-love’. In this model, what distinguishes a good person from an evil person is not which one of these is discarded by the individual, but ‘which of the two he makes the condition of the other’, which is a process of ‘subordination’. As Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik summarise, evil for Kant is ‘the deliberate attempt to subordinate what we ought to do in favour of what pleases us’. The evil person ‘makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law’. It is for this reason that evil hides within practical reason, and therefore justifies itself. Psychology and philosophy are both in the background in MacNeice’s presentation of evil as dual-layered.

The chorus explores this idea of a chain of evil just before Agamemnon arrives back from the Trojan War:

Ancient self-glory is accustomed
To bear to light in the evil sort of men
A new self-glory and madness,
Which sometime or sometime finds
The appointed hour for its birth,
And born therewith is the Spirit, intractable, unholy, irresistible,
The reckless lust that brings black Doom upon the house,
A child that is like its parents.

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Evil is a matter of inheritance, passed on by parents to children so that one evil act spawns a lineage of evil acts. Murray had published his own translation of _Agamemnon_ in 1920 which shows, by comparison, the way that a loose vocabulary of the mind informs MacNeice’s translation decisions with a view to fixing some of the problems that he felt were endemic to Murray’s methodology. Murray translates the above passage thus:

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But Old Sin loves, when comes the hour again,
To bring forth New,
Which laugheth lusty amid the tears of men;
Yea, and Unruth, his comrade, wherewith none
May plead nor strive, which dareth on and on,
Knowing not fear nor any holy thing;
Two fires of darkness in a house, born true,
Like to their ancient spring.76
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Where Murray translates ‘Old Sin’, MacNeice substitutes ‘Ancient self-glory’. Note the Kantian echo of ‘self-love’ in MacNeice’s version. Alongside this is ‘madness’, which takes the place of what is translated as ‘Unruth’ in Murray’s version. ‘Unruth’, as in a lack of compassion, suggests a wholly moral flaw in the lineage of evil, as well as a conscious attitude. ‘Madness’, on the other hand, is more in line with MacNeice’s idea of the ‘principle of Evil’ that runs throughout the genealogy of Aeschylus’s characters. The language of psychopathology here suggests a loss of control of the mind, and therefore the indeliberate, non-conscious, and irrational nature of evil which runs underneath the logical connections between specific acts of violence and vengeance.

‘Madness’ here also evokes the influence of E. R. Dodds on the translation. Dodds was the Head of Classics who hired MacNeice to the University of

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Birmingham in 1930. Among his scholarly peers, he was known for pursuing sometimes unpopular strands of enquiry on account of his life-long interest in mysticism. As Tom Walker notes, he expressed an academic interest in the importance of magic to the Gnostics and Neo-Platonists, which was discouraged by Gilbert Murray, who was his academic mentor at the time.\textsuperscript{77} Walker suggests that Yeats’s mystically-inflected writings had a role in the development of this interest, even as Dodds himself emphasised that he approached such subject matter as a ‘historian of ideas’.\textsuperscript{78} This is suggestive of an affinity between MacNeice and Dodds, in the sense that both were approaching the mystic in antiquity from a Yeatsian angle, but with a self-professed desire to make that mysticism useful in a different way. It is worth noting that Dodds had a more overtly scholarly than purely aesthetic investment in the mystic, serving as a member of the council of the Society for Psychical Research from 1927 onwards. Regardless, for MacNeice’s purposes Dodds represented an ally in the broader attempt to affect an epistemological shift in the Classics to reveal the irrational potential of the Greeks.

In 1951 Dodds published \textit{The Greeks and the Irrational}, a sweeping study of Greek culture that sought to use contemporary psychology to re-examine depictions of dreams and madness in Greek culture and re-centre the irrational in the study of the Classics. To this end, Dodds uses psychoanalysis to make links between Classical and modern ideas of the irrational. For instance, he compares Plato’s conception of the \textit{daemon} to the Freudian superego.\textsuperscript{79} Core to his explanation of Greek irrationality is a focus on what he observes is the widespread prevalence in Greek

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} E. R. Dodds, \textit{The Greeks and the Irrational} (Berkley: University of California Press, 1951), 42.
epic and drama of attributing the nonrational to external, often divine or demonic, forces:

When he acts in a manner contrary to the system of conscious dispositions which he is said to 'know', his action is not properly his own, but has been dictated to him. In other words, unsystematised, nonrational impulses, and the acts resulting from them, tend to be excluded from the self and ascribed to an alien origin.\textsuperscript{80}

This gloss is suggestive of further parallels with psychoanalytic thinking, particularly the notion of a ruptured self that is split along the lines of the rational and irrational. Central to his thesis is a discussion of forms of madness in Greek culture. Dodds’s inquiry starts with Socrates’s identification of four different kinds of madness in Plato’s \textit{Phaedrus}, a dialogue composed around 370 BC, which includes assigning a divine patron, understood to be a source, to each kind: Prophetic madness, attributed to Apollo; Ritualistic madness, attributed to Dionysus; Poetic madness, attributed to the Muses; and Erotic madness, attributed to Aphrodite and Eros.\textsuperscript{81} Of prophetic madness he notes a change in attitude as Greek society developed, moving from the notion of Apollo speaking to and through oracles to the idea that they had a ‘second voice’ inside them with which they communed.\textsuperscript{82} While Dodds does not quite go into depth about the connection between the development of an internal madness and modern ideas of the irrational, his work makes these suggestions throughout.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 71-73.
\textsuperscript{83} Dodds seeks to answer how far Classical madness can ‘be recognised as identical with any states known to modern psychology and anthropology’, though he quickly concedes that ‘on many points we may have to be content with a verdict of non liquet’; ibid., 65.
In *Agamemnon*, it is Cassandra who bears the madness of the play, receiving visions of Agamemnon’s death, as well as her own, from Apollo: ‘Apollo! Apollo! / God of the Ways! My destroyer! / Destroyed again – and this time utterly!’\(^{84}\) The reaction of the chorus, who entertain the possibility of believing Cassandra, contrasts with Clytemnestra’s somewhat ironic remark: ‘The fact is she is mad, she listens to evil thoughts’.\(^{85}\) Murray translates this line as: “Fore God, she is mad, and heareth but her own / Folly!”\(^{86}\) While Murray identifies the presence of madness in the line as MacNeice does, he chooses ‘folly’ where MacNeice chooses ‘evil’. Here, MacNeice is pushing the link between evil and irrationality, which he believes to be at the heart of Aeschylus’s original. This also plays into the irony that comes out in his version of the line, as Clytemnestra has her own place in the chain of evil that runs through the *Orestia*. Apolline prophecy is divinely inspired, but for prophecy to be evil the voice must be daemonic, meaning it is a consequence of nature rather than godly power. Clytemnestra’s misidentification of Cassandra’s madness as being internal and mental, rather than divine, ends up betraying a link between the internal nature of man and madness, via the concept of evil. These subtle choices that MacNeice makes chime with an influence from Dodds that seeks to connect modern and ancient ideas of irrationality in a way that recalls the ‘continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ of Eliot’s mythical method.

Agamemnon’s actions, too, are seen in this light. He justifies the war against Troy as ‘enormous vengeance / For wife-rape’ when he returns to Priam, but this comes after the Chorus have expressed doubts over this reasoning:

> Even you, in my thought, when you marshalled the troops

\(^{84}\) MacNeice, *Agamemnon*, 49.  
\(^{85}\) Ibid.  
\(^{86}\) Murray, *Agamemnon*, 46.
For Helen's sake, I will not hide it,
Made a harsh and ugly picture,
Holding badly the tiller of reason[].

Again, this differs from how Murray translates the Chorus:

But I hide nothing, O King. That day
When in quest of Helen our battle array
Hurled forth, thy name upon my heart's scroll
Was deep in letters of discord writ;
And the ship of thy soul,
Ill-helmed and blindly steered was it[].

MacNeice's translation points to the mind at several points where Murray's points instead to the heart or the soul. The choice to have the Chorus speak of their thoughts is a suggestion that came directly from Dodds. His notes on an earlier draft of Agamemnon, which are now held in the Bodleian Library, suggest ‘in my thoughts’ in order ‘to avoid repeating’, adding that this offers ‘a fresh sense’ to the Chorus's self-reference. Furthermore, it is not the ‘soul’ which appeared misguided in Agamemnon’s attempts to rescue Helen, but his ‘reason’. By emphasising the mental in this way, the irrationality that underpins the chain of evil is more conceptually accessible to a modern audience that, as discussed above, has seen psychology, and psychanalysis in particular, change the way that people perceive themselves in relation to their own minds and motivations. This psychological language is part of the translation's wider aim to reify the relevance of the classics to modernity, something that would be shared by Dodds’s The Greeks and the Irrational fifteen years later.

87 MacNeice, Agamemnon, 40.
88 Murray, Agamemnon, 34.
The opening of *The Greeks and the Irrational* makes it clear that the author is aware of the pervasive stereotyping that his work is interrogating, with reference to Roger Fry's *Last Lectures*. Fry identifies in Greek art ‘the desire to identify this organizing power with the intellect – to find geometric and mathematical constants for all these relations of the parts to one another’.\(^{90}\) He argues that this mathematical concern demonstrates ‘a desire for perfection’ of which he does not approve: it is the ‘perfection of a machine’ which is only concerned with the economy of its operations, unsuited to the ‘expression of vital energy’ that art requires.\(^{91}\) To argue for the presence of a vitality that Fry says is lacking in Greek culture, Dodds appeals to the universal potential of his project, expressing a hope that the study is relevant ‘not only for Greek scholars but for some anthropologists and social psychologists, indeed for anyone who is concerned to understands the springs of human behaviour’.\(^{92}\) This is an inversion of the justification for studying the Classics offered by the British education system from the time of MacNeice’s undergraduate study. Rather than the Classics acting as the model for the creation of an ideal subject, here they are posited as a tool for understanding the irrational subject as-is. This repurposing of the Classics into a hermeneutics of the soul has striking parallels with similar appeals to interdisciplinary relevance made by British proponents of psychoanalysis. For instance, in a paper on ‘Freud’s Psychology of the Unconscious’ delivered to the Edinburgh Pathological Club on March 7\(^{th}\) 1917, the psychologist W. H. R. Rivers writes of psychoanalytic theory: ‘If it is true, it must be taken into account, not only by the physician, but by the teacher, the politician, the moralist, the sociologist, and every other worker who is concerned with the study of human

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91 Ibid., 182-183.
conduct’.\textsuperscript{93} In both cases, the concept of a psychology that goes beyond the rational and conscious is implied to contain answers to questions about the operations of human behaviour, not just as a way to understand one’s self, but others as well. Furthermore, both use this as a way of placing their studies at the intersection of different kinds of human understanding. In terms of Dodds’s indebtedness to psychology, it is significant to note that he is not only using its concepts, but is also borrowing its rhetoric and positioning, at least in a British context.

Furthermore, Agamemnon remains an important figure when Dodds writes his study. The book’s first chapter is titled ‘Agamemnon’s Apology’, and it takes an episode of the \textit{Iliad} featuring Agamemnon as a case study from which it springboards into its investigation of Greek irrationality.\textsuperscript{94} A dialectical influence between Dodds and MacNeice is suggested by this timeline. Dodds is in the background of MacNeice’s \textit{Agamemnon}, but \textit{Agamemnon} is also in the background to Dodds’s later work. As such, the play represents MacNeice’s contribution to a shift in the view of the Greeks that utilises psychological thought to resist prevailing assumptions about their supposed rationality.

\textit{Agamemnon} was staged by the Group Theatre in London across two nights in November 1936, the first of which was attended by both Dodds and Yeats.\textsuperscript{95} In its original form, it had a limited audience to which it could disseminate its novel vision of Greek irrationality. Almost precisely ten years later, however, it reached a far greater audience of between 1 ½ and 2 ½ million listeners when it was adapted for

\textsuperscript{93} W. H. R. Rivers, \textit{Instinct and the Unconscious: A Contribution to a Biological Theory of the Psycho-Neuroses} (2\textsuperscript{nd} edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 160.
\textsuperscript{94} Dodds, \textit{The Greeks and the Irrational}, 1-27.
\textsuperscript{95} McDonald, ‘The Deaths of Tragedy’, 228.
radio and broadcast as part of the then-new Third Programme.\footnote{Amanda Wrigley, ‘Aeschylus’ Agamemnon on BBC Radio, 1946-1976’, \textit{International Journal of the Classical Tradition} 12.2 (Fall 2005), 216-244: 223-24.} The radio, as will be discussed, is a medium very well suited to the translation’s ambitions of uncovering and transmitting the unconscious operations of Greek literature, and the seed of dramatic irrationality therein can be detected throughout MacNeice’s work for the medium.

\textbf{‘Deep in my consciousness’: Jung in the \textit{Faust} translation}

In a fair copy notebook of 1936, MacNeice dedicates half a page of notes to points of interest found in Carl Jung’s \textit{Modern Man in Search of a Soul}, a collection of lectures translated by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes and published in 1933.\footnote{Louis MacNeice, Quarto notebook, with holograph drafts and fair copies of poems, 1929-1936, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. 10641/19, Folder 2.} In particular, he responds to the eighth chapter, ‘Psychology and Literature’, transcribing small quotations and making comparisons with his understanding of Freud. Jung’s lecture relies on a small sample of western literature to furnish his points, and one of the examples he returns to more frequently is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s \textit{Faust}. For Jung, \textit{Faust} is an exemplar of two different modes of artistic creation: the psychological and the visionary. The psychological mode ‘deals with materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness’, and as such it is, ironically, closed off to the psychologist because all of the interpretation of the material has already been done by the writer. The visionary mode, on the other hand, draws on material ‘from the hinterland of man’s mind’, that is to say, a primordial unconscious from which Jung develops his theory of the ‘collective unconscious’.\footnote{C. G. Jung, \textit{Modern Man is Search of a Soul}, trans. by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (1933; Orlando, Florida: Harvest, 2000), 155-157.} MacNeice makes
note of all of these concepts, including the line: ‘It is not Goethe who creates Faust, but Faust who creates Goethe’. These notes shed further light on MacNeice as a relatively well informed and sophisticated reader of psychoanalytic theory, especially in his evocation of Freud as a contrasting figure. It also demonstrates that, in the mid-thirties, MacNeice was aware of Faust as a text that was contemporaneously thought of as being psychological, a text with distinct relations to the conscious and unconscious mind.

It is with this background that MacNeice produced a translation of Faust for radio in 1949. The BBC commissioned a new translation to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of Goethe’s birth, and it was conceived as a six-part programme with each part lasting roughly an hour. The commission was initially offered to W. H. Auden, but when he declined MacNeice was brought in. He, in turn, brought in Ernst Stahl as a ‘textual consultant’ on account of the fact that MacNeice had very little German. The other immediate challenge facing the project was the prospect of having to convert an unwieldy pair of stage plays of about 12,000 lines in total into a series of radio broadcasts. MacNeice ended up cutting about one third of the lines from the plays in order to excise what he characterised as the ‘digressions and abandonments’ of the original. According to Stahl, certain scenes were also cut or changed in order to avoid the problem of the broadcast carrying too many distinct voices at one time and confusing the listener.

99 MacNeice, Quarto notebook, MS. 10641/19, Folder 2.
100 As Richards notes, there was little differentiation in the public imaginary between different psychoanalytic schools and their various theories and terminologies. See Richards, ‘Britain on the Couch’, 185.
The resulting abridgement has since faced uneven critical reception. In his sweeping retrospective on MacNeice’s radio work, Christopher Holme writes: ‘It remains to be proved, I think, that *Faust, Part 2*, though much abridged, is suitable for radio’.\(^{104}\) Stahl suggests that the radio producer has greater difficulty than the stage producer of *Faust* because the radio is a blind medium and the original plays rely on visual cues to communicate to the audience.\(^{105}\) However, in light of MacNeice’s first encounters with the plays through Jung, it is possible to see how the project presented a means of exploring the psychological potential of radio through the translation of a work of drama that had been actively understood in psychological terms. This, in turn, can be seen to have implications for his radio output more generally, which goes on to form a key part of the irrational poetics of his later lyric work.

This potential had been indelibly bound up with the field of radio production by the time MacNeice came to it. Not only had it provided a platform for popular British psychologists, but it had also been an area of psychological inquiry itself.\(^{106}\) T. H. Pear’s *Voice and Personality* considered radio drama as part of his investigation into the psychology of sound, emphasising that: ‘we hear not with our ears but with our minds’.\(^{107}\) As John Drakakis writes, early radio practitioners treated its non-visual nature as a distinct advantage in their public defences of the medium. Gordon Lea and Tyrone Guthrie both argued that radio, in prompting images in the listener’s

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mind’s-eye using sound cues, could be argued to have greater visual fidelity than the stage or screen. For Lea, radio was ‘beyond art – it is reality itself’. Guthrie said that because the images invoked by radio plays were ‘solely of the mind’, they were therefore ‘less substantial but more real than the cardboard grottoes, the calico rosebuds, the dusty grandeur of the stage’.\textsuperscript{108} Drakakis further notes that, as a young artform working with relatively new technology, radio production borrowed its vocabulary from other disciplines, including psychology, from which it took William James’s term ‘stream-of-consciousness’, via modernist literature, to denote a production aesthetic that took advantage of radio’s ability to move seamlessly between scenes.\textsuperscript{109}

The German art theorist and practical psychologist Rudolf Arnheim takes a different view of radio’s blindness, viewing it as both limitation and aesthetic goal. For Arnheim, it is not the place of the listener to make up for the lack of visuality in radio, but rather it is the radio writer and producer’s obligation to communicate the action of a play using the aural limitations of the medium.\textsuperscript{110} This, in turn, leads to purer expression. While in the traditional theatre, ‘the existence of the stage and of the spectator’s eye induces a rivalry between word and external action, décor, mime and gesture’, what he calls ‘verbal art’ must ‘give the whole situation if possible in words’.\textsuperscript{111} From here, Arnheim launches a rousing defence of the radio play:

> Speech, then, is the real form of expression of broadcast drama. It is the most spiritual form of expression that we humans know, and from this it follows that wireless, although it may be the poorest of all arts in sensory means of expression, on spiritual levels is, with literature, the noblest.\textsuperscript{112}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{109} Ibid., 7.
\bibitem{111} Ibid., 173.
\bibitem{112} Ibid., 175-6.
\end{thebibliography}
MacNeice’s engagement with writing for radio is preceded by these wide-ranging debates, wherein the psychology of both the listener and the character are seen to be of central aesthetic importance to the justification and theorising of the medium. When considering the historical context, it is important to note that many of these defences and theories were written in response to a nascent anxiety about the existential threat of television to the radio, which perhaps explains the desire to conceive of a special space for non-visual drama. However, MacNeice’s early works had little such contest, as television signals in Britain were shut down at the advent of war.\(^\text{113}\)

In the first Act of Part II, Faust brings back the forms of Helen of Troy and Paris from the realm of the Mothers in order to fulfil the Emperor’s need for entertainment, and falls in love with the illusion of Helen that he has conjured: ‘Have I still eyes? Deep in my consciousness / Does the spring of beauty pour her vast largesse?’\(^\text{114}\) Here, ‘consciousness’ is a translation of *Sinn* in the original German, which can be translated in this context as ‘mind’. Indeed, this is the translation of *Sinn* that MacNeice opts for elsewhere.\(^\text{115}\) In the above scene, ‘consciousness’ works better metrically, as it hews closer to the decasyllabic rhythm of the original German line: ‘*Hab’ ich noch Augen? Zeigt sich tief im Sinn*’.\(^\text{116}\) In light of MacNeice’s encounters with *Faust* in a Jungian frame, it is also a psychologically significant choice. George Madison Priest’s translation of *Part 2*, which was first published eight years prior to MacNeice’s translation, presents the same lines as: ‘Have I still eyes?

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\(^\text{114}\) MacNeice, *Goethe’s Faust*, 188.
\(^\text{115}\) For instance, ‘His neighbour’s will as his own proud mind dictates...’; Ibid, 204.
Is Beauty’s spring, outpouring, / Revealed most richly to my inmost soul?’\(^{117}\) Here, it is ‘soul’ that stands in for Sinn. Philip Wayne makes the same translation choice in this context in his own version some years later.\(^ {118}\) Throughout much of the translation history of Faust, Sinn has been used interchangeably, depending on content and metrical requirements to mean ‘mind’, ‘soul’, and ‘sense’. In light of this, MacNeice’s use of ‘consciousness’ stands out. It echoes the wider importance of mythological figures to Jungian psychology. Similar to MacNeice’s engagement with Yeats’s mythologizing practices, the choices he makes in his translation of Faust highlight psychology as a frame in which MacNeice understands the psychological drama of the play. Several aspects of Helen’s part in Faust anticipate Jung’s placement of her in his psychoanalytic framework. In the play, the realm of Mothers from which the forms are summoned is variously described as ‘the cosmic vault’, and as a realm of ‘Nothingness’.\(^ {119}\) The Mothers themselves are ‘goddesses’ who take on many forms, and at the play’s conclusion are described as the ‘Eternal Womanhead’.\(^ {120}\) To access this realm, Faust has to conceive of a state of ‘desolate loneliness’ to enter ‘the realms of forms no lives attend’. These concepts of universality, loneliness, and interiority were of particular appeal to Jung, who used this episode in Symbols of Transformation to explain how the archetype of the Mother resides in the unconscious.\(^ {121}\)

Yet Holme, as well as being unimpressed by the Faust production, is also unconvinced that MacNeice’s radio work encourages psychological interpretation:

\(^{117}\) George Madison Priest, trans., Faust: Parts One and Two (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 188.  
\(^{119}\) MacNeice, Goethe’s Faust, 177.  
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 303.  
'I must say I find the word “psychology” misleading to describe such a very articulate, explicit, and *simple* style of playwriting as MacNeice’s “Moralities”. Here, he is in disagreement with Auden’s foreword to *Persons from Porlock* (1963) in which Auden holds up MacNeice’s final play as an exemplar of how ‘radio drama is an excellent, perhaps the ideal, medium for “psychological” drama, that is to say the portrayal of the inner life, what human beings privately feel and think before and after they perform a public act.’

Both Holme and Auden are using the word ‘psychological’ here in a manner that recalls Jung’s own description of ‘psychological’ writing: it describes the subject matter of a work of art wherein an implied narrator makes conscious note of their thoughts. Yet, as previously noted, *Faust* provides Jung with an alternative way of conceiving a relationship between literature and psychology: the visionary, in which the writer works from ‘symbolic expression’ of the collective unconscious. In this latter mode, there is an implication that it is the author of the visionary work who is made available for analysis, as opposed to the psychological mode in which the text commits an analysis of a character. The centrality of the unconscious as a *mode* of writing is what distinguishes the ‘visionary’ from the ‘psychological’. MacNeice’s own notes on the cuts that he made to *Faust* suggest a balanced view of this dynamic. He writes of Part II that: ‘While everyone agrees that Part II is incoherent, I am not of those who find all its incoherences profound’. He cut large parts of the Classical Walpurgisnacht scene from Part II because ‘Goethe sowed here with the whole sack

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124 MacNeice, *Faust*, 305.
so that it is hard to see his myth for his mythology’.\textsuperscript{125} This is a significant charge given MacNeice’s own mythological excesses in his early work. There is a shift in attitude here in terms of mythologization as a creative tool. Rather than using broad reference to a corpus of mythology to locate a state of mind within a whole nexus of neuroses, relevance is found instead in a particular myth which has its images and ideas moulded to the structure of the narrative. This move away from a strictly Jungian point of view has particular relevance for placing \textit{Faust} in connecting MacNeice’s earlier mythologically-inflected work with his later parable writing, which relies on the leanness of its images and ideas.

Many of the cuts that he makes are justified in the notes of the text as a way of maintaining a singular focus: ‘In cutting about a third of the whole, our first aim was to bring out the character and story of Faust himself while, negatively, we decided to sacrifice such passages as seemed irrelevant or inferior or merely obscure’.\textsuperscript{126} The restrictions of the medium of radio and the need to streamline the mythological passages appear to have been tandem tasks with a text such as \textit{Faust}. Scenes such as the party in Auerbach’s cellar and the Walpurgisnacht from Part I all introduce new voices that risk stressing the ability of the radio producer to make each distinct and recognisable to a listening audience. As Arnheim theorises, silent characters on radio are effectively absent because there is no other meaningful way of registering their presence. A skilled writer, he believed, would be able to ‘keep them alive in spite of this in a deeper layer of consciousness’.\textsuperscript{127} This task is made much more complicated in the second part of \textit{Faust}, which blends Gothic with Classical scenes and figures, resulting in an overabundance of mythological figures.

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\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{127} Arnheim, \textit{Radio}, 157.
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As a result of this pruning, it can be argued that certain aspects of the mythology employed in the text keep their close relation to Faust as a character. This is particularly important for the figure of Helen, for instance. Faust summons her form and covets her in Act I of Part II, which inspires a search for her that ends with her being summoned to Faust’s castle by Mephistopheles at the beginning of Act III. In the original German, Act III opens with a long scene in which Helen first arrives in Sparta, where a disguised Mephistopheles warns her that King Menelaus is going to have her sacrificed, before transporting her to Faust’s castle.128 In MacNeice’s translation, the omission of this scene is justified by considerations of time, impact, and MacNeice’s own familiarity with the material.129 This also means that Helen’s presence in the play is always dependent on Faust’s desire for her; she has no scene in the radio production by herself. Faust’s disappearance with Manto into the Underworld to search for Helen, followed by her sudden appearance at the castle, also creates an effective mirror of Act I when Faust disappears into the realm of the Mothers, only to have suddenly returned to conjure Helen and Paris afterwards. Her symbolic status is not lost in the diegetic justification for her sudden appearance. This helps to maintain the dream-like nature of the second part; that is to say, it heightens the unreality and irrationality of Helen’s presence.

MacNeice’s cuts appear to indicate a move away from the Jungian reading that first drew him to Faust’s psychoanalytic potential. His view that not all the unintelligible aspects of the second part of the drama are ‘profound’ appears to rebuke the idea of the ‘visionary mode’ as the source of a complex web of symbolism that is rooted in the collective unconscious. Despite this, the translation has an

128 Goethe, Goethe’s Faust, 223-240.
129 MacNeice, Faust, 306.
afterlife that manages to close this circle. In *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung illustrates his concept of the Great Mother archetype, and its place in the collective unconscious, by quoting an extensive passage from the scene in *Faust Part Two* where Faust learns about the realm of the Mothers. Jung praises Goethe as ‘the master, who has plumbed to the root of these Faustian longings’.\(^\text{130}\) In R. F. C. Hull’s translation of *Symbols of Transformation* for the English edition of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, rather than translate the *Faust* passage himself, he draws on two pre-existing translations. One is by Philip Wayne, and the other by MacNeice.\(^\text{131}\) Having initially drawn on Jung for his reading of *Faust*, MacNeice’s translation becomes part of the standard edition of Jung’s works in English, giving him another small part in the dissemination of psychoanalysis in Britain during the twentieth century.

MacNeice’s choices as both a translator and editor, which have their justifications in the radio medium itself, also serve to highlight the precedent for an alternative route that his writing takes in his late period with regards to the writing of irrationality. The shaping down of the sprawling Part II offers striking parallels to the development of parable in his other radio writing.

**Freedom of the Air: The original post-war radio plays**

Three years prior to the *Faust* translation, MacNeice had produced his best-known work for radio, *The Dark Tower*. A parable play structured around the theme of the quest as suggested by Robert Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* (1855), it has far outstripped the rest of MacNeice’s radio output in terms of the

\(^{130}\) Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, 205.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 205-206.
positive critical attention that it has received. It is widely acknowledged to represent an important turning point in MacNeice’s writing as a whole, with Peter McDonald going so far as to say that ‘without the play a good deal of the later poetry would have been impossible’.\footnote{132} He makes this point insofar as the play allows MacNeice to confront elements of his past, as well as the problems of individuality that would dominate his post-war poetry.\footnote{133} The focus of much criticism on The Dark Tower has sought to explain it as an extension of the immediate concerns of MacNeice’s poetry output from the same time. Comparatively less effort has been made to read the play in the context of the development of a radio aesthetic. Rather than The Dark Tower being the single watershed moment of MacNeice's poetics, it is the body of his radio work that constitutes a reassembly of the symbolic order as he writes it. The parable form to which MacNeice arrives comes from, and plays into, the limitations and possibilities of the medium, as well as taking advantage of developments in modernist theatre, his engagement with which remains underexamined.

The Careerist, which was developed as part of the first month’s offering from the new Third Programme, which began in September 1946, was broadcast on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of October that year.\footnote{134} The announcement preceding the programme described it as ‘[trying] to be the modern equivalent of a morality play’, but it was listed internally as a ‘psycho-morality play of modern life’.\footnote{135} This description also appears in a Radio Times listing, which comes with the following synopsis:

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\footnote{132} McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 167.  
\footnote{133} Ibid., 169–70.  
\footnote{134} Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 345.  
\footnote{135} ‘List of Programmes Written and Produced for Features Department’, Louis MacNeice, Left Staff File L1/285/1, BBC Written Archives.
A man’s life story is here presented by an alternation of scenes inside his head (cause) and scenes in the outer world (effect). The characters in the former are personifications of different trends in his own personality. As these wrangle and intrigue within him, his better instincts and natural sense of values are gradually beaten down by a lust for power and success.\textsuperscript{136}

This description complicates Holme’s claim that the stock characters of MacNeice’s moralities preclude any psychological element in his drama – rather, these stock characters are the psychological elements, insofar as they constitute parts of an overarching consciousness that envelops them.

The play tracks the life of Jim Human from his birth, through his education to his career in publishing, up to his suicide after he is caught trying to increase his company’s paper ration by exposing pro-Nazi propaganda that he has written himself. Throughout this life, his decisions are made by a group of figures who represent different facets of his personality: Margos, Philia, Scolios, Eris, and Eusebes. Eris, named for the Greek personification of strife and discord, is seen to dominate Human’s decisions, making him choose lust over love, and power over loyalty, driving him to manipulate the war situation for profit and coaxing him into escaping his fate by suicide.

The central conceit of the play borrows heavily from a psychoanalytic model of mind. Human’s psyche is depicted as a group of warring instincts; he has the potential for both compassion and cruelty, which stems from conflict between his psychosocial needs. The beginning of the play introduces the different roles of these instincts through their reactions to a witch-ball hanging above the baby Human’s cot, with Margos exclaiming: ‘Give it me quickly! / It’s round. It shines. I want it in

\textsuperscript{136} ‘The Careerist’, \textit{Radio Times} 1203 (18 October 1946), 12, accessed 24\textsuperscript{th} October 2019, https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/6271ea31a5bc4affb003faab75632487
my mouth. / Mouth! Mouth! Mouth! Mouth!', which later becomes a chant of ‘Milk! Milk!’ The witch-ball is set up as replacement object for his dead parents, which leads Scolios to say:

Yes, the darkness  
was certainly the best. It was so warm  
And we all were half asleep there […]  
The world has taken him away from that lovely kingdom  
And he will never forget it – nor forgive it.138

This early scene is underpinned by two important tenets of Freudian thought: the oral fixation stage of the child’s psychosexual development; and birth as the first source of anxiety, which was later developed by Otto Rank into The Trauma of Birth (1924). The death of Human’s parents leads him to seek to resolve his oral fixation through the witch-ball. This remains unresolved, and so the witch-ball becomes a symbol of desire that is woven throughout the rest of the play: ‘The witch-ball is still in the sky to worship’.139 When the male and female choruses foretell of the imminent discovery of his treason, the internal voices chime in unison: ‘A womb! A tomb!’140 The announcement at the beginning of the program appears keen to avoid being perceived as accusatory, stating that the character of Human is ‘an extreme case to which modern England shows no close parallel’, but at the same time it argues that ‘most – if not all – of us, have the seed of such a man in us’.141 This appeal to universality accounts for the naming of the central character of Human. Through

137 Louis MacNeice, The Careerist, broadcast on BBC Third Programme, 22nd October 1946, BBC Written Archives, Radio Play Library, 2-3. Page numbers in subsequent references refer to the play as broadcast script. 
138 Ibid., 3. 
139 Ibid., 24. 
140 Ibid., 55. 
141 Ibid., 1.
these references to a layman's understanding of Freudian theory, the psychological framework of the play is firmly grounded in a dark view of unconscious operations.

This concept reappears in the later play *Prisoner's Progress*, which was broadcast 27th April 1954 on the Third Programme. The protagonist, Waters, meets the Chaplain of the prisoner-of-war camp in which he is interred. He quotes directly from the third chapter of the Book of Job: 'Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?'\(^{142}\) MacNeice writes in *Strings* of the centrality of the Bible in his childhood reading.\(^{143}\) The recurrence of this idea that human suffering starts with birth has clear theological origins, problematising the possibility of MacNeice being specifically familiar with *The Trauma of Birth*. However, even in this light there are still clear psychological operations at work here. The interior dialogue between forces of the mind and the conceptual proximity to a Freudian concept of the oral stage invites a more psychological reading. Regardless of whether MacNeice is getting this concept from Rank or the Bible, it is being used to explicate the psychology of the infant Human, sowing the outcomes of his decisions throughout the play in the ur-trauma of birth. Furthermore, the importance of the Bible in MacNeice's conception of his own development imbues the reference with significance as a touchstone for the writing of mental development. Just as with his recourses to Kant and Nietzsche, this reference to Job demonstrates how MacNeice draws on a wide range of non-psychological sources to inform an exploration of the dynamics of mind in his work.

Even with Biblical references at play, psychology is key to the 'morality' aspect of the play. In *The Careerist*, after Human's death, people from his life wonder

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\(^{143}\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 54, 59.
about their effect on the course he took in life, with his University tutor, Maintree, asking: ‘Whose fault is it a man becomes a monster? And so quickly too!’ The dramatic irony here is that the audience is aware that the destructive impulses of Eris have been dominant in Human since his infancy. The play frames the shape of Human’s personality as an extension of the initial trauma of his being orphaned, which leads him to substitute the need for nourishment from his mother with the desire to own the witch-ball hanging above his cot. This is tracked through a chanting motif which is developed throughout. The cries of ‘Mouth! Mouth!’ and ‘Milk! Milk!’ at the beginning of the play recur, with chants of ‘Lust!’ and ‘Love!’ in contest as Human talks to his friend Vera, and later ‘Power! Power!’ when he seeks to consolidate his position in the publishing industry. Indeed, the structure of the morality play, which takes a broad sweep of the life of a man works in tandem with the play’s psychoanalytic bent, positioning Human’s actions not in the specifics of a singular event, but in the wide scope of his development.

As the Radio Times synopsis describes, the play moves between the conflict of Human’s instincts and his actions in the world. At times, Human appears to have an awareness of this dynamic: ‘Things like that – outside things, I mean – should never stand in one’s way. It’s the things inside one, Vera. They don’t always seem to agree’. Over the course of the play, the delineation between internal and external conflict becomes blurred as the voices of the figures of Human’s psyche intermingle with the people Human interacts with, such as the transition from external to internal when Human tells his employer, Sophos, that he is quitting his job:

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144 MacNeice, The Careerist, 61.
145 Ibid., 24, 45.
SOPHOS: Notice? What’s come over you? Look, my dear boy, this is such a trivial matter –
HUMAN: Trivial?
SOPHOS: Yes. Trivial.
SCOLIOS: Trivial? Of course it is.
    Anyone can give his word.
    Anyone can take it back.\(^\text{146}\)

This goes back the other way, from internal to external, after he sleeps with Vera:

SCOLIOS & MARGOS: Had her. Had her. Had her. Had her...
HUMAN: Stop!
SCOLIOS & MARGOS: (Scolios and Margos break off)
VERA: Stop what?
HUMAN: Nothing. I was thinking.\(^\text{147}\)

Here, MacNeice is making use of the radio’s single aural plane to blur the boundaries between the mental and physical as the intervention of Human’s internal voices into conversation create a confusion about who is addressing whom. This builds up the tension of the play as Human struggles to maintain these boundaries, but it also reflects an approach to radio writing that MacNeice had developed during the post-war period in which he wrote *The Careerist*, as well as *The Dark Tower*. This is pointed to by MacNeice himself in his preface to the published version of the latter play. He argues that the purely aural nature of radio means that the delineation between the objective and subjective – between what happens in the radio play and how the characters interpret or react to those events – is rendered moot:

But when no character can be presented except through spoken words, whether in dialogue or soliloquy, that very *spokenness* makes this distinction between subjective and objective futile [...] the author may be making [a character] utter what is only known to his unconscious – but once he has said them, there they are!\(^\text{148}\)

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{147}\) Ibid., 43.
Radio allows for the making of psychodrama by giving parity between the internal and external, the subjective and objective, the unconscious and conscious. As a result, radio is uniquely placed to explore the formation of the self in psychic forces by overlapping them in the same dramatic space.

MacNeice’s radio aesthetics are innovative, but not without precedent. The way that the dramatic presentation of mental forces is structured, with several figures representing the voices of a single consciousness that is enveloped by another figure, is an innovation of modernist drama of the turn of the century, particularly that of August Strindberg. MacNeice saw half a production of his *Ghost Sonata* – having entered the theatre late – in 1926, and had a cool reaction to what he saw, as he related to Anthony Blunt in a letter: ‘I think it was great part irrelevant vulgar mystery and green lights on middle class faces but I only came in the middle and could not judge of the coherence of the whole’.\(^{149}\) Despite this, it made enough of an impression on him that he jokingly refers to his one-time cook, Miss Higgs, as being ‘large and red and formidable like the cook in the *Spook Sonata*’ in his unfinished memoir.\(^{150}\) Just over 30 years after seeing the play his esteem of Strindberg appears to have been higher. While on an interdepartmental placement with the television arm of the BBC in 1958, MacNeice took his first opportunity to create a television production of his own to adapt two of his short plays, *Pariah* and *The Stronger*.\(^{151}\) There is little available material attesting to the development of this familiarity, though aspects of MacNeice’s post-war radio work strongly suggest some level of indebtedness to Strindberg’s psychological theatre. The dream logic

\(^{149}\) MacNeice, *Letters*, 139.

\(^{150}\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 149.

\(^{151}\) Barbara Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 166.
of the parable radio plays parallels many innovations from such works of Strindberg as the, appropriately titled, *A Dream Play*, the explanatory note to which explicates the playwright’s expression of the central subconscious of the play in disparate figures: The characters split, double, redouble, evaporate, condense, scatter, and converge. But one consciousness remains above all of them: the dreamer’s’.\(^{152}\) This is strongly echoed in the *Radio Times* synopsis of *The Careerist*: ‘The characters in the former are personifications of different trends in his own personality’. Strindberg’s interest in the dream as a formal principle becomes dominant in MacNeice’s own dramatics. As Marker and Marker note, for Strindberg the important distinction between dream and fantasy was the connection of the former to reality, which allows for the cleaving of physical and mental realities to be interrogated.\(^{153}\) A similar aim is being reached for in *The Careerist*, and with the use of a similar approach to the embodiment of the psyche. As discussed later below, this is perhaps the key idea that connects the radio work to the parable poetry.

Having gestated for a long time, *The Dark Tower* was finally written while MacNeice was on sabbatical from the BBC with his family in Achill during the summer of 1945, almost immediately after the end of the Second World War.\(^{154}\) For Terence Brown, it represents the apex of how the plays combine ‘a simplicity of language and structure with a thematic seriousness and tonal astringency’.\(^{155}\) Its previously mentioned importance to the late poetry makes the date of its writing and broadcast just after the war worth commenting on in itself. For McDonald, *The

Dark Tower is the only convincing representation of the complete parable form, before the incompleteness of the form defined the tensions of the poetry from the late 50s to the 60s.\textsuperscript{156} His assertion that understanding the late poetry is difficult without The Dark Tower holds true, though this attitude has also heretofore put the play in a position whereby its analysis is useful only insofar as it furnishes an understanding of the ideas in the poetry. Richard Danson Brown takes the same view, noting that while the parable had appeared in earlier verse, ‘there can be little doubt that it was the need to generate ideas for new radio scripts which stimulated his interest in this kind of writing’.\textsuperscript{157} However, this does not account for the particulars of form toward which MacNeice was drawn, which are more adequately contextualised within the development of his ideas about the mind. As mentioned previously, for all of its importance in MacNeice’s development, few attempts have been made to understand the radio play as a radio play. An understanding of the text within its medium not only explicates its subtler psychological operations, but also invites questions about the development of MacNeice’s radio aesthetic. In other words: if the poetry comes from the radio work, then where does the radio work come from?

In The Dark Tower, Roland, the seventh son of his family, is trained to venture from his home to the eponymous Tower, where he must make a challenge to a force known as the Dragon, and in doing so follow in the footsteps of his brothers and ancestors, who have all died during the quest. A listing for The Dark Tower in the January 20\textsuperscript{th} 1946 edition of the Radio Times draws a connection between the parable form and reality: ‘The theme, though presented in terms of fantasy, applies

\textsuperscript{156} McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 169-171.
\textsuperscript{157} Richard Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009), 123.
to our own time'. Even here, the parable is framed in such a way as to avoid a coterminous connection between the play’s content and the contemporaneous situation. While the Dragon has been somewhat productively interpreted as a stand-in for the forces of fascism, McDonald is right to note that MacNeice’s signification in the parable is intended to be broad, connecting the personal to the historical and mythical, even if this connection is contested within the work itself. The figure of the mother, and the trajectory of the quest as a return to a dead father figure, have also been interpreted biographically as the death of MacNeice’s own father bringing him round full circle to the extant childhood grief for his mother. But even here, qualification is necessary: Roland’s mother is emotionally inaccessible, distant nearly to the point of uncaring, and alive. As in McDonald’s formulation, MacNeice’s family dynamics are a starting point for what develops into wider thematic concerns.

What remains underexamined is the way that the play interrogates its own signifying devices. Closer analysis reveals an important preoccupation with dynamics of mind in the text, which connects the dream logic of parable to the radio medium itself. The destabilising function of the dream opens up the irrational as a field of inquiry into questions of self and other. But couching these questions in the mind suggests further consideration of the precedent behind MacNeice’s dramatic presentation. As such, irrationality can be seen to be the concept that connects the signifying practices of parable to the form itself.

One aspect of dream logic that runs through the play is the dissolution of spatio-temporal barriers. The best example of this from early in the play is the

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158 “The Dark Tower”, *Radio Times* 1164 (18th January 1946), 8, accessed 12th November 2019, https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/page/dfa77636109a47a29dc9e95f5d839e03
159 McDonald, *The Poet in his Contexts*, 162.
transition between the Tutor’s final lesson to Roland’s first conversation with Sylvie:

TUTOR: You must arise and go... That’s it: Go! Yes, Roland my son. Go quickly.
SYLVIE: But why must you go so quickly? Now that the sun’s come out.
ROLAND (adult): I have my lesson to learn.160

MacNeice’s notes to the script indicate the technical particulars of how this transition was meant to work in broadcast:

_The Verbal Transition_ [‘Go quickly’ repeated] from one scene to another is controlled from the panel and need not seem either abrupt or confusing. It only makes a change from the musical transition but has certain positive advantages; e.g. as here, irony.161

It allows for a smoother transition between scenes without having to make room for the introduction and exit of a musical theme, which helps the pacing of shorter scenes. As Drakakis notes, the sound control panel, which allowed for the radio producer to transition between studios in an increasingly popular multi-studio setup, enabled a dissolving effect; to the listener, one scene would _become_ another, and this more subtle mediation contributed to the dominant stream-of-consciousness aesthetic, as discussed earlier.162 As MacNeice notes, this also contributes to the set-up of the tensions that drive the action of Roland’s quest: the continual back-and-forth between action and thought, purpose and doubt. The Tutor’s command to Roland as a child is answered by Sylvie years later, the temporal jump of which is implied by a change in Roland’s now adult voice. The voices of the figures around Roland morph into his own subjectivity. The dissolution

160 MacNeice, _The Dark Tower_, 122.
161 MacNeice, _Selected Plays_, 411.
162 Drakakis, 'Introduction', 5.
of temporal barriers by the radio medium is also the dissolution of subjectivity that helps create the dream-like qualities of the parable itself.

This dynamic is pointed to directly in Roland’s encounter with the Soak. When Roland refuses to come to the tavern with him, he creates one from music:

SOAK: All right, all right; If you won’t come to the Tavern, the Tavern must come to you. Ho there, music! (The orchestra strikes up raggedly – continuing while he speaks.) SOAK: That’s the idea. Music does wonders, young man. Music can build a palace, let alone a pub.¹⁶³

In broadcast, there is no exact comparison to be made between the playing of the orchestra and the building of the tavern. This draws attention to the need for the Soak’s dialogue to mediate the music and its function. The abstraction is significant here, as it constitutes a commentary on the reality-making function of sound: the music here is sufficient to create the tavern because it is the music that has been scored for the tavern scene. This is also framed in the negative:

SOAK: Oh don’t be so objective. One would think, Looking at your long face, that there’s a war on. ROLAND: But – SOAK: There is no war on – and you have no face.¹⁶⁴

In the radio play the aural creates, but the visual cannot. This parallels an argument from Arnheim that the ‘test’ of the radio writer and producer ‘is whether he can produce a perfect effect with aural things, not whether his broadcast is capable of inspiring his listeners to supplement the missing visual image as realistically and as

¹⁶³ MacNeice, *The Dark Tower*, 129.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 129.
vividly as he can’.\textsuperscript{165} The suggestion of Roland’s expression is immediately undercut by pointing out that sound is the seat of drama in the radio. A connection is being drawn here between the aurality of the radio medium and the loose ontology of the dream.

The parable aesthetic in drama is being built up non-naturalistically, and this, in itself, relies on an admixture of philosophy of mind and psychoanalysis. Another note from MacNeice identifies the Soak as a character constructed around ideas about the pitfalls of mental life: ‘The Soak I should have called a Solipsist if that word were known to the public’\textsuperscript{166} His building of the scene through his control of the orchestra reflects the fact that he believes everything to be a projection of his mind. He occupies an extreme position of Cartesian radical doubt. He answers the question of how others are able to exist while he is sleeping with: ‘Because I’m dreaming you’.\textsuperscript{167} Descartes’s Dream Argument is being evoked here: since a dream in progress cannot be distinguished from reality, and both rely on sense data to convey themselves, sense data in itself is posited as unable to make the distinction between the two.\textsuperscript{168}

Roland is nearly ready to dismiss his views, but confesses that ‘I’ve sometimes thought the same, you know – / The same but the other way around’.\textsuperscript{169} In the scheme of Roland’s quest, the Soak is meant as a distraction that Roland has to overcome. The extreme rationality of the solipsist prevents action by dismissing externality entirely. This position is made psychological through a further reference

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\textsuperscript{165} Arnheim, \textit{Radio}, 136.
\textsuperscript{166} MacNeice, \textit{Selected Plays}, 411.
\textsuperscript{167} MacNeice, \textit{The Dark Tower}, 131.
\textsuperscript{169} MacNeice, \textit{The Dark Tower}, 130.
to birth trauma: ‘I wrote this farce before I was born, you know – / This puppet play. In my mother’s womb, dear boy – / I have never abdicated the life of the womb’.\textsuperscript{170} Again, like in \textit{The Careerist}, the position of solipsism is couched in terms of a universal, implacable anxiety of being in the world. The inability to engage with the world is an extension of the trauma of entering it.

MacNeice aligns the radio, Cartesian solipsism and psychoanalysis in a way that provides the bedrock for one of his better-known utterances from \textit{Varieties of Parable}: ‘one’s everyday discovery that selfhood cuts one off from the rest of the universe’.\textsuperscript{171} Action – the progress of the quest – is associated with exteriority and the engagement with the other, while thought is associated with interiority and the realisation of the self. McDonald writes that MacNeice’s protagonists in the parable plays ‘are seen to exist at the mercy of their contexts, whether family, social, or historical, and are watched fighting against the odds to maintain a degree of individuality’.\textsuperscript{172} The distractions that Roland faces bring him away from obligation and towards selfhood repeatedly, but in the end Roland must sacrifice his selfhood in order to bequeath free will to others. The parable ‘never succeeds completely as a resolution of the tensions basic to his work, between individual experience and its social, temporal, or historical contexts’.\textsuperscript{173} What makes \textit{The Dark Tower} important is that it enacts a changing attitude towards signification that enables the development of the parable form, as couched in terms of mind suggested by radio’s proximity to the psychological.

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\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} McDonald, \textit{The Poet in his Contexts}, 163.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 167.
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‘Sooner let nightmares whinny’: The parable poetry

As McDonald notes, the parable form and its precedents – the fairy and morality tale – are important throughout MacNeice’s poetic output. However, it has long been acknowledged that his later volumes, starting with *Visitations* in 1957 through to the posthumous *The Burning Perch* in 1963, develop the parable as a creative mode with respect to poetry to the height of its use. Here, as before in the radio work, the parable relies on dream logic in order to achieve the balance between specificity and broadness that it requires from signification. In the poetry, this also reflects back on the function of the dream-as-phenomenon in mental life. For MacNeice, the dream is a useful poetic procedure precisely because of a belief from childhood in the efficacy of its relation to life. In *Visitations*, this is discussed directly in ‘Dreams in Middle Age’. When recalling the substance of past nightmares, the speaker asks:

Such make have been our dreams – but what are these?

The debris of the day before; the faces
Come stuttering back while we ourselves remain
Ourselves or less, who, totting up in vain
The nighthlong figures of the daylong ledger,
Stick at a point. Our lives are bursting at the seams
With petty detail.

Dreams, according to the speaker, are fragmented, as ‘debris’, with details ‘stuttering back’ to the dreamer who struggles ‘in vain’ to account for their totality. Indeed, we are ‘ourselves or less’ in this state. McDonald reads this as a reflection on the deadening routines of modernity, a ‘contraction’ which is found reflected in the dream-state itself: ‘This contraction happens even in dreams, but dreams are the

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element in which it can be countered – albeit through nightmare’. The opening sentiment, ‘Sooner let nightmares whinny, if we cannot / Retrieve our dreams of dalliance’, is repeated later: ‘No, sooner let the dark engulf us’. They allow, for McDonald, an expansion of the self through the disruption of daily routine, and we can become ‘ourselves or more’. The way that this is achieved is through making the barrier between the real and dream worlds porous. This is indicated by the uncertain ending to the second stanza: ‘Thus we live, if living / Means that, and thus we dream – if these are dreams’. The admission of material from waking life into the dream is what gives the latter relation to the former, realised in entertaining the possibility that this makes them extensions of external reality. This blending of internal and external realities is achieved in the third stanza: ‘Sooner / Let the black horses, sputtering fire, stampede / Through home and office’. Just as the ‘daylong ledger’ is admitted into the dream, so too must nightmare be allowed into the ‘home and office’ of routine. The ‘expansion of the self’ that McDonald identifies relies on a kind of mutual exchange that blurs the border between waking and sleeping states as a way of realising a holistic self.

Here, ‘Dreams from Middle Age’ is rewriting some of the problems that plague the Soak from *The Dark Tower*, attempting a synthesis between the potential of mental life to realise experience in and of itself, and the danger of giving in entirely to a radical solipsism that shuts out the external world. We are ‘ourselves or less’ not just in the routines of modernity, but also in the ‘petty detail’ that the dream gets stuck on. Bringing the black horses into the spaces of everyday life is what enables one to be ‘ourselves or more’. Here, dreams are not just a reflection of

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the self, but in fact have a potent self-making potentiality that admits the role of the irrational in the beneficial transformation of reality.

The concept of dreams being sketched out here has psychoanalytic shades to it, such as in the connecting line that is being drawn between the mundane and fantastical sources of dreams. The dream-day is implicated in scenes such as being ‘present at the Crucifixion’. This is a reference to a particular nightmare of MacNeice’s that he had as a child, which he recounts in *Strings*:

One night, lying in the great green dormitory, I found myself walking with my father over the downs. We were ascending a slope that was cut off blind by the sky and I was walking some way ahead. As I came near the skyline there was the noise of the funfair and a tall scarlet soldier standing stiff in a bearskin, woodenly abstracted. I reached his level, topping the curve of the world, the brass music blared up full and down below me was Calvary. Not on a hill – that was the first correction – but far down below me in an amphitheatre cut in the chalk. Tiers and tiers of people in gala dress – bunting, rattles and paper streamers – and in the arena were the three bodies on the crosses. A sight to make you retch and I knew if my father saw it all would be over. He was drawing up behind me when I woke.\(^\text{177}\)

In the memoir, this is contextualised by the narrative of losing his faith in school while having a clergyman father. This is an earlier development of some of the dynamics in ‘Dreams in Middle Age’. There is an implicit connection between waking life and the dream world, which alters, and makes fantastical, the ‘debris of the day’. Highlighting this dream positions it as an important mental touchstone in the development of his selfhood. In memoir, the dream becomes a key element in a particularly *literary* self-making. There is an implicit self-analysis here, befitting of life writing in general, in which psychoanalytic ideas of dreams as symbolically-charged and meaningful phenomena are used to enrich MacNeice’s account of

\(^{177}\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 101.
himself, allowing the contrast of the conscious and unconscious in a holistic depiction of mind. This dream recurs in Canto XXII of *Autumn Sequel*, but this time with the analysis not implied but committed explicitly:

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This was the worst  
Of my dreams and I had the worst of it, in the lack

Of my own faith and the knowledge of his, the accursed  
Two ways vision of youth.178
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While this does emphasise the continual relevance of dreams to selfhood in MacNeice’s writing, the resolution of the dream’s meaning narrows the potency of the images themselves and rationalises them down to particular signifiers. The requirements of the epic form seem to compel this direct analysis in a way that can be elided in prose memoir and, later, lyric. This is the development that ‘Dreams in Middle Age’ sets out as necessary to the later work: a way of poetically disturbing the boundaries between the dream and the waking state in a way that creates space for the irrational workings of the unconscious in lived experience.

There is a pair of explicit dream poems in *Solstices*, ‘Bad Dream’ and ‘Good Dream’, which have received criticism for the obviousness of their operations. Longley writes that “‘Bad Dream’ seems over-explicitly titled and executed’, and Brown compares ‘Good Dream’ unfavourably to ’The Burnt Bridge’.179 Their titling and juxtaposition are, however, useful as exercises in making a poetics of dreams, and as evidence for the importance of the radio work on the parable poetry not just in terms of content, but also form. ‘Bad Dream’ is written in alternating long and

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short lines, and throughout much of the poem these short lines add some kind of twist to the preceding image in a way that makes it more sinister:

The window was made of ice with bears lumbering across it,  
Bears the size of flies;  
The ceiling was one great web with flies cantankering in it,  
Flies the size of men;  
The floor was riddled with holes with men phutscuttering down them  
Into the jaws of mice.\(^{180}\)

The poetry mirrors the transforming effects of the dream on its material and its essential indeterminacy, the way that its images are never fixed. Rather than the ‘broadness of signification’ in some of the other parable poetry, here the scene is so overloaded with details that they struggle to cohere: ‘On the night table a scent spray, a tin of biscuits, a bible, / A crucifix on the wall / And beside it a comic postcard: all this he carefully noticed’. The lyric mode cannot contain the dream-as-phenomenon at this stage, but an attempt is being made here to find a structure to communicate its irrational flow of information through lyric resources nevertheless.

‘Good Dream’ opens with more consistently short lines, but soon introduces a ‘warm voice’ that enters dialogue with the dreamer, who is ambiguously positioned in relation to the narrating speaker themself:

\[\text{Here beginneth the first chapter} - \]
\[\text{But it wasn’t the first, he was half way through.} \]
\[\text{No, says the voice, the first chapter} \]
\[\text{At the first verse in the first voice,} \]
\[\text{Which is mine, none other’s: Here beginneth} - \]
\[\text{But I tell you, he says, I was half way through,} \]
\[\text{I am completely awake, I can prove it[.]}^{181}\]

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 569.
The italicised words of the voice differentiate them from the rest of the poem, but the lack of punctuation around the words of the dreamer merge them with the narration, complicating the reader’s perception of the perspective from which the dream is being described. While the poem’s parable of love found may have some of its power undercut by its explicit dream framing, as Brown concludes, it does mark a significant development in MacNeice’s poetics of dream logic which is only possible through the radio work. The blurring of the dreamer and narrator here recalls the merging of internal and external dialogue in a play like *The Careerist*. In light of the plays, ‘Good Dream’ reads as the development of a textual equivalent to the way that radio flattens action and thought onto a single, aural, plane. Later in the poem, the voice implores the dreamer to row to them – the bed has now transformed into a boat – on the shore:

But I need a light to row.

No.

*No light until you reach this bank.*

*Feel for your oars.*

Here are my oars.

This echoes the scene in Part II of *Faust* when Faust obtains the key to the realm of the Mothers, which was communicated in dialogue without the use of a prop by the line translated as: ‘It grows within my hand! A glow! A spark!’182 MacNeice’s poetics of dreams entails its own kind of translation: the lessons learned from harnessing the innate psychological potential of the radio medium are shown in ‘Good Dream’ to be roughly transferable to poetry.

182 MacNeice, *Goethe’s Faust*, 177.
This blurring of perspectives is itself a reflection of the blurring between the boundaries of waking and sleeping that defines one of the central tensions of ‘Dreams in Middle Age’: ‘thus we dream – if these are dreams’. In ‘Good Dream’, this is done through the motif of the dreamer insisting he is ‘completely awake’. This is challenged directly by the warm voice: ‘You will tell me / Once you are’, as well as by the transformations of the scene itself, the falling away of the wall’s rooms and the bed becoming a boat. This ambiguity carries through to the poem's final lines:

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His usual room
Has lost its usual walls and found
Four walls of sky, incredible blue
Enclosing incredible green enclosing
Her, none other.
   Completely awake.
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The break in the middle of the line has been used throughout the poem up to this point to indicate a change in speaker. Here, the change that is being affected is ambiguous, but the use of the motif implies that the dreamer-speaker is finally ‘completely awake’. The move from total darkness to light creates a sense of revelation, but the parallel move from the mundane scene of the bedroom to the fantastical scene of the lake isle marries this revelation to a movement further into the irrational. While ‘completely awake’ indicates the end of the dream on one level, it also implies the synthesis of being that is argued for by ‘Dreams in Middle Age’. Waking is affected by moving further into the irrationality of the dream state, that one may take the revelation – possibly of love, as per Brown’s interpretation – back out into waking life.

Explicit though they may be, both ‘Bad Dream’ and ‘Good Dream’ avoid the restrictive analysis of *Autumn Sequel*, instead seeking ways for the dream to stand
on its own. This offers insight into some of the core ideas of MacNeice’s poetics of dream logic, mainly the idea – that he locates prior to his psychoanalytic readings – that the dream has relevance to waking life. The evidence of his engagement with psychoanalysis and philosophy of mind throughout his writing shows that this initial idea found qualifications, vocabularies, and forms of expression through the psychological ideas that he later encountered as an adult. Part of the success of the later poetry, however, is in the way that it makes a distinct space for the inherent irrationality of dreams to inform the nature of the work itself, as MacNeice’s theory and praxis of mind gain a new momentum of their own. Parable has a refining effect on the material, in that it creates a focus on a particular thread of ideas throughout the text, while a text like ‘Bad Dream’ entertains the incoherence of the dream itself. But in this sense, the turn to parable is a logical development from the idea of the porous boundary between dream and waking states, and the ontological perspective gained therein that irrationality is inextricable from a holistic sense of self. It maintains a controlled schema of signifiers whilst also allowing for each to work broadly. The dream is neither left to accumulate endlessly, nor is its tension and mystery rationalised.

It is this confluence between the interior and exterior that informs MacNeice’s work based on the ‘everyman’ parable, as exemplified in *The Careerist*. The development of a central figure offers a moral lesson, though in MacNeice’s work, as seen in the radio plays, these plots have a distinct psychological element to them as the moral development of the protagonist is couched in terms of mind. This can be seen in a poem such as ‘Notes from a Biography’, which has a five-part structure following its central figure from their childhood to old age. Psychology is implied by the description of childhood as ‘The longing back and aspiring forward;
the double / Feeling that all is new and that all has happened before’, which echoes the interpretation of the crucifixion dream from *Autumn Sequel*: ‘the accursed / Two ways vision of youth’. Like in the previous epic, ‘Notes for a Biography’ is interested in the mental impact of entering the world, and the idea of the threshold moment that inducts the child into knowledge. For the central figure here, this moment is taking in a view of the sea from a beach:

> Where head-down first he brooded on pebble and limpet,  
> Then raised his head to gulp the world entire –  
> Bumpers of foam and fire,  
> The horizon carved his guts like a Turkish sword  
> (Oh gay fire-walking, sad sword-swallowing childhood)  
> Leaving an ache in his guts and a troubled night.\(^{183}\)

There are a few parallels with earlier examples of the everyman figure from the radio plays here. The trauma of the child being brought into the vastness of the world accords with Human’s birth-trauma in *The Careerist* and with Roland’s perilous quest in *The Dark Tower*. The latter play also informs the sense of a ritual passage from childhood into adulthood that closes the first section of the poem: ‘The ringers in St Clement’s / Rang their bells down and under the arch of hands / He escaped, or was carried away, from those ups and downs of childhood’. The sea is linked to both, with Roland’s Mother saying ‘Turn your face to the sea’ as he leaves on his quest.

Indeed, there are frequent echoes of Roland in the central figure here, as the narrative of the poem guides the reader through his strict education and integration into class structures before he is sent off on a quest – colonial service – that he

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\(^{183}\text{Ibid., 529.}\)
progresses through but constantly questions: ‘While the questions hammered away:
Had it been strength / Or weakness what he had done and what his rulers had done?’

These are the same questions that Roland asks at the end of The Dark Tower:

But for you
I who had no beliefs of my own,
I who had no will of my own,
Should not be here today pursuing
A dark tower that is only dark
Because it does not exist.184

‘Notes for a Biography’ is written in light of both British colonialism in India and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, with each taken as flashpoints of self-questioning by the protagonist. The latter example points to this more directly as an example of how the protagonist takes these incidents as a reflection of morality: ‘here is Japan / Where man must make what he chooses of man’. In conceiving of history as moments of doubt in an everyman parable, MacNeice is, again, troubling the boundary between the waking and dreaming worlds. In imbuing the real world with dream-logic, it is implied that parable is suited to a conception of post-war modernity because its irrationality reflects a growing post-war anxiety about the horrors that people are willing to unleash on others. Again like Roland, the protagonist’s fate is to face an oncoming darkness that implies their annihilation. At the end of ‘Notes for a Biography’, the speaker defiantly states: ‘I will stand as if under fire / With a sweet-smelling bunch in my hand, face to face with Never’. Their induction into a destructive world inspires a kind of iconoclastic individualism, made more forceful by the decision to switch from third- to first-person perspective for the final two sections of the poem.

184 MacNeice, The Dark Tower, 143.
In the fourth section of ‘Notes for a Biography’, the speaker states that: ‘When I next read the news I thought man had gone mad’. A new, post-war sense of the world’s madness informs many of MacNeice’s late parables in *The Burning Perch*, but where the central figures in *The Dark Tower* and ‘Notes for a Biography’ are able to affect a kind of self-destructive self-realisation in the end, poems from the final collection do not attempt to reach such a resolution. Instead, they reflect a sense of perpetuity inherent to life’s rhythms with motifs of repetition and paralysis. This lack of individualist resolution coincides with a parallel shift in the role of irrationality in the poems. In poems such as ‘Birthright’ and ‘The Habits’, parable renders the rationale of the society irrational through nightmare. Indeed, in ‘Birthright’ the speaker is being goaded to mount a horse that is explicitly referred to in these terms: ‘the nightmare neighed’. This calls back to similar imagery from ‘Dreams in Middle Age’: ‘Sooner let nightmares whinny’. The recurring use of horses is rooted in a play on words: bad dreams are *night mares*. The horse in ‘Birthright’ draws the poem to its end in an inverted cliché: ‘My jaw dropped and I gaped from drouth: / My gift horse looked me in the mouth’. Longley notes that in *The Burning Perch*: ‘Cliché and idiom tighten their control of poems’. Here, there is a strange bathos in the last line, with the colon at the end of the previous line setting up a pause that gives it the impact of a joke’s punchline. The odd humour and cliché of the poem is in tension with the dread that runs through it, creating the convincing uncanniness of nightmare.

The refusal of the speaker of ‘Birthright’ to mount their horse is a refusal to be born: ‘When I was born the row began, / I had never asked to be a man’. This

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links the poem to the radio parable plays and the hero’s entry into a hostile world, but, as McDonald notes, the move to lyric form lines up with a draw towards the incomplete parable. Xavier Kalck has pointed out that the couplet rhymes of the poem reflect the sense of spiritual stasis that comes from the speaker’s refusal to mount the horse. The rhyme also works with the bouncing iambic tetrameter to create the nursery rhyme-like form that contributes to its uncanny effect:

I said ‘To mount him means to die’,
They said ‘Of course’; the nightmare neighed
And I felt foolish and afraid.
The sun came up, my feet stuck fast,
The minutes, hours, and years went past,
More chances missed than I could count,
The stable boys cried: ‘Time to mount’!

The speaker appears to be stuck in the solipsism of the Soak from The Dark Tower who will not ‘abdicate the life of the womb’. In failing to overcome this trial the parable is left incomplete. The part that is left incomplete specifically is the one where the questing hero is supposed to give in to the irrationality of their own annihilation as a paradoxical means of asserting their individuality. The problem is that the opposite action – refusing to mount the horse – is also described in paradoxical terms. The speaker feels ‘foolish and afraid’, caught between the demands of a world that will knowingly lead them towards death and their own desire for self-preservation.

The forces of the world leading one to destruction against one’s will informs the structure of another parable poem, ‘The Habits’. Here, the quest of entry into the world is completed, as the poem tracks a man’s life from infancy to death. At each

187 McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 171.
stage, he is moulded by ‘the habits’, who take on the guises of different social forces: ‘His parents’, ‘The master’, ‘The adgirl’, ‘The computer’, and ‘The Lord God’. Each of them is ‘dressed’ in a kind of uniform, for instance in the second stanza: ‘they were dressed / In pinstripe trousers and carried / A cheque book, a passport, and a sjambok’. Finally, the habits say in the refrain at the end of each stanza: ‘it was all for the best’. Kalck has discussed the rigid structure of the poem, noting: ‘The automatic character of the frame makes it a regular habit in its own right, which creates a frightening level of self-reflectiveness in the poem’. While the poem does track a kind of completed quest from birth to death, what is being questioned is what kind of quest can be completed in a journey that continually treads over the same ground. In fact, the changing uniforms of the habits and the repeated refrain create the sense of a continual re-induction into the world with each new stage of life. This is how the speaker of ‘Birthright’ can wait for ‘minutes, hours, and years’, refusing to mount the horse. In *The Burning Perch*, life itself takes the form of a continual failure to mount the horse, or be born, or engage the quest.

This troubles the positive possibilities of irrational self-sacrifice. In the final stanza of ‘The Habits’, surrendering to one’s death no longer carries subversive possibilities:

> Then age became real: the habits  
> Outstayed their welcome, they were dressed  
> In nothing and carried nothing.  
> He said: If you won’t go, I go.  
> The Lord God said it was all for the best.

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190 Kalck, *Muted Strings*, 112.
While the man appears to assert some kind of autonomy, ‘I go’, the extent to which this is true is questioned by the repetition of the refrain. ‘The Lord God’ repeating ‘it was all for the best’ implicates this pseudo-sacrifice in the entire chain of involuntary social influences that have shaped the man from the beginning. As Longley writes: ‘Refrain often reinforces deterministic vistas in The Burning Perch, the sense that the universe runs on habitual tramlines’.

Death is not an escape from the deterministic world, but the terminus to which the individual has been moved this entire time. Between ‘Birthright’ and ‘The Habits’ there is a development of this crucial paradox, that facing one’s destruction can reify individuality, emerges. What was once the irrational, but ultimately edifying, choice to self-sacrifice, in order to bestow freedom to others, is now the last in a series of decisions that has been made for one by social forces. Refusal of the quest is no solution, and in fact traps one within a cycle of paralysis that resolves the same way. The way that the lyric form realises this entrapment through its tightly controlled stanzas and repetitious motifs precludes the possibility of resolution. In this sense, the move to the lyric parable reflects a new view that the assertion of individuality in society is itself a kind of paradox.

This chapter began by exploring how MacNeice’s engagement with the classics laid the groundwork for ideas about how irrationality can be part of a holistic self that allows one to assert individuality in a rationalising society. But in a post-war world that appears to have turned irrational itself, where does this leave those models of selfhood? While these later poems do not at first appear to be overly concerned with the mind, the terms on which they discuss their paradoxes have a

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191 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 166.
clear psychological heritage. What we have seen over the course of this analysis is the development of a MacNeicean concept of the irrational self that, at the end of his writing life, is reflected back onto the society it once baulked against. The shadowy interior of the mind becomes a model for writing a world that has left the speaker behind. As the speaker in the fourth section of ‘Notes for a Biography’ says: ‘I am not of their temper and not of this age’. At each stage of his career, concepts of irrationality lie at the heart of a consistent tension between self and society, which casts the whole span of his writing about the self in psychological terms. The next chapter revisits some of these ideas about the relationship between the recesses of the unconscious and the formation of the self, but from a slightly different angle: instinct.
CHAPTER TWO

DIALECTIC OF PURIFICATION: TOWARDS A POETICS OF INSTINCT

There is in every word set down by the imaginative mind an awful undercurrent of meaning, and evidence and shadow upon it of the deep places out of which it has come. — John Ruskin, _Modern Painters_

‘Experiences with Images’ and the mythology of childhood

In an essay entitled ‘Experiences with Images’, which first appeared in the journal _Orpheus_ in 1949, MacNeice writes about the images that ‘form an early stratum of experiences which persists in one’s work just as it persists in one’s dreams’, which for him includes the sea, fields, factories, and gardens. Of their importance to his poetry, he writes: ‘it is these [...] images which I am more likely to use “instinctively”’. What is meant by this is not precisely explained, and the quotation marks around ‘instinctively’ seem to distance MacNeice from his own word choice, indicating a deliberate lack of commitment. It is therefore not clear from what sources he is drawing his understanding of instinct, and how those might be underpinning the poetry in the way he describes. Helpfully, his thought about instinct can be traced, according to _The Strings are False_, back to his time as an undergraduate student:

Reading Plato for examination purposes I was reacting against the view that reason dominates instinct, soul body, and subject-matter form, and found support for my attack on these three Platonic tenets in the psychoanalysts, D. H. Lawrence and the Post-Impressionist painters respectively.

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3 Louis MacNeice, _The Strings are False_ (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 127.
The idea that ‘reason dominates instinct’ comes from the *Phaedrus*. Speaking of the form of the soul, Plato writes the allegory of the charioteer driving two winged horses:

> Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer. Now all the gods’ steeds and all their charioteers are good, and of good stock; but with other beings it is not wholly so. With us men, in the first place, it is a pair of steeds that the charioteer controls; moreover one of them is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome.⁴ [246a-246b]

The charioteer represents man’s reason, and each horse represents a side of the instincts: the noble horse represents moral impulses and the other horse represents irrational appetites. The role of the charioteer is to wrangle both horses towards enlightenment: the role of reason is to keep instinctual urges, both noble and ignoble, in check.⁵

MacNeice is not specific about which psychoanalysts he is referring to in order to counter this view. As discussed in the previous chapter, MacNeice was, by the time he comes to write this, directly engaged with psychoanalysis through his reading of Carl Jung. However, there is no central theory of instinct in either psychoanalysis as a whole or in the body of work of some of its major figures. For Sigmund Freud, instinct was ‘the most important but at the same time least complete portion of psychoanalytic theory’.⁶ This is made more complicated for Freud’s readers in English by debates around James Strachey’s choice to translate

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‘instinct’ from the original German *Trieb*. The controversial nature of this choice is evidenced by Strachey’s need to defend himself in the Hogarth Press’s complete edition of his Freud translations: ‘My choice of this rendering has been attacked in some quarters with considerable, but, I think, mistaken severity. The term almost invariably proposed by critics as an alternative is “drive”’. Part of his justification is the looseness of the original term itself: ‘There seems little doubt that, from the standpoint of modern biology, Freud used the word “Trieb” to cover a variety of different concepts’. The trouble with this, according to Jacques Lacan, is that: ‘What [Freud] calls *Trieb* is quite different from an instinct’. In uniting different concepts under one term, Strachey collapses the distinction between animal instinct and human impulses to Freud’s English readers. Lacan is among those who translates *Trieb* as ‘drive’, writing that: ‘the characteristic of the drive is to be a konstante Kraft, a constant force. The constancy of the thrust forbids any assimilation of the drive to a biological function, which always has a rhythm’. The drive is a continual impulse or desire that is cleaved from survival needs, and instead hews closer to desires that run unacknowledged in the recesses of the mind. What is important to note for present purposes is that this theory of drives is presented to the British reading public under the banner of ‘instinct’, as attested to by a 1925 editorial in *The Times*: ‘According to believers in “psycho-analysis”, the mainsprings of conduct lie in that instinctive or emotional part of the mind to which they have given the name

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8 Ibid, xxv.


“unconsciousness”’. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud’s theory of drives or instincts took a turn when he developed the idea of the ‘death drive’, an unconscious desire in organic life to ‘return to an earlier state of things’. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he described it as ‘an instinct of destruction against the external world’. This concept found influence in Britain through the work of Melanie Klein. Klein’s psychoanalytic work was focused on accounting for the development of personality in children, and the Freudian conflict between a life and death instinct at the heart of living organisms offered a structure for her theories about their destructive or combative tendencies. In a 1933 paper entitled ‘The Early Development on Conscience in the Child’, she writes:

> the danger of being destroyed by this instinct of aggression sets up, I think, an excessive tension in the ego, which is felt by it as an anxiety, so that it is faced at the very beginning of its development with the task of mobilizing libido against its death-instinct. [...] A division takes place in the id, or instinctual levels of the psyche, by which one part of the instinctual impulses is directed against the other.

Klein’s impact in Britain was due in part to her focus on child development, which happened to be popular at the time. While it is not certain what psychoanalytic texts the undergraduate MacNeice was referring to in order to refute Plato’s idea

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that reason dominates instinct, he was writing in accordance with a contemporary view that the instinctual life of man was defined by an inner conflict between two aspects of the self: the rational and the irrational, or the life drive and the death drive.

MacNeice’s treatment of animals offers Darwinian evolutionary theory as another vector for thinking through what he understands by instinct. In Zoo, a non-fiction prose work of 1938, he uses the situation of the zoo animals that he observes as an allegory for modern, civilized man’s relation to his own mind: ‘And one must forget one’s life outside just as the animal has forgotten his – forgotten it on the surface, though the instincts creep about inside him which will never again be realized in action.’\(^\text{16}\) Here, he is writing from an understanding of Darwin’s The Origin of Species, in which the naturalist theorised the loss of ‘natural instincts’, meaning those inherited through generations of wild animals, through subsequent generations of domestication: ‘In some cases compulsory habit alone has sufficed to produce inherited mental changes; in other cases compulsory habit has done nothing, and all has been the result of selection, pursued both methodically and unconsciously.’\(^\text{17}\) In Zoo, the repressed instincts in the domesticated animal reflect a dark human psychology that is contextualised by a worsening political situation on the European continent. Yet in On The Origin of Species (1859), Darwin, as with Freud in Three Essays on Sexuality, does not provide a stable point of departure for MacNeice to use ‘instinct’ as a term in a specific way. Instead, there is a deliberate fuzziness in his account, and an appeal to common understanding:

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 104.

I will not attempt any definition of instinct. It would be easy to show that several distinct mental actions are commonly embraced by this term; but every one understands what is meant, when it is said that instinct impels the cuckoo to migrate and to lay her eggs in other birds’ nests.¹⁸

Darwin fleshes out his theory of inherited instinct under wild and domestic conditions in situ through different case studies and observations. As will be discussed in chapter three, the writing of instinct in Zoo brings Darwin to bear on both Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents (1930) and Aristotle’s teleology, but for the purposes of the present discussion, what is relevant is how this particular passage adds to a complex picture of how MacNeice is understanding instinct in different ways. His use of instinct is drawn from a number of different sources, each of which is definitionally evasive in its own way.

Any attempt to examine the importance of instinct to MacNeice’s poetics must proceed from what appears to be an unstable starting point. However, its nebulous, wide-ranging meaning arguably makes it a great asset for a writer such as MacNeice who, as discussed previously, makes use of much of the contemporaneous intellectual milieu without ascribing simplistic lines of influence or allegiance to particular creeds or movements. The present chapter will therefore argue that there is no single source for MacNeice’s understanding of ‘instinct’, but that he draws on a wide, and sometimes intersecting, pool of influences in his attempts to write poetry that attests to the powerful pull of his childhood on his mental life. What unites these influences is a shared gesture towards an unknown aspect of the self that resides in unconscious mental activity. In doing so, it will be discovered that the poetry, as a body of work, builds up psychological associations

¹⁸ Ibid., 253.
within certain images, which in turn interact with the other intellectual properties, such as their metaphysical import.

Returning to ‘Experiences with Images’, it can be seen that psychoanalysis has an influence on how instinct manifests in the unconscious through childhood memory. MacNeice recalls ‘the noise of the trains’, as well as ‘the foghorns and the factory hooters’, which he could hear from his bedroom window, which he writes were ‘impinging on me before I knew what they meant, i.e. where they came from, these noises had as it were a purely physical meaning which I would find it hard to analyse’. From the child’s perspective, the sounds that come from the distance are unyoked from their referents, leaving the child with no context in which to understand them. As a result, they take on ambivalent significances that are ‘hard to analyse’. Between its invocations of instinct, dreams, and analysis, ‘Experiences with Images’ represents a trend in MacNeice’s prose poetics and memoir of appealing to psychoanalytic discourses in order to apprehend the past formation of the present self. Comparison with Strings reveals some of the characteristic traits of MacNeice’s literary relationship with psychoanalysis. The end of the third chapter proposes that the narrative of the text will be taken back in time to MacNeice’s childhood. The opening of the fourth chapter, however, undermines this immediately: ‘Hark the lying angels sing. Every man’s birth might be a Messiah’s but is it? All this nine month’s trouble and forward-looking in order to produce, so the psychoanalysts tell us, a backward-looking child who longs again for the womb’. In placing his own compulsion to return to the past in the context of psychoanalysis, MacNeice invites a psychoanalytic interpretation of the entire memoir project.

19 MacNeice, ‘Experiences with Images’, 158.
20 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 36.
However, he is careful not to identify completely with it. The wry tone of ‘so the psychoanalysts tell us’ is more derisive than supportive. *Strings* conjures psychoanalysis with one hand, while pushing it away with the other.

MacNeice then moves into a sequence that, while not explicitly a dream, certainly reads like one, with its ersatz spatiality and symbolism:

Memory cannot go back that far, fades into myth, I find myself walking down a long straight passage hung with bead curtains. Through one curtain after another, like sheets of coloured rains, but I notice very little in the passage, only at the end there is a staircase. I go up it several flights, at the last floor but one there is a small window of cheap stained glass which throws a stain on the floor, mingling with the pattern of worn-out linoleum. The last flight of the stairs is uncarpeted and the top is all but dark. The top is a blind alley, a small lobby without any doors and the roof sloping down as in an attic. It smells very fusty. Close in under the roof, but I can hardly see it, is a trunk, an old-fashioned trunk with metal studs on it. On the lid of the trunk there are initials but I cannot see if they are mine. Anyway the trunk is locked.21

At the very outset of his inquiry into the personal past, MacNeice troubles the possibility. This passage is instructive for an examination of his writing from memory in a number of ways. It illustrates the consciously porous barriers between memory, myth, and dream in his work. This is reflected in the loose manner in which it has been written, with the beginning of the dream-like narrative blended seamlessly into the observation on memory and myth. This is in part down to the unfinished, unrefined nature of the manuscript from which *Strings* was published. As Dodds notes, the project was originally abandoned by MacNeice, and the version that would be posthumously published comes from this abandoned manuscript. Dodds’s preface notes the fragmented nature of the manuscript, existing initially as an amalgam of notes, chapters written in longhand, typed sections, and parts of

21 Ibid.
possible lectures.\textsuperscript{22} Regardless of whether the connections proposed above would have been edited out in a refined draft, the fact of the text as it is extant suggests a natural affinity for MacNeice between the problem of memory and the inscrutability of the dream.

That myth mediates this shift is particularly telling, for myth and dream both hold privileged positions in the psychoanalytic concept of the mind for the potential of their symbolism to interpret and understand memory. Indeed, the way that MacNeice writes the dream sequence bears slight, but noteworthy, stylistic similarities to the way that Freud describes his own dreams as case studies in the James Strachey translation of *Interpretation of Dreams*:

\begin{quote}
A great hall - a number of guests, whom we are receiving - among them Irma, whom I immediately take aside, as though to answer her letter, and to reproach her for not yet accepting the "solution." I say to her: "If you still have pains, it is really only your own fault." - She answers: "If you only knew what pains I have now in the throat, stomach, and abdomen - I am choked by them." I am startled, and look at her. She looks pale and puffy. I think that after all I must be overlooking some organic affection.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Note, in both passages, the immediate attention to space, the use of present tense, and the distanced narration of an ‘I’ with which it is ambiguously identified. Even though the links of influence between Freud and MacNeice are vague at this stage, *Strings* evidences an awareness on MacNeice’s part of a particular set of stylistic conventions for describing dreams derived from foundational psychoanalytic texts. Importantly, however, he withholds the analysis. In ‘Experiences with Images’, after all, he claims that the ambiguous nature of those early memories he regards as having instinctive properties are ‘hard to analyse’ because they appeared to lack

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 11.

proper referents. This is a recurring theme in his engagement with psychoanalysis: he readily employs its vocabularies and assumptions, but ignores, or is vocally sceptical of, its analytical and therapeutic promises. Its diagnostic language enables the self-examination that constitutes memoir, which accounts for its recurring presence in MacNeice’s biographically-informed poetics. In using the language of psychoanalysis, however, its structures are tacitly brought into play. When MacNeice writes that he uses certain images ‘instinctively’, he indicates that the poetic potential of his childhood relies on the self being unknown to the self. Memory must become like myth, and experiences must resist analysis, leaving the adult poet with a body of images that do not have fixed significances, concrete referents, or easy explanations. There must be an unconscious element to these images, by which is meant an unclear biographical provenance, that offers them both potency and flexibility in equal measure.

In this sense, ‘Experiences with Images’ finds affinity with the earlier Modern Poetry: ‘And I should agree with those who say paradoxically that the poet is often not completely sure what he is trying to say until he has said it. He works up to his meaning by a dialectic of purification’.24 ‘Dialectic’ carries connotations that are more readily suggestive of philosophy, and yet the idea that the act of writing works on an expressive level that is not immediately clear to the writer places the poetic germ squarely in the unknown, unconscious self that is clearly also psychological. There is no explicit analysis of the dream-work in MacNeice’s writing because this compromises the working-through of the dialectic. The chapter will thus proceed from the understanding that to use certain images ‘instinctively’ means that the

presence of these images in the poetry identifies unconscious processes and a preoccupation in the writing with modern ideas of a selfhood that is unknown, but still felt.

The use of this psychoanalytic language in *Strings* and ‘Experiences with Images’ reveals an early search for a way of thinking through the dream logic that will develop into the double-level thinking of *Varieties of Parable*. The late poetics do not arrive at their mental properties suddenly, but these can instead be traced through the images that ‘Experiences with Images’ identifies. Their place in the unconscious affords them an ambivalence that appears to destabilise the act of using them at all. Proceeding from this sketch of a psychological poetics, the present chapter investigates two of the images that MacNeice identifies as being used by instinct: the garden, and the sea. Previous readings of these images have focussed on their metaphysical meanings. The approach taken by this chapter will rather argue that MacNeice’s metaphysics interact with different frames of knowledge to explore a more central concern with the limits of the mind. This, in turn, implies the importance of psychology to MacNeice’s poetic thinking and aligns him with the psychological turn in other modernist texts.

The garden and the sea will be the focus of this chapter. A survey of everything ascribed to instinct by MacNeice in ‘Experiences with Images’, which also includes fields, factories, trains, and images of petrification, is outside the scope of a single chapter.\(^\text{25}\) The garden and the sea are sufficient to reveal the workings of a poetics of the unconscious. Furthermore, they are relatively common throughout his writing life in comparison to these other examples. The chapter will argue that

\(^{25}\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 160.
the garden and the sea are used to explore ideas of containment and infinity, respectively. These competing desires operate from a mental subjectivity that is interested in its own borders, and are continually engaged with the possibilities, and impossibilities, of perception and imagination. The metaphysical explorations that the poetry is interested in are conducted through a self-consciously mental framework that comes from the importance of these images and ideas for constituting a present self out of the past. In this sense, MacNeice can be seen to be tapping into psychological conversations with certain figures of Bloomsbury modernism, including the art criticism of Roger Fry and the writing of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. This makes MacNeice an important figure in the afterlife of high modernism’s psychological debates.

The next section of this chapter will examine the garden in MacNeice’s early work, considering its biographical provenance and its relation to ideas of limit. The following sections will look at MacNeice’s extended engagement with the sea, which is one of the most potent images in his entire oeuvre. From the liminal space of the shore, MacNeice’s speakers struggle with the impossibility of realising infinity within the limits of the mind while yet being instinctively drawn to it.

‘Across the hawthorn hedge’: MacNeice in the Garden

The gardens of MacNeice’s poetry have their aesthetic genesis in the grounds of his childhood homes in Carrickfergus. They are private and personal spaces, as opposed to the more public botanical gardens in the writings of Evelyn Waugh or Virginia Woolf. Nonetheless, they have several conceptual affinities with these wider

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26 Barbara Cooke notes that Waugh’s gardens denote peace and containment through the limits of their walls. See Barbara Cooke, *Evelyn Waugh’s Oxford* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2018), 136-139. For a discussion of Kew Garden’s aesthetic and political significances in Virginia Woolf’s work,
understandings of the garden: they mediate the natural and human worlds by ordering and containing the natural according to human taxonomies, temporalities, and spatialities. An early example of the garden in his poetry is ‘A Serene Evening’, from his juvenile collection *Blind Fireworks*: ‘The garden to-night is all Renoir and Keats, / In the mouth melting to forgetfulness, / The skimmings of the sun hang on the hedge’.  

Terence Brown writes of the reappearance of the garden in *Autumn Sequel*: ‘Within the garden of limitation value is incarnate. [...] The moment is poised within its limitations, valuable because of them’.  

This is true of the earlier poem also. As the sun sets, the space of the garden allows the moment to be framed, while an awareness of its limitations – the moment cannot last forever – informs the imagery. Both ‘melting’ and ‘hang’ offer the suspension of a particular state, while also suggesting impermanence: the garden will melt to forgetfulness, and the hanging rays of sun will fall out of view. Specifically, it is the hedge wall, which carries the suggestion of the hawthorn hedge of the garden at Carrickfergus, that allows the sunset to ‘hang’, visually connecting ideas of spatial and temporal encapsulation.

While the experience of the moment is often framed in metaphysical terms, the reference to Keats opens up avenues for thinking through the mental operations of the garden. The poetry of Keats contains numerous well-known examples of garden imagery, particularly in the final stanza of ‘Ode to Psyche’. The speaker declares their dedication to Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul: ‘Yes, I will be thy

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priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind'. The construction of a mental ‘fane’, or shrine, takes on the guise of a garden:

And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,
  With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign,
  Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:

The garden becomes an expansive allegory for the mind, with the speaker as a kind of gardener who cultivates the ‘untrodden region’ of the mind and orders it. Alongside the explicit mental imagery, such as the ‘working brain’, the view of the scene draws back from the ‘wide quietness’ of nature to the contained space of the mind-garden, emphasising the containment that can be traced in MacNeice’s own gardens. As Alan Bewell points out, this treatment of natural imagery marks a point of departure between Keats and the earlier Romantics, such as William Wordsworth: ‘Keats and his circle, like their Victorian counterparts, saw botany and gardening as hobbies, as being intrinsically linked to pleasure and the leisure-time escape from the demands of city-life’. As a result, his employment of nature imagery is contextualised by an architectural focus on the ordering of plants. The garden ‘is a textual product’ for Keats: ‘Where Wordsworth would have emphasized “common nature,” Keats is concerned with nature as a product of art and labour’.

When MacNeice evokes the Keatsian garden in ‘A Serene Evening’, he evokes with it the idea of a textual garden that is defined by its limits within the mind. There are a number of ways in which an underlying architectural logic makes itself known

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31 Ibid., 75.
in the poem. The sun that hangs on the hedge is ‘Spread out like draperies’, hewing closer to a domestic, rather than natural, idea of the garden, and implying deliberate arrangement. The first six lines take care to set out the details of the space – the sun on the hedge, the bonfire smoke, the yellow deck-chair – before the speaker declares that they wish to ‘permeate the garden’. Furthermore, the reference to Renoir, who painted a large number of garden scenes, not only deepens the intertextual links that the text is self-consciously making, but also foregrounds the idea that this garden is a painterly place, an aesthetic construction that is framed by the speaker.

This garden appears at first to be defined by deliberation and self-consciousness, rather than the unconscious character of instinct. However, the mental clues in the text signal a departure from Keats, which in turn suggests an unconscious undercurrent counterpointing the sources that it draws from. The mind is subtly evoked by ‘melting to forgetfulness’, and later by the ‘dreamful blue’ that ‘Covers the garden’. Where Keats consciously furnishes his mind-garden with ‘a working brain’, here the psychological inflections of the language emphasise the lowering of a conscious state. As quoted earlier, in ‘Experiences with Images’, MacNeice writes that instinctive images such as the garden ‘persists in one’s work just as it persists in one’s dreams’. The poetic seed of that link can be seen in the ‘dreamful’ garden of the earlier work. While MacNeice is continuing a Keatsian association of the mind with the garden, what has changed is the specific idea of the mind that he is connecting to this imagery. The garden here is a place that is associated with a lack of consciousness, making explicit reference to an older model of the mental garden while developing another that is clearly more indebted to an unconscious mode. The speaker wishes to ‘permeate the garden’, an image of diffusion that seems to clash with the ideas of containment that are otherwise
informing the space. However, this chimes with what is being suggested by
forgetting and dreams here: the relationship of the speaker to the space is defined
by an undeliberate, associative navigation, rather than the labours of the Keatsian
gardener.

It is this sense of containment that is the thematic focus of much of his writing
that uses garden imagery, as exemplified in 'The Sunlight on the Garden':

The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold,
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.32

Brown has noted the complexity of the poem’s rhymes.33 The end rhymes of each
stanza follow an abcbba structure, but the a and c rhymes of the first and third lines
inform internal rhymes at the beginning of the second and fourth lines, respectively:
‘garden / Hardens’; ‘minute/ Within its’. Between the strength of these internal
rhymes and the enclosed structure of the A rhymes bookending each stanza, the
form here appears to mirror the idea of the ‘cage’. Yet, of course, the cage fails
precisely to contain ‘the minute’, with the enjambment between the first two lines
immediately undercutting the stable image of the sunny garden. Entropy runs
through the poem’s imagery. In the first two lines, sunlight ‘grows cold’, echoing
MacNeice’s earlier use of the same idea in poems such as ‘Morning Sun’: ‘But when
the sun goes out, the streets go cold’.34 In earlier work these shifts of light reflected
the darker edge of the poetry’s phenomenological flux, offering the contrast that
energises the overwhelming brightness and colour of the modern city. Here, that

32 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 57.
33 Brown, Sceptical Vision, 181.
34 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 15.
same shift still suggests flux or change, but elsewhere in the poem as lines such ‘Our freedom as free lances / Advances towards its end’, and ‘every evil iron / Siren and what it tells’, qualify that this change is historical, suggesting apocalyptic movement towards what would become the Second World War.

In a footnote from the introduction to his 1944 selected edition of Tennyson’s poems, W. H. Auden compares Tennyson and Baudelaire’s technique, opining:

> It is interesting to speculate on the relation between the strictness and musicality of a poet’s form and his own anxiety. It may well be, I think, that the more [the poet] is conscious of an inner disorder and dread, the more value he will place on tidiness in the work as a defense, as if he hoped that through control of the means of expressing his emotions, the emotions themselves, which he cannot master, might be brought to order.\(^\text{35}\)

Brown points out that MacNeice quotes this passage in a review of Edward Lear’s *Tea Pots and Quails* before he applies it to his reading of the structure of ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’: ‘We feel that although we cannot cage the minutes within nets of gold, at least the poet has been able to cage his feelings about it, within the filaments of a verbal pattern. Something has been done’.\(^\text{36}\) This is suggested in the repetition of the first line in the final line, which keeps the poem textually bound by the same image while also allowing for the transformation of that image from a negative to a positive connotation: ‘The sunlight on the garden / Hardens and grows cold’ turns into ‘And grateful too / For sunlight on the garden’. Peter McDonald notes the tension between the poem’s structure and suggestions of entropy: ‘Effectively, MacNeice uses the structure of his poem to supply the closure against which, in fact,

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the argument runs’. He argues that this suggests ‘an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the isolation which the poem’s structure, its firm and obvious closure, enacts’. Brown and McDonald both emphasise the way that the structure here is working against the poem’s content. However, the movement of the poem is towards the resolution of its form and imagery, as the containment suggested by the rhyme scheme is perfectly adequate to, and highly suggestive of, the prime image of the text, which is the garden itself. By the end of the poem, the harmony has been resolved, but in the mean time the structure has been threading this resolution throughout the text in the background.

The Auden quote above offers some context for thinking about this in terms of the mind. He is bringing a loose psychoanalytic logic to his reading of Tennyson and Baudelaire: in proposing that a particular mental state can result in a particular behaviour, or way of writing, he is implying that this process can be traced backwards, and that a particular way of writing can be seen as a sign of a particular mental state. His point is speculative, and certainly not definitive or rigorously evidenced. Nevertheless, its analytic echoes – ‘anxiety’, ‘inner disorder’, and ‘defense’ in particular bear Freudian connotations – speak to a way of reading that sees form as kind of psychological hermeneutics. That MacNeice goes on to endorse this viewpoint shows that he is aware of such an approach by the time he comes to write ‘Experiences with Images’, a text in which he retroactively assigns psychological significance to images that include the garden. As previously stated, the evocation of instinct suggests ideas of an unknown operation. The affinity between the image of the garden and the structure of ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’

38 Ibid., 76.
provide a model of what this may mean in practice, as the garden’s connotations of containment inform a second layer of meaning in the poem operating beneath the entropy on the surface. This immediately suggests the double-level meaning that would prove critical to MacNeice’s theorising of the parable later on. It is not merely that MacNeice uses images ‘instinctively’ to mean ‘unthinkingly’, but that certain images herald poetic operations that work subtextually in a way that calls for later theorising by the writer. This interpretation is substantiated by the way that MacNeice writes in ‘Experiences with Images’ about this exact dynamic:

Even in what is said [...] all poems, though again in varying degrees, contain an internal conflict, cross-talk, backwash, come-back or pay-off. [...] Hence all poems, as well as and because of being dramatic, are *ironic* (in the old Greek sense of ‘dramatic irony’); poet and reader both know, consciously or unconsciously, the rest of the truth which lurks between the lines.39

In ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’ one can see this internal conflict, and McDonald’s identification of ‘the inadequacy of the isolation’ signals a sense of dramatic irony. The relevance of this passage to a reading of instinct is in the idea that it is both the poet and reader on whom the poem can work both consciously and unconsciously. ‘Experiences with Images’ opens with the question: ‘How do I use images?’40 The answers that follow often disavow the possibility of knowing the answer precisely, hence the garden is used ‘instinctively’, rather than just being a stand-in for a concrete idea of the mind.

The phenomenological and psychological potential of the garden as a space inform several modernist works in anticipation of ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’.

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40 Ibid., 153.
Virginia Woolf’s ‘Kew Gardens’, for instance, shares a similar aesthetic interest in the changing of light:

The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of a pebble, or the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins, or, falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear.⁴¹

The shifts in light match the trajectory of the story’s loose narrative, as the perspective shifts between the thoughts of different people and creatures populating the eponymous botanical gardens at Kew. In the first of these instances, a woman wonders to her husband: ‘Doesn’t one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren’t they one’s past, all that remains of it […] one’s happiness, one’s reality?’⁴² The garden is also a place of memory, and of ‘one’s reality’ for MacNeice: in the first instance because of its place in childhood, and in the second because of the personal, mental isolation that can be experienced within its limits. Even in a public garden such as Kew, the ordering and enclosure of nature informs the similar bordering of the individual mind.

MacNeice may also be taking cues from D. H. Lawrence, for whom gardens were a very important image. Of particular relevance is ‘At the Front’, in which the speaker wishes that ‘the elder trees in flower could suddenly heave, and burst / The walls of the house, and nettles puff out from the hearth at which I was nursed’.⁴³ The garden is defined by containment through its association with the domestic space of the house, which makes it a suitable counterpoint to history. The context for the

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⁴² Ibid.
writing of ‘At the Front’ is the First World War, scenes of which are evoked in the final lines of the poem: ‘And now that the skies are falling, the world is spouting in fountains of dirt, / I would give my soul for the homestead to fall with me, go with me, both in one hurt’. Both here, and in ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’, the private grounds of the house are a site that stages a tension between the apocalyptic portents of the outside world and the safety of the private. MacNeice appears to be taking an opposing trajectory to Lawrence here. While the elder writer resolves the destruction of war into the garden imagery by imagining the bursting forth of trees and nettles, MacNeice’s poem attempts to contain disaster within the walls of poetic form. Nonetheless, MacNeice inherits the garden’s connotations of isolation and privacy from Lawrence. Furthermore, in his collection of travel essays Mornings in Mexico (1927), the garden is associated with memory through the concept of Heimweh, which is the German for homesickness: ‘Perhaps when I have a Weh at all, my Heimweh is for the tree in front of the house, the overshadowing tree whose green top one never looks at’.44 Both here, and in ‘At the Front’, the private garden is indelibly tied to a particular kind of memory, which is a nostalgic reminiscence of something considered formative. This is particularly relevant for MacNeice, for whom reminiscence informs the importance of those images that have ambivalent significances rooted in childhood.

An understanding of the importance of biographical detail to the origins of MacNeice’s garden imagery begins with a consideration of the gardener as a figure, and the centrality of the mind to that writing. ‘The Gardener’, the third part of the short sequence ‘Novelettes’ in Plant and Phantom (1941), covers the final years

44 D. H. Lawrence, Mornings in Mexico (1927; New York: Tauris Parke, 1999), 174.
of a gardener as his mental and physical health deteriorate. The first, third, and fifth stanzas end with lines calling his mind into question: ‘For he was not quite all there’; ‘He was not quite right in the head’; ‘He was not quite up to the job’. E. R. Dodds’s notes in Strings indicate that the poem refers to Archie, the gardener hired by MacNeice’s father to tend to the grounds of their second house in Carrickfergus. The poem is drawn from conscious memory, rather than unconscious instinct. Nevertheless, it speaks to a conceptual link between the gardener and the feeble or limited mind that can help illuminate the wider significance of the garden itself to a psychological poetics.

In the novel Roundabout Way, the main character, Devlin Urquhart, abandons his studies at Oxford to become a gardener. His reasoning generates a dichotomy between the gardener as unthinking physical labourer and the scholar as mentally over-active. Devlin claims to his friend Gunter: “SEX and LIFE are the two great things to avoid […] that’s why I’m going to be a gardener. I imagine you don’t get either if you’re a gardener”. When Gunter accuses him of being a ‘poseur’, Devlin replies: “I’m not a poseur at all. That’s just what I’m running away from. LIFE and HAVING TO FACE REALITY – that’s where the pose comes in; all just so much claptrap”. Gunter predicts to himself that Devlin’s scheme will fail: ‘The trouble about him was, Gunter thought, he was too much brain and not enough – well not human enough’. Ultimately, Gunter is proven correct. There are antecedents here to some of the ideas that later come up in ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’. For instance, becoming a gardener is thought of as an escape from life and reality, which informs

45 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 188-189.
46 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 47-48.
48 Ibid., 19.
the opposition in the later poem between the confines of the garden and the
destructive march of history outside. This episode fleshes out some of the
gardener’s mental characteristics, according to MacNeice, in a way that draws links
with Archie. Archie the gardener from childhood memory becomes the generalised
idea of the gardener figure who is mentally deficient, but honest and free from the
pretences of society. These attitudes are patronising, but are framed throughout the
work as offering salvation from the stultification of the intellectual crowd.
Intelligence here is opposed to humanity, which Devlin lacks. While what it means
to be ‘not human enough’ to be a gardener is never satisfactorily explained by the
novel, it can be understood in the context of the poetry that came after *Roundabout
Way*.

In ‘The Glacier’, the speaker turns from the overwhelming, contradictory
rhythms of urban life to ‘seemingly slower things’, which includes a view ‘where a
gardener with trowel and rheumatic pains / Pumps up the roaring sap of vegetables
through their veins’,49 The gardener offers a counterpoint to the urban traveller in
a few key ways. As the speaker of ‘The Glacier’ suggests, the experience of watching
traffic crawl down city streets leads to a kind of dissociation or detachment from
events as the stream of vehicles becomes imperceptible: ‘But they all go so fast, bus
after bus, day after day, / Year after year, that you cannot mark any headway’. The
commuter is a stationary figure, perpetually waiting, as the city moves before them.
The gardener, on the other hand, is deeply, physically engaged with their world.
From their ‘rheumatic pains’, to the vegetable sap pumped ‘through their veins’, they are a figure that represents the promise of meaningful embodiment that the

city does not provide. This embodiment has an affinity with the linguistic dexterity of the classics, ‘the minnow-twisting of the latinist’, as one of the ‘seemingly slower things’ that counterpoint the urban. This marks a change from *Roundabout Way*, in which being a gardener is framed as the opposite of being a student, implying a complete mental-physical binary distinction between the two positions. Nevertheless, there is consistency between the two texts, in that each deploys the gardener as a stand-in for a mental alternative to the contexts in which they were written. *Roundabout Way* was written at the end of MacNeice’s undergraduate career in Oxford, and ‘The Glacier’ appeared in *Poems*, alongside other poetry responding to his changed surroundings in Birmingham. Whether as a foil to the pretences of academic life, or the paradoxical rhythms of the modern city, the gardener is useful in this early period of work for imagining ways of being that run counter to the pressures of modernity.

The way that the gardener suggests these accrued connotations of mental limits in other poems is true of the garden itself as well. The reference to Renoir in ‘A Serene Evening’ ascribes an affinity between the garden and visual art in a way that is developed by later ekphrastic poems. As a result, it is possible to see that garden imagery is used by MacNeice to flesh out ideas about the mind that art is drawing him to. Both Tom Walker and Edna Longley have written about MacNeice’s ekphrastic poetry, drawing attention to his schoolfriend Anthony Blunt, the eminent art historian and, later, Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures, as a primary intellectual influence.50 Longley states: ‘It is not widely appreciated that MacNeice’s first

intellectual mentor was Anthony Blunt’.51 Through Blunt, MacNeice was inducted into the ideas of a post-Impressionist Bloomsbury aesthetic as espoused by art critics such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the latter of whom theorised ‘significant form’, which would become a dominant idea for both Blunt and, by association, MacNeice. This line of influence has a natural antagonism with psychology, as Fry, in particular, was highly suspicious of the way that Carl Jung used, and abused, art in his clinical practice: ‘Nothing that he says corresponds to any kind of experience which I, or, I suspect, any of the artists I have ever known have had’.52 Jung frequently had his patients paint or draw during analysis as a means of allowing their unconscious to express itself.53 This approach was at odds with the ideas of Fry and Bell that visual forms have value in and of themselves, rather than in relation to a Jungian symbological corpus from which a narrative of instinct can be drawn: ‘the contemplation of formal relations’, according to Fry, is ‘as much detached from the instinctive life as any human activity that we know; to be in that respect on a par with science’.54 MacNeice’s informal education in art may well have steered him far from making any kind of connection between art and instinct, were it not for an independent aesthetic sense that developed during this same period:

There was one distorted still-life by Picasso – a jug and a bowl of fruit – which seemed to me especially real, the distortion bringing out the jugness of the jug and the bowlness of the bowl. That was my chief reason for liking it, but I did not say so as Anthony believed in Pure Form and entirely discounted the representational elements in painting.55

54 Fry, The Artist and Psycho-analysis, 4.
55 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 97.
This is echoed humourously when he later describes his early encounters with alcohol: ‘And the distortions of drunkenness made objects more real, more “significant”, even on a morning-after emphasising, as Picasso did, the jugness of the jug and the bowlness of the bowl’. Even in jest, by the time that MacNeice is coming to write *The Strings are False* he is making connections between his views on art and the kind of mental closing-off that can be traced in ‘A Serene Evening’. Earlier, in *Modern Poetry*, he had written a more forthright repudiation of Fry and Bell, in which he stated that significant form is ‘a contradiction in terms’. This accords with ‘Experiences with Images’, which is based on the argument that representational images of the mind, such as those in instinct or dreams, have significances for what he calls ‘my childhood’s mythology’. While not necessarily informed by a Jungian point of view, MacNeice’s poetry of paintings nonetheless evinces a psychological inflection to his ideas about the image that are informed by the garden.

    In ‘August’, for instance, the mind is compared to a painting, with respect to the experience of flux:

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

The thing that makes painting inadequate to the representation of reality – its being static where reality is in perpetual motion – is seen to be true also of the human mind. The references to tombs and ‘the living curve’ speak to the poem’s

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56 Ibid., 103.
58 MacNeice, ‘Experiences with Images’, 158.
metaphysical concerns about flux from an Aristotelean point of view, and this will be discussed in further detail in the section on MacNeice’s depiction of the sea. What also emerges from this stanza, however, is a psychology of perception. The difficulty of depicting the flux of experience is underscored by the limits of the mind itself. These limits are, by analogy, the frames of a painting, turning any one day into a world by itself. This is reinforced by the comparison of the mind to the theatre stage, which also implies a creative artifice to perception: the mind stages a representation of reality, rather than allowing for an unhindered experience of reality itself.

These ideas of the constructed image have an affinity with the constructed garden-image of Renoir and Keats, which is bolstered in the next stanza:

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

The sudden presence of the lawn-mower brings the garden into a poem about art. Furthermore, the image of the ‘little fountain of vivid green’ appears to come from memories of Archie, and makes its way into MacNeice’s description of him in the memoir: ‘a shrill silver noise as he pulled it back and a deeper purring or snoring noise and a clack as he thrust it forward. Then we could imagine the emerald dance of the grass in the air’.  

The speaker then casts himself as Nicolas Poussin, the French Baroque artist whom MacNeice admired after being introduced to him by Blunt, who had in turn read about him in the writings of Roger Fry.  

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60 MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 48.
61 Miranda Carter writes that Poussin had been seen as ‘a lifeless academic formalist’ until a revival in reputation during Blunt and MacNeice’s school years: ‘This very obscurity attracted Blunt, who was developing a taste for neglected artistic underdogs’. See Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2001), 28-29.
to the earlier poem ‘Poussin’, Walker connects MacNeice's striking use of colour to his friendship with Blunt and the influence of the significant form doctrine:

MacNeice’s strong response to colour [...] is conditioned in part by the importance placed on colour in the work of artists he was familiar with, such as Cézanne and Matisse; it is also related to the ways of interpreting that art and placing it within a narrative of art history that he had read or discussed with Blunt, such as Fry’s essay on "Plastic Colour".62

In ‘August’, ‘vivid green’ bears the mark of this conditioning, highlighting the presence of Bloomsbury aesthetics in MacNeice’s writing of art. However, the specific autobiographical context of the image puts this in tension with an independent view that admits the psychological as a framework for understanding painting. The presence of the garden here draws a connection between the desire to freeze the moment, as in the ‘A Serene Evening’ and ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’, and the ambition of the artist to depict a still image in a work of art. It implies unconscious mental activity in the development of independent aesthetic thought through its accrued biographical and textual associations with the limits of the mind. This is further evidenced by the wording of the poem’s final lines: ‘Our mind, being dead, wishes to have time die / For we, being ghosts, cannot catch hold of things’. The mind is personified by being given intentionality in the form of a wish, in such a way that subtly avoids total identification between the mind and the self, as if the former has its own sense of agency. There is a separation between ‘our mind’ and ‘we’, in a way that appears to theorise a causality between them that works unconsciously: ‘we’ are not able to ‘catch hold of things’, therefore ‘our mind’ develops a wish ‘to have time die’. Indeed, there are distinctly Freudian undertones,

62 Walker, “Even a still life is alive”, 208.
not only to the use of the word ‘wish’, but to the way that unconscious processes moderate between the mental and physical in these lines; as stated previously, this is the nearest that Freud gets to a definition of instinct. There is absolutely a metaphysical investigation about the nature of time here, but it is so frequently couched in terms that call attention to the mind that it also reads as the inklings of a psychological treatise about how the mind processes and represents time.

This also applies to ‘Nature Morte’, which works up to a reaction to the still-life paintings of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin by connecting suburban routines to similar problems of capturing the moment as are found in ‘August’:

So we whose senses give us things misfelt and misheard
Turn also, for our adjustment, to the pretentious word
Which stabilises the light on the sun-fondled trees
And, by photographing our ghosts, claims to put us at our ease; 63

The poem echoes much of the concerns about perception, art, and the moment as MacNeice’s other ekphrastic work. The speaker notes an impulse to turn to art to affect the still moment that comes from the limits of sense perception – a small adjustment from ‘August’, in that the limits here are not specifically on the mind. However, the psychological still registers a slight presence in the image of ‘the light on the sun-fondled trees’, which ‘the pretentious word’ attempts to ‘stabilise’. Here, garden imagery contains in itself the tension between the real and the representative. ‘The printed word’ attempts to ‘stabilise the light’, providing a clear picture of a moment, but this is troubled by the use of the active verb ‘fondled’ to describe the light itself. Its essence is in its movement, and so there is an irreconcilable cleave between medium and subject. Richard Danson Brown makes

63 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 23.
the connection between this tension and the similar tension between significant form doctrines and MacNeice’s ‘quickening sense of his own subject matter’.64 Indeed, the phrase ‘photographing our ghosts’ recalls a bold statement made by Blunt in a paper, ‘De Cubismo’, that he published in Marlborough's school paper, The Marlburian. He claims that ‘no one would maintain that the photograph is a work of art’ in comparison with a painting of the same scene, and that: ‘Therefore any artistic merit that the picture may have must be due to qualities not purely imitative’.65 This echo of influence from Blunt imbues the comparison of writing and the photograph with a Bloomsbury scepticism of the representational subject, but the evocation of the garden modifies the terms of this engagement in a way that offers a synecdoche of the interaction between the formalist and the psychological in MacNeice’s writing of art. The subject is suspect, not because it is unimportant to the artwork, but because it operates on an unconscious level to undermine the static pretences of mimesis, hence: ‘even a still life is alive’.

‘Nature Morte’ was originally published simply as ‘Poem’, though it still had its subtitle of ‘(Even so it is not so easy to be dead)’, in the December 1933 edition of Geoffrey Grigson’s magazine New Verse.66 The contents of this edition demonstrate that MacNeice’s concerns about the moment formed part of a wider discourse about the impossibility of resisting flux and change. For instance, in Edwin Muir’s ‘Threelfold Time’, time is repeatedly figured as an aggressive army who cannot be defeated: ‘All strategy here is plain retreat, / And the sure issue of this

64 Richard Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009), 57-58.
66 Louis MacNeice, ‘Poem (Even so it is not so easy to be dead)’, New Verse 6 (December 1933), 6-7.
war defeat’. The surrealist poet David Gascoyne also contributes ‘Morning Dissertation’: ‘Remember death walks in the daylight and life still through filter seeps, / While you will remain unchanged, perhaps, throughout the day’. Chapter four will go into greater detail about MacNeice’s treatment of time and the problematics of the changing self. For now, it is important to note that ‘Nature Morte’ sits among a wider set of concerns about the relation of the self to the passing moment. Gascoyne’s ‘daylight’ is as similarly troubled as MacNeice’s frequent use of changing sunlight in his thirties poetry, containing the inevitability of time’s advancement towards death. It is, like in MacNeice’s work, an image of something that cannot be made still. In addition, it appears to trouble the unity of the self, with the word ‘perhaps’ undercutting the certainty of ‘you will remain unchanged’. The solution, for Gascoyne, is to realise one’s place in a multiplicity: ‘If you are isolate, only a self, then petrify there where you stand; / Destinies crumble, bodies run down, the single scones burn out’. This chimes with Gascoyne’s committed leftist politics. MacNeice, on the other hand, does not attempt to resolve the difficulties of self and flux here, as Danson Brown notes: “Nature Morte” suggests that disturbance is inescapable even in the most controlled of domestic environments’. Instead, it builds on the image of the dissolved self in the flux of reality that ties together poetry of art and the garden. The image of ‘photographing our ghosts’ is echoed in the last line of ‘August’: ‘For we, being ghosts, cannot catch hold of things’. It also calls back to the speaker of ‘A Serene Evening’ who asks for a cigarette, ‘That

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69 For more on Gascoyne’s negotiations between surrealist aesthetics and Left politics, see Benjamin Kohlmann, Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 90-126.
70 Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s, 58.
I may also fuse myself in smoke / And permeate the garden'. This dissolution posits the self as essentially non-bodied, made as-if-ethereal by the passage of time which, in turn, adds to the tension inherent in those poems between the desire to capture the moment and the knowledge of its impermanence. ‘Nature Morte’ combines these metaphysical concerns, made in response to painting, with the psychological provenance of the garden imagery by unifying the ‘sun-fondled trees’ and the ‘ghost’ to advance its central intervention into both Bloomsbury aesthetics and contemporary questions of selfhood. In short, MacNeice’s private mythology of the garden provides depth to his singular perspective on thirties anxieties of experience, and marks his point of divergence from the wider literary networks that he operates in.

The unconscious operations that the garden implies come through in the Chardin painting itself at the end of the poem: ‘And in your Chardin the appalling unrest of the soul / Exudes from the dried fish and the brown jug and the bowl’. Here, it is possible to read the germ of what will develop over time into the double-level writing of parable. Inner turmoil is read in Chardin’s subject. Here, MacNeice negotiates significant form’s disinterest in subject matter, and the apparent claims of still life to offer a static image. Even at this early stage, MacNeice is diverging from his direct influences to theorise an aesthetics that imbues a manifest subject matter with a latent significance derived from internal life. In doing so, he is taking his discerning eye that he formed under Blunt’s informal tutelage and adapting its observances in service of communicating the unconscious. However, there is a switch in terminology here, from the ‘stagey’ mind of ‘August’ to the ‘soul’, which carries philosophical connotations that appear to match more with MacNeice’s education in the classics. This evidences what has been previously discussed in
chapter one: the terms on which MacNeice engages with questions of an internal, unconscious selfhood are subject to the intersection of different intellectual influences. What is common between them is an interest in the role of self unknown to the self in artistic production, as identified later in Modern Poetry. This is as true in MacNeice's poetry of the sea as it is here, as that image comes to exemplify the pull of the unknown.

**Between classicism and romanticism**

In the final stanza of 'The Gardener', the titular figure's physical and mental state deteriorates with age. The last details of his home reflect the fact that he can no longer leave it: ‘With a finch in a cage and a framed / Certificate of admission / Into the Orange Order’. The cage and the frame suggest the borders of containment, circumscribing both the body and the limits of a particular set of values that defines him. After this, however, the fading mind offers a kind of release from this rigid enclosure:

And memory ebbed  
Leaving upon the shore  
Odd shells and heads of wrack  
And his soul went out on the ebbing  
Tide in a trim boat  
To find the Walls of Derry  
Or the land of the Ever Young.

Over the course of the stanza, the garden gives way to the sea, and the walls of the former open up to the unknown possibilities of the latter. The metaphysical opposition of these images is not exclusive to MacNeice's poetry. In Auden's 1933 poem 'A Summer's Night', the speaker is situated in the security of the static garden:
'Whom hunger does not move, / From gardens where we feel secure'. This security enables a deliberate ignorance: ‘And, gentle, do not care to know, / Where Poland draws her eastern bow, / What violence is done’. However, this leisure is disturbed by the great flood of history: ‘Soon, soon, through dykes of our content / The crumpling flood will force a rent’. From this destruction, however, comes a flowering: ‘But when the waters make retreat / And through the black mud first the wheat / In shy green stalks appears’. In Auden, the metaphysical opposition of the garden and the sea gives way to a Marxist dialectic that synthesises into revolutionary potential. For MacNeice, however, the distinction comes back on the self, with both ‘memory’ and ‘his soul’ associated with the ebbing tide.

MacNeice’s poetry of the sea, like that of the garden, is rooted in memoir. In ‘Experiences with Images’, he recalls the early impact that the sea, specifically the Belfast Lough, had on his imagination: ‘It was something alien, foreboding, dangerous, and only very rarely blue. But at the same time [...] it was a symbol of escape’. Wonder and danger appear to be twin threads that run through his memories. In Strings, he describes a family holiday to the Antrim seaside during which the sea is at the source of a kind of Burkean sublime, as the child MacNeice is overwhelmed and terrified:

We stayed in a house looking over the sea [...] one day we were climbing fearfully along this path with the sea boiling below us far among rocks when I saw to my horror two people in the boiling sea and curious pink bladders growing out from under their arms; I asked my mother what they were and she said they were wings. Wings! It was all too much to take in.73

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72 MacNeice, ‘Experiences with Images’, 158.
73 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 39.
As well as illustrating the danger associated with the sea in ‘Experiences with Images’, this episode points towards the romantic influences at work in MacNeice’s writing about the sea. Auden’s 1951 study *The Enchafed Flood* takes the dream from Book V of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* as the starting point for considering romantic attitudes towards the sea more generally. He writes: ‘The sea, then, is the symbol of primitive potential power’, and ‘living barbarism’. Its inherent potentiality links it with concepts of freedom and infinity. In the context of *The Prelude*, the sea is linked with the shell, which itself is a symbol of ‘Poetic Truth’. The dreamer takes the shell from a man on horseback and holds it to his ear:

I did so,
And heard that instant in an unknown Tongue,
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,
A loud prophetic blast of harmony,
An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold
Destruction to the Children of the Earth
By deluge now at hand.

There is the prophecy of a flood that washes over the desert scene of the dream: ‘I saw him riding o’er the Desart Sands, / With the fleet waters of the drowning world / In chace of him; whereat I waked in terror’. This is the direct source of Auden’s own flood in ‘A Summer’s Night’. It is a violent force of potential that destroys and creates. Its status as a symbol from a dream has particular bearing on MacNeice’s affinity between instinctive images and dreams in ‘Experiences with Images’. Throughout MacNeice’s sea poetry, it can be seen that he responds to what Auden

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75 Ibid., 44.
77 Ibid., 437.
describes as ‘the siren voice of the poetic shell’, which ‘calls men to the sea, the
double kingdom, to put off their human nature and be trolls’.\footnote{Auden, \textit{The Enchafed Flood}, 78.}

However, at other times the sea’s romantic heritage is counterpointed by a
parallel influence from Greek literature, such as in a memory of driving through
Connemara with his father: ‘When we drove over a hill-top and there was the
Atlantic gnashing its teeth in the distance, my father rose in his seat and shouted
“The sea!” And something rose inside me and shouted “The sea!” Thalassa!
Thalassa!’\footnote{MacNeice, \textit{The Strings are False}, 111.} The way that the response of the young MacNeice is framed here posits
an unknown ‘something’ within the self that performs the act of shouting. This
ambiguity between internal feeling and expression matches with a similar
indistinction between the remembered and narrating MacNeice. The feelings of the
child appear to turn in to the adult narrator’s own cry of ‘Thalassa’. In each case,
there is an ambiguity about the relation of the self to the reaction elicited by the
sight of the sea. ‘Thalassa’ is a reference to Xenophon’s \textit{Anabasis}, which points to the
consistent importance of Greek literature in his descriptions of the sea.

MacNeice would have been aware of contemporary ideas about the tension
between the romantic and the classical from his reading of T. E. Hulme. John Hilton,
in an appendix to \textit{Strings}, recalls that, while at Oxford, he and MacNeice were both
‘exhilarated’ by Hulme’s \textit{Speculations} (1923), which contains the essay
‘Romanticism and Classicism’.\footnote{John Hilton, ‘Louis MacNeice at Marlborough and Oxford’, in MacNeice, \textit{The Strings are False}, 283.} Hulme claims that: ‘after a hundred years of
romanticism, we are in for a classical revival’.\footnote{T. E. Hulme, \textit{Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art}, ed. Herbert Read
(London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1924), 113.} The two terms here refer to what
Hulme sees as different artistic and philosophical attitudes. Romanticism, in this
sense, is the idea that ‘man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities’, as opposed to classicism, in which: ‘Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant’. These attitudes create different kinds of poetry: ‘The romantic, because he thinks man infinite, must always be talking about the infinite’, whereas ‘The classical poet never forgets his finiteness, this limit of man’. This dynamic informs the two traditions from which MacNeice draws the vocabularies and structures of his sea imagery, but what remains in view throughout are the autobiographical elements that undergird the psychodrama of his poetry’s shoreline encounters.

Terence Brown has pointed out that MacNeice’s ambivalent seas represent ‘the eternal, that area beyond normal human experience’, following a broad European literary tradition in which it holds ‘varying symbolic value’. Combined with his differing accounts of the sea’s personal meaning to him, this results in a poetic image that ‘is both destroyer and sustainer, to be both avoided and courted’. There are similarities to Auden here, but in MacNeice it is ambivalent movement between finite and infinite man that generates a poetically productive tension. A psychological self-awareness intervenes in the neat distinction between the romantic and the classical. As a result, MacNeice’s early sea poetry bears affinities with his gardens, in that its metaphysical questions are framed in terms of their ability to provide psychological answers. The sea has direct relevance for the lived mental experience of perception and imagination, as well as the excavation of an unknown self that acts instinctively. The following sections examine the

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82 Ibid., 116.
83 Ibid., 119-20.
84 Brown, Sceptical Vision, 118.
85 Ibid.
psychodrama of the shoreline encounter in MacNeice’s poetry prior to ‘Experiences
with Images’.

‘The yellow waves are roaring’: MacNeice on the shore

MacNeice’s shoreline speakers are caught between confronting and avoiding the
sea. According to McKinnon, evasion can solve the metaphysical tensions that the
sea presents. For instance, the seaside tripper in ‘Upon this Beach’ can: ‘take heart,
enjoy the Many, pay no heed to the One’.\(^{86}\) However, the neatness of this resolution
is troubled by the interaction between the romantic and the classical which
highlights, rather than assuages, the poem’s tension between image and form. The
problem posed by the opposition of competing metaphysical principles is grounded
in the more fundamental problem of man’s incapacity to perceive and understand
the unstable image. The ‘ever-crumbling masonry’ of the tide cannot be represented
‘by any device [...] In any medium’.\(^ {87}\) That the sea cannot be represented is an
extension of its inherent instability. It is a ‘falling wall’ that ‘Explodes its drunken
marble / Amid gulls’ gaiety’, existing in a continual, violent state of collapse that
operates outside the limits of art. However, the image of ‘drunken marble’ also
points to the presence of Homeric influences in the poem, as it strongly echoes the
Homeric phrase ‘the marbled sea’, ἅλα μαρμαρέην.\(^ {88}\) According to Marie-Claire
Beaulieu, the original comparison between the sea and marble comes from:

The indefinite colour [of the sea], together with the constant movement of
the water and the refraction of light on its surface [...] This expression is
particularly revealing, since the adjective μαρμάρεος generally means
‘flashing, gleaming’ [...] In this way, the epithet μαρμαρέην suggests that the

\(^{86}\) McKinnon, *Apollo’s Blended Dream*, 96.
\(^{88}\) Marie-Claire Beaulieu, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination* (Pennsylvania: University of
sea is shining like divine objects and bodies, while having an ambiguous materiality, since \( \mu \alpha \rho \mu \delta \rho \varepsilon \omicron \varsigma \) can apply to solid as well as ethereal bodies.\(^8^9\)

MacNeice’s invocation of Homer here allows him to work around a peculiar aspect of ‘Upon this Beach’: the poem attempts to convey an image of the sea’s perpetual collapse whilst also arguing that the same is beyond representation ‘by any device’ and ‘in any medium’. ‘Drunken marble’ works not only as representation, but as allusion, constructing an image indirectly through association. Furthermore, since the phrase’s Homeric source implies the ambiguous materiality of the sea, the use of ‘marble’ here points to what it is about the sea that puts it beyond the reach of art. Like in Homer, MacNeice’s sea exists between materialities, but the only relevant vocabulary that the poetry has to describe this ambiguity relies on reference to Homer. This allusion, then, works to highlight the seemingly unbridgeable divide between writer and subject, and establishes the aesthetic problems posed to the poet by the sea.

The poem also appears to attempt a reflection of its subject in its verse form. ‘Upon this Beach’ is comprised of three tercets wherein each line gets shorter, mimicking the collapse of each wave before the next one rises up, only to collapse again. This cyclical motion is further indicated by the \( aba \) rhyme of each stanza, which links the trough of the waves to their preceding peak, suggesting the repeated cycle of rise and fall that begins and ends each wave. The poem attempts to hold this motion in tandem, so that each rise implies a collapse, and each collapse another rise. However, this continual action is seen to be an affront to ideas of totality and cohesion. This is supported by the choice of verbs throughout: the waves are

\(^{8^9}\) Ibid.
‘falling’, ‘ever-crumbling’, or ‘cancelling sum’. The action of the waves is defined by negation, by the undermining of structure and wholeness. While the form appears to reflect the motion of the waves, it also enacts the diminishing power of the poem itself to hold on to this representation. The collapse of each tercet mirrors the speaker’s failure to attend to the sea on a material level. The perpetual structural collapse of ‘Upon this Beach’ does more to reflect upon its own poetic processes than it does to attend to its subject.

Edna Longley notes that ‘a number of MacNeice’s poems of 1932-1933 worry about the whole issue of imposing aesthetic patterns on the flux of experience and consciousness’. The antagonistic relationship between cohesion and flux is what characterises the cleave between art and the sea. However, MacNeice’s early poetry finds the roots of this aesthetic problem in the fact that art is a product of perception. The inability of the poem to attend to the flux of the sea, therefore, is an extension of the mind’s own inability to bring stillness to something that is defined by its being always in motion. As discussed above, art is a significant frame for the treatment of flux in this early poetry. Just as the poem cannot ‘stabilise the light on the trees’ in the garden, so too it cannot keep up with the motion of the waves. While the garden and the sea represent different approaches to the limits of thought – containment and infinity, respectively – they are linked by an undercurrent of problem of resolving flux into an image. There is a psychological connection between ‘Upon this Beach’ and ‘August’, in which ‘Our mind, being dead, wishes to have time die’. Like time, the sea is defined, as demonstrated through the stanza form, by its being in ceaseless motion. Art is beholden to the limits of perception, and perception, ‘being

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dead', is unable to keep up with vital flux. The 'ever-crumbling masonry' of the sea challenges representation inasmuch as it challenges the meaning-formation practices of the perceiving mind.

This challenge is embodied in the tripper of 'Upon this Beach', who, standing on the shore, looks out over the sea and finds themselves affronted by the motion of the tide. When the poem was originally published in *New Verse* as 'Turn Again Worthington' it carried the subtitle ‘(or a thought for intending mystics)’.\(^91\) This brings attention to the metaphysical aspects of the poem, which forms the basis of Brown’s and McKinnon's readings. However, when it was collected in *Poems*, it was retitled after its opening words: ‘Upon this Beach’. This retitling casts a different frame on the text, placing emphasis on the beach as a space and positioning the reader in that space, rather than the abstract thought-exercise suggested by the original subtitle. In turn, this encourages a consideration of the holiday tripper, who negotiates this space at the advice of the speaker:

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

The ceaseless collapse of the waves constitutes 'monstrous fatuity', characterising the sea as a force that works in total ignorance of man to the point of being threatening. The tripper is a temporary figure in an interstitial zone: he is merely a visitor, who does not occupy the space of the beach but passes through it, while the beach itself mediates between the land and the sea. On one level, it enables the shoreline encounter between the tripper and the sea. On another, this encounter is

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\(^91\) Louis MacNeice, 'Turn Again Worthington', *New Verse* 1 (January 1933), 2-3: 2.
also between the 'tomb-like', 'dead' art of 'August', which represents stillness and the limits of perception, and the threatening vitality of flux that challenges the forms put upon it by the poem. The speaker implores the tripper to 'forget' his encounter, invoking the language of mental limits. This may imply Hulme's idea of classicism, and the awareness of man’s own finitude. However, the ‘monstrous’ quality of the waves and the destructive language mentioned above recalls the feelings of terror that MacNeice describes in his childhood memories in the memoir. The connection between the sea's perpetuity and a terrible Romantic sublime echoes Wordsworth’s ‘It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free’: ‘Listen! the mighty Being is awake / And doth with his eternal motion make / A sound like thunder – everlastingly’.92 The retreat from the liminal space of the beach is also a retreat from an intractable knowledge that the finitude of the mind can only place a frame on the infinitude of reality. The tripper’s jollity when they get to the bus is qualified by the fact that it can only be achieved by forgetting, rather than resolving, this issue. In Woolf’s Jacob’s Room (1922), the retreat of Mrs Flanders from the beach is described in more explicitly mental terms: ‘Mrs Flanders hurried up the steep lane, aware all the time in the depths of her mind of some buried discomfort’.93 David Bradshaw notes that, in a review of Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim (1900), Woolf notes that the forests and seas of the novel ‘dominate us’ with their ‘latent inarticulate passion’.94 Latency is particularly important for connecting MacNeice’s instinctive seas to the important of latent and manifest content in Varieties of Parable. While the classical and romantic tussle in MacNeice’s depiction of the waves, the retreat of the tripper

chimes with a wider modernist anxiety about the shore as a space of irresolution that works beneath conscious thought.

The imploring of another to turn away from the sea and the problematics of its representation are also crucial to ‘Ode’, which was written soon after the birth of MacNeice’s son, Dan. Its speaker diagnoses his own ‘love of that infinite’, symbolised by the sea, before claiming that he does not want his son to inherit this same love. Like in ‘Upon this Beach’, perception struggles with the image of vital flux:

If God is boundless as the sea or sky
The eye bounds both of them and Him,
We always have the horizon
Not to swim to but to see
God is seen with shape and limit
More purple towards the rim

Perception imposes limits on the sea, turning it into something that can be contained. However, as Peter McDonald argues, this transformation from boundless to bounded undermines its role as a referent: ‘its relation to reality may be lost under its symbolic function’. An image of the infinite given ‘shape and limit’, then, is like the stone face of Time in ‘August’; it is a ‘dilettante’s lie’, a symbol that undermines the very thing that it stands in for. The speaker is caught between needing to impose perceptual limits on something boundless in order to accommodate it, and rendering that same image inert by doing so.

These problems of perception and representation indicate a similar psychodrama to that in ‘Upon this Beach’, which is developed through the speaker’s

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96 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 33.
97 Peter McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 31.
complex position in relation to the sea. It is not clear where he is situated at the start of the poem:

To-night is so coarse with chocolate  
The wind blowing from Bournville  
That I hanker after the Atlantic  
With a frivolous nostalgia  
Like that which film-fans feel  
For their celluloid abstractions  
The nifty hero and the deathless blonde  
And find escape by proxy  
From the eight-hour day or the wheel  
Of work and bearing children.

John Brannigan notes the parallel between the Bournville chocolate factories and the sea as ‘two figures of disillusioned utopia’. Bournville is a model village, the utopian design of which is undermined by its air pollution and the drudgery of ‘the wheel / Of work and bearing children’. The sea is seen as an alternative, but this is compromised by language that continually foregrounds the falsity of MacNeice’s nostalgia: it is ‘frivolous’; it, like film, is an ‘abstraction’; it offers escape from ‘the eight-hour day’ only ‘by proxy’. There is a cleave between what the sea promises and what it provides. It suggests an alternative to industry and domesticity, but this alternative cannot be enacted, hence it remains an ‘abstraction’ at remove from reality. MacNeice’s source in ‘Ode’ is Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’, in which the position of the speaker is far more assured:

There is no obstacle  
But Gregory’s wood and one bare hill  
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,  
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;  

Yeats's speaker is confidently placed in Coole Park, the estate of Lady Gregory, and the later image of the wind screaming 'upon the tower' clarifies that he is near Thoor Ballylee, Yeats's family home. This positioning contextualises the poem’s concern with familial legacy in the wake of political tumult, as seen in the speaker’s wish that his daughter ‘become a flourishing hidden tree’ that is ‘Rooted in one dear perpetual place’. As Tom Walker notes, this contrasts with ‘Ode’: ‘whereas Yeats’s persona stands before actual nature [...] MacNeice’s is at a remove’.\textsuperscript{100} Indeed, the speaker is at a remove from both Bournville and the sea, the former being only registered by smells carried on the wind, and the latter being psychologically invoked from a destabilised memory. Yet later, the speaker states: ‘I walk on the shore of the regular and rounded sea’. The shore here is an image derived from the limits of perception that have bound it to make it ‘regular and rounded’. The shoreline encounter, by extension, is explicitly psychodramatic, as it spatialises the imposing of limits on abstract infinity and the problems that entails. The struggle of ‘Ode’ to ‘accommodate and understand its own symbols’ is grounded in the inability of the mind to adequately account for the boundless.

This link between perceptual and artistic difficulties is made explicit through the development of the poem’s engagement with its Yeatsian source. The ‘green laurel’ of ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’ is a stabilising presence in contrast with the tumult of ‘angry wind’ that blows around the tower. In ‘Ode’, however, as Walker points out, tree images ‘prove less stabilizing’:\textsuperscript{101}

\begin{verbatim}
Coral azalea and scarlet rhododendron
Syringa and pink horse-chestnut and laburnum
Solid as temples, niched with the song of birds,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 21-2.
Widen the eyes and nostrils, demand homage of words.
And we have to turn from them,
Compose ourselves, fit out an ethic

The poem explodes Yeats's image into a litany that is multifarious to the point of 'leading to sensory and linguistic overload'. ¹⁰² What is being charted here is an imagined movement towards a hypothetical Romantic attainment. The widening of the eyes that had previously imposed limits on the sea contains the suggestion of lived experience pushing back on the restrictions of the mind, which is able to internalise these spectacular images. This leads to the 'homage of words', the writing of poetry, which requires us to turn away from those images and draws us in to the inner world of composing 'ourselves'. This compulsion, however, is troubled by the form of the poem. Turning away enacts the split between lived experience and the art that proposes to represent it, as the lines suddenly shorten and employ more terse phrases to indicate the poem's shift into the limits of the mind. The speaker asks whether he can give his son anything that can help him with this 'journey' between experience and expression, but concludes: 'Only so far, so far as I can find, symbols'. The stanza break before the line reinforces the inadequacy of this solution, distanced by the form from the problem it is meant to be solving. 'Ode' turns to its Yeatsian source seeking a form that can offer a path towards a sense of attainment, but instead ends up back with the inadequate symbols exemplified by the rounded sea.

Brown writes that the speaker of 'Ode' 'looks to a time when [...] the ideals expressed by the Romantic poets were attainable', when the widening of the eyes was possible, but 'promptly knocks on the head any Romantic associations that are

¹⁰² Ibid., 22.
evoked, any flowering of the Romantic tendencies’ in their sensibility’. In this respect, Brown situates MacNeice within a context of modern writers who turned to Romantic poetry in order to try and understand why its ideals could not be seen in the modern world: ‘They sought such explanation in a nostalgic survey of the past, to excuse their own failure to achieve the desired synthesis of intellect and emotion. It is the times that are at fault, not the poet’. However, in ‘Ode’ the failure of Romantic attainment is couched in psychological terms; it is a failure specifically of the mind’s ability to internalise flux without reducing it to inadequate symbols. The scepticism that Brown notes finds its basis in an awareness of the gap between experience and expression that the speaker yearns to bridge. The poem’s engagement with Yeats exemplifies the psychodrama of which the sea is an ideational representation. In the same way that the sea stretches out to a horizon that can be seen but not reached, the notion of Romantic attainment along Yeatsian lines can be envisaged but not enacted. The sea, then, indicates the presence of what Brown terms ‘a transcendent non-reality’, an imagined alternative that throws the real world into relief: ‘It is the unknown without which there could be no known’. In the context of the poem’s explicit psychological framing, this non-reality manifests as the projected space of the shore onto which the speaker maps his desire for attainment. The interplay between reality and desire can be seen when the speaker says he wishes to ‘Dream of the both real and ideal / Breakers of ocean’. The waves are not simply symbols of attainment, but of the complicated movement between the ‘real’ and ‘ideal’, emphasised by the internal rhyme. The speaker’s desire for attainment is inextricably linked to his dissatisfaction with modern life.

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103 Brown, Sceptical Vision, 39.
104 Ibid., 41.
105 Ibid., 115.
His inner world of projected shore-walking is layered onto his negotiation through the external world exemplified by the smells of the factory. By contrast, he wishes for his son to be mentally grounded in the ‘blessedness of fact’ which can be found ‘everywhere except in the fancy of man / Who daubs his slush on the hawthorn and the may’. Here, the ‘love of that infinite’ is explicitly associated with the projection of one’s inner world on to images of nature. The speaker wishes for his son to negotiate the external world of ‘fact’ without the intrusion of the psyche.

Of course, the nostalgic survey of the past that Brown notes is very much a Romantic position in itself. In Wordsworth’s ‘The world is too much with us’, the speaker claims: ‘we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in nature that is ours’, because ‘For this, for every thing, we are out of tune’.

Wordsworth’s questioning of perception’s capacity to take in nature is rooted in a kind of spiritual disjuncture between the subject and the world. This gives an obvious prototype for MacNeice’s image of the eye that places a limit on the extensive world. Indeed, Wordsworth may provide an alternative source for MacNeice’s positioning of his speaker:

> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
> Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;  
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

Wordsworth, Yeats, and MacNeice each position their speakers on the land while they imaginatively conjure the sea. On the one hand, as mentioned above, Yeats’s speaker rebukes the chaotic Atlantic in favour of the laurel tree. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s speaker directly seeks the mythic and revelatory from the sea. MacNeice’s speaker appears to mediate between these two positions, but it is the

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mind that proves crucial to this negotiation. At the end of the poem, the speaker attempts to ‘put away this drug’, to close himself off mentally from his impulse towards abstraction. However, as in ‘Upon this Beach’, this cannot be completely resolved:

For nothing is more proud than humbly to accept
And without soaring or swerving win by ignoring
The endlessly curving sea and so come to one’s home.

And so come to one’s peace while the yellow waves are roaring.

The speaker turns away from the sea, repeating the same reaction to the multifarious trees. In doing so, they hope to ‘come to one’s home’ by ‘ignoring’ the call to infinite that cannot be attained. However, the form denies this attempt at resolution. The single line at the end of the poem frustrates the neat ending of homecoming by reworking the end of the previous line, displacing the very notion of settling into a stable sense of the Absolute. Furthermore, the rhyme of ‘ignoring’ with ‘roaring’ works ironically to suggest that the waves cannot be truly ignored. Instead, the omnipresence of the sea is emphasised in the reconfiguration of the last line, and the speaker is left with the task of coming to ‘peace’ in spite of the waves. As McDonald concludes, ‘Ode’ ‘brings Poems to a close by questioning the implications of conscious endings’.107

His word ‘conscious’ is fortuitous, as an earlier version of the poem demonstrates the importance of unconscious instinct to the tension of this ending. In a fair copy notebook now held in the Bodleian Library, a draft version of ‘Ode’ extends the narrative of the final stanza over two stanzas with shorter lines, which

107 McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 32.
have been crossed out with pen and pencil. Next to this is markings in pencil, also in MacNeice’s hand, showing how those earlier ideas correspond to different lines from the published version. From this it can be seen that there were three different attempts to write a line that would be later condensed into the phrase ‘win by ignoring’: ‘Amenable because forgetful’; ‘& forgetful by instinct’; and ‘forgetting by instinct’.108 It is clear that, more than a decade before ‘Experiences with Images’, MacNeice was already thinking about the relation of the speaker to the sea in instinctive terms. Robyn Marsack has pointed out that in his notebooks of this period, longer poems such as ‘Train to Dublin’ and ‘Ode’ were subject to more extensive revision than the mostly untouched shorter poems, ‘suggesting that MacNeice found the direction of longish poems more difficult to control’.109 In the specific case of the closing passages of ‘Ode’, the decision to edit ‘instinct’ out of the poem is likely part of a larger concern with condensing the ideas of the line into something more convincingly poetic. This has the additional benefit of making MacNeice’s psychological influences themselves latent to the text. What this suggests is that ‘ignoring’ to MacNeice suggests conscious mental limits on the one hand, while more subtly suggesting the enfolding of unresolved tension into a textual undercurrent. This reflects back on the same mental action taken in ‘Upon this Beach’. The tripper forgetting the waves can be seen to be similarly psychologically loaded, further connecting it to the psychological implications of Woolf’s shoreline retreats. In ‘Ode’, too, it is clear that the shore cannot be mentally abandoned, as the ‘regular and rounded’ sea of perceptual limits folds out and

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becomes the 'endlessly curving sea'. Even when the speaker tries to ignore the sea, the concept of infinity subtly registers its presence in the mind.

‘Upon this Beach’ and ‘Ode’ also posit the sea as an indicator of the unknown in terms of unreachable understanding or attainment. ‘Wolves’, on the other hand, treats the epistemological anxiety of the sea as an overwhelming threat. The speaker declares: ‘I do not want to be reflective any more / Envying and despising unreflective things’, expressing a yearning for a more grounded worldview that echoes the desire expressed in ‘Ode’ to achieve a stable Absolute. The sea is invoked as an example of a reflective thing that causes the speaker distress: ‘The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want / To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence’. The mind cannot keep up with the repetitious motion of the tide, which results in a frustrated attempt at understanding it. This recalls the anxiety over the sea’s motion in ‘Upon this Beach’, yet here it is characterised by both flux and permanence, which are juxtaposed to highlight their inseparability in the sea’s character. It is a constant that is always changing, defined as much by its ever-presence as it is by its ever-crumbling. This reflects the unstable status of the sea in the mind of the land-bound man who holds it within the remit of his instinct yet lacks the vocabulary to siphon, and articulate, an adequate understanding of it. In the same way that the tide itself is ceaseless, so too is the frustrated search for adequate meaning from the instinctive image. The speaker wishes to take the advice that was given to the tripper of ‘Upon this Beach’, to ‘forget’ the sea and bury its enigma in his mind.

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110 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 26.
As in ‘Upon this Beach’ and ‘Ode’, the tension between the limited subjectivity of man and the flux of the poetic image is framed as essentially unresolvable, and the only solution for the affronted speaker is to either turn away from the sea or attempt to ignore it. In ‘Wolves’ this entails a conscious focus on the present moment, avoiding the introspection of being ‘reflective’:

I do not want to be a tragic or philosophic chorus
But to keep my eye only on the nearer future
And after that let the sea flow over us.

Again, the eye binds the infinite. Whereas God was given shape in ‘Ode’, here it is time that is limited by perception. This is an extension of the speaker’s wish to avoid becoming like a ‘chorus’ from a classical tragedy. Choruses are passive onlookers in antiquity drama, standing apart from the action but always commenting or reflecting on it. It is not their being passive to which the speaker objects, since the rest of the stanza describes the inevitability of the sea flowing over us. What he wants to avoid is the double-bind of the passive interpreter who continually reflects on the world around them without being able to affect it. Meaningful agency under these conditions not being possible, the speaker instead wishes to ignore all but ‘the nearer future’, grounding himself as close to the present as possible. Not wanting to be ‘reflective’ means being able to operate outside of concerns about the indiscernible possibilities of an unknown future, similarly to how the speaker of ‘Ode’ wishes for his son to focus on the ‘blessedness of fact’ outside of his own impulse towards the abstract. Once more, however, ignoring the tide does not end its motion. The coming of the unknowable future cannot be permanently abated and

this inevitability is imagined as ‘us’ being overwhelmed by the tide. This image of
drowning marks a tonal change in the poem as the melancholy of the opening lines
develops into a more palpable sense of fear that underlines the final stanza:

Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,
Join hands and make believe that joined
Hands will keep away the wolves of water
Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed
That no one hears them among the talk and laughter.

The circle that the speaker implores for again suggests the invoking of boundaries
in opposition to that which is boundless. This is a salve rather than a solution, as it
attempts to counter the vastness of the unknown future by looking inwards,
ignoring one’s wider context and focussing on an immediate community. ‘Wolves’
presents another example of figures on the shore turning away from, or ignoring,
the sea, and this action carries the same instability as ‘Upon this Beach’ and ‘Ode’.
This is indicated by the uncertain language of ‘make believe’ and ‘assumed’. Longley
reads ‘Wolves’ as ‘partly an attack on the thirties illusion that any conceptualization
or shared ideology can avert “the wolves of water / Who howl along our coast”’.\textsuperscript{112}
Indeed, the comfort offered by the circle of hands is unsustainable, yet reading the
poem as an ‘attack’ risks mischaracterising the speaker’s attitude towards it. When
considering his acceptance of the fact that the sea will flow over the figures on the
shore, the circle can be seen to be more of a coping mechanism that stems from his
desire to no longer be reflecting on the flux or permanence of the tide. The conflict
here is between the conscious desire to ignore the sea of the threatening future, and
the unconscious, instinctive impulse that frustrates this. This can be seen in the

\textsuperscript{112} Longley, \textit{Louis MacNeice}, 144.
complex interplay between the physical and the mental in the poem. The joining of hands physically grounds the speaker in the immediate, enclosed community of the circle, in contrast with the sea which, like the future, is an immaterial projection. Yet the use of uncertain language frames the ‘talk and laughter’ as a kind of performed ignorance that tacitly acknowledges the presence of the threatening sea. In turn, the community of the circle is rendered uncanny. Its claim to being a distraction from the abstract fear of the unknown is undermined by the fact that the inevitability of the future is foregrounded. This overlapping is conveyed by the layering of the talk and laughter over the sound of the howling from the ‘wolves of water’. There is a sense of rupture here; the attempt to suppress the fear of the unknown instead makes it manifest throughout the strategies employed to do so. This complicates the existing understanding of the interaction between the mental and physical world in MacNeice’s poetry, wherein the latter impinges on the former. In ‘Wolves’, it is the psychological that constructs the significance of external reality, leading to an interplay between the physical and the mental.

This underlines the importance of the Freudian drive to an understanding of how MacNeice comes to think of the sea in terms of instinct. By understanding instinct as a konstante Kraft the categorisation of the sea as instinctive indicates its significance as a poetic tool is illuminated. The sea is materially inaccessible, but it is this very immateriality that imbues it with its power as a psychological image. Poems establishes the sea as a complicated poetic resource that allows the presence of the mental world to be registered in the poetry, and provides a baseline for understanding the way that MacNeice’s later work grapples with the dual realities of the physical and the mental.
‘Each receding wave’: MacNeice at Cushendun

By the end of the thirties, the dark future of ‘Wolves’ had reached its apotheosis in the form of the inevitability of a second World War. Nazi Germany’s increasing aggression, combined with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which theoretically precluded the Soviet Union from intervening in Nazi land-grabs, had led people to correctly predict that there was no way to disincentivise the Third Reich from its territorial expansion efforts.\(^{113}\) Mere days before the invasion of Poland by Nazi forces in 1939, fulfilling these fears, MacNeice began a road trip around the Irish island with his friend Ernst Stahl. The pair started in Dublin, where they were living at the time, before heading up to Cushendun in the North to holiday with MacNeice’s family. They then took the car westward, visiting Sligo, Mayo and Galway. It was in this last location that they heard the news of the invasion, and the next day they solemnly drove back across the island to where they had started.\(^{114}\)

From this journey, MacNeice wrote a ten-part sequence poem entitled ‘The Coming of War’, which recalls the places that MacNeice and Stahl visited, as well as MacNeice’s anxieties over the impending war. It was originally composed for a small collection that MacNeice published with Cuala Press in Dublin entitled The Last Ditch (1940). He did this as a favour to F. R. Higgins, and had secured permission from his editor at Faber, T. S. Eliot, to do so on the condition that the book would be circulated in Ireland only.\(^{115}\) The Last Ditch was published in 1940, and a year later its poems were used by MacNeice as the basis for a larger collection called Plant and Phantom which was published by Faber. Most of the Last Ditch poems were

\(^{114}\) Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 258-9.
\(^{115}\) Louis MacNeice to T. S. Eliot, 6th October 1939, Faber archive; repr. in Jonathan Allison, ed., Letters of Louis MacNeice (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 359.
unchanged for their reprinting in the Faber book, but ‘The Coming of War’ had three sections removed. Furthermore, when MacNeice published a selected edition of his poems in the US with Random House that same year, another two sections were taken out, and the sequence was retitled ‘The Closing Album’. This is the sequence that was reprinted as representative of the *Plant and Phantom* version in Peter McDonald’s edition of the *Collected Poems*.116

The two sequences are thematically and tonally quite different. MacNeice’s continual concern about the effect of the war on his relationship with Eleanor Clark, for instance, only appears explicitly in the final section of ‘The Closing Album’, whereas ‘The Coming of War’ leads up to the lamenting coda with references to the relationship in the second and fourth sections. The original, longer sequence gives more room to other themes that were necessarily omitted or reduced in the shorter version, including MacNeice’s anxiety about becoming involved in a British war effort and his overwhelming fear of death. The shorter sequence also omits any and all references to the fact that the Ireland trip was conceived as a way of escaping from the war. The place of the longer sequence in the broader picture of MacNeice’s travel writing will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

The longer sequence also maintains an extended engagement with the sea as an image. ‘The Coming of War’ has been read as a sequence split somewhat neatly between descriptions of Ireland and reflections on the terror of war. Robyn Marsack describes it as being made up of ‘simple poems, relying on the contrast between

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116 McDonald notes of his own editorial practice: ‘So, this new *Collected Poems* does not reprint exactly the volumes as originally published; instead, it offers those volumes revised in the light of the poet’s later thoughts’; see Peter McDonald, introduction in Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, xxi-xxxii: xxiii.
natural beauty and human threat’. Richard Danson Brown writes that ‘the sequence explores the disparity between various places in Ireland and the European War’. However, a reading of ‘The Coming of War’ in light of the sea’s function as an instinctive image, as established throughout Poems, complicates the notion of a clean dichotomy between the physical reality of Ireland and the mental reality of the war. Indeed, it can be demonstrated that what Marsack terms a ‘contrast’ instead plays out as a complex interplay between the two in which MacNeice’s ability to use the Irish landscape to escape the fear of war is tested to breaking point. As McDonald notes, this renders the poem as a kind of journey through Limbo:

It is caught between two states, each of which seems to be an unreality. One unreal state is that of Ireland, which is rendered unreal by the imminent cataclysm; another is the War itself, unknowable and unimaginable in the arriving future.

McDonald’s identification of the interaction between these states has been taken up by Nao Igarashi: ‘While [the sequence] contains pleasant depictions of Irish landscapes, there lurks the poet’s anxiety about the war’. Yet, little attention has heretofore been given to the way that this interaction is psychologically framed. Consideration of the presence of the sea allows for a re-evaluation of ‘The Coming of War’ that contextualises some of the sequence’s less examined passages in the broader development of psychology’s role in MacNeice’s poetic praxis.

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118 Richard Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009), 89.
This can be seen most clearly in the sections of the poem that depict MacNeice’s time in Cushendun, a seaside town in County Antrim, where his family were renting a holiday home. MacNeice and Stahl stayed there for a while, and settled into a comfortable routine:

Ernst and I used to walk across the bay every night [...]. Every morning we drove to Ballycastle to play golf, buying a daily newspaper before our game. One morning the paper announced the Russo-German pact. ‘Ought we to go back?’ Ernst said. ‘Certainly not’, I said.\(^{121}\)

MacNeice’s insistence on maintaining their routine, regardless of the progression of events on mainland Europe, shows a determination to treat Cushendun as the site of an imaginative, wilful ignorance that comes through in the attitude of the poetic speaker. However, being in Cushendun also meant that MacNeice was far from Eleanor Clark, with whom he was romantically involved at the time. Clark was an American writer based in New York, and escalating global tensions meant that travel to the States was highly restricted, making the difficult circumstances of their relationship even worse. MacNeice had visited the States to do a lecture tour earlier in the year, and hoped to visit her again the next year, but became increasingly doubtful that this would happen.\(^{122}\) McDonald insightfully notes the importance of her influence on the sequence, which he states ‘is as important as any political or cultural considerations in MacNeice’s general sense of ambivalence about the War itself’.\(^{123}\) This influence runs through the second, third and fourth sections of ‘The Coming of War’, which dramatizes the struggle between fear and desire, between the thought of war in Europe and the thought of Clark in America. In the middle of

\(^{121}\) MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 210-211.

\(^{122}\) Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 257.

\(^{123}\) McDonald, ‘Louis MacNeice’s War’, 380.
these, geographically, is Cushendun, with the sea that faces Europe and, with some imaginative manoeuvring, New York City, surrounding it. It is this spatial relation that serves as the basis for the psychodrama of the poetry, with the sea mediating between MacNeice’s speaker, the future of the unknown war, and the unseen lover who is registered as the ‘you’ of these sections. In this sense, ‘The Coming of War’ can be considered to be a development of the way that Poems conceived of the sea’s ambiguous capacity to represent the unknown. While the earlier work developed ideas of the sea’s unknown as unreachable attainment and unknowable doom separately, the Cushendun sections of ‘The Coming of War’ demonstrate the precarious balance between these as part of the same psychodrama.

The first Cushendun poem, Section II, establishes the importance of the sea to the sequence’s psychological operations by putting it in the background of the speaker’s lamentations as he lies in bed:

Here in this strange room
On a brass bed
Listening to the wishing
Washing of the sea
I wonder if in a year
Democracy will be dead
Or what is more to the point –
If I shall be dead.

Pause and plash,
The sea goes pause and plash,
The brass lamp throws
A target on the ceiling;
For myself I should like
To go on feeling.\textsuperscript{124}

The effect of the speaker’s anxiety on the poem is seen in the phrase ‘this strange room’, which ‘replaces the characteristic modifications and juxtapositions of

\textsuperscript{124} MacNeice, \textit{Collected Poems}, 682.
MacNeice’s best work with a blunt statement of anxiety’, immediately destabilising any sense of place. This unfamiliarity and lack of exact referent denies the speaker the chance to distract himself from the situation in Europe. Instead, the poem depicts a withdrawal into inner thought as he wonders whether the war will kill him. This withdrawal is communicated by the sea as the poem moves from the physicality of the house, to the abstract sound of the sea heard in the room, to the speaker’s innermost thoughts. Its privileged place in the speaker’s consciousness originates from its being an instinctive image: instinct frontiers the mental and physical which, in the poetry, allows it to communicate between the two. Both the first and second stanzas move between focussing on the sea, the war, and the room, creating complex associations between them. The space of the house begins to take on the character of the speaker’s thoughts as ‘The brass lamp throws / A target on the ceiling’; the room’s unfamiliarity renders it a blank slate onto which the speaker’s thoughts can be projected. This image is further linked to the speaker’s thoughts through the later rhyme of ‘ceiling’ with ‘feeling’.

The sea indicates the psychological here inasmuch as it signals the move between the inner and outer world, but it further indicates a second psychological presence that becomes clearer by the end of the poem – that of an unseen lover, who corresponds with Eleanor Clark:

But, if I am going to be dead
Within a year,
There is someone I should like
Beside me in this bed
And God damn Hitler
That she is not here.

This lover figure is desired as a kind of emotional balm against the anxiety of war, promising intimacy to the lone figure in the bed. Section II takes the intimate relationship as a microcosm of the social impact of colossal, contemporary events, with the end of the poem framing the speaker’s inability to be with his lover in the context of the war by blaming Hitler himself for his loneliness. This may seem crude given the scale of global destruction seen as a consequence of Nazi aggression, but it does key the reader into the poem’s concerns about the solitary individual seeking communion in the face of something as overwhelming as the prospect of death. The association of the sea with this attainment of communion is made aurally, as the soft ‘w’, ‘sh’, ‘ing’, and ‘p’ sounds of ‘wishing’, ‘washing’, ‘pause’, and ‘plash’ contrast with the hard ‘b’, ‘d’, and ‘t’ sounds of ‘brass’, ‘bed’, ‘democracy’, ‘dead’, and ‘target’. The space of the room is set off against the sea which, by association, suggests the possibility of an alternative to the anxiety of death that the room begins to embody. Furthermore, this association is foreshadowed by the use of ‘wishing’ to describe the sound of the waves, which develops into the overt desire to connect with the lover by the end of the poem. The sea both contains the promise of fulfilment, and also threads it subtly throughout the text. Yet there is a parallel here between Section II and the destabilising language of ‘frivolous nostalgia’ in ‘Ode’. The soft sounds of the words associated with the speaker’s desire for an alternative to war undermines the speaker’s faith in the attainment of this alternative. The half-presence of the lover in the final stanza – thought of but unseen, evoked but not present – enacts the possibility of escape, but also troubles it. The contrast is not just between nature and war, but also between companionship and loneliness, presence and absence, and between one’s desires and fears. The sea contrasts with the room not just because it is an image of natural beauty, but because it suggests
an imagined alternative, which is layered onto the scene of the poem. That is to say, the sea of the Cushendun poems forms part of an Irish landscape that acts as a site for MacNeice’s mortal anxieties and desires. This is what complicates Marsack’s claim of a simple contrast: the fear of death and the need for connection are psychologically interwoven, which means that both are embodied and enacted by the space of the poem.

Section IV revisits these feelings of distance from Clark, which now threaten to mentally obscure her from MacNeice. The interplay between fear and desire now becomes a struggle between the two as the former threatens to subsume the latter:

O my darling if only you were with me
And the old rhythms could be made to work
And the new horror that is the old redoubled
Were not there waiting in the dark.126

The unbridgeable distance between the speaker and his lover is paralleled with, as well as attributed to, the loss of an old world order. This works similarly to the closing lines of Section II, with the speaker’s desire for connection with his lover becoming intertwined with the situation in Europe as the stanza develops; the ‘old rhythms’ that the speaker pines for are both personal and political. That these rhythms can no longer be ‘made’ to work also hearkens back to the fatalism of ‘Wolves’ and the image of letting ‘the sea flow over us’. This inevitability eliminates the agency of the speaker, who is now entirely subject to the weight of current events. This ‘new horror’ is ambiguously placed: it is both identifiably ‘there’ and also inscrutably ‘in the dark’. This reflects an equally ambiguous sense of the war’s being real, in the sense that it is psychologically ever-present, but materially absent.

126 Ibid., 683.
MacNeice knows that the war is real, is ‘there’, even though it only exists as an idea of something yet to come. This unreality, however, is becoming more real than the lover in Manhattan – as the former manifests as a projection in the dark, the latter threatens to unravel. The lover is more overtly associated with the sea in Section IV, but as that association becomes clearer, so too does the attendant scepticism in the possibility of escape:

And you beyond the clamour of Manhattan
    Are terribly far away.

In a land which is a legend for me already,
    A dream that has come untrue,
For now, my love, there is more than the Atlantic
    Dividing me from you.

In contrast with the new horror, the lover cannot even be properly placed; she is ‘beyond’ Manhattan, but not precisely in it, adding another layer of obscurity that frustrates the ability of the speaker to adequately evoke her. As war comes closer to happening, he foresees the possibility of never being with her again. The prospect of being permanently cut off from travel to America is so palpable that America itself becomes a legend. In the context of Cushendun, this mythical transformation is suggestive of what Tom Moylan identifies as:

    a tendency in the Irish imaginary that brings to people’s social dreams a topos wherein those dreams can be located and, more or less, fleshed out, so that they can function as distanced (estranged) re-visions of what life could possibly bring.127

This is also strongly suggested by the loose ballad form of the poem, with each quatrain taking on an abcb rhyme scheme and alternating between five stress lines.

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and three or four stress lines. As Walker has pointed out, this form can be detected throughout 'The Coming of War', and its use indicates an engagement with an Irish poetic mode adopted by a body of revivalist poetry written in English. Indeed, the relevance of this to the Cushendun poems in particular is indicated by a reference made in Strings to Moira O'Neill, 'the popular sentimental poetess' known for her 1900 collection Songs of the Glens of Antrim, who had previously lived in the house that the MacNeices were staying in. The imagined topos of America becomes part of the poem's claim to a distinct Irishness by evoking a particular Irish tendency to cast one's desires in a projected elsewhere, which completes the image of the poem as a kind of revivalist ballad. MacNeice's Irish poetic mode is also a psychological mode, as the ballad form contextualises the spatialising of the speaker's desires within a tradition that is tied to Irish place. Yet, this also undermines the efficacy of Ireland as a means of escape from the war by doing so. This is because the poem locates MacNeice's true hope for escape in an America which has now become a utopian legend, while Cushendun itself cedes to the new horror waiting in darkness. Walker's conclusion that revivalist poetry 'does not offer an enduring route of escape from the coming war' also has stark relevance for the explicit psychological operations of the Cushendun sections. The final lines of the poem point to the way that different psychological registers are layered on onto an Irish topography through the invocation of the sea, but also how these registers throw each other into relief. The need for connection with the lover heightens the fear of war, which troubles the image of the lover in turn.

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129 MacNeice, Strings, 210.
An understanding of the way that the sea indicates and enacts these psychological registers in Sections II and IV is important when considering the same in Section III, which is sometimes anthologised by itself with the title ‘Cushendun’. It survived all edits made to ‘The Coming of War’ as it turned into ‘The Closing Album’, but its subtle psychological employment of the sea is more fully appreciable in light of the significances that are built in to the image by the deleted sections that border it:

Fuchsia and ragweed and the distant hills  
Made as it were out of clouds and sea:  
All night the bay is plashing and the moon  
Marks the break of the waves.\textsuperscript{130}

What is, on the surface, a simple, idyllic scene of pastoral calm, is complicated by the image of the hills being ‘made’ from ‘clouds and sea’. This blending reflects the effect of the dark night, which would obscure the distinctions between distant elements of the landscape. It also indicates what Adam Hanna terms the ‘self-conscious innocence’ of the scene – it is an image of pastoral idyll that foregrounds its own wilful conjuring.\textsuperscript{131} That this is a distinctly psychological procedure is shown further in the transition from the sea-like hills to the plashing of the sea itself, which, in the context of the longer version of the sequence, echoes ‘pause and plash’ from Section II, and thereby the attendant instinctive association with possible attainment. Just as in ‘Upon this Beach’, the image of the sea is materially ambiguous: it cannot be properly seen, as it is shrouded in darkness, but instead the crests of the waves are glimpsed momentarily by the reflection of the light from the moon. This ambiguity,

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\textsuperscript{130}MacNeice, \textit{Collected Poems}, 682.  
\end{flushright}
in turn, reflects back on the landscape which is ‘made’ from the sea, now rendered with an uncanny quality. The instinctive image becomes the means by which the external world of Cushendun is imbued with its potential for an idyllic attainment. The uncertain materiality of the scene demonstrates a consciousness of this construction process, but it also betrays the fragility of it: the darkness which allows for this mental manipulation is the same in which the new horror is placed in Section IV. It is in this darkness that the material reality of Ireland becomes malleable, and the psychological image of the sea fills this space.

At the centre of this conceit of tranquillity is the house in which MacNeice is staying with his family, but this too is an image of peacefulness compromised by a self-knowing construction:

Limestone and basalt and a whitewashed house
With passages of great stone flags
And a walled garden with plums on the wall
And a bird piping in the night.

The house is linked to the tranquillity of the landscape by the structure of the stanza’s first line, which matches ‘Fuchsia and ragweed and the distant hills’ precisely in terms of both its metre and use of parataxis. Furthermore, there is a parallel between the blended materiality of the hills in the first stanza and the way that the parataxis frames the house as a natural extension of County Antrim’s coastal geology in the second. The house can be read as sitting alongside visible deposits and formations of limestone and basalt, or as a transformation of those images, as if the sight of the house itself is being constructed from limestone and basalt as the line develops. This can also be seen in the way that, as Hanna points out, the ‘basalt’
of the landscape chimes with the ‘wall’ of the house.\(^{132}\) Again, there is the suggestion here of the house being willed into the scene precisely to fulfil MacNeice’s psychological needs; it is ‘part other-worldly holiday dwelling, part fortress’ against the war.\(^{133}\)

However, the house is also where the fiction of the peaceful landscape is undone. As the final stanza moves the perspective of the poem into the house the foregrounded construction of the perfect idyllic landscape – telegraphed by the uncanny ambiguity of the hills and the house – is undermined by the war:

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Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtain drawn against the winds and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
   What a place to talk of War.
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Inside the house is the radio, which connects MacNeice and family to the outside world and allows current events to intrude on their private holiday. Furthermore, the curtains of the room are drawn, physically blocking out sight of the landscape in which they have come to relax and trapping the speaker, and the reader, within the anxiety of war. Readings of ‘Cushendun’ place great emphasis on the power of the poem’s closing line. Stallworthy observes that ‘at the poem’s end, we are left looking at a world in which everything has been altered by the shocking revelation of the last word’.\(^{134}\) Igarashi characterises this shift in tone in invasive terms, as the line ‘violently thrusts reality into the scene’.\(^{135}\) Yet this dissolution of idyll is signalled as early as the stanza’s first line, ‘Only in the dark green room beside the fire’, which echoes Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’: ‘Only, from the long line of spray / Where

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 43.
\(^{133}\) Ibid.
\(^{134}\) Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 260.
\(^{135}\) Nao Igarashi, ‘Representing Reality in “The Closing Album”’, 67.
the sea meets the moon-blanced land, / Listen!’\(^{136}\) In both poems, ‘only’ prefaces a shift from the description of a deceptively idyllic landscape to a loss of faith in the ability of that landscape to attend to reality by the end of the stanza, seen in the ‘talk of War’ in ‘Cushendun’ and the sea’s ‘eternal note of sadness’ in ‘Dover Beach’. The Arnoldian echo acts here as a poetic touchstone that helps the text negotiate the shift between these different psychological registers as the fear of the war reflects back as a loss of faith in attainment.

MacNeice’s engagement with Arnold at the time of writing ‘The Coming of War’ is evidenced by his monograph on Yeats, which he was in the middle of writing while he and Stahl were travelling around Ireland. Arnold’s presence in the book is limited to contrasts between him and Yeats on the subjects on poetics and philosophy.\(^{137}\) Yet, the Cushendun poems themselves, when taken as a whole, have several parallels with ‘Dover Beach’, all of which point to a sustained engagement with Arnold. Both feature a figure staying in a coastal house, addressing an unseen lover as they look out at night over a dark, tranquil landscape that suggests peacefulness. Furthermore, the sea is a complex, psychological presence in both: it is registered through sound that interweaves its psychological significance throughout ‘Dover Beach’: ‘we / Find also in the sound a thought’. It indicates a particular spiritual need for the speaker, but also troubles the possibility of attaining that same need. This undermines the peace suggested by the landscape, and raises the spectre of conflict: the ‘new horror’ of war that is ‘waiting in the dark’ in Section IV has faint echoes of the ‘darkling plain’ where ‘ignorant armies clash by night’ in ‘Dover Beach’. A psychological reading of ‘Dover Beach’ is offered by Norman N.


Holland, who theorises that the sound of the sea mediates the way that ‘the poem moves back and forth between here and there, past and present, land and sea, love and battle, [...] appearance and reality’. Evidence of these same movements, mediated in similar ways, throughout the ‘Cushendun’ poems illuminates the way that Arnold’s poem acts as an archetype for the sequence’s expression of its psychodrama.

Violence, rather than being thrust into the scene, is instead seen to be unmasked. Fear does not directly conflict with attainment in ‘Cushendun’ but is subtly communicated through it. This is how the interplay between these different psychological registers is dramatized. The desire for attainment is rooted in anxiety, or indeed profound terror, of the unknown; this prompts the wilful evocation of an idealised, idyllic shore that, in turn, gives expression to the fear from which the speaker is attempting to escape. This is visualised throughout the ‘Cushendun’ poems as a subtle blurring of distinctions embodied in the presence of the sea. ‘The Coming of War’ is a turning point in MacNeice’s use of the sea as an instinctive image, as the uncanny terror of conflict forces the poetry to accommodate his own ambiguity of attitude not just between texts, but within them as well. The sea makes a final important appearance in the final section of the sequence, after Britain’s declaration of war with Germany. The speaker asks: ‘why should the sea maintain its turbulence, / Its elegance’, and later:

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

The tension between ‘turbulence’ and ‘elegance’ reflects the sea’s duality throughout the poem as an image taken from external nature and from the recesses of the mind. On the one hand, it is an aspect of the physical world that leaves ‘a film of muslin down the sand / With each receding wave’. On the other, it provides the language for the speaker’s anxiety as those waves turn into the ‘doom’ that is ‘lapping at the door’. This final section repeats the movement from exterior to interior from the third section, but this interiority goes further. We do not just move from the beach to the house, but from the house to the imaginative ‘another world’ at the end of the speaker’s lament. On a wider, structural level, the motion of the waves in ‘The Coming of War’ provides a structuring principle for writing the movement between the interior world of the mind and the exterior world of history, implying the instinctive in history.

**Instinct, memory, myth and dream**

When MacNeice writes ‘Experiences with Images’ in 1949, he does so having already built up the unconscious operations of those images that he says he uses ‘instinctively’. Yet, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, quotation marks have been put around the term. By the time MacNeice comes around to using this psychologically-loaded language to describe certain images, he is already tacitly questioning the efficacy of that language. The desire to write poetry that attends to the unknown self below the surface of consciousness, though, is not under question, as this becomes the basis for double-level writing in *Varieties of Parable*. The instability of instinct as a concept allows it to gesture towards the psychological as a framework for developing poetry out of the materials of childhood, whilst also
giving MacNeice the necessary leeway to shift the terms of his unconscious engagements.

This is evidenced by the fact that the garden and the sea remain vital to the poetry. For instance, in ‘Soap Suds’, from The Burning Perch, the garden and the sea coalesce once more. The smell of soap pulls the speaker back into childhood memory: ‘the walls of the bathroom open / To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop’.139 Later, the speaker lists ‘the joys of that house’, including: ‘A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees; / A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea’. Longley describes the poem as ‘marvellous double-level writing’ that ‘balances the “stuffed black dog” against the live rabbits and bees, the enclosed garden and vine against the “open” sea’.140 The scene is ‘at once vividly concrete and a powerfully symbolic microcosm of the world into which we are born’.141 This symbolic resonance has been built up over a long time, not just for MacNeice but also for the central figure of ‘Soap Suds’, who is transported back across an entire lifetime. The presence of the garden and the sea in this Proustian episode of involuntary remembrance demonstrates that both have maintained their unconscious mental connotations over the course of MacNeice’s writing career, and are now deeply embedded in questions about changing selfhood across time. These questions become clearer once the scene turns into a nightmare:

And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play! But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child.

139 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 577.
140 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 158.
141 Ibid.
The final line, which returns the speaker to the physical world, is the reverse of the earlier line that indicates the move into memory: ‘To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child’. In each case, the extent to which the figure is identified with memory is left ambiguous. In the earlier line, ‘a child’ suggests a cleave between the remembered and the remembering figure. In the final line the return from memory appears to leave the figure without an identity, or at least an identity that can only be described in negative terms: he is not ‘a child’, which leaves the question of what he is. Selfhood, here, is placed in a symbolic past from which one can become lost. This is also communicated in the breakdown of those instinctive images that were once balanced in the construction of childhood. The image of the grass ‘grown head-high’ undermines the sense of containment and limit that the lawn once suggested, imbued instead with the sense of overwhelming chaos that was once the province of the sea. This is not the hopeful synthesis of dialectic in Auden’s ‘A Summer’s Night’, in which the flood gives way to new buds. Instead, it is as if the flood and the lawn have become entangled in the same terrifying realisation that one’s sense of self has been compromised by time.

Another poem, ‘Round the Corner’, attempts to soothe this anxiety by reaffirming the sea’s persistent relevance to selfhood through continual revelation. The first line, ‘Round the corner was always the sea’, echoes another scene from MacNeice’s childhood memories of trips to the Antrim seaside mentioned above:142

I might have cried because the sea was not at the station but they said it would only be a little while now and I pattered along the road, my mouth full of ginger, and suddenly around a corner or over a crest came a strong salt breeze and a rich smell of herring and there down below us was the blueness,

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142 MacNeice, Complete Poems, 578.
lumbering up against the wall of the fisherman’s quay, ever so or never so blue, exploding in white and in gulls.\textsuperscript{143}

That MacNeice considers this memory a formative experience is suggested not just by the fact of his revisiting it in poetry after writing it in the memoir, but in revisiting the same phrase to describe the moment, which suggests a linguistic habit tied to memory. Indeed, this sense of continual revisiting is reflected in the form itself, as the repetition of the title or a variation on it – either ‘round the corner’ or ‘round that corner’ – five times throughout the poem creates a cycle of revelatory experience rooted in the first line, which is the text’s own formative moment:

\begin{verbatim}
Round
That corner regardless there will be always a realm
Undercutting its banks with repeated pittance of spray,
The only anarchic democracy, where we are all vicarious Citizens.[.]
\end{verbatim}

The act of turning the corner is repeatedly reinforced through the use of enjambement to break up key phrases, including ‘Round / That corner’ itself. In the case of the phrase ‘vicarious / Citizens’, it also points to an important tension in the speaker’s relation to the sea, which is at once provides a sense of belonging and distance. Furthermore, there is repetition in the alliteration of ‘r’, ‘p’, and ‘t’ sounds in ‘repeated pittance of spray’, which in turn is an image that points to a tension between infinity and containment as the waves crash against their banks. Just as in ‘Ode’, the speaker is placed at an ambiguous distance from a sea that nevertheless registers potently in the mind. But where in the earlier poem the speaker sought to perpetually navigate the shoreline of an ‘endlessly curving sea’, creating an

\textsuperscript{143} MacNeice, \textit{The Strings are False}, 39. Emphasis mine.
uncomfortable unconscious disturbance, here the encounter is cyclical, reaffirming
the place of the sea in the psyche of the speaker.

According to McKinnon, ‘Round the Corner’ answers the metaphysical
problems of the One and the Many established by the thirties poetry: ‘Now the
glinting wave actually manifests the presence of the universal [...] There seems no
doubt that he had found the real or ideal, as well as the actual, Atlantic he had
despairingly hankered for in “Ode”’. However, the sea’s ‘anarchic democracy’
complicates this by pointing to both the One and the Many, rather than a satisfactory
universal One. In fact, the satisfaction of the speaker towards the once-troubling
waves comes from a new-found ability to hold the One and the Many in tandem,
which is written in terms of the ability to feel individual and collective. This has its
roots in Aristotle's ideas of possibility and actuality, which allow for an object to be
considered both One and Many at the same time. He explains this in the first book
of his Physics:

Thinkers of the more recent past also were much agitated lest things might
turn out to be both one and many at the same time. [...] Things, however, are
many, either in account [...] or by division, like the parts of a whole. At this
point they got stuck, and began to admit that the one was many; as if it were
not possible for the same thing to be both one and many, so long as the two
are not opposed: a thing can be one in possibility and in actuality.  

Possibility is what allows for the sea's multiple potentialities to be adequately held
in tandem, as it is both the large 'blueness' as described in Strings and the 'spray' of
the poem at once. This, in turn, fulfils its enabling potential to the speaker, who can

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144 McKinnon, Apollo's Blended Dream, 104.
be multiple and singular themselves: a ‘vicarious / Citizen’ of an ‘anarchic democracy’.

In this sense, the sea in ‘Round the Corner’ embodies the ‘dialectic of purification’, the process of working up to meaning, that MacNeice identifies in *Modern Poetry*. Not only has the sea accrued symbolic significances rooted in childhood memory over the course of a lifetime, but it also stands in for the continual revelation of meaning itself. While instinct was a source of anxiety for MacNeice’s early shoreline trippers who could not sustain contact with the unknown, here that contact represents the ability to rediscover oneself anew. What undergirds this development is the psychological idea that an image can mediate between conscious and unconscious selves, lost and essential selves, and present and past selves. Chapter four will discuss the split between the present and the past with regard to time and haunting. The next chapter will lead into that discussion, while also delving further into the spatial negotiations that have been suggested here by MacNeice’s beach traversals.
CHAPTER THREE

SPACE TO THINK: PSYCHOLOGY AND SPATIALITY IN MACNEICE’S POETRY AND PROSE

As Lucretius says, ‘Thus each man ever flees himself’. But what good does it do him if he does not escape from himself? He constantly follows himself and oppresses himself as his own most irksome companion. Accordingly, we ought to know that what makes us struggle is the fault, not of our locations, but of ourselves.\(^{380}\)

— Seneca, ‘On the Tranquillity of the Mind’

Political and spatial negotiations in the thirties

By the time he had completed his studies at Oxford, MacNeice had been offered a job as an Assistant Lecturer in Classics at the University of Birmingham, and he moved to Birmingham with his first wife, Mary Ezra, in 1930.\(^{381}\) E. R. Dodds, who had offered MacNeice the job, later recalled the difficulty he faced in adjusting to his new environment:

Birmingham was his first introduction to the ordinary world; it humanised his aestheticism and set free his natural love of life, but the process took some time. He was faced simultaneously with two new experiences – marriage and earning his living.\(^{382}\)

Indeed, MacNeice himself blamed these circumstances for his difficulty with writing poetry in the first few years of living in Birmingham:

The trouble is that you cannot write in a hot-house [...] To write poems expressing doubt or melancholy, an anarchist conception of freedom or

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nostalgia for the open spaces (and these were the things that I wanted to express), seemed disloyal to Mariette.383

Key to MacNeice’s recollection of his creative difficulties is the idea that the materials of his poetry expressed a worldview antithetical to the suburban lifestyle he was affecting with his wife. That one of these unworkable materials is ‘nostalgia for the open spaces’ adds an important consideration to Dodds’s list of new experiences MacNeice faced in Birmingham; the city’s materialism and the routines of work and leisure are indelibly tied to the negotiation of its sprawling spaces, which had not previously figured in his poetry. The collection that he had published as an undergraduate, _Blind Fireworks_, was situated in the middle-class homes with which he was immediately and intimately familiar at the time. Now, the home was the site of his joint domestic project, and to write poetry would compromise it. This was not helped by a kind of wilful ignorance on the MacNeices’ part: ‘We ignored our Birmingham context as much as possible’.384 His poetics of the home was unviable, and his poetics of the urban was undeveloped. This creative dilemma underlines the importance of space to MacNeice’s writing as a whole; he writes from experience, and experience is understood in terms of its situation in space.

MacNeice found ways out of this impasse by two paths. The first is a greater engagement with the city itself:

I used to walk around the suburbs with my borzois slowly digesting the world I had lived in almost without knowing it. I was aware of a dichotomy. Living with Mariette was not only pleasant but good, Mariette was a ‘real person’, she at least meant what she said, her enthusiasms, however whimsical or frivolous, were genuine. But outside Mariette was the Rest of the World,

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383 Louis MacNeice, _The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography_, 137; Mariette is the name given to Mary Ezra throughout the memoir.
384 Ibid., 133.
intellectually stimulating and in ways more real than Mariette but horrifying.\textsuperscript{385}

The awareness of the city grows unconsciously, manifesting from the experience of spatial negotiation. This carries through to the poetry that followed this period, which, as will be discussed, attempts to work through this precarious tandem of stimulation and horror. Here, it can also be seen that the dichotomy of urban and domestic space allows MacNeice to conceive of his own movement past the fear of compromising his domesticity. In this remembered version of events, there appears to be some anxiety as to whether either experience felt genuine, with each space being thought of as being ‘more real’ than the other in different ways. These questions of reality and unreality manifest a dialectic in the poetry between MacNeice’s growing discontent with urban conditions and the city’s opportunity to express a need for freedom and openness that did not betray Mary.

The second is the publication of \textit{New Signatures: Poems by Several Hands}, which was edited by Michael Roberts, in 1932. The anthology collected a selection of poems by young poets who exemplified, according to Roberts’s polemical preface, the need for poetry to move on from old ways of expression in order to reflect new times:

\begin{quote}
It is not only that our response to certain words and rhythms has changed; new knowledge and new circumstances have compelled us to think and feel in ways not expressible in the old language at all.\textsuperscript{386}
\end{quote}

What counts for ‘new knowledge and new circumstances’ in this context is left vague, but the poets included in the collection, which included W. H. Auden, Stephen

\textsuperscript{385} Ibid., 145.
Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and William Empson, point towards a sense of social and political change in light of growing anxiety in Britain, as well as the West in general, about the future. There was widespread disillusionment with Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour government which, in light of a fresh banking and currency crisis in 1931, had made sweeping cuts to unemployment benefit and public spending. This in turn led to increasing factionalism among the intellectual left who felt that MacDonald had failed to fulfil a socialist programme.\textsuperscript{387} Stephen Spender’s ‘Oh Young Men’, published later as ‘Us’, speaks to an anxiety about the way that modernity continued to trap the young in cycles of deadening labour: ‘it is too late now to stay in those houses / your fathers built where they built you to build to breed’.\textsuperscript{388} One of Auden’s contributions, ‘Chorus from a Play’, later collected as ‘The Wanderer’, gives urgent voice to the salvation of man atomised by modernity: ‘Save him from hostile capture, / From sudden tiger’s leap at corner’.\textsuperscript{389}

MacNeice’s recollection of his complex, vital reaction to the collection appears at first to emphasise its political dimension:

They were all politically Left, but it was not the jogtrot, compromising Left of my landlady’s garden parties. [...] The strongest appeal of the Communist Party was that it demanded sacrifice; you had to sink your ego. [...] I had a certain hankering to sink my ego, but was repelled by the priggishness of the Comrades and suspected that their positive programme was vitiated by wishful thinking and over-simplification. I joined them however in their hatred of the status quo, I wanted to smash the aquarium.\textsuperscript{390}


\textsuperscript{390} MacNeice, \textit{Strings}, 145-6.
This stance, as is typical for MacNeice, balances two kinds of political scepticism: of the systems and mechanisms of Western capitalism on the one hand, and of utopian solutions on the other. The appeal here is specifically in the act of ego-sinking, an emphasis that echoes Roberts’s preface to the anthology:

It is natural that the recognition of the importance of others should sometimes lead to what appears to be the essence of the communist attitude: the recognition that oneself is no more important than a flower in a field.[391]

Distancing himself from what he describes as the ‘over-simplification’ of ideology, the echo of Roberts in his own recollection of New Signatures indicates that what was valuable to him in part was the way that it signposted the development of a poetics through which he could position himself as the conscience of a community, eliding the danger of betraying his committed domesticity.

However, the reference to the ‘ego’, which by this time was a well-established part of Freudian psychoanalysis, in his gloss of Roberts suggests a deeper engagement with the programme of New Signatures that sees poetic possibility in the psychological as well as the political. In the same year that MacNeice’s Poems was published, Auden writes in an essay titled ‘The Good Life’ about Communism and psychoanalysis as two ways of understanding the world that were aligned in their aims:

Psychology and Communism have certain points in common:
(1) They are both concerned with unmasking hidden conflicts.
(2) Both regard these conflicts as inevitable stages which must be made to negate themselves.
(3) Both regard thought and knowledge not as something spontaneous and self-sufficient, but as purposive and determined by the conflict between instinctive needs and a limited environment.

[...]
Both desire and believe in the possibility of freedom of action and choice, which can only be obtained by unmasking and making conscious the hidden conflict.392

As Rod Mengham notes, these statements are reductive in its synopsis of both Communism and psychoanalysis in order to make a better fit of them.393 This was typical of Auden’s treatment of psychoanalysis, which for him was necessarily situated in the bedrock of modern thought. In ‘Psychology and Art To-Day’, he writes: ‘Freudianism cannot be considered apart from other features of the contemporary environment, apart from modern physics with its conception of transferable energy, modern technics, and modern politics’.394 The new knowledge that Roberts identifies in his preface is accompanied, in the poetry he anthologises, by new concepts of subjectivity. Thought itself must be made modern to account for the world that it observes, processes, and projects. For Auden, this requires adapting Freudian ideas to bear upon the wider world as if it were an analysand: ‘Freud’s error is the limitation of neurosis to the individual. The neurosis involves all society’.395 MacNeice’s reference to the Ego hints at not just a colloquial awareness of psychoanalysis, but a sensitivity to the contemporaneous interaction between politics and psychoanalysis that underlines a socially-embedded poetics. An aim of this chapter, then, is to broaden the understanding of MacNeice’s poetic relationship to the crowd by explicating the extent to which the psychological is manifest throughout his political engagement with the city as a space.

395 Ibid., 170.
MacNeice's treatment of the crowd is not confined to the city. A consideration of his travel writing from around the same period is essential to a complete understanding of the intertwined roles of spatiality and psychology in his encounters with his poetic predecessors and contemporaries. As Hugh Haughton writes, 'MacNeice is not only a moving poet, but a poet with an interest in movement'.  

If the work of Poems elided 'nostalgia for the open spaces' on Mary's account, then their divorce later in the same year removed any such obstacle. In the summer of 1936, MacNeice accepted an invitation from Auden to join him on a three-month excursion to Iceland as part of a commission from Faber and Faber to write a book about their journey. The following year, the pair published Letters from Iceland, which contains an idiosyncratic mixture of letters, epistolary poems, travel information and a selection of writings on Iceland from various sources. In 1937, he was commissioned by Longmans to write another travel book about the Hebrides. The journey was in two parts: the first accompanied by the painter Nancy Coldstream, the second done alone. These materialised as I Crossed the Minch (1938), a book that is as similarly eccentric as Letters from Iceland, if not as joyously so.

The publication of these books forms part of a trend throughout the thirties of travelogues written by pre-established literary figures, a trend exemplified by Graham Greene's Journey Without Maps, which came out the year before Letters from Iceland. These books would be typically commissioned by publishers, and so

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397 Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 185.
398 Ibid., 203.
travel was undertaken specifically for the purpose of writing about it. MacNeice admits as much in ‘Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard’: ‘Wystan said that he was planning to go / To Iceland to write a book and would I come too; / And I said yes, having nothing better to do’. Yet in the writing itself there was a focus, which can be traced back to the earliest examples of travel writing, on journeys to places that were either desolate or dangerous. The narratives thereby become a kind of modern quest, or a ‘search for individual identity conducted against a natural landscape that leads to self-knowledge’. Travel in itself became popularised through such books as an enactment of the need to escape civilization, which was, in turn, a reflection of increasing anxieties about the condition of the West in light of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. As such, MacNeice’s contributions exemplify a consistent contradiction throughout travel writing in the thirties: it is a reflection of where the writer has come from as much, if not moreso, than where the writer is going to. For MacNeice, this forges a strong link between his writing of travel and his poetry of the city along both spatial and psychological lines.

For this purpose, space is understood as distinct from place along theoretical lines borrowed from philosophers and cultural geographers such as Martin Heidegger, Michel de Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre. Yi-Fu Tuan summarises this distinction:

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Place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value [...] it is an object in which one can dwell [...] Hence space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and – more abstractly – as the area defined by a network of places.404

Andrew Thacker writes that this distinction can be used to understand the way that place and space interact in modernist texts:

To a number of geographical theorists space indicates a sense of movement, of history, of becoming, while place is often though to imply a static sense of location, of being, or of dwelling. Much modernist writing oscillates between these twin spatial visions, often in ways that complicate any sharp and easy division between a conservative sense of place and a revolutionary sense of space.405

It is this interaction that can be thought of under the umbrella of spatiality. Places, for instance, can be located in spaces, but can also become spaces by virtue of their being negotiated. It can even help in understanding the dichotomy that MacNeice notes between walking around Birmingham with his dog and living at home with Mary. The former is inherently spatial. As he walks through, or negotiates, the streets of Birmingham, his experience is characterised by a kind of epistemology of becoming; it is ‘intellectually stimulating but horrifying’ to him. This contrasts with a more stable, conservative home life in which Mary is cast as ‘genuine’. The complication lies in the notion, as previously discussed, that Mary and the city can be more ‘real’ than each other in different ways. This idea of spatiality, then, can prove useful in framing MacNeice’s city poetry as a writing of psychological

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404 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 12.
experience, inasmuch as it is a writing of oscillation, of movement, between the real and unreal.

Closed and open spaces: Birmingham, Iceland and the Hebrides

It was in 1935’s Poems that MacNeice’s new engagement with the psychology of city-space and a new poetics of self and world manifested in his work through poems like ‘Birmingham’ and ‘Morning Sun’. In ‘Birmingham’, this interest in the dynamics of the modern city comes through in the text’s continual recourse to the language of space. Behind the figure of the policeman guiding traffic, ‘the streets run away between the proud glass of shops’, and houses are ‘Splayed outwards through the suburbs’. When the poem was published in New Verse in 1934, the latter line originally began ‘Sprayed outwards’, the change suggesting better the sight of the city being stretched out in space. The city in ‘Birmingham’ is always extending outwards, offering a view that takes in its shapes and contours before moving in to the street level imagery of ‘Cubical scent-bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops’. This concern with the extension of space is also a concern with the ordering of space. As the poem moves past the shop windows ‘the slumward vista thins like a diagram’, and one of the poem’s final images is of factory chimneys ‘like black pipes of organs in the frayed and fading zone / Of the West’. The poem is very aware of the way that Birmingham is spatially ordered along class lines: the commercial life of the city is centralised, juxtaposed with suburban areas, while the factories and poor areas are pushed to the city’s margins beyond the speaker’s vision. Edna Longley argues that ‘MacNeice builds up a single felt image of

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Birmingham’, but this image is ‘frayed and fading’ towards the edges. It is Birmingham’s spatiality that guides the speaker’s perception of it; just as the city is built to privilege commercialism and marginalise the working classes, so too does the poetic traversal of the city follow this same logic.

The ordering of city-space obscures the industrialism that underlies the ‘gewgaws’ behind the ‘proud glass of shops’. Longley identifies the poem’s influence from both Marx and D. H. Lawrence, with commercial culture being shown to be both an economic and spiritual injustice. Plato, too, is an important resource for the poem’s sociocultural critique, which in turn grounds its treatment of city-space in psychological terms. This can be seen in the dwellers of suburban houses who ‘as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms / With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to the fickle norms’. In Plato, Form is the essence of an object, the idea of a perfect version of a thing. Objects seen by man are manifestations of that Form which, in being manifested, are imperfect. The lack of grammar in the litany of suburban household objects matches the same in the litany of shop-window objects, imbuing material wealth with a sense of immateriality which, in light of the reference to Plato, renders the succession of objects in the poem as the shadows flickering across the wall in the Allegory of the Cave. The objects of commercialism approximate a sense of satisfaction but cannot achieve it. The cleave between perception of the thing and the thing itself renders urban and suburban existence as a kind of dream, a different psychological reality. Plato here is an important resource for the poem’s negotiations, not just through the superfluous trappings of commercial culture, but also through the way that urban life affects the psyche.

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'Birmingham' plays with the efficacy of the senses, and with sight in particular, to explore the psychological consequences of modernity. The negotiation of the commercial city-space is itself a negotiation of commercial culture.

This connection between obfuscation and commercialisation is encapsulated in the poem’s opening line: ‘Smoke from the train-gulf hid by hoardings blunders upwards’. The juxtaposition of the smoke and the billboard acts as a kind of synecdoche for the poem’s comment on the urban; material aspiration, the pursuit of Platonic Forms, is itself an agent of obfuscation, glamour hiding labour. This is further exampled by the recurring images of faces, both obscured and obscuring. Car drivers become ‘faces behind the triplex screen’, and the faces of shopgirls are ‘Diaphanous as green glass’. Not only are people’s faces hidden by glass, but they then take on its material qualities, removing their features and anonymising them. As the latter image develops, the green glass of the shopgirls’ faces blends into the ‘ticketed gewgaws’ they are selling, and then into ‘the Burne-Jones windows in St. Philips broken by crawling leads’. The people of the city are a part of the texture of the city-space itself, but in a way that depersonalises them.

This is a reversal of an image from the previous stanza in which houses assume facial features: ‘Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest / Seducingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed / So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic through bleary haws’. The repetition of ‘houses’ not only emphasises the multiplicity of the buildings that are ‘splayed’ through the suburbs, but with each repetition they become further personified as the speaker moves through the streets. This personification itself is the end product of an attempt at ‘jerry-built beauty’. Like the objects they contain, these houses are built to suggest or approximate the attainment of a successful suburban lifestyle. This is
emphasised by the ‘bleary’ vision of the eyes; as the city takes on the aspect of its people, it replicates the obfuscation that underlies their relation to the city. The speaker reads the condition of the city’s people in the buildings that surround them. Again, the poem’s critique of commercialism is grounded in the psychology of obscured perception, which reflects back on to the space of the city.

This recurring motif of fading vision calls in to question the representation of the city a whole. William T. McKinnon reads ‘Birmingham’ as an example of a poem in which 'The images cohere [...] largely because of the poet's delighted sense of the oneness of his universe’, which accounts for the ironised juxtaposition of certain images. Longley too recognises the poem’s ironic operations: ‘In one sense MacNeice’s powers of observation and absorption relish what he condemns. But this is the inherent paradox of poetic subject matter rather than any suspect attraction to surfaces’. Yet the poem, as demonstrated, continually problematises observation, and moreover situates this as the baseline for its critique of commercialism. The final stanza contains some of the richest, and therefore most questionable, imagery:

On shining lines the trams like vast sarcophagi move
Into the sky, plum after sunset, merging to duck's egg, barred with mauve Zeppelin clouds, and Pentecost-like the car’s headlights bud
Out from sideroads and the traffic signals, crème-de-menthe or bull’s blood,
Tell one to stop, the engine gently breathing, or go on[.]

There are several examples here of striking and vibrant light, all of which are tied to transport: reflections off tram lines, car headlights and traffic lights. This continues the association of movement through the city with obfuscation. The comparison of

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411 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 48.
traffic lights to ‘crème-de-menthe or bull’s blood’ appears to be a reversal of the ‘insipid colour’ associated with the shopgirls’ faces, and by extension St. Philip’s Cathedral, in the previous stanza. Yet from here the cars go on to ‘where like black pipes of organs in the frayed and fading zone / Of the West the factory chimneys on sullen sentry will all night wait’. It is the negotiation of space that enables the ironic juxtaposition of elements that McKinnon and Longley point out. Through this negotiation, the poem is bookended by images of static sentries, with the factory chimneys at the end recalling the monolithic policeman directing traffic from the opening. This calls attention to the contradiction inherent to the experience of city-space. That which seems transcendent and near-Romantic is, in fact, defined by a strict ordering; the vibrant motion of the city is contained, geographically and textually, by stasis. It is around this time that MacNeice is also engaging in the clash between the classical and romantic in his poetry of the sea, as discussed in the previous chapter. That same clash is also present in ‘Birmingham’, and this is how the poem reveals the city’s challenging psychological character. The experiential view of the city, informed by spatial negotiation, and the socio-political view, informed by the revelations of New Signatures, generate a city-space that is multiple. The move from monolithic policeman to shining tram lines to black factory chimneys questions the idea of a single ‘Birmingham’ that the poem can take as its subject.

MacNeice’s depiction of the city here not only reflects a ‘pylon poets’ approach to the city, but it also inherits from a modernist writing that sought to give expression to the new sights and sounds of rapidly expanding urban spaces. The line ‘Into the sky, plum after sunset, merging to duck’s egg, barred with mauve’ owes something to a similar scene from Lawrence’s The White Peacock (1911):
The Spring came bravely even in South London, and the town was filled with magic. I never knew the sumptuous purple of evening till I saw the round arc-lamps fill with light, and roll like golden bubbles along the purple dusk of the high-road.412

Where in Lawrence’s novel the natural light of sunset becomes intertwined with the artificial light of the lamps, in MacNeice’s poem the vivid colour of the sunset is juxtaposed with the traffic lights. Contained in both is the modernist negotiation of a warped romanticism, of writing the modern city in the language of transcendent nature. For MacNeice, this is balanced with, as Longley notes, a Marxist awareness of this new romanticism as a façade, or, as argued above, a Platonic form. What Lawrence also allows MacNeice to do through this inheritance is to place the mind in relation to the contradictions between the city’s commercial glamour and industrial hardship. There is a sense of mental compromise in the ‘sleep-stupid faces’ of the workers who move ‘through the daily gate’ towards the black chimneys in the poem’s final line. A possible Lawrentian source for this is the poem ‘The factory cities’, which opens: ‘Oh, over the factory cities there seems to hover a doom / so dark, so dark, the mind is lost in it’.413 But instead of just locating the loss of the mind in the city’s darkness, MacNeice locates something similar in the show of lights as well. The ‘sleep-stupid faces’ can also be found in the ‘bleary haws’ of the houses and the inattentive faces of the shopgirls. It is the entire experience of the city’s routines, from dawn until dusk, that keep the mind tired and vision blurred.

‘Morning Sun’ also depicts the city as a space in which concentration and awareness is lost through motion and light. The poem opens with traffic imagery

reminiscent of ‘Birmingham’: ‘Shuttle of trains going north, going south’, and later there are ‘horns of cars, touché, touché, rapiers’ retort’. The vectors of these movements are ambiguous; the imagery of motion in itself is underlined by the restrictive connotations of ‘a moving cage, / A turning page of shine and sound, the day’s maze’. The city-as-space robs movement of its freeing potential. The cars in traffic are bound to the ordering of space in a way that poses a challenge to the ability of the senses to attend to urban experience, which is emphasised by the internal rhyme of ‘day’s maze’ bringing out the homophonic daze.

Light is central to the way that the poem explicates the limits of experience in the city. For the first three stanzas, the light of the sun is reflected and refracted off of the surfaces of the city’s objects in a way that heightens the poem’s visuals: ‘The shining of the lines of trams like swords’; ‘Yellow sun comes white off the wet streets but bright / Chromium yellows in the gay sun’s light’; ‘bouncing on the traffic which never stops’; ‘the street fountain blown across the square / Rainbow-trellises the air’. As in ‘Birmingham’, light accentuates and changes colour in a way that has an obscuring effect. Longley notes that ‘Morning Sun’ is among MacNeice’s early poems that ‘comment on their own aesthetics, on the artist’s problem of doing justice to flux with his own patterns’. Indeed, the changing of light from white to yellow to purple in the second stanza keeps the imagery destabilised. This reflects the treatment of the city-space itself: the poem’s visual flux contributes to the city’s sense of being in constant motion without trajectory. It is part of the dazing effect of the maze, the way that ‘Morning Sun’ strikes a parallel between the way one sees and moves through a city.

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414 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 15.
415 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 14.
MacNeice's contributions to *Letters from Iceland* largely reflect on his motivations for accepting Auden’s invitation in the first place, which invariably leads into extended reflections on the city's antagonistic relationship to the individual. A kind of mental tether forms between Iceland and the English city: MacNeice negotiates Iceland as an alternative to negotiating Birmingham; Iceland is peaceful because it is not as crowded as Birmingham. This difference between the two spaces comes down to the difference between possibilities for selfhood in those spaces. In 'Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard', MacNeice explores the ‘obscure but powerful ethics of Going North’,\(^{416}\) which trace a dissatisfaction with the urban:

In England one forgets – in each performing troupe
Forgets what one has lost, there is no room to stoop
And look along the ground, one cannot see the ground
For the feet of the crowd, and the lost is never found.

What is lost in the city is a sense of an essential self. While MacNeice was drawn to the idea of sinking the ego by *New Signatures*, here the ego is subsumed and lost in the crowd. The city itself is inadequate for the purposes of reconstituting the self because the rhythms of working life trap one in the movement of the crowd. Later, the speaker responds to those who object to travel, "'Escape by staying where you are; / A man is what he thinks he is and can / Find happiness within'”, with the wry reply: 'How nice to be born a man'. The isolationism implied by the speaker's need to get away from the crowd is qualified here in a way that reifies the importance of spatiality. Engagement with the world is still necessary, as one cannot simply 'Find happiness within'. The self remains a product of the interaction between the individual and their environment. This claim pushes back against a particular strand

\(^{416}\) Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, 30.
of popular psychology that developed after the First World War which promoted ideas of mind that largely focussed on auto-didactic self-improvement. At the vanguard of this phenomenon were movements such as Pelmanism, a correspondence course in which participants practiced memory exercises daily in the mornings and evenings with the promise of greater mental acuity and efficiency. These movements posited a view of the relationship between mind, body, and world wherein the mind was separated from the world, and so could be isolated for training that would allow the body to better exert itself.

What the speaker seeks in Iceland is a synergistic relationship between the mind and body found in Aristotle:

Aristotle’s pedantic phraseology
Serves better than common sense or hand to mouth psychology.
ἔσχε τὴν φύσιν – ‘found its nature’; the crude
Embryo rummages every latitude
Looking for itself, its nature, its final pattern

Here, MacNeice is putting forward a particularly loose interpretation of Aristotle’s teleology of the soul. For Aristotle, living beings are defined by their purpose. As Christopher Shields writes: ‘We learn what it is when we learn what it is for, when we learn its function, or in Aristotle’s terms, when we learn its final cause’.

This idea of the final cause complexly ties the body to the soul in terms derived from Plato: ‘The soul is the form of the body and the body is the matter of the soul’. Essentially, the body is in actuality what the soul is in potentiality. What this means

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418 Auden and MacNeice, Letters from Iceland, 32.
420 Ibid., xix.
is that the actions of the body are performed for the sake of the soul fulfilling its final cause, or *telos*:

> It is evident that the soul is a cause as that for the sake of which: just as reason acts for the sake of something, in the same way nature does so as well; and this is its end. And in living beings the soul is naturally such a thing. For all ensouled bodies are organs of the soul – just as it is for the bodies of animals, so it is for the bodies of plants – since they are for the sake of the soul.\(^{421}\) [415b25-20]

This body-soul relation underlies MacNeice’s whole rationale for his travels. Movement of the body across space is linked with the fulfilment of his own *telos*: he travels for the sake of his soul. While the city’s spatial order is aligned with Platonic abstraction, travel is aligned with the Aristotelean realisation of selfhood through becoming. This is how MacNeice’s speakers can resist both total identification with the crowd and total mental isolation.

With this position, MacNeice may be aligning himself closer to psychology than his speaker would wish. In discrediting the idea that ‘A man is what he thinks he is’, the speaker aligns himself with a contemporary perspective that was presenting as a counter-current to 1910s models of mind through the works of psychologists such as William MacDougall and W. H. R. Rivers. These figures took cues from Freud in considering the unconscious as key to understanding an essential human self: ‘The analytical, descriptive psychology of the past had to make way for one that recognised its subjects as changing rather than fixed, biological heritage in constant dialogue with environment’.\(^ {422}\) In this way, MacNeice’s speaker in ‘Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard’ is much the same as the speaker who

\(^{422}\) Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, 61.
traverses the ‘endlessly curving sea’ of ‘Ode’, as discussed in the previous chapter. In both cases, some unknown, unconscious self is realised by perpetual spatial traversal. While Aristotle is a crucial frame here, MacNeice’s poetic position on the relationship between spatiality and the self finds an intellectual mirror in shifting contemporaneous ideas of psychology.

Nonetheless, this tension appears throughout the travel writing, as MacNeice’s various speakers appear to disavow the idea of self-reflexive thought altogether. Later in ‘Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard’, the silence of Iceland allows one to mull over ‘morsels of un-thought’, which are better than ‘morsels of thought’ because ‘Thinking these days makes a suburban clatter’. In ‘Eclogue from Iceland’, Craven and Ryan pine for an idealised Icelandic life where one would ‘never dream’. In I Crossed the Minch, Crowder and Perceval, MacNeice’s imagined travelling company, are used to head off the concept of a self-reflective travel book through dialogue:

CROWDER: So, he’s going to write a book about the islands?
PERCEVAL: Yes.
CROWDER: Let’s write a book about him.
PERCEVAL: No.
CROWDER: Why?
PERCEVAL: My dear Crowder, I have never had time for minor cerebral exercises. I have never gone in for Pelmanism, crossword puzzles or detective fiction. I have never kept a diary or written to the Observer to say when I first heard the cuckoo. And I am not at this time of my life going to start writing about that! Later, Perceval claims he is coming up with an equation ‘to prove that Flora McDonald equals the Freudian–’ before being interrupted by Crowder ‘bursting into

423 Auden and MacNeice, Letters from Iceland, 32-33.
424 Ibid., 122.
425 MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch, 20.
drunken song’, interrupting the attempt to psychoanalyse a historical figure from the Hebrides.\textsuperscript{426} On the surface, this appears to frustrate a view of MacNeice’s travel writing as a reflection of wider trends during the thirties. The examples from \textit{Minch}, in particular, demonstrate an awareness of the vogue of travelogues reflecting on the author. Overall, systemised thought, exemplified in Freud and Pelmanism, is antithetical to the impulse to travel itself. It brings one back to the suburbs.

However, both texts are tonally underpinned by this very self-reflection. In ‘Eclogue from Iceland’, Ryan is a rather transparent stand-in for MacNeice himself, being a self-exile from Ireland, which he describes as ‘a nation / Built upon violence and morose vendettas’, in a clear nod to ‘Valediction’: ‘At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies’.\textsuperscript{427} In explicating the value of a trip to Iceland against the society he is leaving behind through a named persona, MacNeice attempts to find a way of ironising the attempt to leave the urban behind. Ryan is an ‘exile’, but cannot avoid carrying his country with him; it is the place that he has come from and must return to by the nature of the journey itself. The presence of Grettir, from the Icelandic sagas, offers new possibilities for this returning. Recalling his own legend as an outlaw, he insists that Craven and Ryan have a duty to return to their homelands and assert ‘human values’, because ‘every country stands / By the sanctity of the individual will’.\textsuperscript{428} The saga epic here becomes a way of reframing the return to the urban as the fulfilment of the journey’s \textit{telos}. However, the resolution is not so neat as this. Craven asks, ‘Is it our only duty?’, to which Grettir enigmatically replies: ‘Yes, my friends, it is your only duty. / And, it may be added, it is your only

\textsuperscript{426} Ibid., 68-69.
\textsuperscript{427} MacNeice, \textit{Collected Poems}, 8.
\textsuperscript{428} Auden and MacNeice, \textit{Letters from Iceland}, 132.
chance’. His directive to the travellers is modified by the qualification that the return home is no more a choice for having enabled an ethical possibility. This new perspective that Grettir offers is troubled by an admission that the individual cannot be found in the bleak landscape of Iceland, but can only be asserted among the crowd. As James Matthew Wilson writes, this attitude in MacNeice’s poetry has its origins in the concept of Aristotelean ethics that man attains self-knowledge arising from the polis, or community: ‘In the attempt to imagine himself as autonomous, as principally other than the society into which he is born and lives, man negates, rather than discovers his identity’. Not only do Ryan and Craven bring the urban with them to Iceland, but Iceland in turn reifies the need to return to the urban. Aristotle is at once an enabling and troubling source for the travel narratives with regards to selfhood.

The use of an imagined persona to externalise the thoughts of MacNeice the traveller also applies of course to Crowder and Perceval from Minch. Their names, their stuffy, critical manner, and their affectations – Crowder’s pipe, Perceval’s use of cocaine and reading of Kafka and Freud – allow MacNeice to bring the suburban, and specifically the English, with him. This is all conducted with self-conscious humour, such as in an early passage when MacNeice allows two passengers to ‘sit down respectively on top of Crowder and Perceval’, making a joke of his own attempt to convincingly externalise his suburban and English-influenced subjectivity. This reflects the core of the travelogue’s tonal tension as MacNeice, moving in and out of periods of boredom throughout his journey, struggles to find

429 Ibid., 133.
431 MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch, 20.
any sense of communion with the communities of the Hebrides on account of his not knowing Scottish Gaelic.

The externalisation of the self in the form of multiple, interacting personae demonstrates a reflexive concern with the traveller’s subjectivity. The Hebrides trip continually demonstrates the frustrating inability of the traveller to leave behind the context from which they have travelled. Furthermore, it reflects a modernist fragmentation of the self and a scepticism of the possibility of a unified self. When Grettir implores Ryan and Craven to return to their home countries, ‘Eclogue from Iceland’ stages a conflict between selves, between the desire to travel and the ethos of the socially-embedded observer heralded by Michael Roberts in *New Signatures*. In *Minch*, this is evident in a later passage in which MacNeice finishes a poem, published in *The Earth Compels* (1938) as ‘The Heated Minutes’:

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

The poem was started when MacNeice was in Lochboisdale, the main village in South Uist, and a sign, like Stornoway, of the creeping industrialisation that MacNeice fears is corrupting the traditional life of the islanders. Here, imagined communion with a loved one offers potential respite from the anxiety associated with the clock’s reminder of the passage of time, and of the routines of commercialism that are being imported to the islands. This has a distinctly psychological dimension that is pointed to by the line ‘creeps inside the skull’.

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432 Ibid., 180.
Contained within a travelogue that ironises the same phenomenon, ‘The Heated Minutes’ communicates a fearful reaction to the revelation of a self-reflexive subjectivity that runs throughout the text. Connection with another person is conceived as a salve, which in turn brings back the call to Aristotle that is so important to Letters. The constitution of a selfhood through relation to others is revealed as a frustrated attempt to work past this self-reflexivity. Bringing Aristotle on the modernist journey is a part of the travel writing’s constitution of psychological discourses, of skulls and selves.

‘The tiniest circle circumscribed’: Anxiety and the crowd in pre-war London

By the time that I Crossed the Minch was published, MacNeice had already been living in London for about two years, having moved in October of 1936 to take up a position as a lecturer in Greek at the Bedford College for Women. The poetry that he wrote immediately following the move, including the verse play Out of the Picture in 1937 and the collection The Earth Compels in 1938, kept the critical attitude towards commercialism that had flourished in Poems, but without the framing of urban space. Instead, his critiques of capitalism were reflections seen in the mirror of his trips to rural landscapes such as Iceland and the Hebrides, and given voice in forms associated with rurality; the pastoral eclogue and the folk-song. The urban is distant in most of these poems, and its flaws are implied, rather than pointed to, by the peace and slow time of island life. In ‘Postscript to Iceland’, addressed to his travelling companion W. H. Auden, he summarises the function of these trips thus:

Holidays should be like this,
Free from over-emphasis,

433 Jon Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 192.
Time for soul to stretch and spit
Before the world comes back on it,

Before the chimneys row on row
Sneer in smoke, 'We told you so'.

The peace of Iceland accentuates the way that city life – at this point still suburban Birmingham – crushes the soul, encapsulating the Aristotelean concerns of the Iceland book. The tax of the urban on the spirit is made by a pivot from the language of time to that of space. ‘Time’ is what a good holiday gives to the soul, whereas the return to the city evokes claustrophobia and regimentation. This small section maintains a thematic thread in MacNeice’s thought on the urban that emphasises spatiality at the core of its effect on the individual. However this critique is, by this point, indelibly tainted by the anxiety of developments in Europe leading to the rise of fascism and the encroaching spectre of war.

The move to London, at least initially, appears to have given MacNeice a rejuvenated outlook. This move south was also a move from the suburban to the urban, and from the idealised domesticity of his marriage to Mary Ezra to a more intense, if dispassionate, engagement with the intelligentsia of the capital:

I omitted to order the News Chronicle and the Statesman, began a life which was a whirl of narcotic engagements – meetings for a drink, political meetings, private views, flirtations, the experimental theatre, the question of my overdraft, the question of Spain.

Rather than a deliberately sustained ignorance of his surroundings, as in Birmingham, MacNeice throws himself into this new context. His proximity to the centre of the British intelligentsia gives his memoir recollections a sense of hectic

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434 Auden and MacNeice, Letters from Iceland, 252.
435 MacNeice, Strings, 165.
significance. Yet what this passage also captures is the persistent anxiety of this lifestyle in both public and private spheres. His financial instability sits alongside larger questions about the fate of Europe and the rise of fascism.

Commensurate with this growing anxiety, there is a subtle shift in the treatment of the crowd in the run up to the war throughout MacNeice’s work. Whereas *Poems* and the travel literature place the authorial voice at a conscious distance from society, that it might act as a reflecting mirror, by the time war was on the horizon those boundaries had become blurred. The speaker of *Autumn Journal* refers to a general ‘we’, implicating themselves in the reactions of the population to the march of history. To do so suggests a keen awareness of the speakers’ own roles in their social contexts, and a notion of selfhood that relies more overtly to the Aristotelian conception of man as a political animal. Increasing importance is given to interpersonal identification, with the self being formed in relation to a crowd or individual Other. *Zoo*, written and published in 1938 on commission from Michael Joseph, is a particularly important text for helping to understand the changing nature of selfhood in MacNeice’s poetry, and its overt, but also complex, psychological character.\textsuperscript{436}

*Zoo* is replete with the language of psychoanalysis. This is employed satirically sometimes: ‘Psychologists, I suppose, if we told them we envied the sloth, would say we wanted to get back to the idle comfort of the womb’.\textsuperscript{437} Yet the book’s discussion of the value of the zoo as an experience, and man’s relationship to animals more widely, is underpinned by ideas of instinct and the unconscious throughout. Indeed, it is from these ideas that *Zoo* launches its consideration of the


crowd. The book therefore connects the metaphysical and political relations between the individual and the crowd in *Autumn Journal*, to a specific strain of psychological understanding that demonstrates MacNeice's grounding in, and diversion from, contemporaneous ideas about Britain's, and Europe's, grim situation.

*Zoo* opens with an epigraph from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem ‘*Der Panther*’ [‘The Panther’], which establishes many of the psychological concerns of the rest of the book:

> Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
> so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
> Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
> und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

[His glance, so tired from traversing his cage's repeated railings, can hold nothing more. He feels as though there were a thousand cages, and no more world behind them than before.]

The panther in its cage is in the menagerie of Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the city that Rilke had moved to in 1902 and that remained his home until the end of the decade. During that time he was briefly a personal assistant to the sculptor Auguste Rodin while he worked on a monograph about him. Rodin owned a plaster cast from an ancient carving of a tiger, which Rilke describes in admiring terms to his wife Clara in a letter of 1902:

> And that in plaster! And with this the expression of the prowling stride is intensified to the highest degree, the powerful planting of the broad paws,

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and at the same time, that caution in which all strength is wrapped, that noiselessness'.

The treatment of the real panther in terms of the cast of the tiger creates a poem that contrasts an awareness of the panther's subjectivity, 'hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt', with the speaker's own aestheticizing gaze: 'Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte, / der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht' ['The padding of the strong and supple paces / within the tiniest circles circumscribed'].

It is precisely this tension that informs MacNeice's Zoo. Animals are like aesthetic objects that man makes for himself: 'The dog, as we have domesticated him, is in a sense our creation, a toy, an art-object. We play Pygmalion with him and he comes to life'. The othering of the animal entails a reduction of their subjectivity, yet there is an awareness that they nonetheless retain some compromised independence of mind, which is discussed in terms of 'instinct' that seem here to be drawn more from evolutionary psychology:

And one must forget one's life outside just as the animal has forgotten his – forgotten it on the surface, though the instincts creep about inside him which will never again be realized in action. His cage is a train carrying him through the jungle that was but is no more his; now it is night and when he looks into the window all he can see is himself in the cage reflected there.

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, by the time MacNeice is writing this he is already thinking about the human animal in terms of repressed or ignored instincts, as in the earlier drafts of 'Ode'. MacNeice draws on the image of the train, which also goes on to figure as an emblem of childhood mental formation in

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441 MacNeice, Zoo, 64.

442 Ibid., 104.
‘Experiences with Images’. Its use here in a metaphor about animal instinct subtly brings the tectonics of MacNeice’s own childhood into view, suggesting the influence of evolutionary psychological discourses on his sense of his own mental formation. The relationship between mind and action, now compromised by captivity, blends all of this with Aristotelean conceptions of the soul to expand on the implications of Rilke’s observation: the zoo animal’s sedentary lifestyle robs it of its telos, and it is in this way that it can be aestheticized, made an art-object by the locking away of its instincts.

The relevance of this line of thought to MacNeice’s writing of space and the mind lies in the link that Zoo makes, suggested in the first line of the passage, between the zoo animal in its cage and the individual in society:

We are, of course, a plurality as it is and we have many animals in us. We have gills in the womb and tails and those we drop, but the sea-beast still swims in our brains and the monkey itches in our fingers. But the community is undemocratic – the beasts enslaved for ever, caged or buried. And that is why the Zoo can give us parables for our history. What men do with the outward and visible animals he has already done with the inner ones.\(^{443}\)

MacNeice’s analysis of the relationship between the individual and society here takes clear cues from Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents, which was first published in English translation by the Hogarth Press in 1930. In that text, Freud develops his theories on the role of faith in human psychology from The Future of an Illusion (1927), and takes as his main subject what he sees as a core contradiction in the human psyche: that the development of man necessitates the development of civilization in order to allow people to co-exist peacefully with each other, but that this self-same civilization is also the cause of man’s most profound neuroses. He

\(^{443}\) Ibid., 122.
writes: ‘This contention holds that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions’. Civilization, in this sense, refers to: ‘the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations’. In seeking to co-exist as a society, which fulfils man’s ultimate aim as a species, individual members of society must control and repress their most violent, anti-social instincts, such as the instinct to fight or kill. Freud’s thesis implies that the modern condition, as characterised by the breakout of a devastating global war, the sense of fragmentation in art and society, and the burgeoning of mental illnesses, was the result of these repressed anti-social instincts beginning to rise to the surface in the form of neuroses.

This argument had profound implications for the way that western society viewed its own progress and the relationship of the individual to the collective. It has a major effect on Stephen Spender’s account of modernist writing in The Destructive Element, acting as an explanation for the fragmentation of Eliot’s The Waste Land: ‘The method of The Waste Land is justified in so far as it fulfils the psychological truth exposed by Freud’. The usefulness of Freud as a diagnosis of society also has a political dimension, as Spender goes on to laud Auden’s poetic blend of Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. These perspectives are united in their aim to identify symptoms of sickness within a system. The particular value of

445 Ibid., 89.
Civilization is to make the systems of the mind and the systems of society coterminous.

Zoo follows this line of thinking to an extent, stopping short of the optimism of a possible mind-society cure. However, Freud is evidently important as a framework for expanding on, and qualifying, his Aristotelean outlook on the relationship between the individual and society. In both Aristotle and Freud, man is a political animal, constituting selfhood through interactions with others which are the foundation of society and civilization. Yet Freud allows for MacNeice’s ambivalence towards society. This accounts for the need to reconstitute the self through travel in unpopulated lands. From Freud, MacNeice takes the idea that society unhealthily binds the individual, but substitutes the violent urges of Freud’s theory for the notion of an Aristotelean teleology that is so important to Letters from Iceland. In short, Freud is an important enabling framework for MacNeice’s quasi-journalistic perspective from which he writes the community. Ancient ideas of soul and modern ideas of the unconscious are intertwined, and both serve the same ends of figuring the way that the modern individual is made by the crowd.

Yet Freud, too, is an implicitly qualified presence, this time by the Rilke epigraph. In The Strings are False, when MacNeice writes about how ‘one needs personal relationships, but not as the end of existence’, the poet is set up against the psychologist:

Whoso saveth his life shall lose it. And even the psychoanalysts, whose job it is to put such relationships in a right perspective, are on a long-term view destroyers because they are only concerned with saving your life for you. It is better to be like Rilke and capitalise your own loneliness and neuroses, regard Death as the mainspring.447

447 MacNeice, Strings, 171.
It has been previously noted that MacNeice harbours a suspicion of the curative appeal of psychoanalysis, which reappears in his most psychologically engaged texts as part of a wider suspicion of holistic creeds. What this passage clarifies is that this suspicion arises from the view that neuroses serve a self-making function. Rilke stands as an important example of someone who ‘capitalised’ on a tortured mental state and made his profound fear of mortality into an endless poetic resource. What psychoanalysis ‘destroys’, then, is the ability of the poet-figure to separate themselves from the community which they write, which is a central tenet in the concept of the poet's societal function in *Modern Poetry*. In the context of *The Destructive Element*, this has political repercussions. MacNeice’s suspicion of thirties left politics, which aims to cure the social ills of man, finds its intellectual parallel in a similar approach to the aims of psychoanalysis.

The Rilke epigraph also has spatial significance. As the poem continues, the ‘allerkleinsten Kreise’ [tinier circles] of the panther demonstrate the mental consequences of his being caged in action. The animal becomes more aestheticized the longer it is kept apart from its natural habitat: ‘*Ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte, / in der betäubt win großer Wille steht*’ [is like a dance of force about a basis / on which mighty will stands stupefied]. In tying the mind to movement in this way, MacNeice’s reading of Rilke offers him as an exemplar for connecting Freudian ideas of civilized entrapment and Aristotelean ideas of teleological action, as well as for seeing them in his navigation of London zoo, and the streets outside:

> When talking about the Zoo I have co-opted the animals as members of my private world. But this word member I am also here using loosely for a member is someone who co-operates, and these animals do not co-operate.
But they contribute *unwittingly* to the life which I myself am living. Just as the streets, stations, clouds and trees of London contribute to it.\(^{448}\)

The comparison of the animals to the geography of London brings us back to MacNeice’s recollection of slowly absorbing the sights of Birmingham as he navigated it. Negotiation of city space here is conceived as a *co-opting* act that makes the external world illustrative of the inner world. Very much like *Zoo*, *Autumn Journal* is structured in a way that moves canto-to-canto between the public world of the community and the private world of the mind as contemporary events harken back to memories of visiting Spain with Auden, or of MacNeice’s childhood. As Wilson writes, *Autumn Journal* is engaged with the Aristotelean idea of man as a political animal, and voices ‘a ubiquitous concern for the relation of persons to their historical community and the possible moral responsibility that relation may entail’.\(^{449}\) More than this, however, *Zoo* offers a way of thinking about the negotiation of London as depicted in *Autumn Journal* as a way in to the private world. The movement between the individual and the crowd enables the blurring of the narrator’s psyche and the wider psychological character of the historical moment in the months before the war.

The consideration of London as both spatial and psychological is established at the end of the first canto of *Autumn Journal*, when the speaker is taking a train from Hampshire:

> And so to London and down the ever-moving
> Stairs
> Where a warm wind blows the bodies of men together
> And blows apart their complexes and cares.\(^{450}\)

\(^{448}\) MacNeice, *Zoo*, 124.

\(^{449}\) Wilson, ‘Louis MacNeice’s Struggle with Aristotelean Ethics’, 53.

\(^{450}\) MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 103.
As in ‘Postscript to Iceland’, the return to the city from the rural immediately brings up ideas of claustrophobia, blowing the bodies of people together. The forces that create the crowd also separate their minds from this sense of unity. The mention of ‘complexes’ highlights a Freudian understanding of psychopathology which keys the reader into the impact of Civilization and its Discontents on popular conceptions of the tension between individual and crowd psychology. ‘Blows apart’ ends the canto on a subtle note of violence. In light of the crowd’s ‘complexes’ this evokes ideas of repression which underline the negative view of the individual’s relation to the crowd as discussed in Zoo, but the historical context of Autumn Journal means that it also points to the fear of coming violence. This is a particular use of psychological terms that also speaks to a scepticism of a utopian psychology that had been developing in Britain in the preceding decades, from William MacDougall’s The Group Mind (1920) to Ian D. Suttie’s The Origins of Love and Hate (1935), which sought to distil and promote Freudian ideas of instinct in a way that put emphasis on ideas such as love and group action.451 MacNeice gives evidence to a counter-strain of thinking that complicates the claims of psychology to offer a salve for either the individual or society at large, whilst still using a broadly Freudian vocabulary as a reference point for describing the contemporary social atmosphere. As Michal Shapira describes, there was a fervent pre-war political and public discourse about the potential effects of total war on the mental health of the British population that drew from Freudian ideas: ‘Even those ambivalent about psychoanalysis often had to engage with the implications of its dark view of human psychology as anxious,

fearful, irrational, aggressive, and fragile'. Situating the psychology of *Autumn Journal* in these discourses allows for the richness of its interplay between the individual and the crowd to emerge.

The fifth canto expands on the relation between urban space and the psychology of the individual and crowd as the war begins to filter into everyday life for the speaker through news bulletins and posters:

And we cannot take it in and we go to our daily
Jobs to the dull refrain of the caption 'War'
Buzzing around us as from hidden insects
And we think ‘This must be wrong, it has happened before,
Just like this before, we must be dreaming;
It was long ago these flies
Buzzed like this, so why are they still bombarding
The ears if not the eyes?’

This passage explores a complex psychological reaction to war's becoming everyday. What is being described is a process of denial that thwarts acknowledgement of the possibility of war. War is a ‘dull refrain’ and a ‘caption’, a purely linguistic phenomenon that, as language, can be contained within quotes and relegated to a corner of experience that can be disavowed. Also contained within quotes is a thought attributed to a common ‘we’, in which the threat of war is seen to interfere with the mind in several ways. The situation takes on a dream-like quality, on account of that fact that it makes memory seem present, and in that it defies perception. The war, being only a threat, cannot be seen, existing only in the mind. This is all written in terms of disavowal: the speaker ‘must’ be dreaming, and the cleave between inner and outer experience renders the war itself as a question.

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Yet this disavowal is, in turn, thwarted as the buzzing of the radio becomes a confrontation while socialising in town:

But did you see
The latest? You mean whether Cobb has bust the record
Or do you mean the Australians have lost their last by ten
Wickets or do you mean that the autumn fashions –
No, we don’t mean anything like that again.
No, what we mean is Hodza, Henlein, Hitler,
The Maginot Line[.]

The need of the speaker for distraction is compromised by the interjection of the ‘we’ with whom the speaker has been identifying. The move from escapism to reality is seen in the shift from long clauses and enjambment to the staccato litany of names, which itself creates the kind of military regimentation that the speaker begins to see in the city itself, such as the table-sweepers who move ‘like a tank battalion / In answer to the drums.’ This passage highlights the problematics of crowd-identification with which the speaker struggles throughout the poem:

And the individual, powerless, has to exert the
Powers of will and choice
And choose between enormous evils, either
Of which depends on somebody else’s voice.

While the ego-sinking of Communism earlier in the decade held some appeal for MacNeice as he sought a socially-aware writing, here pre-war anxiety threatens to forcibly subsume the ego. The individual, subject to the advances of history, is unable to exert a true agency, which is reflected in the growing reality of the war on a psychological level. This is realised fully in the space of London itself. The speaker tracks their movement home via Trafalgar Square, Corner House, Tottenham Court Road, Charlotte Street, and Regent’s Park, when they finally arrive at Primrose Hill:
Whose summit once was used for a gun emplacement
And very likely will
Be used that way again. The bloody frontier
Converges on our beds
Like jungle beaters closing in on their destined
Trophy of pelts and heads.

While at the start of the canto the speaker struggled against the acknowledgement of war, now the war is being imaginatively located and constructed by the speaker. It is in this way that 'The bloody frontier / Converges on our beds': memory and anxiety summon the image of the gun emplacement in a way that bridges the gap between the war’s literal, physical absence and its psychological omnipresence. MacNeice speaks to the role of the mind as a platform for the making of the reality of history.

This imagery is paid off in Canto VII with the transformation of Primrose Hill:

The night is damp and still
And I hear dull blows on wood outside my window;
They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill.
The wood is white like the roast flesh of chicken,
Each tree falling like a closing fan;
No more looking at the view from seats beneath the branches,
Everything is going to plan;
They want the crest of this hill for anti-aircraft,
The guns will take the view

The realisation of an anti-aircraft gun on Primrose Hill fulfils a complex intertwining of geography and the mind as mediated through war. The change in the physical geography of the hill, the cutting down of trees, entails a change in the way that the individual engages with the space of the city – no longer can the speaker take in the view. The speaker's spatial tactics, their appropriation of the city-space, are

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454 Ibid., 115.
undermined by the spatial strategies that transform the hill into a military asset. It is in this sense that *Autumn Journal* uses the space of the city to stage the uneven conflict between the individual and the forces of history. The line ‘The guns will take the view’ suggests this in a couple of different ways: the guns will take the view away from the speaker, but will of course appropriate it for themselves as they ‘probe the heavens for bacilli / With narrow wands of blue’ when the war breaks out. Looking out over the city can no longer offer the restful perspective that it once did, and now carries connotations of war and the anxiety of attack. Significantly, this transformation has yet to happen from the speaker's perspective. The guns ‘will’ take the view but haven't yet. The transformation of the space is completed psychically, by the fearful, anxious perspective of the speaker who looks toward a future of war.

As mentioned earlier, the move from Birmingham to London was also a move from the suburban to the urban, from domesticity to involvement in the intellectual heart of the metropolis. However, as Plato's Forms resurface in Canto XII as *Autumn Journal* borrows heavily from the earlier work of the other city in its treatment of London: ‘His world of capital initials, of transcendent / Ideas is too bleak’, contrasted with Aristotle: ‘Stressing the function, scrapping the Form in Itself, / Taking the horse from the shelf and letting it gallop’. This dichotomy of outlooks is mapped onto contesting ideas about the ideal place of the individual in society. The speaker wants to be part of ‘a civilised, articulate and well-adjusted / Community where the mind is given its due / But the body is not distrusted’, as opposed to the current state of the intelligentsia who are ‘spiritually bankrupt / Intellectual snobs’. Where Plato represents a too-transcendent outlook that leads to a purely theoretical intellectualism, Aristotle offers, as Wilson describes, a grounded ethics.
of interaction with wider society: ‘Autumn Journal' recurs regularly to Aristotle’s philosophy as a means to resolving the extreme ethical ambivalence MacNeice faced in the tense months before the outbreak of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{455}

Classical philosophy, here, is important for developing the mind-body dualism from the end of Canto I into a central thread of Autumn Journal’s outlook on the individual and the crowd. They act as the intellectual poles between which the speaker moves as he seeks to constitute a sense of social embeddedness in light of the forces of history that move in on the space of the city. ‘Birmingham’ provides a useful touchstone for the imagery of the night-driving scene in Canto XIV: ‘Among red and amber and green, spears and candles, / Corkscrews and slivers of reflected light’, and later ‘Where housewives bolster up their jerry-built abodes / With amour propre and the habit of Hire Purchase’. While the previous canto declared ‘Good-bye now, Plato and Hegel’, the city is still seen in terms of kaleidoscopic light on the one hand, and the pursuit of Platonic forms on the other. In the context of Autumn Journal’s wider dichotomy between Platonist and Aristotelean views of the individual in society, this echo from the earlier poetry serves as the basis for critiquing the effects of a cynical involvement in the community that is ultimately self-serving: \textit{amour propre}, judging one’s esteem by the opinions of others.

This episode details MacNeice travelling back to Oxford, on the encouragement of E. R. Dodds, to help with canvassing people to vote for the independent candidate A. D. Lindsay in the City of Oxford by-election of October 1938. The election was seen as a microcosm of attitudes towards the Munich Agreement, and towards Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement in general, with

\textsuperscript{455} Wilson, ‘Louis MacNeice’s Struggle with Aristotelean Ethics’, 65.
Lindsay offering a chance for people’s discontent to be registered on an electoral level.\(^{456}\) It was not to be: the opposing candidate, Quintin Hogg, retained the seat for the Conservatives with a reduced majority. This ‘coward vote’ frustrates the speaker’s appeal to political involvement and solidarity. Before the vote, the speaker asks: ‘What is the use / Of asking what is the use of one brick only?’ The outcome of the Oxford election is made illustrative of this point, with the threat of war underlining the need for ‘The nicest people in England’ to ‘align against the beast / That prowls at every door and barks in every headline’.

While the call back to ‘Birmingham’ brings back to mind the issues of commercialism and its deadening effects on the crowd, their recontextualization in light of the war here leads to a sense of urgency that sheds light on the primary obstacle that MacNeice sees to his own sense of involvement in the community: the lack of a sufficiently engaged community to be involved with. Platonist Forms, here, invoked by the suburban houses of London, map onto the kind of political perfectionism that leads to a cynical attitude about the impact of voting: ‘The perfectionist stands for ever in a fog / Waiting for the fog to clear’. The hope for positive change, and for Britain taking a stand against fascism, lies in ‘vulgar’ action within ‘a world of error’, which is aligned with an Aristotelean outlook. The sense of defeat that runs through the poem comes from an increasing scepticism that this is achievable in Britain. What *Autumn Journal* traces as a whole is this conflict between the individual's desire to affect positive change not just in the face of history, but also in the face of a community that is resistant to the idea of change.

By the end of *Autumn Journal*, London takes on a deadened quality as the first snow of winter falls in Canto XXII. The result is a strange kind of transformation in which details and differences fade away. The cars in the street ‘Turn animal, moving slowly / In their white fur like bears’, the trees ‘fade into the hill behind them’ while ‘the sombre laurels break parole and blossom / In enormous clumps of peonies’:\footnote{MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 155.}

Our London World
Grown all of a piece and peaceful like the Arctic,
The sums all cancelled out and the flags furled. 
At night we sleep behind stockades of frost,
Nothing alive in the streets to run the gauntlet
Of this unworldly cold except the lost
Wisps of steam from the gratings of the sewers.

The peacefulness of this scene, as well as the earlier description of train steam as ‘a northern / Geyser erupting in a land of lava’, recalls the contrast between London and Iceland from ‘Epilogue’. Yet, it is at this time that the speaker declares ‘Let us flee this country and leave its complications / Exactly where they (the devil take them) are’. This can be accounted for in part by the subtle language of violence suggested by ‘stockades’ and ‘gauntlet’, which inflect the empty, Arctic-like space of the street with the continual suggestion of war. This scene is not the solution that the speaker seeks, as the comparison with Iceland might suggest, but is in fact the apotheosis of the paralyzed, fearful attitude that runs through the poem’s sense of disillusion and defeat. The snow materialises the tendency to inaction that is associated with an apathetic perfectionism. The space of the street takes on the mental characteristics of the crowd, and so the need to escape the city is also a need to escape this psychological condition.
MacNeice did indeed leave the city, travelling to Barcelona on what was supposed to be a group trip of a delegation of English writers to the besieged capital of the Spanish Republic. In the end, he was the only one to make the trip. Stallworthy speculates that MacNeice went ‘probably to get copy for a late section of Autumn Journal that would counterpoint the sixth section’s memories of Spain in 1936’. Canto XXIII does work to illustrate the consequences of the earlier canto’s portents, not least the Cambridge don’s enigmatic warning: “There’s going to be trouble in this country soon”. Yet, as previously mentioned, the speaker’s travel is demonstrably psychologically motivated.

In the penultimate canto of the poem, Spain represents a global future of conflict. It is ‘a place in space where shortly / All of us may be forced to camp in time’. Spatialising war adds to its sense of enormity; war is not something that one goes through, but something one occupies, is surrounded by, and must dwell in. There is also a melding of the boundaries between the physical and the mental here. War threatens material consequences, yet they are still to play out. A certain personal confusion is suggested by the need to escape a country heading for war to go to a country that is already there. Yet the speaker finds in Spain the thing that is missing in London. War has enabled the conditions of the adequate community for the ideal engagement of the individual: ‘Here at least the soul has found its voice / Though not indeed by choice; / The cost was heavy’. This is because ‘the old order is gone and the golden calf / Of Catalan industry shattered’. This dissolution of industry as a consequence of war has encouraged a renewed communal sense and a realignment of priorities outside of material attainment: ‘The human values
remain, purged in the fire’. These sentiments, and the purging fire in particular, will prove relevant to MacNeice’s writing of the war itself. However, the path to community runs through Ireland, which was a final pre-war travel narrative that complicates the neat development of a poetic community in his war responses. The possibility of finding the adequate community did not ease the prospect of war for MacNeice, who remained fearful of its growing reality and possible consequences.

‘Running away from the War’: Ireland and back again

The previous chapter has already discussed the genesis of ‘The Coming of War’ in detail. The motivation for the trip around Ireland with Ernst Stahl on which the sequence was based was a progression of the anxieties about events on the continental mainland. In Strings, MacNeice recalls: ‘The fatalist in me said, War or no war, you have got to go back to the West. If only for a week. Because you may never again’. While previous trips to Iceland and the Hebrides had been conceived, at least in part, as a professional concern, this trip around Ireland was born purely of the near-panicked need to escape the grasp of current events, and to seek respite from his fears in the West.

The longer original sequence, as published in The Last Ditch, contains sections that depict travel between different stops on MacNeice and Stahl’s tour, including movement across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The shorter version, ‘The Closing Album’, therefore truncates the length of certain parts of the trip, leading Terence Brown to note that the title ‘The Closing Album’ reflects ‘its method as a series of poems of place, with the resultant snapshots pasted in an

461 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 210.
album.\textsuperscript{462} Furthermore, the contrast between ‘Coming’ and ‘Closing’ is indicative of the different approaches of the respective sequences: the former suggests a present-tense movement, reflecting the sequence’s depiction of travel as it happened; the latter suggests that it is a look back at something that has already happened, just as one looks at the photos in an album. In the context of how MacNeice writes the long build-up to war throughout the thirties, ‘The Coming of War’ poses a challenge to \textit{Autumn Journal}’s insistence on living in the world of error. The later sequence instead stages a test of the speaker’s ability to satisfactorily occupy a physical reality – Irish place – cleaved entirely from a different mental reality – the inevitability of war.

The trip’s first destination was Dublin, where MacNeice had been periodically staying for the past year, pursuing employment opportunities at Trinity College Dublin and involving himself in Irish literary life.\textsuperscript{463} When he arrives there with Stahl, however, he describes in \textit{Strings} how they ‘went up the Nelson column like any trippers’.\textsuperscript{464} The pair are recalled as playing the part of the tourist, a mode of moving through the city that implies its own temporariness. The complexity of identification, both of MacNeice to Dublin and of Dublin itself, forms the thematic kernel of the first section of ‘The Coming of War’, itself collected as “Dublin”, which mirrors this semi-touristic approach:

\begin{quote}
This was never my town, \\
I was not born nor bred \\
Nor schooled here and she will not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{462} Terence Brown, “‘What am I doing here?’: Travel and MacNeice’, in \textit{Incorrigibly Plural}, 72-84: 78.
\textsuperscript{463} He was approached to apply for the Chair of English at Trinity College Dublin, and was in talks with Cuala Press about publishing what became \textit{The Last Ditch}. He had also been asked by F. R. Higgins to join the Irish Academy of Letters. See \textit{Letters of Louis MacNeice}, ed. by Jonathan Allison (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 350-72; Stallworthy, \textit{Louis MacNeice}, 257.
\textsuperscript{464} MacNeice, \textit{The Strings are False}, 210.
Have me alive or dead
But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance[.]\(^{465}\)

The feminisation of Dublin recalls Section XVI of *Autumn Journal*: 'Why / Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female, / Mother or sweetheart?'\(^{466}\)

Personification makes of Dublin a city-subject, which imbues it with a sense of agency; it is not just that the speaker can feel rejected in Dublin, but can be rejected by Dublin.

For de Certeau, the creation of the ‘universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself’ is one of the founding operations of an urbanistic discourse, ‘[providing] a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties’.\(^{467}\) The city’s identification is an ordering principle that contains its elements and subsumes them under the banner of ‘the city’. In his negotiation of Dublin, MacNeice poetically constructs the city-subject that contains Dublin’s meanings and properties. His overstated insistence that it is not ‘my town’ then appears to be a strategy to avoid falling into the trap of self-identification, which is anathema to the moving self. De Certeau goes on to say, in theorising spatial stories, that:

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense experience of lacking a place[.]\(^{468}\)


\(^{466}\) Ibid., 138.


\(^{468}\) Ibid., 103.
The poem’s touristic mode allows the speaker to move through Dublin as a free agent without being subsumed by the quagmire of national identity. This is also reflected in the space of the city itself, the identity of which is continually troubled by the moving perspective of the tourist-speaker. Critics have been perceptive to note that the Dublin of the poem is a mixture of incongruous properties that draws upon the long history of the city and its associations with different civilizations:

Fort of the Dane,
Garrison of the Saxon,
Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought[.]

Edna Longley states that MacNeice’s own complex claim to Irishness is reflected in the city’s ‘mongrel heritage’. This appropriation is conceived as a building-out of the city space: a fort becomes a garrison becomes a capital city at the centre of a nation, each space growing from the last one so that the stanza forms a kind of architectural genealogy. The multiplicity of Dublin’s identity, imagined through its development as a spatial project, accounts for MacNeice’s touristic fascination with the city, even as he self-consciously avoids simple identification. As Bertrand Westphal notes: ‘the city, like any human space, is an archipelago, both singular and plural’. Dublin is at once the political centre of an Ireland that MacNeice feels distant from, and the host of a varied history that he can relate to. It is a place that concretes national identification, and a space that makes room for a historical discourse.

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469 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 7.
MacNeice’s touristic view of the city as he and Stahl walk up to Nelson’s pillar ‘like any trippers’ creates a spatial story in “Dublin” from the elements of the city space that he observes, and this story mediates the shift from history to romantic image and back to history again. His walking through the city is what enables these images to be strung together, therefore creating the space for a discourse of the city’s identity. This discourse is underlined by the last three lines: ‘O greyness run to flower, / Grey stone, grey water, / And brick upon grey brick’. There is a continual shifting back and forth between greyness and flowering that reflects the way that the section as a whole shifts between romance and history, or identification and alienation. The section ends with a mirroring of the first line, indicating that the speaker is letting go of the parataxis that he has built up, leaving Dublin exactly as he found it. As Walker notes: ‘The poem articulates but does not try to resolve Dublin’s distinct and not-altogether Irish identity’. Resolution implies fixity, but that would undermine the ‘mongrel heritage’ that defines Dublin. The city, for MacNeice, is better existing between and across the boundaries of identity. For as long as it does, travel, the act of walking through the city, offers the best way for him to account for the space of the city, allowing him to engage in the ‘immense experience of lacking a place’, the indefinite absenteeism of the wandering tourist.

The fifth section underscores the inability of Cushendun to offer relief to the travellers, as they travel across the border to the West:

Running away from the War,
Running away from the red
Pillar-box and the stamps
Bearing George’s head.

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Running away from the War,
Running away from the Black
North – the winch and the windlass,
The drum and the Union Jack.⁴⁷²

For Walker, this section marks a poetic turning point in the sequence where MacNeice begins to employ a distinctly Irish mode, using repetition, alternating rhymes and three- and four-stress rhythms to ‘partly inhabit the world of song and cast a kind of spell, driving the poem beyond the signs of Britishness in Northern Ireland that are a reminder of the imminent war’.⁴⁷³ In connecting the war to these signs, the poem also dramatizes the way that this anxiety affects one’s existing psychological makeup. Now, postage stamps represent war. Further, the images of industrialisation and sectarianism, which by this time were already well-trodden in MacNeice’s poetry of Northern Ireland, bear this psychic significance as well. In ‘Belfast’, they are already signifiers of a kind of violence: ‘The sun goes down with a banging of Orange drums / While the male kind murders each its woman / To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna’. The apocalyptic note on which the earlier poem ends takes on new significance here. As a whole, ‘The Coming of War’ makes the war local, even private, as it finds its way into Irish towns, kitchens, and bedrooms. Yet this section, in making the global local, connects the fear of war to MacNeice’s distaste for the violent parochialism of sectarian attitudes. Northern Ireland is a reminder of the war not just through the news, but through the schisms that make it a failed community. This section resultanty casts the speaker as an individual escaping the community that cannot be interacted with, an apotheosis of the sense of failure in the project of the embedded individual seen late in Autumn

⁴⁷² MacNeice, Collected Poems, 683.
Journal. The turning point comes, as Walker notes, as the journey moves towards the border: ‘Through Dungannon and Augher, / Clogher and Fivemiletown’. The litany of placenames slows down the rhythm of the poem, creating ‘a mimetic correlative’ with the speaker’s desire to get away from the war in the West. The placenames indicate increasing distance from the war, which is connected rhythmically to the hope of discovering a different mental reality elsewhere. Travel is implied to have great reality-making power, such that one can hide one’s head in the clouds of the West and escape history. This is, of course, subverted in ‘Galway’: ‘The war came down on us here’. History is totalizing, and space itself is not a solution. But in the attempt one can read a multifaceted reaction to the anxiety of war. Space, movement, and travel intersect with the expression of individual agency that comes under threat of negation. It tests the possibility of rejecting both history and community. The limits of the West are the limits of one’s ability to eschew the crowd and to realise an integral self in the same way as found in Letters from Iceland.

After Galway, and the declaration of war, MacNeice and Stahl returned across the island so that Stahl could get a boat back to England in Dublin and MacNeice could return to his family, who were still in Cushendun. On the way, they stopped at the monastic site at Clonmacnoise. Section VIII is an address from the speaker to the dead kings of Connacht who are buried there, acting as a bookend to Section V as it depicts travel going the other way:

Eastward again, returning to our so-called posts,  
We went out of our way to look at Clonmacnois –  
A huddle of tombs and ruins of anonymous men  
Above the Shannon dreaming in the quiet rain.

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474 Ibid.  
475 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 212.
You millenarian dead, why should I arraign,
Being a part of it, the stupidity of men
Who cancel the voices of the heart with barbarous noise
And hide the barren facts of death in censored posts?\textsuperscript{476}

As Peter McDonald points out, the poem has a chiasmatic rhyme scheme, \textit{abcd dcba}, which ‘offers its own kind of “second sight’”, modifying the scene of the speaker surveying the tombs of Clonmacnoise in light of the war.\textsuperscript{477} It also emphasises this section’s place in the schema of the sequence as a return journey, as the rhyme returns the reader to where they started. McDonald also notes that ‘the poet’s voice is powerless here because it is part of a conspiracy of noise which may falsify reality’.\textsuperscript{478} The poem as a whole works towards the asking of a question that undermines the individual-making project of the trip. The speaker is no longer in a position where they can deny ‘being a part of it’ and question the crowd. History is also chiasmic, as the address to the ‘millenarian dead’ implicates a history of conflict in the contemporary moment, returning man to violence. In this way, travel, both in the potential of leaving and the reality of returning, allow MacNeice to chart the impossibility of escaping the crowd throughout the whole sequence.

There is no adequate solution to the problem of the individual and the crowd in MacNeice’s pre-war poetry. Travel, as a utopian discourse, ultimately fails by continually bringing the individual back in to the community, becoming a test of the extent to which the Aristotelean political animal can be denied and a subjectivity free of the Other can be realized. The outbreak of the Second World War inscribes a view of the relationship between the individual and society from Freud in history.

\textsuperscript{476} MacNeice, \textit{Collected Poems}, 685.
\textsuperscript{478} McDonald, \textit{The Poet in his Contexts}, 99.
The trip around Ireland was not MacNeice’s last attempt to escape the war: he would find passage to America later that year. However, it was only a short time before he was inevitably compelled to return. When he did, his relation to the crowd was drastically altered by the circumstances, and this is evident in the poetry he wrote at the height of the war.

‘The latitude and longitude of life’: The psychology of flux in the Second World War

According to Hermione Lee, William Somerset Maugham once recalled an anecdote about Virginia Woolf, who, he claimed, insisted on walking home after a party during a German air raid in 1941. He followed her, only to find her ‘lit up by the flashes of gun-fire, standing in the road and raising her arms to the sky’.479 After Woolf’s death by suicide the effect of the war on her mental health came under scrutiny as a possible cause that led her to take her own life, a theory later bolstered by evidence from her diaries that detailed the intense anxiety and stress she felt trying to sleep through the air-raids of the Blitz. In this sense, people began to see Woolf’s death as a war death. In a letter to Eleanor Clark, Louis MacNeice notes Woolf is ‘Almost the first suicide of a British intellectual in this war’.480 There is a subtle suggestion here that she, in a sense, anticipates the suicide of British intellectuals as a category of war dead in itself. This, alongside the Somerset Maugham anecdote, suggests in turn a particular view of wartime Britain’s psychological character: not just that air raids and the threat of invasion caused profound anxiety and fear, but that this could drive the individual towards self-abnegation, to beckon the bombers to come closer.

This view has a potential source in the popular discourse of the time. In the decade before the outbreak of war, attentions were turned to psychology as a means of anticipating, and dealing with, the mental dimension of a potential war. Matthew Thomson writes that ‘by the late 1930s, psychological reading of the international situation was attracting interest among an influential section of the population as vital for statecraft’. Michal Shapira notes that, arising from the increasing retrospective attention paid to the impact of ‘shell-shock’ on soldiers on the Great War, the prospect of another continental war generated predictions that there would be ‘tens of thousands of casualties, as well as millions of cases of civilians suffering from mass panic, fear, and anxiety in the event of a Nazi air attack on the home front’. According to Lyndsey Stonebridge, ‘psychoanalysis had only a marginal role in official thinking and planning for the psychic casualties of the second war’, yet it remained important for a popular accounting of the British psyche under extreme duress. British psychoanalysts John Rickman and John Bowlby had platforms to disseminate Freudian ideas of fear and anxiety in newspaper columns and BBC Home Service broadcasts, respectively. In Freudian terms, anxiety was conceived as being a kind of pro-active defence against anticipated trauma, a way of readying the mind for damage yet to be inflicted. Stonebridge summarises that it is ‘a way of staying in relation to history without being consumed by it’. It was entirely natural, then, to characterise the psyche of

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481 Thomson, Psychological Subjects, 212.
485 Stonebridge, The Writing of Anxiety, 4.
the British population in these terms, as the logical endpoint of the anticipation of conflict that had been building up throughout the decade.

Ideas about anxiety were also being disseminated, and remedies attempted, outside of a strictly psychoanalytic frame in ways that utilised spatiality to pre-empt mass psychological distress. In 1940, John Langdon-Davies published a self-help book titled *Nerves versus Nazis*, in which he claims that ‘the chief aim of modern warfare’ is *not to kill, but to exhaust until the mind no longer works properly*.486 The book aims to provide the layperson with mental strategies for conquering their fears, framing this in terms of a counter-attack against the Nazis. One of these strategies is explicitly spatial, and involves marking one’s home in pencil on a map and then dropping grains of salt, representing bombs, from above:

> Only a very few will have fallen on buildings, because, even in the most built-up area in the world there is always more space unoccupied by a building than there is space actually covered by one. It will be a strange mischance if any grain of salt has actually hit the blue pencil point, which marks your own home.487

Aerial bombardment, which was an important strategy on both sides of the war, entails a reorientation of spatial relations for the city dweller. Rather than a maze-like bundle of personal-industrial relations extending horizontally, it is now being thought of as vulnerable from above. Space is the means by which threat was being popularly conceived with regards to air raids, which is seen in the way that the work of Langdon-Davies tries to adjust this spatial view towards a psychological end.

Yet, there were contrarian threads of psychological thought that sought to disrupt conventional notions that people were, broadly, afraid of the war. Ideas that

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487 Ibid., 18.
people were anticipating the war in complex and ambiguous, rather than straightforwardly negative, terms were put forward by figures such as Edward Glover, who claimed, based on a survey of a hundred cases seen by psychoanalysts, that people were reporting feelings of relief in response to the Munich Crisis, and anxiety in response to the period of peace that followed.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Psychological Subjects}, 220.} This was corroborated by Melanie Klein’s analysis of patients during the same time.\footnote{Michal Shapira, \textit{The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 96.} During the first few months of the Blitz, several Mass Observation reports evidenced feelings of excitement and happiness at the prospect of being bombed.\footnote{Ibid., 44-45.} These ideas were occasionally sidelined by the wider psychoanalytic community, but nevertheless their presence in the discourse speaks to an undercurrent of thought that identified problematic contours in the British wartime psyche, and wished to explore what made people shift between different states of mind under war conditions.

This reflects back on the writing of the war itself. Leo Mellor claims of MacNeice’s writing in response to the destruction of German air-raids on London that it represents ‘a strand of British wartime writing’, characterised by: ‘a fascination that sees hope in the flames despite – or because of – destruction, and indeed wishes to find a language of personification for devastation’.\footnote{Leo Mellor, \textit{Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites, and British Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 59.} Indeed, certain exemplars of writing that came from the war negotiated their way between anxiety and fascination, that suggested the war had philosophical potential. Dylan Thomas’s ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London’ speaks of ‘The
majesty and burning of the child’s death’.492 Linda M. Shires writes that in Thomas: ‘Death is not to be grieved but remains a secret part of the universal rhythm of remembrance’.493 T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, which came to be received as ‘war poetry’ after the publication of its final quartet, *Little Gidding*, made a similar appeal to seeing the particularity of war’s destruction within a grander, theological, schema. By the end of *Little Gidding*, fire comes to stand in for the unity of a cycle whereby destruction begets construction, and death the possibility of renewal:

> And all shall be well and  
> All manner of things shall be well  
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
> Into the crowned knot of fire  
> And the fire and the rose are one.494

Mellor identifies ‘a measure of pleasure in auditing with wonder this destructive force’ in Stephen Spender’s ‘Destruction and Resurrection’: ‘How new you are. And real! / Who, naked, live, or collapse, dead, / In the sensitivized city!’495 From America, Auden wrote *The Age of Anxiety*, a ‘baroque eclogue’ that combined pastoral dialogue, medieval metre, Jungian psychoanalysis and Shakespeare to explicate the ways in which crises such as war can engender a community-making project.496 The war, according to the poetry written by members of MacNeice’s closest networks, had a vital potentiality, or at the very least a complex relation to the individual that reached beyond fear and grief.

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Similarly, MacNeice’s own poetry from the period attempts to find a psychological ground that goes past fear and find ‘incarnate value’ in the prospect of death. This phrase comes from ‘The Trolls’, which, when published in *Springboard* (1944), bore the subtitle ‘Written after an air-raid, April 1941’. In the third section of the poem, the speaker declares that: ‘We think we lose something but if it were not for / Death we should have nothing to lose’. This perspective goes back to poems such as ‘Ode’, in which the speaker wishes for his son to live in the world of the ‘Absolute’ and of ‘definite worth’. Death represents the limits of life, and for MacNeice, as Terence Brown notes, limits enshrine value. Therefore, death gives meaning to life. It is in this sense that ‘The trolls can occasion / Our death but they are not able / To use it as we can use it’.

However, the poem also communicates a struggle to fit this mindset into language. Representing air-raid bombers as fable-esque trolls in turn necessitates a sing-song quality to the poem’s first section, which jumps between alliterations: ‘They ramble and rumble over the roof-tops, stumble and shamble from pile to pillar’. The destruction of total war is chaotic, uncalculated, almost childish. It is ‘Skittle-alley horseplay’, and the trolls themselves ‘don’t know what they are doing’. The experience of an air-raid appears to be cleaved from history. The socio-economic and political forces that have dragged the world into a state of destruction as attested to in *Autumn Journal* are here reduced, which in turn allows for a more metaphysical angle on death to emerge. As Mellor notes, these abstractions move

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497 MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 218,
the poem away from the encounter with fire itself.\(^\text{500}\) The fourth section marks the farthest point from the air-raids that the poem gets:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Than which not any. Time} \\
\text{Swings on the poles of death} \\
\text{And the latitude and the longitude of life} \\
\text{Are fixed by death, and the value} \\
\text{Of every organism, act and moment} \\
\text{Is, thanks to death, unique.}
\end{align*}
\]

The poem increasingly reads as a conscious attempt to manufacture the psychological space in which the war can be productively understood. The first line of this section is a truncated version of the opening of the second section, which defines life as that ‘Than which not any could be found other / And outside which is less than nothing’. This shortening attempts to bring the rather confusing longer version of the statement under control by echoing the incantatory parataxis of the end of Eliot’s *Little Gidding*. The struggle to attend to history finds intellectual and poetic form in an Eliotic appeal to higher concerns, but in MacNeice’s case these are philosophical rather than spiritual. Nevertheless, this is rooted in the poem’s turning of an old phrase, ‘Than which not any’, over to find new meaning and enable this conciliatory attitude.

This reflects back, uneasily and clumsily, on the image of the trolls themselves as the poem ends: ‘they happen / To be – for all their kudos – / Wrong, wrong in the end’. This also entails an appeal to the subjectivity of the crowd: ‘This then is our answer under / The crawl of lava, a last / Shake of the fist at the vanishing sky’. Here, we see the portents of *Autumn Journal*’s penultimate canto coming back into play. Now that MacNeice is back in London, and the war can no

\(^{500}\) Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 60.
longer be escaped, his poetry returns to the notion that the human values can be refined in the fire of war, and that war can engender the ideal community for the engagement of the individual. Yet, as mentioned previously, the poem’s diction problematises its appeal. MacNeice’s war poetry, rather than landing cleanly on the ideal community, dramatizes the struggle to give voice to a collective subjectivity.

Richard Danson Brown also identifies the struggle ‘to find a credible voice, or voices, of solidarity’ in Springboard, stating that his focus on individuals in poems such as ‘The Conscript’, ‘The Libertine’ and ‘The Satirist’ allows him to ‘diagnose the psychology of the war’. The individual struggles to find expression in light of the forces of history, as in ‘The Conscript’. The eponymous subject ‘feels the weight of history / Like clay around his boots’ which compels him ‘from pillar to post’ and ‘From camp to camp’ towards certain death:

He lives a paradox, lives in a groove
That runs dead straight to an ordained disaster
So that in two dimensions he must move
Like an automaton[.] The image of the automaton threatens the total reduction of humanity. History, in compelling the individual along a fatalist path and making them ‘choiceless’, thereby also makes a machine of man, eradicating the individual themselves. However, it is possible to retreat into the self in order to escape this: ‘his inward stalk / Vertically aspires and makes him his own master’. It is on this note of self-avowal that the poem ends:

By feeling down and upwards he can divine
That dignity which far above him burns

501 Richard Danson Brown, Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009), 96, 98.
502 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 224-5.
In stars that yet are his and which below
Stands rooted like a dolmen in his spine.

This perpendicular arrangement allows the individual to be rooted and yet cosmically aware, providing a pseudo-mystical idea about the value of the inward turn to the individual caught in history. The connection between the roots in the earth and the stars in the sky is reminiscent of Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*: ‘Below, the boarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars’. The inward turn allows for access to a broader metaphysical perspective that attempts to reconcile the individual with history, as in ‘The Trolls’. Yet, the credible voice of solidarity must engage with the crowd. Furthermore, as discussed previously, the psychology of the war reached beyond coping with fatalism, entering problematic areas that blurred the boundary between identifying with the crowd and identifying with the necessary conditions of the crowd. The poems of *Springboard* do not just try to ignore death and destruction, but seek strategies for incorporating them into a wider view. By viewing the inward turn of poems like ‘The Conscript’ in light of poems that deal with crowds, it is possible to properly examine the extent to which MacNeice engaged with the complex range of war psychology.

In ‘Brother Fire’, which was first published in *The Penguin New Writing* in March 1943, the speaker is part of a group of people watching an air raid from a rooftop. The poem gives voice to the perverse excitement of watching the carnage from afar. Fire is spoken of with a sense of kinship: it is seen ‘Jumping the London streets’, is described as ‘our brother’; and later, ‘we heard some shadow say / ‘Give

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the dog a bone’ – and so we gave him ours’. As Peter McDonald points out, the attitudes expressed here can also be found in MacNeice’s journalism. In one of his ‘London Letters’ for the American journal *Common Sense*, he writes:

> I have noticed myself that to walk along a great shopping street [...] on the morning after a blitz, far from being depressing, is almost exhilarating (this may shock you but many people share my experience).

The journalism context helps orientate ‘Brother Fire’ as a poem that attempts to express a self-knowingly contradictory state of mind that finds the war exhilarating. As McDonald goes on to note, there is an insistence throughout MacNeice’s war journalism that these attitudes are communal, hence ‘Brother Fire’ is written from the perspective of a ‘we’ rather than an ‘I’. There is a clear line of development that runs from the end of *Autumn Journal* to here, and the idea of the human values refined by fire. Yet the distant rooftop perspective of the poem also offers a sense of scale that chimes with its metaphysical influences:

> O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire, O enemy and image of ourselves, Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear, When you were looting shops in elemental joy And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire, Echo your thoughts in ours? ‘Destroy! Destroy!’

The word ‘dialectician’ prompts Adam Piette to interpret the poem’s sentiments in a Marxist context; the war offers the potential for bringing down the structures of capital against which MacNeice had been railing in the thirties. Yet, the

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personification of the fire itself suggests a self-questioningly de-historicised approach to destruction that has more in line with Heraclitus than Hegel. MacNeice was exposed to Heraclitus during his final year of school, probably through the 3rd edition of John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* (1890), during a testing holiday with his father and stepmother in Scotland.507

I was reading a book on Greek philosophy in order to prepare for a scholarship examination at Oxford and was swept away by Heraclitus, by the thesis that everything is flux and fire is the primary principle.508

Heraclitus’s thought survives in fragments from a variety of different sources, and so it is impossible to reach a holistic and comprehensive understanding of his metaphysical outlook. Perhaps the key idea of Heraclitean thought, though, is that reality is in a state of perpetual change, and that this flux is transcended by a *logos*, or pattern, that can be detected through reality.509 In light of the importance of flux, Heraclitus characterises fire as the primary element, or 'principle', of the universe, which forges and destroys.

It is in these terms that fire was understood by T. S. Eliot, who read the fragments of Heraclitus during his time as an undergraduate student at Harvard. In *Four Quartets*, as previously discussed, fire unites the ideas of the poems and channels them towards the thematic terminus of salvation. Fire is purgatorial, owing to Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism: 'If to be warmed, then I must freeze / And quake in frigid purgatorial fires / Of which the flame is roses, and the

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508 MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 96.
509 For a discussion of Heraclitean *logos* as a structuring principle to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, see Andries Wessels,‘Heraclitean *logos* and flux in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: “cosmic consciousness” and “the still point of the turning world”’, *Koers* 66.4 (2001), 571-584.
smoke is briars’. In *Little Gidding* this is then blended with the imagery of London during air raids: ‘The only choice, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre – / To be redeemed from fire by fire’. Heraclitus is important to Eliot because he offers the philosophical frame that allows destruction and redemption to be held together by a *logos* that reveals itself through history: ‘Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness’; ‘history is a pattern / Of timeless moments’.

In ‘Brother Fire’, this *logos*, the act of perceiving the pattern itself, comes about as a result of the distance the viewing party has from the air raid. This broader perspective reappropriates the spatial strategies that the war previously barred the speaker from in *Autumn Journal*, and replaces the historical fact of the air raids with the psychological tension that comes from this pattern. The poem ends on a question that suggests an implicit identification with the processes of destruction: ‘Did we not […] Echo your thoughts in ours?’ Yet, as Leo Mellor points out, the poem was composed after the Blitz, offering a retrospective look at the reaction to destruction. The questioning end, which leaves ambiguous the nature of the crowd’s thoughts, suggests a self-analysis from the speaker that encompasses the crowd, a need to understand one’s own thoughts and account for an observation of the crowd in psychological terms. The inward turn of ‘The Conscript’ is thus turned on the community in a way that gives poetic evidence to the kind of contemporaneous psychological inquiry that sought to explicate the crowd’s darker reactions to war. In personifying a primary element, the poem attempts to

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511 Ibid., 41.
512 Ibid., 7-8, 42.
513 Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 59.
externalise the crowd’s own primal, destructive thoughts. This externalisation, alongside the ambiguity of the question, nevertheless puts these thoughts at a remove that does not allow them a settled place in the psyche. The duality of the fire, ‘Enemy and image of ourselves’, is also a duality of the mind, that is at once afraid of death but also revelling in action of destruction. But the relation of the speaker to the polis of fire-watchers here turn from the Freudian view of individual instincts and the crowd as expressed in Zoo. In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud saw that the community repressed destructive impulses in the self, but in ‘Brother Fire’, a community is made out of a collective indulgence in those impulses. While not explicitly referred to, discourses of the unconscious are undoubtedly at play when feeling out the contours of problematic thoughts, especially in the context of a time where the irrational mind was a matter of immediate national concern. Like Eliot, MacNeice uses Heraclitus to widen the view of the war experience on the home front and place it within a grander metaphysical pattern. In doing so, his work runs up against ethical questions with regards to the aestheticization and de-historicization of the war. However, rather than eliding them, as Eliot does in service of his theological endgame, MacNeice allows room for the problematic aspects of this representation. In doing so he gives voice to a side of war psychology that broadens a picture of the period, and the way in which a preoccupation with the mind was important to describing the fullness of war experience.
CHAPTER FOUR

AGAINST THE CLOCK: TIME, MEMORY AND HAUNTING IN MACNEICE’S POST-WAR POETRY

And behold, I am not able to comprehend the force of my own memory, though I cannot name myself without it.\(^1\)

– Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

The temporal legacies of modernism

Time’s inexorable forward momentum is a harsh lesson for some of MacNeice’s poetic personae. The speaker of ‘The Coming of War’, for instance, cannot run from the conflict to come. The earlier poem ‘Aubade’ asks: ‘Having felt with fingers that the sky is blue, / What have we after that to look forward to?’\(^2\) ‘The Heated Minutes’ identifies ‘The taut and ticking fear / That hides in all the clocks’.\(^3\) Alongside identity, McDonald identifies time as one of the ‘perennial difficulties’ of MacNeice’s poetry.\(^4\)

Throughout the poetic *oeuvre*, the progress of time brings the threat of change. In the early poetry, this is historically contextualised by fears of the breakout of war, and conditioned by MacNeice’s interest in the *telos* and flux of Aristotle and Heraclitus, respectively. Resultantly, when criticism discusses MacNeice’s sense of the temporal, it is often in terms of his equally perennial fascination with the flux of experience. Terence Brown comments: ‘Experience is a flux of unrelated fragments. In the midst the poet moves, uneasy, anxious, bleakly aware of the passage of time

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3 Ibid., 59.
(MacNeice is a poet haunted by mutability). What is missing from the critical literature is a consideration of the fact that MacNeice's writing reacts to a high modernist legacy that started to view time as a psychological phenomenon. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, his education in the classics and philosophy frequently intersects with psychological ideas gleaned from his reading and his contexts. This leaves open the possibility of reappraising MacNeice's temporal sense, thus positioning him in relation to the reaction from a high modernist psychology of time.

One plausible reason for the lack of critical attention to a modernist time of the mind in MacNeice is, fittingly, the chronological gap between MacNeice and the apotheosis of high modernism's time-obsession. In the years before the First World War, the philosophy of Henri Bergson became hugely popular in Britain. In *Time and Free Will*, first published in 1889, Bergson espoused a distinction between two different kinds of time. The first is time as it is commonly understood, as the measured progress of discrete states external to the mind, which he argues is in fact more to do with space than time:

> For if time, as the reflective consciousness represents it, is a medium in which our conscious states form a discrete series so as to admit of being counted, and if on the other hand our conception of number ends in spreading out in space everything which can be directly counted, it is to be presumed that time, understood in the sense of a medium in which we make distinctions and count, is nothing but space.

The second is what he calls *durée*, which is the duration that is subjectively perceived by the mind: 'Pure duration is the form which the succession of our

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conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. This distinction between exterior spatial succession and internal durée has a number of consequences for fin de siècle society. It offered a counter-current of thought to the rationalisation and standardisation of time of the earlier nineteenth century. In 1847 the standardisation of British clocks was affected as a consequence of the need to streamline train timetables, and in 1884, the International Prime Meridian Conference, held in Washington D. C., established the Greenwich Observatory in London as the prime meridian from which a ‘universal day’ would advance, thus establishing time zones as we understand them today. These moves aimed to increase productivity in Western nations – literally centring Britain in maps of time – and so Bergson’s ideas offered not just an alternative way of defining time, but a means by which the subjectivity of duration could be reconstituted, and the self could be seen as the seat of time rather than the clock.

Such ideas were hugely popular in Britain during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. Not only were there English translations of his major works published from 1910 to 1912, but, according to Mary Ann Gillies, over 200 articles were written about Bergson and his philosophy between the years 1909 and 1911. These ideas were highly appealing to writers such as Virginia Woolf, whose novels are replete with characters negotiating the time of both the clock and the mind in novels such as Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse. T. S. Eliot attended lectures given by Bergson in Paris while he was studying philosophy at the

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7 Ibid., 100.
Sorbonne from 1910 to 1911, and his early poetry bears a distinct Bergsonian influence. Bergson’s philosophy also drew detractors, most notably from Bertrand Russell, who wrote in ‘The Philosophy of Bergson’: ‘There is no room in this philosophy for the moment of contemplative insight when, rising above the animal life, we become conscious of the greater ends that redeem man from the life of the brutes’.

A significant aspect of Bergson’s impact on modernism was the relation of his work to other fields. In Time and Western Man (1927), Wyndham Lewis, who draws heavily on Russell, allies Bergson’s durée with Einsteinian relativity and the Freudian unconscious in his attack on the over-subjectification of experience that these three ideas encourage. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, but the significance of this here is that durée is being constructed as part of a modernist milieu that emphasises the heterogenous subjectivity of time. It is as part of this milieu that MacNeice will be seen to engage with Bergson. His reaction is not direct, but is instead mediated by certain literary intermediary figures, most notably Eliot. In short, MacNeice’s reaction is not just to Bergson, but to an intellectual and literary world in which Bergson’s thought is diffuse.

The threads of Bergson’s durée and Einsteinian relativity allow shape to be given to new ways of writing the present moment, which is also an aesthetic concern in MacNeice’s poetry prior to the end of the Second World War. Temporal subjectivity is key to the way that a poem such as ‘Meeting Point’ enables the transcendence of time by the freezing of the moment: ‘Time was away and

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somewhere else. / The waiter did not come, the clock / Forgot them’. Bergsonian hints can be read in the way that the meeting of the two lovers in the poem disavows both the clock and the external spatialization of time, which is ‘somewhere else’, as well as the opposition of clock time and mental time in ‘the clock / Forgot them’.

*Poems* as a whole deals with the possibilities and limits of the transcendent moment in a number of different guises, from the luminous revelations of ‘Snow’ and ‘Morning Sun’, to the shortness of life in ‘Mayfly’. As discussed in chapter two, gardens and ekphrastic engagements question the ability of written and visual art to truly capture the still moment: ‘even a still life is alive’.  

There is another vitally important strain of modernist thought with regard to the time and mind, and that is the new perspectives on memory that were explored by psychoanalysis. Prior to the First World War, Freud had investigated memory in publications such as the 1898 essay ‘On the Psychic Mechanism of Forgetfulness’, and memory was central to one of his most popular works, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* of 1901. However, after the war, Freud’s investigations into what is now understood as post-traumatic stress disorder in returned soldiers opened up new avenues of investigation through the impact of trauma on memory. Graham Richards notes that it was widely understood that war trauma had implications for wider views of the modern psyche beyond the

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13 Ibid., 23.
15 ‘The terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force’. Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XVIII, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 12.
trenches: ‘Traditional psychological [...] categories and concepts were simply insufficient to enable people to construe their self-experience in a world transformed almost beyond recognition’.\(^{16}\) The First World War thrust upon modern thought the problem of a novel memory that was evasive, repressed, fragmented, even unnameable. The mind was revealed to be capable of forcefully implying the past in the present in a way that haunts the subject, splitting them between times, and undermining the self’s coherence.

Of course, MacNeice had no direct experience of the front lines of the First World War. However, his body of work is threaded through with an obsessive autobiographical streak, which is arguably the ultimate expression of those perennial difficulties of time and identity. Not only was there the draft of the unfinished memoir that would be posthumously published as *The Strings are False*, but other prose works such as *Zoo* and *Modern Poetry* dedicate portions of their narrative or argument to autobiographical reminiscences to help expound their wider argument. In the poetry, the most obvious example of this is arguably in ‘Carrickfergus’. There is also ‘Autobiography’, which recalls his childhood relationships with his distant father and his deceased mother. However, as Xavier Kalck has noted, the expectations of the poem’s title are frustrated by elements of a song-like structure. This includes its refrain of ‘Come back early or never come’, which ‘holds back the initial progress of the first three couplets’.\(^{17}\) Kalck compares this to an illuminating passage from *Modern Poetry*, in which MacNeice lists the things that ‘conditioned’ his poetry. Among these, MacNeice includes: ‘having a


father who was a clergyman; the fact that my mother died when I was little; repression from the age of 6 to 9'. Two decades after the end of the First World War, Freudian hints can be found in the attention paid to father-son and mother-son dynamics, trauma, grief, and repression. This is given form in the struggle of 'Autobiography' to cohere the narrative that it promises. Yet, in *Modern Poetry* there is also an important qualification: 'However much is known about the poet, the poem remains a thing distinct from him'. As has been stated previously in this thesis, psychoanalytic concepts are clearly identifiable in the poems as reflections of the intellectual zeitgeist of their production, rather than as a primary structural logic of the texts to which the poet was fully subscribed. Nevertheless, MacNeice's work before the end of the Second World War demonstrates an abiding interest in the struggle with memory as a means of constituting the self from the records of personal history.

The aftermath of the war heightens the urgency of these inquiries and multiplies them. As Britain returns to peace, and to the period of economic and social stagnation that followed, MacNeice finds himself grappling with a growing body of memories from which the self must be constituted, including new traumas of a father and friends lost to war, age, or illness. His poetic capacity for thinking through the difficulties of the present moment, the future, and the remembered past, all carry over in this period, but must now reckon with the immediate psychological consequences of war in a way that they did not after the end of the First World War. The present chapter argues that there is a turn in MacNeice's treatment of time from 1945 onwards that reflects the new ways that past, present,

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19 Ibid., 89.
and future are implicated in each other through the psychology of trauma, grief, and memory. Tim Armstrong writes that ‘the dynamization of temporality is one of the defining features of modernism: past, present, and future exist in a relationship of crisis’.\(^{20}\) This dynamization will be seen to be at play in MacNeice’s work beyond the heyday of high modernism. As a result, the poetry will be analysed for the way that it draws on older models of time and the mind, that slightly preceded his own writing career, through both a demonstrable engagement with popular ideas of wartime psychology, as well as intertextual engagements with T. S. Eliot that interrogate the wider modernist project. It is in this way that MacNeice’s poetry will be seen to dramatize debates about a Bergsonian time-mind and explore the limits of modernist ideas of time into the mid-twentieth century.

Throughout this chapter it will be theorised that MacNeice’s poetry after the war is ‘haunted’. This haunting is not just the persistent, spectral presence of those that have died through MacNeice’s memory. It is also the half-presence, or mental non-presence, of returned soldiers who have been traumatised by their experiences; the unrealised potential of the post-war world and the disappearance of the pre-war order; and, as suggested above, the predecessors of literary history who are invoked by MacNeice to examine a British society in decline. These hauntings enable the dynamization of time in the poetry. Importantly, they also, both explicitly and implicitly, place this in the mind. This concept draws upon the work of Jean-Michel Rabaté. In *The Ghosts of Modernity*, he attempts to draw out a history of a ‘haunted modernity’ that cannot ‘make it new’, as in Pound’s phraseology, without the return of some aspect of the repressed past.\(^{21}\)

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on psychoanalytic readings to posit, as an overlooked feature of modernism, ‘the transformation of the writer into a spectre, because his own past returns whenever he imagines he can predict, arrange, or control the future’. Of particular use to the present chapter is a problem of time, grief, and selfhood that he identifies in André Breton’s *Nadja*: ‘The great issue becomes how to reconcile the alleged timelessness of the self with the experience of loss: this describes the entire trajectory of the mourning process that will reveal the self’s mortality’. Grief grounds the self in a particular relation to time, making the past emotionally relevant to the present and forcing acknowledgement of one’s own temporal mutability. For MacNeice, the spectres of his friends conjure also the spectre of his past self. Haunting is a concept that accounts for the broad spectrum of memories, from the personal to the national-historical, brought up by the poetry, as well as the continual collisions that these memories have with the present moment.

‘The years that did not count’: *Holes in the Sky*

*Holes in the Sky* was published in 1948 and collects MacNeice’s poetry of the years immediately following the end of the war. Richard Danson Brown characterises the collection as ‘a mixture of contempt and disillusion’, centred on concerns of problematic nostalgia and the impossibility of returning to innocence. In the wake of the war, the poetry cannot help but think back on it. The collection is necessarily underpinned by ‘a hankering to make poetic sense of these undigested experiences’. This need, however, is insufficient to cope with the complex

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 47.
temporal dynamics of the immediate post-war period. After living with the war as a present reality for nearly six years, it remains unclear how people are supposed to cope with it as a now-past event, just as its personal and social consequences are put into stark relief by peacetime. Resultantly, the poetry’s sense of time is truly characterised by a sense of haunting, as the past is continually made a part of the lived present.

This haunting begins with the ontological problem of the war becoming history. This is identified in ‘Hiatus’, which opens: ‘The years that did not count – Civilians in the towns / Remained at the same age as in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine, / Saying last year, meaning the last of peace’.25 The speaker identifies a desire to return society to the pre-war norms which were disrupted by the outbreak of conflict. This sequesters the war within its chronological boundaries, as if its timeline also denoted the beginning and end of a different experience of time that was radically different from pre- and post-war experience. In temporally binding the war thus, it can be exorcised from continuity: the war years can be made to ‘not count’.

Sequestering the war also gives it a sense of unity which is developed in the poetry through analogies of oneness and of coverings. ‘Aftermath’ opens with the metaphor of time as a deck of playing cards: ‘Shuffle and cut. What was so large and one / Is now a pack of dog’s-eared chances’.26 Later, the speaker says that ‘the bandaging dark which bound / This town together is loosed’. There is also the sense of a loss of social cohesion that is associated with the war: ‘Their ransomed future severs once more the child / Of luck from the child of lack – and none is wild’. Here,

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26 Ibid., 225.
a correlation is being made between the war's flattening of social hierarchies and its status in memory as a distinct experience of time. MacNeice was perhaps exaggerating the extent to which such hierarchies were truly upended by conflict. As Harold L. Smith notes, the idea that the war engendered 'reduced class feeling', particularly after Dunkirk, was 'based largely on the perceptions of middle-class observers', while working-class people felt such barriers had in fact defined many aspects of war experience such as rationing.27 MacNeice's work for the BBC during the war implicates him in the construction of these egalitarian ideas. The didactic messaging of a play like *The Careerist*, as discussed in chapter one, draws a clear connecting line between self-interest and treason. As Ian Whittington has discussed, *Christopher Columbus*, which was broadcast in 1942 as a reaction to America joining the Allied war effort, reflects a popular cultural conversation shifting towards questions of what kind of society Britain should be after peace.28 J. B. Priestley's hugely popular 'Postscripts' programme, which was broadcast between June 1940 and March 1941, is another example. As Whittington writes: 'Priestley used the forum to extol the courage of average Britons in his decidedly non-metropolitan Yorkshire accent, all the while insisting that the conflict must yield a more equitable society after the war'.29 In *Holes in the Sky*, MacNeice is partaking in a wider cultural re-orientation of the war as a memory of a more purposeful existence, but this also implicitly confronts the failure of the social cohesion that he had advocated for in his radio work. The speaker of 'Aftermath' asks: 'Where is the Fear that warmed us to the gun'. There is a tension here between the broad sentiment of cohesion and

29 Ibid., 30.
the ‘Fear’ and the ‘gun’ that engendered it. In the more intimate lyric mode, the voice of the soft propagandist is tested, with its failure implicit in the unbandaging of social relations that constitute its public.

This mismatch between twin memories of the war’s violence and camaraderie recur throughout the collection. In ‘Bluebells’, a woman whose soldier partner has returned from the war struggles to cope with this change in their relationship, but also on a broader level with the loss of direction and purpose engendered by the war: ‘She, who last felt young during the war, / This Easter has no peace to be waiting for’. Again, the years of the war do not count in her conception of the passage of time, which makes her feel that the achievement of peace has, in itself, aged her. Having gotten used to the end of the war as a possible future event, it is now difficult to think of it as being in the past. As a result, the woman and her partner miss the structure and rhythms of the war that they wanted to end:

So both wake early, listen without words
To the now foreign badinage of birds,
And in the twilight when only the bats fly
They miss those engines overbrimming the sky,
For all green Nature has gone out of gear
Since they were apart and hoping, since last year.

The dysfunction of the reunited couple evokes the sense of a wider dysfunction with life itself. Rather than things returning to the way that they should be, nature itself is seen to be in disrepair. The personal drama of ‘Bluebells’ has some basis in the reality of post-war experience, as reunited couples struggled to adjust to each other’s renewed presence. Alan Allport examines the testimonies of returned

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30 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 256.
soldiers and their partners and summarises that, having been apart for so long, and during such a traumatic time: ‘some couples were, in short, a complete mystery to one another’. In the poetry, there is a concern with telos, the individual’s end purpose, similar to some of the pre-war poetry discussed in chapter three. Here, however, the problem is that the achievement of peace has taken away the purpose to which the individual was able to look forward. The simple couplet rhymes formalise this new malaise. They reflect the new, unexciting life of the reunited couple, as they resolve too quickly to build up any sense of poetic drama. For MacNeice, the state of peace paradoxically represents an ontological crisis as a sense of end purpose is taken away from both individuals and society at large.

It is this sense of lost unity in common experience that underpins a poem like ‘Place of a Skull’. It is named for Golgotha, itself the Hebrew name for Calvary, the hill on which Christ was crucified, and it imagines a sense of boredom and disillusionment in the wake of this event: ‘The remote / Metropolis yawned’. In the wake of the Second World War, however, its focus on the perspective of the ‘bored / Soldiers’ invites an allegorical reading for post-war peace. In both contexts, their reaction comes from a loss of immediate purpose as a result of the completion of their task to eliminate an existential threat to the powers that command them: ‘Earth water stars and flesh – the seamless coat / Which is the world, he left’. This leaves them in a contradictory state wherein they pine for the figure that they have eliminated:

The bored
Soldiers played for the leavings but even they,
Though trained to carve up continents with the sword,

31 Alan Allport, Demobbed: Coming Home after World War Two (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 61.
32 Ibid., 279.
Approved the weaver who made night and day
And time and mind a tegument, therefore swore
To hazard it as one lot.

The idea of conflict as a source of unity and purpose is suggested immediately by the opening litany of ‘Earth water stars and flesh’, which leaves out punctuation to emphasise the Biblical unity of God’s creation with the body of Christ, from John 1:14: ‘And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us’. The image of the coat, which connects the world to the idea of a soldier’s uniform, is then invested with these connotations, remaining to be fought over by the soldiers who see it as a symbol of the conflict that defined them. It ‘made night and day // And time and mind a tegument’, a kind of skin or covering, and effectively circumscribes a whole mental reality that defines a particular experience of night, day, and time in general. Here, the loss of telos of the soldiers is seen in terms of the temporal, which is in turn mutually implicated with the mental. It also has implications for the sense of camaraderie that they built as a result: ‘one lot’ is both the unity of experience that comes from having a definable purpose and also the soldiers as a unity themselves. Time becomes the barometer of the way that the war has changed everyday experience and the mutual relations of man. The soldiers’ attempt to hold on to this symbol of their purpose proves unfruitful: ‘Why the first time I wore / That dead man’s coat it frayed I cannot say’. Nostalgic memory of purpose is insufficient to maintain it.

The ethereal character of the past is contrasted in many poems by a harsh physicality associated with the present. Waking figures represent how the passage of time is embodied in the war’s survivors, which casts the ‘bandaging dark’ of the
remembered war as a kind of dream. In ‘Hiatus’, the war is remembered through different imaginative lenses:

The would-be absent heart came forth a magnetic mine.

As if the weekly food queue were to stretch, Absorb all future Europe. Or as if The sleepers in the Tube had come from Goya’s Spain Or Thucydides’ Corcyra – a long way to fetch People to prove civilization is vain[.]

According to the speaker, art and the classics mediated the experience of the Home Front in a way that suffused it with a particular aestheticism; it is remembered as dramatic and vivid, but also unreal. Recourse to these frames of reference, from the perspective of the ‘Civilians in the towns’, comes from the need to cope with what felt like an existential collapse. It is this unreality that retrospectively turns the war into a hiatus. The speaker places these feelings in the ‘heart’, turning it into a signifier of the conflict itself as the heartbeat becomes the blasts of a mine coming up from the ground. This memory of the war is, by implication, the memory of a particular emotional and mental state that comprises fear, panic, and pity. When the war is subsequently made a part of the past, a vivid sense of self goes with it. This is what leads to a post-war sense of stultification and slowness; an intense identification with the war developed by people on the Home Front has now been compromised, and nothing has replaced it.

It is evident throughout the poems of Holes in the Sky that duration, the flow of experience, is associated with an Aristotelean conception of becoming; the difficulty of moving on from the war and of its changing nature in time has ramifications for incorporating that experience into a cohesive sense of self. In short, if the war years no longer count, then the personhood that one built up during
the war also no longer counts. It is through waking and embodiment that this is dramatized, as seen between the second and third stanzas: ‘Wrapped in old quilts; no wonder they wake stiff. // Yes, we wake stiff and older’. The stanza break enables the transition between past and present, but the confusion of the pronouns – they becoming we – suggests a difficulty in that transition. The past, aesthetically framed, becomes distant to the point of being unrecognisable, whereas the act of waking in the present implies recognition. There is a tension here between the destabilisation of the self from the sequestering of the war in the past and the revelatory embodiment of waking in the present. The latter act forces a reconciliation with that past, but the extent to which this is possible remains unsatisfactory.

The figure of the returned soldier is a significant aspect of this complication. In ‘Hiatus’, their re-presence helps underline the revelatory waking into the present, providing some evidence outside the body for the movement of time:

Yes, we wake stiff and older; especially when  
The schoolboys of the Thirties reappear,  
Fledged in the void, indubitably men,  
Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount  
And found some dark and tentative things made clear,  
Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count.

The nostalgia for a pre-war sense of youth as seen in ‘Bluebells’ also appears here as the younger returning soldiers are identified as ‘The schoolboys of the Thirties’, a phrasing that, again, packages the past within the distinct borders of a decade. Their ageing is more immediately noticeable, and so provides a starker reminder of the war years. But the other reason that they provide such a profound touchstone is that their experience of war, being so different from those on the home front, is a counter-example to the temporal nature of the war and its relation to the present
from a civilian's perspective. For the soldiers, the war was not a hiatus and the years very much count. While they have, as discussed above, lost their sense of purpose, they cannot return to a state of innocence or youth associated with the pre-war years. The war itself has mediated their transition from schoolboys to men.

Yet this does not allow for a resolution of the ontological difficulties that the civilians have with their perception of the war’s passage. Indeed, the imagery of the void suggests that it has been further complicated. A soldier’s perspective of the war remains inaccessible and with it its attending experience of time. The void here helps to clarify how the dark can symbolise a unifying, almost comforting, collective war experience in other poems. The war is seen to have subverted reality itself and man’s relation to the world: dark things are made clear and clear things dark. The return of the soldiers in peacetime is a challenge to the attempt of the speaker to sequester the war in the past in such a way that it can be dismissed. ‘Hiatus’ makes no attempt to reconcile the temporal relations of the civilian and the soldier. The ominous void suggests that the war has heightened the psychic inaccessibility of the other, intensifying and further complicating the issues surrounding the relation of the individual to society that existed before the war.

Resultantly, soldiers become haunting presences throughout *Holes in the Sky*. Whether alive or dead, they are implied to be out of reach, both physically and emotionally, as a result of their experiences. This distance is frequently couched in ideas of motion and fluidity that ultimately relate to time. In ‘Bluebells’, the woman is unable to reconnect with her lover: ‘And though her man is back, yet feels he has brought / The Desert with him, making her cheeks taut’. The desert here is different from MacNeice’s pre-war use of the word in the ‘Epilogue’ to *Letters from Iceland*: 
'Better were the northern skies / Than this desert in disguise'. While the earlier poem refers quite broadly to the conditions of consumerist, metropolitan modernity, in ‘Bluebells’ the desert is ambiguously both a place and a mental state. There is a possible reference here to the Western Desert campaign in Egypt and Libya, which not only roots the desert in a different place but also a different time, keeping the man mentally in the war. The desolation that the desert suggests is internalised and becomes a way of being that puts the soldier at odds with the peace and personal connection to which they return. It is in this sense that ‘all green Nature has gone out of gear’ after the lovers’ reunion. The return to peace is compromised by the profound changes that the war has made to the rhythms of everyday life, making the desert and green nature incompatible.

Furthermore, there is a dark-light inversion here, similar to ‘Hiatus’ and ‘Place of a Skull’:

Sun is too bright and brittle, wheat is too quick,
She turns from them to the wood where the slow thick
Shade is becalmed and chill and as a glacial stream
Meeting the sea inlays and weaves a milky gleam
Through the dark waste, so here the bluebells flow
Athwart the undergrowth, a merger of blue snow.

The dark woods are aligned with the ‘twilight’ during which ‘They miss those engines overbrimming the sky’, while the light of the sun represents an increasingly alienating present that keeps the woman and her lover emotionally apart. Again, this is associated with the act of waking and of embodiment in the present: ‘So both wake early, listen without words / To the now foreign badinage of birds’. This

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association between light and loss of connection also appears in ‘Aftermath’: ‘in the array / Of bourgeois lights man’s love can save its breath’. Thus, the retreat to the woods and the shade is a retreat to a kind of nostalgia for the war, or at least the state of interpersonal relations engendered by war, expressed by the woman in the final stanza:

‘Oh in this dark beneathness where he and I
Live, let a delta of flowers atone for the sky
Which we cannot face and from my ice-cap, oh,
Let one river at least unfreeze and flow
And through that brine so deep and yet so dim
Let my cold gentleness irradiate him.

The association of the previous image of the bluebells as ‘a merger of blue snow’ to the nostalgic past is made by ‘Twelfth Night’, also from *Holes in the Sky*:

Snow-happy hicks of a boy’s world –
O crunch of bull’s-eyes in the mouth,
O crunch of frost beneath the foot –
If time would only remain furled
In white, and thaw were not for certain
And snow would but stay put, stay put!34

This appeal is made knowing that snow must melt and that time must move on: ‘But now the sphinx must change her shape – / O track that reappears through slush’. The association of snow with the unsustainable moment and inevitable change comes from his early pre-war work, most notably in ‘To A Communist’. While ‘Snow’s unity engrosses’, the speaker warns that ‘The poise is perfect but maintained / For one day only’.35 In the early poem this is contextualised by a distrust of utopian political discourses, but in *Holes in the Sky* snow’s unity is

imaginatively sought for, problematically casting the war as a kind of utopian ideal itself insofar as it realised the ideal community.

‘Bluebells’ also revisits many of the images and concerns of ‘The Glacier’. In the latter, the image of a slow flow from the titular glacier describes the view of slowly moving traffic as emblematic of the deadening repeated rhythms of industrialised modernity: ‘Carrying its dead boulders down a glacier wall’.36 In ‘Bluebells’, a very similar image of a river flowing from ‘my ice-cap’ is the expression of her desire to reconnect with her returned lover. Furthermore, in both poems, there is an expressed need to ‘turn away to seemingly slower things’ that is associated with a return to nature, or at least a move away from industrialised modernity.

Between its images of snow, ice, and the desert, the poetry of Holes in the Sky makes continual appeals to the procedures and ideas of MacNeice’s pre-war work and its critiques of modernity. These creative returns both enable and reflect the figures of the poetry seeking their own returns to previous experiences of time. Yet, in the same way that these desires are seen to be unrealisable, so too is the poetry’s recourse to these images strained. In ‘The Glacier’, the image of the glacial stream anchors the paradox of time around which the poem revolves – that the repetitive rhythms of modern life can make that which is slow and dull seem as though it is passing too quickly. The desert identifies a related lack of vitality in civilization. In ‘Bluebells’, however, the former is appealed to in order to resolve the latter. The woman wishes for them both to find a way to come together in the new present, for the idealised past moment to thaw and for the stream of time thereof to bring the

36 Ibid., 28.
soldier out of his fugue. The turn to slower things as a way of resolving tensions in the experience of time is less convincing in light of the war. The woman's address, given to nobody in particular, remains unanswered. MacNeice's earlier poetry of time finds escape from the present through alternative experiences of time in the observation of nature and the play of language, but now the return to the present cannot be affected by the same means. The anxieties of time as suggested by the poetry’s use of MacNeice's pre-war images is explicitly mental, being contained in the irreconcilable subjectivities of the returned soldier and the civilian on the home front. The result of this interpersonal distance is the constitution of a poetry of haunting. Time divides the soldier from the population, makes them inaccessible, and compromises the sense of their presence to the people to whom they return.

In 'Tam Cari Capitis', this sense of haunting is more literal. The poem takes its title from the opening of Horace’s 1.24: 'Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus / Tam cari capitis?'37 ['What restraint, what limit can there be to our sense of loss for one so beloved?] While it remains unstated who is being eulogised here, MacNeice perhaps drew upon his grief for the loss of his close friend Graham Shepard, who served in the Royal Navy Reserve and was killed in an attack on the HMS Polyanthus by German submarine on 21st September 1943.38 While the Horatian ode, an address to Virgil on the death of their mutual friend, Quintilius Varus, counsels that grief must be controlled, and that it must be allowed to lessen over time, in MacNeice’s poem grief becomes more profound in quieter moments.39 The speaker, talking about the death of a friend, argues that 'it is not at floodlit moments we miss

him most, / [...] Nor the full strings of passion'. Rather, the dullness of the everyday is the site of grief:

...it is in killing
Time where he would have livened it, such as the drop-by-drop
Of games like darts or chess, turning the faucet
On full at a threat to the queen or double top.

Time is central to the poem’s elegiac operations. It is intertwined with light in the phrase ‘floodlit moments’. This aligns with the ’bourgeois lights’ of ‘Aftermath’ and the difficult waking of ‘Hiatus’. A cleave is being made between the natures of present experience and past memory, with the latter compromising or qualifying the former. This cleave is formalised in the enjambment of ‘killing / Time’. It highlights the distinction between the passage of the post-war present, which is passed in boredom, and the possible, but now unrealisable, present had the war not claimed the lives of those close to its survivors. Haunting is thus enabled by time, more specifically by the complex relationship of time and mind: it is the mental overlap of that which is with that which could have been.

This contest of the real present and the imaginative possible is further complicated by the attempt to return to pre-war rhythms of life that have been seen in ‘Bluebells’ and ‘Hiatus’. The first line of the poem inscribes these difficulties: ‘That the world will never be quite – what a cliché – the same again’. There is a tension here between the sentiment that things are now irrevocably different and the overt reliance on the tried and familiar cliché to express this. The poem’s quickness to turn on its own rhetorical devices has structural consequences. The interjection ‘what a cliché’ turns the line from a five-stress line to a seven-stress, which makes it

stand out from the rest of the five-stress lines in the stanza that follows. Consequently, it fails as an opening to set up the rhythm of the rest of the poem.

However, it is this failure that formalises the poem’s core concerns about post-war expression. As McDonald notes, the end of the Second World War marks a turn in MacNeice’s poetic sensibilities, taking cues from Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, wherein the poems ‘rely more on form to achieve their effects’.\textsuperscript{41} He sees the roots of this in the development of a growing metaphysical bent: ‘MacNeice’s treatment of the idea of time and the paradoxes of objectivity and subjectivity, self and other, depend in these years on the poetic medium’s capacity for balance and opposition’. However, these concepts, as demonstrated above, are informed and grounded by a parallel engagement with modern discourses of mind. ‘Time and mind’ are, after all, ‘a tegument’. *Holes in the Sky* observes a world that seeks a return to peace without the mental or emotional equipment to adequately account for the scale of loss during the war, and attempts to trace the faultlines that thereafter inevitably appear in psychic experience.

It is through these faultlines that the figure of the soldier haunts the present. Their half-presence is couched in mental terms in the first stanza. The speaker explains that the impact of history is only truly registered on an individual level: ‘When a friend dies out on us and is not there / To share the periphery of a remembered scent’. The friend’s evocation is related to memory, firmly placing the tensions of overlapping time in the mind. Indeed, it is memory that makes the presence of the friend so ethereal. They have not simply ‘died’, but ‘died out on us’, suggesting a sense of fading that aligns them with the scent, itself made ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{41} McDonald, *The Poet in his Contexts*, 131.
by the word ‘periphery’. Just as the woman in ‘Bluebells’ and the public in ‘Hiatus’
cannot access the desert, or void, from which the returned soldiers have come, so
too is the memory of the friend here difficult and only partially possible. In each
case, the struggle is to access the past, the soldiers before they were soldiers, and to
reconcile this with the return to the ‘normal’ rhythms of modernity. Horace’s appeal
to the control of grief seems to appear in the image of the tap in the final stanza. This
marries the Horatian idea to the Heraclitean image of time as a flow of water, yet
inverts the intention of its source. What is suggested here is that the possibility of
an enriched emotional experience has been compromised by the death of those
friends that enabled it. Grief, in contrast, comes through in the inability to access
such overflow, the turning of the faucet to full. Again, MacNeice’s recourse to old
modes of expression are not found to be entirely adequate for post-war experience.

This is also the structural conceit of ‘Aftermath’, a shortened sonnet of twelve
five-stress lines with an ababcdedeff rhyme scheme. While the initial quatrain and
the final couplet suggest a straightforward Shakespearean sonnet, the intervening
sestet is a variation on Petrarchan convention. This mutation of the form affects the
placement of the volta, which moves the poem from the treatment of the past to the
‘new round’ of the present in the middle of the fifth line. The final couplet then casts
into the ‘ransomed future’. The poem attempts to take in the whole sweep of
continuity from the sequestered memory of war to the unknown future, but these
structural deviations call attention to the problems in such ambition. Old forms of
the sonnet are depicted as unsustainable, incapable of reconstituting harmony in an
age that has seen such violence. The shortened sonnet itself is much like the shuffled
and cut deck of time. The struggle to come to terms with the relentless passing of
the present into the past is reflected in the poem’s too-quick move to a Petrarchan
sestet which, in its usual form, should indicate the resolution to a previously established argument. As McDonald notes, in this period ‘MacNeice’s attempts at coherence are tinged with a feeling for chaos’. To this end, he brings up MacNeice’s 1946 article ‘The Traditional Aspect of English Poetry’, in which he argues:

All pattern is artificial and most patterns need smashing up on occasions; we cannot, for all that, get away from artificiality. The writer who despises form must still formalize even in selecting his material. To despise ‘form’ will not bring him any nearer reality but may very easily take him further from it.

If the artificiality of form is a necessarily flawed exercise in bringing one closer to reality, then this suggests that the formal tensions of ‘Aftermath’ diagnose a distress, resuscitated but changed from the thirties, with the ontological instability of duration. It is not just the soldiers but the war itself that has a spectral presence throughout Holes in the Sky. While it remains ever-present in memory, the question remains: ‘Where is the Fear’?

As McDonald notes, one of the problems that MacNeice’s post-war poetry addresses is the fact that ‘those lessons that could be drawn from the war were close to truism and seemed to lead in no direction’. He argues that ‘Tam Cari Capitis’, as an example of this, is more successful than poems such as ‘The National Gallery’ and ‘Street Scene’ because it ‘acknowledge[s] the disjunctions imposed by war along with the disappointments of peace’. In light of the structural difficulties encoded in ‘Aftermath’, and the thirties echoes in ‘Bluebells’, it is worth considering the failure of a poem like ‘Street Scene’ as a reflection on the differences in memory and

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42 Ibid., 134.
44 McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 132.
45 Ibid., 133.
duration that affect a poetic view of the urban that was once a defining feature of the ‘pylon poets’. Indeed, analysis of its relation to poems like ‘Birmingham’ and ‘The Glacier’ indicate the ways that it draws attention to its own ruptures and, significantly, uses these to highlight how the irresolution of the war’s emotional and mental consequences bring it back to haunt peacetime.

‘Street Scene’ is not only similar to early MacNeice because of its overall subject matter of the cityscape, but also in its employment of certain images. ‘The smoke of his hair’ recalls ‘Smoke from the train-gulf’ in ‘Birmingham’, a poem which also supplies the image of the statuesque uniformed figure – the ‘monolith Pharaoh’ policeman becoming ‘The Canadian sergeant turns to stone’. A disabled singer on the street ‘holds our own lame hours in equipoise’, recalling the same language in ‘Dublin’: ‘And by a juggler’s trick / You poise the toppling hour’. The ‘naval officer on the traffic island’ who ‘Unsees the buses with a mid-ocean eye’ calls back to the double-vision of ‘The Glacier’. These call-backs suggest a simple return to pre-war concerns of the urban, the inscrutability of others, and the atomising influence of modern city life. However, while these earlier poems explored these psychological concerns in the context of modernity and commercialisation, the formal procedures of ‘Street Scene’ recontextualise them within the traumatic return to peace that does not resemble the pre-war world. The third stanza troubles the scene of people on the street listening to the disabled singer with the intervention of a soldier:

Sunshine fortissimo; some young man from the Desert
Fumbles, new from battle-dress, for his pocket,
Drops a coin in that cap she holds like a handbag,
Then slowly walks out of range of A sentimental tune

46 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 275, 22-23.
47 Ibid., 681.
Which cruising down – repeat – cruises down a river
That has no source nor sea but is each man’s private dream
Remote as his listening eyes; repeat for all will listen
Cruising away from thought with *An old accordion playing*
Not that it is, her accompanist plucks a banjo
*On a Sunday afternoon.* She ends.

The sudden focus on sunshine perhaps recalls the use of bright light in an early poem like ‘Morning Sun’, but ‘fortissimo’ here, from the notation of musical dynamics meaning ‘very loud’, troubles this by establishing a synesthetic sense of the scene that recurs in the later phrase ‘his listening eyes’. This admixture of the visual and aural is weaved throughout the poem via the blending of different modes as the text moves between narration and song. What might otherwise suggest the expansion of MacNeice’s pre-war aesthetic of the experience of moving through the city is instead part of the difficult search for a poetics of the post-war psyche, as is signalled through the figure of the soldier that this is being signalled. The semi-colon binds the light to the ‘young man’ as if, being from ‘the Desert’, he has brought it with him. As the above reading of ‘Bluebells’ argues, post-war desert imagery has a profoundly mental dimension to it. Its introduction here chimes with a line from the first stanza: ‘in each little city of each individual person / The black tree yearns for green confetti and the black kerb for yellow stalls’. Again, the inscrutability of the other here bears a trace of the empty-headed shopgirls of ‘Birmingham’. However, while the earlier poem threaded this into the kaleidoscopic colour of the city via the stained-glass windows of St. Philip’s, here such colour is gone. This is how the ‘city of each individual person’ can work with the alternative mental image of the desert. Both inscribe a post-war psyche that is static or barren, not overwhelming with sensation but deadened to it. Similarly, as the song is carried down the ‘river’ of the street, that river turns into ‘each man’s private dream’. 
Yet, if the river, which ‘has no source nor sea’ is supposed to be the adequate image for the mind, then this claim is disturbed by the closing image of the naval officer who, after everybody else has exited the scene, ‘Unsees the buses with a mid-ocean eye.’ The buses, as discussed above, call back to a ‘paradox of time’, that one’s perception of its passage can be so radically different to an external, ‘real’, idea of time. The ocean, then, is part of how the poem explores the obliqueness of the mind of others. However, its precedent in earlier poetry also suggests that the ocean and river act to unify concerns of time with this interiority. The naval officer is still mentally present in the war and is therefore thinking of the ocean, a state reflected in his stasis on the traffic island where he is exiled between the flows of traffic up and down the street-river. In marrying the city, the desert, the river and the ocean to a post-war mental state, ‘Street Scene’ is trying to, as phrased in ‘Place of a Skull’, ‘make time and mind a tegument’. The impact of the war on the mind is coterminous with its implications for the experience of time.

The extent to which this is successful has been doubted by many of MacNeice’s critics. Terence Brown dismisses the poem as one that ‘tries unsuccessfully to build up an image from a snatch of popular song’.48 Indeed, the aforementioned overload of different images employed to tie the mind to time is unconvincing overall, and the stranding of the naval officer on Orphan Street reads as overdetermined. Yet, there are tensions of rhythm and structure throughout the poem that suggest a critical awareness of this failure is being formalised in the text. The intervention of ‘repeat’ modifies the first line of the fourth stanza, shifting the verb form of ‘cruise’ in a way that appears to have little effect besides bolstering the

line to the six stresses needed to fit in with the rest of the poem. There is a parallel to be drawn here with the intervention of ‘what a cliché’ in ‘Tam Cari Capitis’. In each case there are very different implications for the metre, but both call attention to a stumbling in the line, here foreshadowed by the soldier who ‘Fumbles’, that sabotages expression. The blending of narrative and musical voices is also knowingly undercut. Just as the song appears to blend smoothly into the description of the scene, that description replaces the image of the accordion with the banjo, after which the song ends. The contest of visual and aural perception here fits in with the sense of distance in the soldier’s ‘listening eyes’. There is a cleave between observation and expression that highlights the gulf between the interior and exterior lives of the post-war subject. The soldier is a demonstrably significant figure throughout *Holes in the Sky* because they are emblematic of the lack of resolution, mental distance, and overlapping temporalities that define life in the sudden peace following destruction.

This is not to excuse ‘Street Scene’ all its failings. Rather, this implies a reorientation of the failings of the immediate post-war poetry. While they have been excused by McDonald as a necessary waypoint in the development of the late poetry, it is possible to affirm their place in MacNeice’s body of writing on their own terms, as reflections of the psychic conditions of their times. Their ruptures and weaknesses are apposite to the conditions in which they were written, expressing and embodying the need for, and difficulty of, attending to a suddenly changed subjectivity.
A post-war mindset

In reference to the late poetry, Tom Walker observes that MacNeice’s influence from Eliot has not received as much critical discussion as its importance would suggest due to ‘its failure to operate in terms of straightforward influence or MacNeice’s Irish identity’.\(^{49}\) This can be traced back to middle period works like *Ten Burnt Offerings* and *Autumn Sequel*, in which a debt to Eliot is evident, but in small ways that pass through other prisms of influence. This is suggested by the structural choices of the former work. *Ten Burnt Offerings* contains ten poems, each with four sections that employ different modes and structures, which are unified by thematic strands of the relationship of the individual to faith and history. Its construction encourages a reading of the collection as a wider, cohesive project in line with *Four Quartets*, rather than a less deliberate book of individual lyrics. Similarly, the title of the first poem, ‘Suite for Recorders’, shows an attraction to musical form as a structuring concept, with each section as a ‘movement’ in a suite. In a letter of March 1953 to the American literary agent Ellen Borden Stevenson, MacNeice claims that they are ‘symphonic’ poems, again evoking the scale, polyvocality, and musical structuring of Eliot.\(^{50}\)

Their reception, however, was critical in comparison. In the same letter, MacNeice concedes that *Ten Burnt Offerings* has received ‘bad press’, blaming the fact that his friends are no longer reviewing and those writers who are are younger poets that he blames of being jealous of his success.\(^{51}\) Contrary to the motives

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\(^{51}\) Ibid.
suggested here, this reputation has remained with the collection and was cemented posthumously. Terence Brown accuses it of offering ‘weak colloquialism, poorly altered clichés, as a substitute for poetry’. Edna Longley writes: ‘the thirties verbal mill goes on loosely grinding without its grist’. While noting its failures, as well as those of Autumn Sequel, Alan Gillis concedes: ‘both books had been partially about poetic failure; or, at least, about the difficulty of finding symbolic resonance in changed times’. Failure then, conceived as a foregrounded difficulty of expression or representation, diagnoses a rupture between the advance of history and the creative resources of the individual.

In the discussion of Holes in the Sky above, the post-war psychological context was immediate and clear. In the 50s, however, these terms were more oblique, with the aftermath of conflict having become a new normality. In Britain, the concept of declinism, a broad set of ideas that sought to account for the fall in the country’s standing in various global contexts, gained new currency as a rhetorical shibboleth for political and economic commentators. The popularity of studies such as Shonfield’s British Economic Policy since the War and Shanks’s The Stagnant Society spoke to a generalised sense that peace had disappointed the nation, subjecting the surviving population to economic uncertainty and the slow unravelling of the social fabric. A particular strain of this thinking sought the source of the problem in the mentality of the populace. In 1964, Arthur Koestler published the polemically-titled Suicide of a Nation?, in which he claimed that ‘psychological

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52 Terence Brown, Sceptical Vision, 168.
attitudes are at the root of the economic evils – not the loss of empire, not the huge sums we must spend on armaments, not the misfortune that the steam engine was invented by an Englishman. “We are at the moment dying by the mind”, wrote Ian Nairn, “it is the mind that must will the change”.56 MacNeice admired Koestler’s 1945 essay collection The Yogi and the Commissar, writing in a letter to E. R. Dodds: ‘There at least is someone who’s got something to say’.57 Furthermore, one of the essays in that collection, ‘In Memory of Richard Hillary’, first appeared as ‘The Birth of a Myth’ in the April 1943 issue of Horizon, to which MacNeice was a frequent contributor around the same time.58 From the end of the war through to his death, MacNeice was implicated in the periphery of an intellectual-literary network that reflected a defeated attitude towards the post-war world in explicit terms of time and mind.

The idea that the modern collective psyche is uniquely compromised draws on previous discourses from the war around trauma, extending psychological conditions to the whole social sphere. Lyndsey Stonebridge summarises the attitudes that prevailed at this time thus:

Modern war, the marriage of technology with barbarism as it was thought of by many in the middle of the twentieth century, has become the highly charged emblem of a moral, psychological, and existential paralysis of thought.59

The fifties, then, can be productively thought of as what could be called the long aftermath of the war; the trauma of the end of conflict extends, unresolved, until it becomes the new normal. This is not just because the traumas of the returned soldiers remained literally unresolved, but because the war was seen to herald a catastrophic change in the status quo after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the revelation of the Holocaust. MacNeice does not write direct responses to these events at the time, but they work their way into certain poems up until his death as emblems of a newly brutal world, such as ‘Notes for a Biography’, as discussed in chapter one. Their poetic operations as historically traumatic moments are linked to discussions of memory and identity in the poetry. This will be discussed in detail later, but in terms of an overview of MacNeice’s post-war work this provides two different ways of looking at his treatment of time: it is both the slow movement toward decline and the flashback to the unresolved past. In blending these two views, MacNeice’s work from the fifties onwards demonstrably engages with a central Eliotic tenet of the time: the mutual implication of the past, present, and future in each other. Eliot, of course, is drawing on a vast array of influences himself, but MacNeice’s education in philosophy, alongside certain specific textual echoes, indicate that MacNeice is following along very particular lines from the elder poet. Specifically, it is possible to trace in *Ten Burnt Offerings* a genealogy of debates about time, the mind, and the self that runs from Bergson to Eliot through Bertrand Russell and Wyndham Lewis. Moreover, in *Autumn Sequel*, this temporal ontology coalesces with the hauntings that characterised *Holes in the Sky*, as discussed above, to inform the importance of that poem’s spectral presences to its metaphysical and psychological discussions of selfhood.
Losing count: *Ten Burnt Offerings*

The opening of the sixth poem in *Ten Burnt Offerings*, ‘Day of Renewal’, contains the line that has become an infamous standard for lamenting the state of MacNeice’s poetic output between the end of the war and the end of the fifties:

Do I prefer to forget it? *This middle stretch Of life is bad for poets; a sombre view Where neither works nor days look innocent And both seem now too many, now too few.*

However, this turn to an obsessive retrospection and a fresh concern with one’s place in the breadth of one’s lifespan parallels the second part of Eliot’s *The Dry Salvages*:

It seems, as one becomes older, That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence – Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution, Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

In both, age inspires a re-consideration of the impact of time on the nature of the self. Eliot’s influence on MacNeice’s structural choices in *Ten Burnt Offerings* has implications for its subject as well: polyvocal dialectics enable the poetic exploration of successive selfhoods. Both diverge on the implications of such possibilities. MacNeice’s speaker immediately considers not just moving away from a particular time-bound self, but of forgetting one, a similar mental rejection to the retreating

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shore tripper of ‘Upon this Beach’. Here, he is attempting to re-open a path that Eliot had previously closed:

Now, we come to discover that the moments of agony
 [...] are likewise permanent
 With such permanence as time has.

This divergence is a matter of emphasis, with MacNeice placing it on time as memory, which centres the mind as the arbiter of changing selfhoods, and Eliot on time as phenomenon, expressing it as a force: ‘Time the destroyer is time the preserver’.

The question of disowning time that MacNeice is reigniting here is a last link in a chain of discourse that leads back to Bergson. Eliot sees this wish in the context of ‘superficial notions of evolution’. It is highly likely that he is borrowing this argument from Bertrand Russell, whom he had first met in 1914 when Russell began teaching at Harvard. In that same year Russell published *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*, in which he attacks ‘evolutionism’, defined as a set of philosophical attitudes stemming from the impact of evolutionary theory on modern thought. These attitudes, in his view, attempt to formalise and advance the consequences of how ‘the old fixed landmarks became wavering and indistinct, and all sharp outlines were blurred’ in the wake of Darwinism. For Russell, Bergson’s evolutionism was philosophically problematic, as it assumed too much of this impact on the nature of modern knowledge without

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erecting a stable epistemological framework within which such conclusions could be reached:

Evolutionism, if what has been said is true, is to be regarded as a hasty generalisation from certain rather special facts, accompanied by a dogmatic rejection of all attempts at analysis, and inspired by interests which are practical rather than theoretical.\(^{64}\)

Russell is also important to Wyndham Lewis’s critique of Bergsonian thought in *Time and Western Man*. Aside from his direct quoting of Russell’s *Knowledge of the External World*, Lewis adapts several specific aspects of its rhetoric. Where Russell speaks of Bergsonian thought as ‘dogmatic’, Lewis refers to it as ‘doctrines’.\(^{65}\) Lewis also takes up the thread drawn between Darwin and Bergson by the term ‘evolutionism’ and includes Freud in a pantheon of thinkers whose ideas are seen to be collectively destabilising to civilization:

Freud’s teaching has resuscitated the animal past of the soul, following upon Darwin, and hatched a menagerie of animal, criminal and primitive ‘complexes’ for the Western mind. All these approaches stress the *Past*, the primitive, all that is *not* the civilized *Present*.\(^{66}\)

Throughout *Time and Western Man*, Lewis reflects the implications of Russell’s analysis back onto the subject. In his argument, Bergson forms part of a milieu whose ideas threaten cohesive selfhood in general, making ‘time-philosophy’ a problem not just of knowing the external world, but of being:

You become no longer one, but many. [...] By this proposed transfer from the beautiful *objective, material* world of common-sense, over to the ‘organic’ world of chronological mentalism, you lose not only the clearness of outline,\

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 18.


\(^{66}\) Ibid., 52.
the static beauty, of the things you commonly apprehend; you lose also the cleanness of outline of your own individuality which apprehends them.\textsuperscript{67}

What Freud, Bergson and Darwin have in common, according to Lewis, is that their discoveries conjure an image of man being not entirely in control of their own mind. Of course, Lewis is haphazardly melding several different concepts – the subjective, the unconscious, the irrational, and the genetic – together with little delineation. What is clear, however, is that, according to Russell, these concepts are coming from a similar place and are trending toward an end with raised stakes: that an over-emphasis on subjectivity can, in fact, threaten the subject-proper.

Through the lines ‘People change, and smile: but the agony abides. / Time the destroyer is time the preserver’, Eliot seeks to incorporate this problem of the self’s temporal continuity within the paradoxes that characterise much of the metaphysical concerns of \textit{Four Quartets}. This allows the self to remain coherent even as Eliot places it in the sweep of history, and so ‘moments of agony’ can be ‘permanent / With such permanence as time has’. It is on the condition of the possibility that the coherent and the changing self can be held together that MacNeice enters this conversation. \textit{Ten Burnt Offerings}, and later \textit{Autumn Sequel}, put their author at the end of a modernist network of ideas about the role of time and the mind in constituting a subject. But being at the end, they are also responsible for bringing this debate over the threshold of the Second World War. At stake here is a question of what kind of modernism survives the transition. This interrogation has already started in the turn back to earlier motifs in \textit{Holes in the Sky}. As such, MacNeice’s turn to Eliot’s structures signals a different vector for the continuing

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 175.
The intervention that ‘Day of Renewal’ makes in this lineage comes as early as its title: it is a poem that attempts to work through the problems of the temporal self via the concept of rebirth. MacNeice returns to the Platonic-Aristotelean split of Being and Becoming to shape this problem: ‘Not to become but be. / Still that remains an ideal – or a pretence’. In MacNeice’s formulation, the self is stuck in the liminality of becoming, unable to access either the stability of the past – ‘But I felt sad to end each fairy story, / Kept turning back to the first page’ – or the teleological end-point to which it perpetually works. There is only really the present moment, with the inaccessibility of the past implying the inaccessibility of previous selves:

Birthdays come round
And the child graduates from milk to meat
And loses count of himself, finding and losing
Visions as quickly lost as found.

This is how, in middle age, days can ‘seem now too many, now too few’. The continual turning of the present into the past generates a growing number of past selves to keep track of. At some point, this number must become too much to contain within a cohesive sense of self. The question then becomes what self can be constituted under these conditions. This conflict between ideas of the changing and constant self can be seen in the sometimes confusing way that the poem attempts to communicate both ideas structurally. The $abcbdefd$ rhyme scheme initially gives each stanza a song-like feel that suits a rhythmic, shifting idea of time. However, the rhyme also gives the last four lines of each octave an enclosed shape, suggesting containment within the $d$ rhymes, that disrupts this. The first stanza illustrates this
neatly. The first quatrain rhymes ‘stretch’, ‘view’, ‘innocent’, ‘few’ match up with the concern expressed in the opening lines with this new relationship to the past brought on by middle age. Then, the rhymes ‘age’, ‘Progress’, ‘story’, ‘page’ contain the ‘Progress’ of the ‘story’ within the image of the book, which is ‘Kept turning back to the first page’, to reflect anxieties about the self changing over time. In the later stanza quoted above, the repetition of ‘And’, helps evoke the sense of slippage across time, while the mirroring of ‘finding and losing’ with ‘lost and found’ reflects the rhyme’s closure.

On a broader level, the poem explores the loss of past selfhood in the process of becoming while digging into the details of MacNeice’s memories of birthdays to make this point. He runs into similar problems as Eliot here, but where Eliot appeals to the Incarnation to affect the reconciliation of flux and eternity, MacNeice retreats to the mind to explore the making of mental ‘Milestones’ that characterise the poem’s treatment of the past:

As time, so place. This day a year ago
Or thirty years lie rooted in one spot
Which in itself has changed but in our mind
Does not become but is; what it now is not.

The concept of time ‘rooted in one spot’ is a clear nod to Wordsworth, a reference which places this autobiographical text in a lineage following on from the elder poet’s own long memoir project, the Prelude. The ‘spots of time’ passages were composed for the two-book Prelude of 1799.68 They are described in Book XI of the 1805 version as particular memories by which ‘our minds / Are nourished and

invisibly repaired’.\(^{69}\) As Charles I. Armstrong writes, the identification of such spots offers a ritualistic aspect to remembrance: ‘The spots of time are related to ritual, in that these two phenomena share a recurring need for confirmation of the numinous harmony of existence’.\(^{70}\) Memory mentally brings the past into the present, thereby contributing to the ‘invisible links’ between them that constitute the contiguous narrative of selfhood. The ‘Renewal’ of the poem’s title is the renewal of the self across the years. Wordsworth is useful to MacNeice here for conceiving of the mind as a point at which being and becoming can intersect in an ontological schema. Since memory allows for the preservation of lost time, and the implication of the past in the present, it can thereby realise the past from the flux of time. However, this affords things-as-remembered a particular ontological status: memory allows them to exist, but only in the mind. It is from this point that the two poets diverge. While Wordsworth sees these spots of time as being positively regenerative, here MacNeice is concerned with the consequences of the ritualistic mental recurrence of the past, and the limits of constituting the self in this way. In the passage above, memory of a place preserved in the mind ‘Does not become but is’; it is in a state of being, while the world around the subject is subject to the constant flux of becoming. This formulation allows the dichotomous states to co-exist, theoretically, but it is also at the heart of a paradox of the remembered self. As elsewhere in MacNeice’s poetry, being is associated with death and becoming with life: ‘Death is, but life becomes’. How can the living present self, then, be adequately constituted from the dead past of memory? The value of Wordsworth in ‘Day of Renewal’ is that spots of time allow for the poem’s metaphysical concerns to be conceived in terms of the

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 565.

mind, underlining the psychological framework of MacNeice’s probing of the
temporal self.

‘Suite for Recorders’, the first poem in the collection, loosely ties time to the
mind in its first part: ‘Though Time drive ships from sail to steam, / Though what
was vision shrink to dream’.71 The sweep of history coincides with a crude, one-line
history of ideas on the mind. Just as technology advances, so too does a secular
mindset in its wake. The transcendent connotations of the vision can now be
understood as the internalised phenomenon of the dream. However, the possibility
of a return to older modes is being anticipated here. The poem intervenes in a
literary conversation between Christopher Marlowe and Sir Walter Raleigh.
Marlowe’s 1599 poem ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love’ is a typical pastoral
love poem, but a year after it was published Raleigh wrote ‘The Nymph’s Reply to
the Shepherd’ as a cynical riposte to what Raleigh saw as Marlowe’s naivety. To
make his point, Raleigh uses the changing seasons to reflect the impermanence of
affection, and emotion more generally: ‘A honey tongue, a heart of gall, / Is fancy’s
spring, but sorrow’s fall’; and later, ‘Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten: / In
folly ripe, in reason rotten’.72 In MacNeice’s version, time comes around again to the
point of ripeness: ‘Black fingers will bear fruit and spring / Put paid to every
reckoning’. The ‘black fingers’ of trees here recall the same image from ‘Street
Scene’: ‘The black tree yearns for green confetti’. In the immediate aftermath of war,
this image reflects the mental paralysis of trauma, but upon revisiting in the early
fifties the inevitability of the seasonal cycle appears restored. This, however, implies

71 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 316.
72 Sir Walter Raleigh, The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh Collected and Authenticated with those of Sir
Henry Wotton and Other Courtly Poets from 1540 to 1650, ed. J. Hannah (London: George Bell and
Sons, 1875) 11-12.
repetition. It is not simply the case that the new decade allows a sense of time's new movement, but that time can be modelled as the recurrence of states of being.

This has profound implications for selfhood. The historical discussion that makes up the poem's subject matter – expanding from the literary correspondence of Marlowe and Raleigh to Raleigh's role in Britain's early colonialism – falls back, in the third part, into a discussion of the implications of identifying oneself with history. 'Pride in your history' is tantamount to 'taking your own pulse / And counting in you someone else'. Selfhood is framed in terms of the mind through an engagement with idealist thought that ties into modernist debates about Bergsonian thought:

Members of one another? Who
Could prove by reason that gag true?
But reason, if it were a lie,
Should counsel us at once to die.

For being alive is what?
Is being what yourself are not,
Is being a world which must outlive
All you take from it and give.

Your Alter Egos, present, past,
Or future, even, could not last
Did your word only prove them true;
Though you choose them, yet they chose you.

This question of people being 'members of one another' recalls MacNeice's undergraduate reading of idealism, particularly Giovanni Gentile's idea of the mental unity between selves:

A fundamental condition, therefore, of understanding others is that our mind should penetrate their mind. [...] Every spiritual relation, every communication between our own inner reality and another's, is essentially
unity. [...] We may even say that a law of knowledge of spiritual reality is that the object be resolved into the subject.\textsuperscript{73}

According to Gentile’s idealism, the unity of the self with the other, or the resolving of object into subject, is an extension of a wider metaphysics that places knowledge and experience of the world in the mind. To know another person is to resolve their mind into yours, making people ‘members of one another’. This is how it is connected to the idea of the self ‘being a world which must outlive / All you take from it and give’. The way this ties to the influence of Bergson’s thought goes back to Wyndham Lewis, and his objection, as quoted above, that Bergson blurs the ‘outline’ of the individual by making the self multiple rather than singular. The multiplicity of the self is a loaded philosophical question by the time that MacNeice comes to write ‘Suite for Recorders’, and he appears to be consciously engaging with it, as shown by writing this section as a question-and-answer exchange.

These others with whom one achieves unity become time-stretched ‘Alter Egos, present, past, / Or future’, which points to his reading of the British idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley. MacNeice read Bradley in Oxford tutorials with his mentor G. R. G. Mure, who in turn had been Bradley’s student.\textsuperscript{74} At the time he was attracted to Bradley’s The Principles of Logic (1883), but his enthusiasm was qualified:

I was delighted to find him saying that any judgement about anything whatsoever is a judgement about the Universe; I tried to suppress the feeling that in that case it becomes impossible to assess a judgement without subpoenaing the Universe[].\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{73} Giovanni Gentile, Theory of the Mind as Pure Act, trans. H. Wildon Carr (3\textsuperscript{rd} edn; London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), 8–10.
\textsuperscript{74} McKinnon, Apollo’s Blended Dream, 44.
\textsuperscript{75} MacNeice, Strings, 125.
He mentions this argument again in *Modern Poetry* with respect to poetic practice: ‘Any odd set of words which anyone uses may, on ultimate analysis, be significant, but the poet cannot wait for this ultimate’. Yet years later, the self as idealist arbiter of the world attains the condition of universality: ‘our task is set / To become Atlas while we can’. It appears that the reader of *Ten Burnt Offerings* is being given two contradictory views of selfhood and mind. The speaker of ‘Day of Renewal’ continually loses their past selves, while the speaker of ‘Suite for Recorders’ expands selfhood to contain the world.

MacNeice’s notes on Bradley from his studies offer a path for clarifying the difficulties of time and the mind across these poems. Among his undergraduate papers are several pages of notes summarising Bradley’s *Logic*, with attention drawn on the first page to Bradley’s idealist approach to the past and future. The undergraduate MacNeice glosses this section thus: ‘Events past & future merely ideal constructions connected with the real that appears in present perception’. Decades later, Bradley offers MacNeice a model for using the mind to connect the present moment to both the past and future, hence ‘pride in your history’ is ‘counting in you someone else’. This is enabling for the speaker of ‘Suite for Recorders’, but in ‘Day of Renewal’ the speaker is also made frustratingly aware of their past selves as ideal constructions, since the present is all there is.

MacNeice is also in dialogue with Eliot here, seeking a way to realise a historical pattern into which they fit without disowning the past. Using idealism to

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77 Louis MacNeice, ‘Bradley’s Logic’, Miscellaneous essays, lecture notes and revision notes, mainly on (Greek) philosophy [c. 1926-1930], Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. 10641/38, Folder 2. The relevant section of Bradley is: ‘Memory of the past, and prediction of the future, are separated clearly from mere imagination. In the former we have the reference to that reality which appears in perception’; F. H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883), 75.
achieve this shifts the emphasis from the theological to the mental-philosophical. The self as the centre of historical recurrence is reflected in the form, as the third section revisists the iambic tetrameter of the first section, but with greater fidelity to Marlowe and Raleigh’s *aabb* rhyme scheme. The connection between the speaker and their poetic antecedents through the mind justifies the speaker placing themselves in the lineage of replies across texts. Indeed, the recursion to ideas he picked up during his student days subtly maps out another kind of historical pattern for MacNeice, who retraces the steps of his own younger thoughts. *Ten Burnt Offerings* sits in a curious place with regard to the poetics of mind, as its philosophical engagements emphasise conscious attempts to construct patterns for understanding the temporality of selfhood. On either side of this collection, however, unconscious operations disrupt this, as will be discussed.

‘Our present chains’: *Autumn Sequel*

*Autumn Sequel* tests many of the ambitions in *Ten Burnt Offerings* to realise the pastless present self. It is a poem that is haunted by both the presences of friends and colleagues who have died, and by its own provenance as a sequel to MacNeice’s reputation-making *Autumn Journal*. The latter is evident from the very first canto:

An autumn journal – or journey. The clocks tick
Just as they did but that was a slice of life
And there is no such thing. Our days are quick –

Quick and not dead. To lop them off with a knife
In order to preserve them seems pure fake[.] 78

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The desire to distance the new work from the old stems from a reconsideration of art’s relationship to time. The speaker clarifies earlier: ‘It is not time I resent, it is that the hand should stick / On a lie which the heart repeats again and again’. A tangle is identified in a modern, rationalist view that misidentifies time’s measurement with its actuality. In essence, there is more to time than the clock. The implication of this is that the journal format was inherently flawed in its approach, aestheticizing ‘slices’ of time, rather than finding an aesthetic for the experience of time. These passages implicitly establish a goal for the speaker to work towards: to realise the genuine in place of the fake; to generate a poetics of time in place of a poetics of the clock.

However, throughout Autumn Sequel the desire to separate temporal experience from measurement is continually frustrated by an omnipresent bureaucracy that organises, and thereby deadens, time according to the clock. In the second canto time itself is personified as a ‘dark officer’ at the end of a brief reimagining of Faust in similarly bureaucratic terms: ‘Mephisto loves the Fall, his clerks abscond / With all the green of nature’.79 In Canto III, nature is similarly reduced:

The woodpecker, like a typist, taps away
Relentlessly; the record must be kept
Though the same larceny happen day by day[]80

The language of the office here has an anti-romantic effect, as though providing an all-encompassing framework for reading all the repetitions and cycles of reality. In Canto V, this attitude is stated more explicitly: ‘I find / That timeless means the time

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79 Ibid., 382.
80 Ibid., 385.
one office hour devours'.

There are faint echoes in these passages of Eliot’s earlier work, particularly *The Waste Land*. The combination of the mythic with the bureaucratic recalls something like the passage from ‘The Fire Sermon’ in which the blind Greek prophet Tiresias narrates an affair between a typist and her boss:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting[.]

In both Eliot and MacNeice, mythic, folkloric, and natural references are used to emphasise the way that the clock-time of officialdom orders experience, making the human body and mind an instrument. The Eliotic echo is, in turn, also a return to the sociological work of Max Weber, whose ideas about religious culture as capitalist bedrock in works such as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905) theorised such ‘disenchantment’, as he termed it, as a core feature of modernity. His best known formulation of this was expressed in the 1917 lecture ‘Science as a Vocation’: ‘The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”.’ Sarah Cole summarises Weber’s contribution to a modernist self-knowledge of a growing de-romanticisation thus:

As scientific rationalism and commodity materialism take the place of spiritual vibrancy, the organization of life across a range of institutions and practices squeezes out even the residue of any living spiritual presence. The rationalizations enacted by capitalism, the ascendancy of mass culture, bureaucracy, the rise of professionalism, and the scientific episteme – all

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81 Ibid., 393.
contribute to this denuding of the magical, spiritual, and divine from modern existence.\footnote{Sarah Cole, \textit{At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40-41.}

When Weber speaks of rationalisation, he is referring to an increasing trend after the Industrial Revolution of quantifying and ordering labour and work itself. This is different from the philosophical rationality against which MacNeice rails in his poetry, as discussed in the chapter on the irrational. However, they share a certain amount of post-Enlightenment ideological baggage, and in \textit{Autumn Sequel} rationality is seen to have similar consequences in terms of a depersonalising emphasis on productivity and efficiency that aligns him with Weber's influence.

Throughout the poem, rationality is presented as anathema to some essential part of human nature. This idea of human nature relies on psychoanalytic echoes, particularly as filtered through his own earlier exposition of a quasi-psychological mythic impulse. In Canto XXIV, the speaker goes to the British Museum to revisit a collection of artifacts from the 'Ancient East' that he visited as a child. Viewing figures of 'blends of man and beast' is seen to be a formative experience for the speaker's development:

\begin{quote}
Nor did these seem unnatural, they complied
With early dreams of mine, which decades later
I felt again, watching the Sphinx deride

The lives on which she turned her back; the traitor
To life within us all reorientates
Himself with her to flout the world's creator

By brooding on the desert which negates
And abnegates for ever.\footnote{MacNeice, \textit{Collected Poems}, 479.}
\end{quote}
The museum as the revisited locus of childhood memory – and a notably formative part of that childhood – may seem at first like a reversal of the wish in ‘Day of Renewal’ to leave previous selves behind. However, this canto works towards an appeal to something more primordial. An irrational psychology is suggested by an identification with the mixed forms of man and beast, recalling MacNeice’s previous animal-identifications in Zoo, and with them a shade of their Freudian influences. Furthermore, the idea of an innate ‘traitor to life’ contained within all people and guiding their thoughts is a clear echo of the death drive from Freudian psychoanalysis, positing a negating, destructive impulse as an indelible part of the psyche. Later, this becomes more evident: ‘our deep embedded // Lusts fear and fears lust after her’. Here is a sense of a mental interiority that includes a subtly changed Freudian vocabulary of desires and anxieties to account for the contradictory forces at work in life’s capacity for its own opposite.

This is evident in the poem’s epigraph from Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself (1855): ‘Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself...’

Contradiction is one facet of how the poem attempts to formulate possibilities for different selves, which can in turn negate clock-time and realise alternative relationships to time. Concepts of irrationality and the unconscious listed from psychoanalysis are core elements of these formulations, offering a frame within which multiplied selfhood is considered not only explicable, but indelible to the human condition. However, as in the analyses above, MacNeice is not only operating with a simple, psychoanalytic toolkit here. Later in the canto, the mythology of the Ancient East is universalised:

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86 Ibid., 372.
a moral which
Has weighed upon all Babylon since, an ache

In the back of the heart, a twitch in the nerve, an itch
In the front of the soul.

Again, MacNeice borrows concepts and vocabularies from psychoanalysis, but not so strictly its topographies. Instead, his speaker opts for a litany of places where primordial or unknown feelings can be located, generating a broader concept of a soul-mind that exists between strictly spiritual and scientific understandings of the psyche. While it is clear that psychoanalysis is still offering MacNeice ways of connecting myth to the mind at this stage of his writing career, his desire for a concept of selfhood capable of contradiction and multiplicity also still requires a sense of the mythic in its method as well as its subject. In other words, MacNeice is resisting a scientific understanding of the irrational, which is the province of psychoanalysis. Myth is not just used as evidence of cross-cultural concepts of the soul-mind but seeks to maintain its status as a system of understanding, even when it is qualified by modern developments.

Indeed, the concept of the mind itself is brought into question in Canto XVII, when the speaker claims that people have grown beyond ‘The reasons and the rhymes // Of Mother Church and Mother Goose’, and have ‘learnt to call our minds (if minds they are) our own’. An apparent endorsement of the modern shift towards the secularisation of society risks an identification with the rationalising forces that this entails. MacNeice’s speaker qualifies his statement with an attempt to dislocate the self from the mind. Such rhetorical navigations generate a tension in the poetic voice wherein the means to describe an obfuscated, primordial self are

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87 Ibid., 448-449.
sought, but without the trappings of a straightforward scientific or psychoanalytic model of mental activity. This is evident when the mind appears to come up unquestioned elsewhere, such as near the end of Canto XIII: ‘I unthink youth and Oxford. A little pin / Drops in the back of my mind’. Here, the mind is identified – and identified with – but on the condition that a state of unthinking is affected. Furthermore, we are drawn to the ‘back’ of the mind, suggesting something like an unconscious. The connection between this attention to the irrationality of the mind and the rationalisation of modern life is made through different ideas of time in the same passage.

The relationship of *Autumn Sequel* to the legacy of modernism is complex. As a poem, its ideological and rhetorical positions retread older diagnoses of the stultifying implications of bureaucracy and places the human in contest with them. At the same time, it finds modernism’s vocabularies of mind useful in constructing its case for the valorisation of the unconscious self and buys in to psychoanalytic genealogies tracing twentieth-century neuroses in an older ur-culture. An issue that still remains is how to realise the possibilities of this impulse within the confines of modernity itself. Throughout, the speaker emphasises subjectivity as *Autumn Sequel* adopts a voice that frames its search for selfhood as one that seeks an alternative truth that runs counter to the dominant discourses of rationalisation. As the speaker moves from Oxford to their home in London, they move away from a self-contained, localised time to the modernised, standardised time of the capital: ‘Let Big Ben / Shout down Great Tom’. They also move towards a particular and personal idea of being settled in time: ‘My Lares and Penates have revolted // Against the time’. The

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88 Ibid., 432.
word ‘time’ here is being used in a sense closer to fashion, but even so there is a sense of the retreat to the interior, ‘the back of my mind’, being associated with a withdrawal from the contemporaneous regimentation of clock time, as symbolised by Big Ben.

This is all further illustrated by the end of Canto XI, though it also demonstrates that the poem’s relationship with clock time is never simple:

And no false note could spoil the varied chimes
We heard with them at midnight, when to think
Meant to feel and to feel meant to be
And being meant pure joy and no weak link

Impaired the daisy chain which a not impossible She
Had tied our hands and hers with. We did not call
On God or Time to free us; nor did we want a free

Hand, nor would we imagine a world at all
Outside our present chains. 89

A memory of youth is modified here by the reference to 2 Henry IV (1596-1599). In Act III, Scene 2, Justice Shallow reminisces about the misadventures of his younger days, with Falstaff affirming the memories ‘We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow’. 90 As in Ten Burnt Offerings, an Elizabethan mode is being employed to access a complex relationship with nostalgia. The speaker is remembering not just a different time, but a different way of being associated with it. The move from thinking, to feeling, to being, to joy works as both the deconstruction of an inverse relationship between rationality and the fulfilment of the soul. It also works as a history of ideas on human action, starting with modern thinking, back through

89 Ibid., 424.
Romantic feeling, to the philosophical ideas of Being that MacNeice encountered during his own youth. In either case, the development of rationality is tied to the advance of time, which in turn places time at odds with joy.

However, the Shakespeare reference that this relies on has a self-ironising quality. In a November 1959 essay for *Encounter* on the *Henry IV* plays, later collected in *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962) as ‘The Prince’s Dog’, Auden comments that Falstaff represents a certain type of character that does not ‘belong to the temporal world of change’.91 He reads the plays as parables that contrast ‘the idleness and the drinking, the surrender to immediacy and the refusal to accept reality’ as ‘signs for the Unworldly Man’ with ‘Prince Hal who represents worldliness at its best’.92 At one point, Auden makes a connection between this parable of worldliness and human development with overt psychoanalytic overtones:

> Once upon a time we were all Falstaffs: then we became social beings with super-egos. Most of us learn to accept this, but there are some in whom the nostalgia for the state of innocent self-importance is so strong that they refuse to accept adult life and responsibilities and seek some means to become again the Falstaffs they once were. The commonest technique adopted is the bottle and, curiously enough, the male drinker reveals his intention by developing a drinker’s belly.93

Where MacNeice once relied on a Freudian framing borrowed from *Civilization and its Discontents* to understand animals in *Zoo*, Auden now uses it to realise the modern significance of Falstaff. Psychological discourses are critical in connecting this reading to a troubled relationship with time. Falstaff is a figure who represents both a ‘surrender to immediacy’ and the desire to reach back into a kind of

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92 Ibid., 596.
93 Ibid., 590.
prelapsarian innocence, and so Auden’s reading connects a web of associations between unworldliness, resistance to clock time, memory and drunkenness. He had developed this parabolic reading of Henry IV in lectures on Shakespeare given at the New School for Social Research in 1946, but Autumn Sequel anticipates the expanded and revised thoughts that were printed in Encounter and The Dyer’s Hand.

Regardless of provenance, Falstaff works as a perspective from which a particularly middle-aged relationship to time can be understood. Indeed, many of the details of Auden’s reading are relevant to Autumn Sequel’s Falstaffian mode. Alongside the nostalgia of an unworldly youthfulness in Canto XI, the connection between drinking and the dissolution of clock-time comes up later in Canto XIV, as discussed above. MacNeice also shares Auden’s sense of an emotional pull between the demands of reality and the promises of naivety. The image of ‘daisy chains’ morphs into the ‘present chains’ of adult life, and the rebuke of ‘We did not call / On God or Time to free us’ carries in it the implication of entrapment. The desire to return to a Falstaffian way of life is continually qualified by an awareness that nostalgia, memory and the past are another kind of temporal trap. This tension is not meant to be resolved here, but instead remains throughout the poem’s appeals to escape. As soon as this canto closes, the next one opens with: ‘Now to dissolve in port’.

Through Falstaff, MacNeice can inscribe the continual pull between the worldly present and nostalgic memory as a contest at the heart of questions about selfhood in modernity.

Falstaff is useful as a touchstone for developing a particular position on nostalgia and remembered selfhoods, but this is within the context of the poem’s

94 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 424.
wider internal debate about the past. As previously mentioned, the first canto is keen to create a sense of separation between *Autumn Sequel* and *Autumn Journal*, and this comes down to a contest between the MacNeices who wrote each text: ‘I to I / Is not for that self and me’.\(^95\) The past self being disowned here is described as being not quite formed: ‘In my hand of unformed smoke those fifteen years / A-going, a-going, ago’. This assumption that the earlier self is the less coherent is challenged in Canto V when the speaker revisits the same part of the Welsh coast they holidayed in as a child:

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Thirty-two years ago the same Welsh sky
And sea in this same month beguiled a boy
Who, looking back on it, I note was I –

More or less I. Perhaps more: the years destroy
The courage of our ignorance. Perhaps less:
The tree of knowledge stands the test of joy

And evil strops our wits.\(^96\)
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The poem complicates the notion of an essential baseline ‘self’ against which temporally-bound selves may be measured. The speaker cannot, and will not, resolve the question of which self is truer: the one that develops over time, or the one that is compromised by experience. Instead, the speaker is resigned to the idea of a kind of metamorphosis in Canto XII: ‘I am / Not what I was’.\(^97\) This also highlights the complicated nature of the poem’s ideas about memory, which seems at once to bring the past nearer to the present while also underlining its irretrievable distance. Later in this canto, there is a Proustian suggestion in the way that ‘The smell of wet charred woodwork’ can ‘whisk me back / A dozen years’.

\(^95\) Ibid., 373.
\(^96\) Ibid., 394-5.
\(^97\) Ibid., 425.
However, as evident above, it is clear that the remembered self and the remembering self are made distinct.

At this point, it seems that *Autumn Sequel* is combining these various sociological, psychoanalytic and literary viewpoints in a way that broadly suits an Aristotelean metaphysics with Heraclitan inflections. Selfhood is seen to be temporally mutable, and is in a constant state of becoming, while the idea of a Platonic ideal of being is implicitly troubled by the lack of a true essential self. However, the Aristotelian concept of man as a political animal constituted by the community is tested by the poem's hauntings. Between the start of the war and the writing of *Autumn Sequel*, MacNeice lost four friends and colleagues, each of whom is given a pseudonymous appearance. Graham Shepard, his close friend from school, who is ‘Gavin’ in the poem, was killed aboard the HMS Polyanthus by a German U-Boat on 20th September 1943. The sculptor Gordon Herickx, named ‘Wimbush’, died the day after the opening of his first solo exhibition in July 1953. The poet Dylan Thomas, named ‘Gwilym’, died in a New York hospital that November. Also mentioned in the poem is A. E. Harding, known as ‘Harrap’, who had first recruited MacNeice into the BBC in 1941. Their deaths are the emotional kernel around which the text revolves in the same way that impending war provided the thrust for *Autumn Journal*, providing a more complicated temporal structure that revolves around the presences of memory – or hauntings.

Gavin’s death, for instance, does not fit neatly into the poem’s chronology except through memory. In Canto II, it is noted that ‘Gavin is dead / Ten years this autumn’, which sparks remembrance of hearing the news about the sinking of the

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Polyanthus. This is preceded by what appears to be a memory of something Gavin said, but that is in fact questioned from the beginning: “On the other hand,” said Gavin – or could have said. This interplay between memory and imagination reflects the blurring of the lines between Graham Shepard and his pseudonymous stand-in, mixing up remembered past and imagined present. This is emphasised as the poem moves forward in time to the memory of Gavin’s death, with Gavin himself moving ‘Deep out of sight and deeper into mind, // Into my mind for one’. The comparison of Gavin sinking into the sea with the mind recalls the association of the sea with the unconscious and the irrational, as discussed in the chapter on instinct, as well as ‘The Casualty’, collected in Springboard, which was another attempt to elegise Shepard. Gavin’s presence from this point onwards, then, is implicitly a mental one, but one that relies on an irrational, associative psychology. Indeed, the speaker is so determined to forward a mental view that a historical one is immediately challenged. The speaker states that ‘Ancient history, one might think, // Runs into World War Two’, but that ‘The years reveal / The need for everydayness’, as seen in the call to ‘Sleep, sleep, // You widows of Mycenae’, and the statement that there is ‘no need to keep / That cutting’, of the headline announcing the sinking of the Polyanthus. There is a rejection, here, of history as a frame through which death can be understood, contextualised, and rationalised, instead privileging personal recall over the written account. As Tom Walker has noted, the figure of the ancient historian Thucydides is invoked at several points in the poem to ‘gesture towards objectivity’, but that this ‘cannot mask the confusion

99 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 379.
100 ‘And making all your past contemporaneous / Under that final chord of the mid-Atlantic swell’. Ibid., 237.
of MacNeice’s response to the post-war world’. It is important to qualify, then, that this disavowal of ancient and modern history here is not just a statement of psychological allegiance, but a part of the poem’s broader discursive navigations between the irrational mind and the increasingly rationalised world.

This contest of personal grief against other ways of framing loss is extended to the legacy of modernism itself. Recalling the moment he hears about Gavin’s death, the speaker describes the following scene:

> a cobra spread an enormous hood
> Over the window and a sudden frost
> Froze all the honey left in the looted hive
> While the white Dove revoked its pentecost,

> Muting the tongues of fire.

Edna Longley has written that ‘Autumn Sequel tends to be nostalgic for the forces which shaped both its prototype and the wartime poetry’. However, as with its Thucydidean appeals to rationality, its view of its precedents is not straightforward. Given the immediate context to this passage of the Second World War, there is a clear challenge here to Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ from Four Quartets in the image of ‘muting the tongues of fire’. The idea of a theological redemption is seen to lose its purchase in the moment of grief. Furthermore, the image of the darkened window and ‘sudden frost’ play out as an inverse of MacNeice’s own ‘Snow’: ‘The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was / Spawning snow’. Gavin’s death becomes emblematic, in retrospect, of the end of the entire thirties poetic project.

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102 Longley, Louis MacNeice, 116.
103 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 24.
that sought to express a qualified romanticism as a response to the phenomenology of modernity. He is described as having been ‘boisterously loyal to his five // Senses’, an attitude that defined MacNeice’s earlier poetics and has now, as it were, died with his friend. More compellingly, it reverses the final stanza from ‘The National Gallery’, which was collected in *Holes in the Sky*:

So fling wide the windows, this window and that, let the air
Blowing from times unconfined to Then, from places further and fuller than There,
Purge our particular time-bound unliving lives, rekindle a pentecost in Trafalgar Square.\(^{104}\)

In the context of a poem about visiting a gallery, the Pentecost is clearly operating here in Eliotic terms as a shorthand for redemption from death, which is also the ability to live outside of the confines of linear time. That Gavin’s death is seen in *Autumn Sequel* to subvert the possibilities of spiritual reconciliation further reflects how death and grief generate a particular relationship to time. The possibilities of transcending linear chronology promised by a theological or metaphysical poetics are now understood as compromised. What is also happening here is a correction of the immediate post-war impulse to view the war as a last point of purposefulness and community, in comparison with an increasingly directionless and atomising post-war period. Malcolm Bradbury summarises that British writers of the late forties had a strange view of the war from which ‘it now seemed to be the wartime age just gone that seemed the better time, a time of common purpose when writing had mattered’.\(^{105}\) This perspective is dismissed in *Autumn Sequel*, in which the failure of wartime poetics is argued through memory and mourning. It is a text that

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 259.
seeks to rewrite a personal history of the war outside the universalising themes and existential stakes of war poetry.

The poem’s challenges to the legacy from which it is being produced are arguably also written into its structure. Of frequent note in criticism that explores the failings of the fifties poetry is MacNeice’s choice to write *Autumn Sequel* in strict terza rima, sticking to pentameter triplets with an interlocking *aba bcb* rhyme scheme. Longley writes that ‘It may be a metre for narrative and flux, but not for argument and climax’.\(^\text{106}\) Indeed, it cannot sustain a dramatic tempo for as long as the looser free verse of *Autumn Journal* could, but *Autumn Sequel* does not seek to capture the perpetual phenomenology of the present like the earlier work did. Instead, as mentioned above, it continually reaches into the past through memory. This is reflected in the rhyme scheme of terza rima, in which each triplet’s structuring rhyme calls back to the middle of the previous stanza. It is a form which refers to the past as it moves forward, implying what has come before in what follows. In theory, this makes it highly suited to a poem that is concerned with the continual presences of the dead. Indeed, it was already used by MacNeice to precisely this effect in ‘The Strand’, a more successful use of the form from the Achill poems of *Holes in the Sky*.\(^\text{107}\) There, terza rima is effectively deployed because it captures both the rhythms of the waves on shore and the spectral presence of MacNeice’s deceased father. By the time he comes to write *Autumn Sequel*, then, terza rima is a form that already carries connotations of grief, and of the blending of

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\(^{107}\) ‘And the mirror caught his shape which catches mine
   But then as now the floor-mop of the foam
   Blotted the bright reflections – and no sign
   Remains of face or feet when visitors have gone home’. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 264.
past and present, through his work. The poem thereby offers a foil to the more straightforwardly autobiographical procedures of its predecessor.

The other important death in *Autumn Sequel* is that of Gwilym (Dylan Thomas). His first appearance is also in the second canto, in which his Falstaffian presence on a night of drinking counterpoints the speaker’s earlier mourning for Gavin. However, memory complicates the narrative here:

The walls of Albany Street came tumbling down
With enough cries of Time to point the joke
While enough ash to fill a funeral urn
Dropped from his cigarette[.]

The image of tavern walls coming down aligns *Autumn Sequel* with MacNeice’s earlier radio work, particularly the dream-like scene with the Soak building the tavern from music in *The Dark Tower*. Indeed, large parts of the poem were broadcast in the same year as it was published, and much of what makes the poem struggle as a read text can be understood as an attempt to create something intended to be spoken. The parable influences of the earlier work are made obvious by some examples of myth-inspired imagery: ‘a dwarfish folk // Crept out from under the counter’, and ‘pagan lore’. This passage is a complex mixture of experience, memory and fantasy. The episode is framed in the present tense: ‘And so today, with Gwilym come to town’. However, it is written as a memory and is informed by events that are known to unfold after. The ‘funeral urn’ and later ‘dolmens’ are highly suggestive of death. They ambivalently bring Gavin’s death into the present of the narrative, and foreshadow Gwilym’s own passing. This is further suggested when the aforementioned narrative present becomes the past nearer the end of the canto: ‘That was one night; already Gwilym is gone / Carmathenwards’.
Through the shift in tenses, the episode is reconfigured as a memory, but the line then moves from ‘was’ to the present tense ‘is’. On the one hand this simply indicates the night turning into the next morning. However, the enjambment separates Gwilym’s destination from the preceding line in a way that gives that line a second meaning: that Gwilym is dead, and that the night out is a more distant memory conjured from the present of the writing. It is through these double meanings, communicated through imagery and form, that Gwilym can be said to have a haunting presence in the poem. The parable, which relies on concepts of the unconscious to generate its double-meaning, tests the ability of memory to transcend linear time. Falstaffian, parable-like worlds of the past are continually, if subtly, undermined by the presents that they inexorably morph into. The previous crying of ‘Time’ itself can be read as an omen, giving voice to the very thing that the speaker is trying to escape from – both through drunken revelry and through memory. It is at the end of this canto that ‘Time’ becomes a ‘dark officer’, as mentioned above. The lines of a contest are being drawn here, between memory, Falstaffian revelry, and life on the one hand, and clock-time, rationalisation, and death on the other.

It is in Canto XVIII that Gwilym passes, and the confusion of tenses and times recurs:

Lament for the Makers. Monday comes; at noon
Gwilym died in New York; if it was late
For his strange kind of poet, it was soon

For all who knew him and we need not wait
To meet his like; his like is seldom born[.]
Again, enjambment here allows for the tenses to take on a double-meaning. ‘At noon / Gwilym died’ works as a present-tense advancement of events, but on its own ‘Gwilym died in New York’ is suddenly past-tense, and can also be read as a memory. As in Canto II, the perspectives from which the poem is being written and that from which it is being spoken are blurred. Gwilym himself becomes a symbol out-of-time in several respects. He represents the last of a particular kind of creative individual, or ‘Maker’, while being too young when he died. He is also a kind of generational phenomenon that is ‘seldom born’, such that ‘his like’ is at an unreachable remove in the future. Gwilym is ambivalently placed across time, as he is seen to be emblematic of the past, present, and future in different ways. This temporal ambiguity becomes central to the speaker’s grief, as it allows Gwilym’s presence to haunt the poem through the unrealisable promise of his return.

Grief is also directly implied in all of the poem’s larger questions about selfhood and the relation of ‘I to I’. Later in the canto, there is a long passage that moves from feeling to dissolution to nightmare:

Tuesday the Tenth: we find it hard to speak
As yet without a catch; when we begin,
The mind is willing but the words are weak,

A pain of sorrow runs from throat to chin –
And then the wave recedes. Was it really I
Who felt like that just now? I cannot pin

It down, whatever it was, and am wondering why,
When in a wink whatever it was comes back
Like thunder out of a clear and placid sky

Stretching our nerves and notions on the rack
And scattering forth what long ago we hid,
The curtains rustle and the world goes black,

Brakes begin to squeal and wheels to skid –
Where were we? What was it you meant to ask?
There is a cleave between thought and communication – ‘The mind is willing but the words are weak’ – that develops into a cleave between thinking and feeling selves: ‘Was it really I / Who felt that just now?’ The problematics of identification with grief here are run through with psychological concepts that have been set up previously in the poem. As the ‘pain of sorrow’ dissipates, it is described as ‘the wave recedes’, recalling the sea imagery that has, by this point, become potently associated with the speaker’s grief for Gavin. Just as memory of Gavin sank ‘deeper into mind’ in Canto II, grief is described as something that resides in the depths of consciousness here as well, with the receding wave suggesting that the feeling is returning to distant source. In light of the earlier comparison of the depths of the mind with the depths of the sea, there is a clear suggestion here of grief as something bursting forth from the unconscious. As such, *Autumn Sequel* is reflecting what is, by the time of its writing, a popular discourse on mental topography and post-war ideas about the presentation of trauma by working these ideas into its imagery of the sea.

Furthermore, this popular psychology of grief is also, by implication, an exploration of mental activity’s difficult temporalities, and the problems therein for notions of selfhood. Again, this is achieved through shifts in tense. The present tense ‘pain of sorrow runs’ turns into a questioning of the past: ‘Was it really I’. The moment instantly becomes a figment of the past, and in that instant there is a rupturing of the holistic self into two parts: one that grieves, and the other that does not, with the latter not being able to recognise the former. When the moment of grief returns, the poem moves back to the unconscious. This is strongly suggested by images of darkness and occlusion, as things that ‘long ago we hid’ are brought to the
fore, while ‘the world goes black’. The strongest suggestion of the retreat into the mind is made when the speaker's nightmarish imagery is cut off and he asks 'Where were we?' The question evokes an addressee, implying that the poem is split between the external concerns of the speaker delivering the narrative of the poem and the internal concerns to which they are seen to digress. However, the poem does not imply a clean break between the two. Instead, the rhyme scheme of terza rima generates a formal psychological action that implies the unconscious in the conscious, and vice versa. Here, the rhyme of 'I', 'why', and 'sky' tracks the shift from the non-grieving to the grieving self. On the other side of this passage, the rhyme of 'hid' and 'skid' during the nightmarish imagery of the unconscious is carried into the conscious memory described in the line ending 'We did'. Even if the dash moves us from interiority to the external addressee rather rapidly, that previous interiority is poetically echoed later.

As previously mentioned, large parts of *Autumn Sequel* were broadcast on the BBC. The radio offers an avenue for exploring further the use of an implied addressee to give shape to the movement between interiority and exteriority that is at the heart of this psychological action. On the 16th of May 1941, MacNeice took part in the fourth edition of the Forces Programme show 'Well Versed', which was a roundtable discussion between MacNeice, fellow poets Clifford Bax and Robert Nichols, and actors Catherine Lacey and John Laurie, on the subject of reading poetry in performance. This discussion took place early on in MacNeice's radio career, and so represents an example of MacNeice's ideas about radio-as-broadcast while they were still being formed. MacNeice advocates for a view that actors should read verse in a way that aligns with the poem's rhythms-as-written:
The rhythm in verse is varied in itself, supposing the poet counter-points the stresses. The reader should let that come out fully, though I don’t think he should alter very much the original metrical stresses. I don’t think the reader should on the whole much alter his speed, though he must perhaps occasionally.\textsuperscript{108}

MacNeice finds almost universal resistance to this from his fellow panellists. He is later asked: ‘Are you, as a poet, Mr. MacNeice, reading poetry just for your own pleasure, or is it something to be put over before an audience?’\textsuperscript{109} To this, MacNeice replies:

Well, my answer to that is – I’m not doing exactly either. I don’t want to put it over unless it will come over in itself. I want the poem to speak for itself and not to be sacrificed for the audience. But two things I want to allow to come out to the audience: one is the meaning of the poem – without going prosy – and the other is the physical shape of the poem as written, as distinct from any melody imposed on it.\textsuperscript{110}

MacNeice’s view that actors should read poetry according to the rhythms of the text itself can be understood in the context of his views at the time on the importance of poetry’s form and structure. McDonald identifies this attitude coming through in much of the critical prose, such as in the 1949 article ‘Poets Conditioned by Their Times’, published in the BBC magazine \textit{London Calling} in 1949, in which MacNeice writes:

\begin{quote}
A poem must have some relation to life – and perhaps that life is messy – but it must also emerge as a thing in itself, an organism. And therefore it must be shaped, it must have an internal structure. And by that I do not mean merely a formal pattern; I mean also the sort of structure which will creep in, willy-nilly, if a poet has some positive values or beliefs.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} Well Versed IV, broadcast on BBC Forces Programme, 16\textsuperscript{th} May 1941, BBC Written Archives, Radio Talk Scripts Pre-1970, 16.5.41., 2. Page numbers in subsequent references refer to pages on the talk as broadcast script.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{111} Louis MacNeice, ‘Poets Conditioned by Their Times’, qtd. in McDonald, \textit{The Poet in his Contexts}, 135.
As McDonald writes: “‘Structure’, then, presupposes for MacNeice ‘positive values or beliefs’, and is in fact itself an aspect of such values’.\(^{112}\) The relevance to radio is that in both cases the idea of a poem’s ‘shape’ is considered critical. It is a phrase that attempts to assert the poem’s independence from both its performer and its audience. In ‘Poets Conditioned by Their Times’, there is the suggestion, developed from the earlier *Modern Poetry*, that structure emerges naturally from the poet’s values, with the term ‘creeps in’ suggesting a subliminal, or even unconscious, aspect to the process. MacNeice’s earlier defensiveness in the discussion on ‘Well Versed’, then, is a defence not just of the poem-as-object, but of the poet’s values that work their way subliminally into a poem’s operations, which risk being wiped out by having a ‘melody imposed on it’ when a rogue performer takes ownership of the reading. Between ‘Well Versed’ and ‘Poets Conditioned by Their Times’, an intermedial dialectic surfaces, which synthesises in *Autumn Sequel*.

Clair Wills reads *Autumn Sequel* as a poem that is deeply rooted in MacNeice’s work as a radio producer for the BBC: ‘It was written to be aired’.\(^{113}\) This informs a guiding focus on the relationship between the writer and the audience:

*Autumn Sequel* offers different models of the poet’s relationship to his audience – the poet as one of a group of friends; as the orchestrator of a national pageant for the new Elizabethan age, one decked out in the modern media language of radio and TV; as public spokesperson and propagandist; as entertainer.\(^{114}\)

\(^{112}\) McDonald, *The Poet in his Contexts*, 136.


\(^{114}\) Ibid.
Ian Whittington has written, with respect to the wartime propaganda radio dramas *Alexander Nevsky* and *Christopher Columbus*, about MacNeice’s foregrounded awareness of his BBC audience, and they way that his radio dramas ‘called into being a listening public defined and bound by their choice to tune in’, stating: ‘MacNeice’s radio dramas depended on the imagined radio public for its operation’.

In Canto XVIII of *Autumn Sequel*, the question ‘Where were we?’ hails the imagined public that is required for the poem’s rhetorical operations, but in doing so it commits a poetic self-sabotage: the imagery of the private interior remains unresolved, instead recurring as an echo in the public sphere to which we are returned. As discussed in the chapter on the irrational, by the time *Autumn Sequel* comes on the air MacNeice’s radio work has explored the medium’s ability to mediate between worlds, temporalities, and mental states by flattening the psychological layers of the parable form onto a single, aural plane. Recall, for instance, how in *The Careerist* the unconscious impulses of Human are implicated in his conscious states. *Autumn Sequel* is certainly a poem ‘written to be aired’, as Wills says, but not just because of its concerns with the maker and their community. It is also in the way that it adopts a radio producer’s approach to explicitly psychological material. The transition from the psychic interior to the public exterior recalls the use of the control panel in *The Dark Tower* to mediate rapid shifts between scenes that can be blended together to suggest continuity across jumps in time and perspective.

Radio can also help to contextualise the contentious decision to write *Autumn Sequel* in terza rima in the first place. As discussed above, the poem makes the unconscious and conscious contiguous through a radio-like flattening, and the

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poem-as-broadcast has to put its ‘shape’ over onto its audience. What arises from this is the potential to understand terza rima as proffering a particular shape that mirrors radio’s flattening effect. As the above analysis shows, both are seen to allow the mediation between different states by the way that they formalise continuity. This can be seen in the way that the past is implied in the present, but also in the way that the unconscious is implied in the conscious. How is it, then, that grief is seen to split the self across time between psychic states, making the speaker ask: ‘Was it really I / Who felt that just now?’ Haunting is the state that arises at the site between continuity and rupture, because it allows for the continual presence of the past in the present, while also marking the distance between them.

Longley’s evaluation that terza rima ‘may be a metre for narrative and flux, but not for argument and climax’, certainly gets at the heart of what makes Autumn Sequel an unenjoyable text. But flux is also important when considering how the text works as a reaction to the circumstances of its writing. Autumn Sequel offers a particular poetics of flux as a kind of continual haunting, insofar as the past is being continually, aurally, looped back into the present, through its shape. In giving poetic shape to grief, it realises the psychic rupture between the unconscious and conscious that generates haunting. This is also the rupture between the private and public spheres which compromises the speaker’s position as ‘orchestrator of a national pageant for the new Elizabethan age’ and, by implication, the BBC’s institutional polis-making authority. Autumn Sequel’s terza rima is a form, or shape, that has implications for the whole British colonial project: it is the anticipation of

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the psychological declinism that would be identified by Ian Nairn less than ten years later.

‘Bones and ghosts’: Remembering the war

Even in his poetry of the sixties, removed from the war by a decade and a half, MacNeice was continually pulled back to the war through memory. The poems of Solstices (1961) are full of remembrances that speak to the post-war decline of their present. In ‘Jericho’, memory forms the refrain in each stanza’s second line: ‘And Joshua remembered Moses’.117 Joshua took over the leadership of the Israelite tribes after the death of Moses and led them through the conquest of Canaan and the peace thereafter. The significance of the Biblical reference refers back to some of the earlier post-war lyrics found in Holes in the Sky that anticipated a lost sense of purpose in the wake of peace:

And the sun stood still above the dome of Paul’s  
And Joshua remembered Moses,  
The fires were out from the war we lost,  
Also the fires of Pentecost,  
And the Tables of the Law were broken again.

Here return the Eliotic Pentecostal fires that have by this stage been long associated with the possibility of spiritual redemption through the trials of war. The phrase ‘the war we lost’ appears to be a striking reversal of history. However, in light of the stanza’s overall identification of absence and loss – of purpose, of transcendence, of history – ‘lost’ gains a double meaning as in something being lost to the past. The following rhyme with ‘Pentecost’ ties this lost past to the connotations of transcendence and purpose with which the fires of war have been imbued, thanks

to Eliot. The poem retreads many of the concerns expressed in *Holes in the Sky* that the aftermath of war has dissolved the societal bonds that the war helped make. This also reiterates a critique of the literary response to the war typified by *Little Gidding*, linking the failure of a post-war transformation of life and the *polis* to the failure of spiritual redemption.

In the final stanza, the sun stands ‘above the Ministry of Defence’, and ‘Neither sense nor conscience stirred, / Having been ultimately deterred’. ‘Sense’ is also seen to be lacking in ‘Notes for a Biography’: ‘Outnumbered, outmoded, I only can pray / Common sense, if not love, will still carry the day’. The context for this plea is the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War: ‘look, here is Japan / Where man must now make what he chooses of man’. The speaker’s reaction implies both temporality and mentality: ‘When I first read the news, to my shame I was glad; / When I next read the news I thought man had gone mad’, and later, ‘For no one will listen, however I rage; / I am not of their temper and not of this age’. The concept of the self that has been split across time returns here. Just as the speaker of *Autumn Sequel* did not recognise his own grieving self across the space of a moment, so too the speaker here feels shame for his initial reaction to the bombing as he vacillates between two opinions. The split between selves also suggests a split from ‘man’, who has ‘gone mad’, but the relation of the speaker to the *polis* is more complex than that:

I too would plead guilty – but where can I plead?

For no one will listen, however I rage;
I am not of their temper and not of this age.

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118 Ibid., 531. A brief discussion of the poem’s irrational operations can be found in chapter one.
The speaker at once seeks identification with the *polis*, implicating themselves in the madness from which they have just reeled, but find that they cannot. The language of the poem mixes concern for mental conditions with concern for the human condition to generate a psychological dialectic as the speaker moves between the poles of a range of states of mind. Crucially, this sense of a social displacement that is also mental is summarised in terms of a relation to history: the speaker is ‘not of this age’. The capacity of time to unmoor the self from past selves, that was a key element of the fifties poetry, is now seen to be a synecdoche of the ontological challenges posed by history’s broader sweeps. It is not just a previous personal mental state from which the speaker is dissociated, but a national psyche that they feel culpable for, even if they don’t recognise it.

Returning to the final stanza of ‘Jericho’, ‘sense nor conscience’ can be read in light of the other works in this collection to refer to a temporally altered national psyche. While conflict was once thought to bind the nation together, it is now a bureaucratised process symbolised by the inert Ministry of Defence building, which fails to stir any kind of reaction: neither the ‘common sense’ spoken of in ‘Notes for a Biography’, nor the Pentecostal hopes of the Second World War. The way that the past of the war is felt, at an unbridgeable remove, among the architecture of the present takes cues from the unreachable past of the individual in previous poetry, such as the child who ‘loses count of himself’ in ‘Day of Renewal’, transposing a sense of individual haunting onto the level of a society-wide decline of ‘sense’ and ‘conscience’. MacNeice’s critique of society begins to take on the psychological, temporal characteristics that he had developed in the decade prior.

The memory of the fires of war also appears in ‘Homage to Wren’: ‘And the flames were whippeting, dolfining, over the streets, / The red whale spouting out
of submerged Londinium'. The fantastical imagery of the fires of the Blitz clearly recalls ‘Brother Fire’ from *Springboard*. Indeed, ‘whippeting’ echoes the imagery of the earlier poem’s first line most closely: ‘When our brother Fire was having his *dog’s day / Jumping the London streets*. However, in revisiting these scenes – the poem is subtitled ‘a memory of 1941’, calling explicit attention to its temporal and subjective framing – they have become historicised. In the lines quoted above, this is suggested by the change from ‘London’ in the previous stanza to the archaic ‘Londinium’ in the next one. Earlier in the poem, the evocation of Sir Christopher Wren, the architect who rebuilt much of London after the Great Fire of 1666, reflects the historical suggestion of the title: ‘And felt that Sir Christopher Wren has made everything shipshape’. In the second stanza, London spatializes history:

London Expects – but the rest of the string was vague,  
Ambiguous rather and London was rolling away  
Three hundred years to the aftermath of the plague[.]

‘London Expects’ is a variation on ‘England expects that every man will do his duty’, the signal sent by Nelson from the HMS Victory before the Battle of Trafalgar. Not only does this fit in with the sea theme of the poem’s depiction of fire, but it also connects recent and more distant history, as the signal, and Nelson’s place in a British historical imaginary, was adapted for propaganda on the home front, for example in posters encouraging industrial productivity, or in advertisements for cigarettes and cosmetics. This variation, the double layers of historical reference, and the vaguening of the message itself, all dramatize a tension between personal

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119 Ibid., 536.  
120 Ibid., 216. Emphasis my own.  
memory and the creation of historical memory, as the creative resources of MacNeice’s previous experiences become tangled with a cultural reckoning with the war and its place in the story of London as a city. With regards to personal memory, there is a subtle undercurrent of scepticism in the passage, such as in the qualification of ‘the rest of the string was vague, / Ambiguous rather’. There is uncertainty in the ‘string’ itself, but also in the recollection of uncertainty. History, on the other hand, is more secure – literally so, in the first stanza: ‘Saw that all hatches were screwed down tight / And felt that Sir Christopher Wren had made everything shipshape’. It is secured in the space of the city itself, which ‘was rolling away / Three hundred years’.

‘Homage to Wren’ forms the last part of an informal sequence of three poems, each ‘a memory’ of the period from 1940 to 1941. The sequence starts with ‘The Messiah’, which is based on MacNeice’s time in a New Hampshire hospital recovering from peritonitis, then continues with ‘The Atlantic Tunnel’ drawing on his return to the England from America. McDonald writes that the period under examination in these poems is ‘a crucial period in MacNeice’s own life and career, private memoirs of a very public phase of life’. The timespan here covers the end of MacNeice’s time teaching in Cornell University up to the beginning of his career at the BBC. McDonald continues that ‘The Messiah’ shows that his memory of events ‘is in fact one of confusion between inner and outer, other and self, in which a cryptic vision is witnessed by a divided and uncertain “I”’. This is literal in the poem: ‘I

122 MacNeice, The Strings are False, 28-29, 32.
123 McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts, 179.
124 Ibid.
split in two, one naïve, one know-all'. The rest of the poem is a dialogue between these two Is:

What's going on over there?
Why, don't you know, they are smelting.
(Pause). But who is?
The great new surgeon of course.
(Pause). New Surgeon?
Greatest surgeon in the world[

McDonald reads the poem as having 'a distinctly 1930s character', with the New Surgeon recalling Auden's 'Healer'. From this, he claims: 'Remembering 1940, with the 1930s dead and buried, MacNeice recalls a potent image of the hopes and ideals of that time as a figure publicly powerful but privately crippled, the brilliant skills of a disabled self'. Indeed, the dialogue between the two Is could suggest something of the eclogue, a form which MacNeice had favoured in the thirties, and the dialectical operations therein. But it is not just the lyric at work here, it is also the dramatic. The expository, question-and-answer nature of the dialogue is more suggestive of the radio plays that MacNeice would go on to write than the displaced Romantic shepherds of the early poems. Specifically, the split self is being cast here in two dominant roles of the everyman parable: the naïve protagonist and the wise guide. Equivalent roles are Roland and his Tutor in The Dark Tower; or Edward and the Still Voice in India at First Sight. As McDonald notes of the sequence of memories: 'The new light in which events from these years are presented shows how MacNeice's lyric medium is beginning to blend private and public into a dreamlike amalgam'. When these poems are being drafted, MacNeice's idea of the public,

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125 MacNeice, Collected Poems, 534.
126 McDonald, Poet in his Contexts, 180.
127 Ibid., 179.
and of the writer’s relationship to the public, is deeply embedded in his experience as a broadcaster. There is a reversal of sorts occurring here: memory is not just being written about in terms of the past being implicated in the present, but also of the present retroactively informing the past. The private-public paradigm of radio is helping to reshape the memory of a split self in a way that offers an adequate frame to its riddle of the New Surgeon. As discussed previously in this thesis, the parable form of the radio play is reliant on a psychoanalytic unconsciousness to conceive of its double-level writing. The split self of ‘The Messiah’ is a striking manifestation of this.

A concern with the radio public is subtly manifest in ‘Homage to Wren’. Through the reference to Nelson discussed above, MacNeice is engaging obliquely with the propaganda machine of which he was a part. The ‘gaudy signals’ of the extended ship metaphor are also suggestive of radio signals. Radio is also important when considering the poem’s amalgam of the personal memory of the Blitz and the public memory of history. This mashup combines two pieces of MacNeice’s writing from the time in question: not only is this a rewrite of ‘Brother Fire’, as previously mentioned, it is also revisiting the subject matter of some of MacNeice’s first pieces written for the BBC. Specifically, the very memory being recalled in the poem is undoubtedly from the production process of the ‘St. Paul’s Cathedral’ episode of the series The Stones Cry Out. Having produced a successful fifteen minute broadcast about the cathedral, MacNeice was asked to make a longer version for the BBC Home Service. On the night of May 10th, he visited the roof of St. Paul’s to gather material for this, and witnessed the destruction of a particularly brutal raid. In a letter to

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Frederick Dupee, he recalls the difficulty of describing what he saw: ‘All the old clichés – seas of flame, palls of smoke etc – would apply in a sense but they’d be hopelessly inadequate’. The resulting program, as Whittington writes, uses architecture as a symbol for the steadfast nation at large: ‘MacNeice’s hallucinatory blend of sirens, fire bells, and bombers confronted British listeners with the aural image of their precarious wartime existence. In doing so, it invited them to participate in a national mythology – already under construction – of vulnerability endured’.

Such national mythology is replicated in the historical texture of ‘Homage to Wren’. The ‘shipshape’ architecture, the references to Nelson, and the spatialization of history all carry the language of propaganda into the text. As mentioned above, this is overlaid onto personal experience, with the result being a ‘dreamlike amalgam’, as per McDonald. Indeed, dreams are indicated, again subtly, by the line: ‘the rest of the string was vague, / Ambiguous rather’. This bears a striking resemblance to Lucius’s line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: ‘The strings, my lord, are false’. Dodds notes that by the time MacNeice returned to England he had already privately posited *The Strings are False* as the title of a memoir, which Dodds would later adopt. ‘Homage to Wren’ is not just a memory in itself, but it also recalls different ways of writing memories, both private and public. But the context of the Shakespeare line also provides a path for understanding the use of this dreamlike overlaying of these different registers. The line comes in Act IV, Scene 3, when the ghost of the murdered Caesar visits Brutus to warn him: ‘thou shalt see

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129 Louis MacNeice to Frederick Dupee, 5th May 1941, *Letters*, 433.
me at Phillipi’. The ghost exits, and Brutus tries to wake up Lucius, who speaks his line to indicate that he is still asleep, and is dreaming about playing his instrument. When he does awake, Brutus asks: ‘Didst thou dream, Lucius, that thou so cried’st out?’ The line that would become the title of MacNeice’s memoir is a communique from the depths of the private mind into the public world, dramatizing the cross from the unconscious dream into the staging of tragedy.

‘Homage to Wren’ is deeply engaged with MacNeice’s radio work in a way that completes the memory trilogy’s exploration of split and amalgamated selves. In the third stanza, the detritus of warfare is visualised across the cityscape, which includes: ‘bones and ghosts and half forgotten quotations’. The image of ghosts not only recalls the historical figures already referenced, but also the context of the poem’s Julius Caesar reference in the scene where Caesar’s ghost comes back. The ‘bones’ and ‘half forgotten quotations’ refers once again to the radio work, and to the biblical references that were written into the ‘Westminster Abbey’ episode of The Stones Cry Out, as MacNeice explains in that letter to Dupee: ‘plugging the Bible shamelessly – all sorts of purple bits from Isaiah & the Psalms & the Book of Revelation, ending with the bit from Ezekiel about making the dry bones live’. The very stuff of writing wartime propaganda forms the imagery of personal memory, making one implicit in the other. Between ‘The Messiah’ and ‘Homage to Wren’, the two Is go from being in distinct dialogue to more blurred relation that allows them to be held in balance, whilst still carrying traces of their distinction. If the dreaminess of the poem is the result of these overlapping perspectives, then it is

133 Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, 356.
134 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
135 Louis MacNeice to Frederick Dupee, Letters, 434.
also possible to see the dream, and its attendant unconscious operations, as a suitable mode for framing the split self in the lyric.

*Solstices* was the Spring 1961 Recommendation of the Poetry Book Society. In his note for the society's *Bulletin*, he responds to criticism of the level of mythic content in *Autumn Sequel* and considers the question of whether the poems contained in the volume are personal:

> My own position has been aptly expressed by the dying Mrs Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times*: 'I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room, but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it.' So, whether these recent poems should be labelled ‘personal’ or ‘impersonal’, I feel that somewhere in the room there is a pain – and also, I trust, an alleviation.

‘Personal’ and ‘impersonal’ here relate to myth, but these terms are also illuminating with regards to the historical, institutional and universal. The memories of the war in *Solstices* are memories of different kinds of community formation, which in turn blur the boundaries between self and other. The ‘pain’ that a poem would identify is therefore ambiguously one’s own personal pain and a pain in society. These terms gesture towards a blurring between self and other, and between the private and public, in a way that maintains a productive ambiguity.

In ‘The Atlantic Tunnel’ this dynamic returns the poetry to some immediate post-war perspectives. The poem is based on MacNeice’s return from America by boat. As the boat moves further from shore, light becomes dark: ‘America was ablaze with lights, / Eastward the sea was black’. There is a community aboard this boat that is absorbed by the darkness:

> Old Irish nuns were returning home,

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138 Ibid., 535.
So were young men due for the call-up,
So were the survivors from the Jervis Bay;
The tunnel absorbed us, made us one.

The association of darkness with wholeness recalls the same association throughout
the poems of *Holes in the Sky*, and the regular control of the tetrameter stanzas
reflects this sense of cohesion. However, while the earlier poems subsumed the
parts of their remembered, imagined communities under the *telos* of warfare’s
common enemy, here the poem takes greater care to attend to the multiplicity of the
community. It gives a litany of its members, and is also careful not to assign to them
the same sense of end purpose. This is pointed to by disrupting the notion of a
shared destination:

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this whole
Zigzag might be a widening crack
Which led to the bottom before Belfast
Or Liverpool gave us reluctant welcome.
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The ship is going to either Belfast, Liverpool or the ocean floor. This community is
not united towards an end, but for the journey itself. It is a very different kind of war
community to the one that his radio work was hailing, which is indicated by the
suppression of radio waves themselves: the passengers do not know ‘how many
waves / Carried in code the word to prevent, / The words to destroy’. While these
are not broadcast frequencies, they nonetheless place the community in the context
of unknown transmissions that operate around them and decide their fate in the
darkness. Now at a sufficient remove from the war, MacNeice’s writing attempts to
return to it with a view to excising a model for the united community that is
disentangled, if only consciously, from the *polis* formation of propaganda. The need
for this has already been established by 'Jericho', which depicts a community entirely formed by the bureaucratic impersonality of state organs.

In opposition to this, ‘The Atlantic Tunnel’ posits the self as the seat of a personal community, a construction that blends the distinction between self and other in a way that is more productive than the dual hauntings of Autumn Sequel's terza rima. The ship becomes a framework for thinking of the self in this way:

As on this ship, so on our own
Lives, passengers, parasites, never
Entrusted with headphones or signals and out of
The code, yet not in the clear.

The self contains its own community of passengers or parasites. Here the poem returns to the idealist blurring of outlines between individuals, that so concerned Wyndham Lewis, from ‘Suite for Recorders’. This brings the mind into the poem by association. Indeed, the unknown signals that shape the community in the dark draws upon a whole lifetime of associations between darkness, the instinctive, and the self unknown to the self. Rather than the public and private blending into one another in a way that results in the temporal clashes of Autumn Sequel, here the two are seen to be mutually enabling. This can be seen through comparison with the final lines of 'Homage to Wren': 'I stretched out my hands from the drunken mast /
And warmed my hands at London and went home'. In that poem, the excavation of London's history becomes the means by which the individual can be affirmed. In both poems the community becomes a model for thinking through the multiplicity of the self, and the self reflects an ideal community.

This mutuality has its consequences. As with Mrs. Gradgrind, there is a ‘pain’ that is both of the self and of society. The signals around the boat are hidden but not
resolved. There is still a sense of threat throughout the poem: the boat is ‘not in the clear’, and ‘The tunnel / Might be about to collapse’. This can also be read in the instability of language in both poems. As mentioned above, there is the change between the ‘vague’ and ‘Ambiguous’ string in ‘Homage to Wren’. In ‘The Atlantic Tunnel’, a similar instability can be seen in ‘passengers, parasites’, ‘Might be about to collapse’, and the ambiguity of the ship’s destination. While these later poems are drawing on an idealist expansion of the self into a historic sweep from *Ten Burnt Offerings*, problematic memory qualifies the ability of the mind to make something cohesive out of it. Instead, the community becomes like the mind in turn, floating above unknown signals.

Yet this must be held in balance with what MacNeice also hopes is in the poems of *Solstices*: ‘an alleviation’. In the final canto of *Autumn Sequel*, the speaker rides an empty train, only to find that it is populated by ghosts: ‘The wrongs I have done, thought, said, / Stare back at me. Some of them should be men, / But why are their hands like claws, their eyes an acrid red?’ The horror of these figments of the past coming back to haunt the speaker, some taking the form of men, can only be allayed at the end with the troubled grounding of the self in time: ‘maybe this morn // Is really Christmas, maybe (who can tell?)’ But even so, the poem suggests that this haunting is perpetual: ‘Must I now run this gauntlet over again? / Over and over again?’ In *Solstices*, MacNeice’s speaker are no less haunted, as in Rabaté’s sense, because the pull of memory and the sense of loss on a personal and public scale brings up an undercurrent of threat and undermines the timelessness of the self. The difference here is that in the later poetry, the ghosts have become a part of

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139 Ibid., 490.
the community. What was a rupture between the private and public self is now a continuity that is enabled by idealist notions of the mind being a world in itself. Poetically, this is affected by the return to lyric form. In terza rima, the past is always brought back when the poem attempts to maintain its forward momentum through its interlocking rhyme scheme. The lyric form still speaks to the mental undercurrents that haunt present thought, but they also allow for the sprawling community of the past to be reframed in a mutually informing relation between the self and the other.
CODA

The poem ‘Coda’ brings The Burning Perch to a close:

Maybe we knew each other better
When the night was young and unrepeated
And the moon stood still over Jericho.

So much for the past; in the present
There are moments caught between heart-beats
When maybe we know each other better.

But what is that clinking in the darkness?
Maybe we shall know each other better
When the tunnels meet beneath the mountain.¹

It encapsulates some of the key themes around which this thesis has argued for a psychological reading of MacNeice’s writing. The poem is spatial, as it moves from the moon in the sky downwards to the tunnels beneath the mountain. This is paralleled by a temporal movement from the past to the future. In turn, this shifts the relation of self to other, as meetings that have already happened give way to meetings that may happen yet. Both Peter McDonald and Tom Walker have noted how the poem’s formal and thematic procedures suggest continuation beyond the bounds of the text.² Of MacNeice’s late poetry, Walker writes: ‘the [...] claims his poems make on the future rest, like Yeats’s, on the ability of poetic form not only to provide a forum for thought, but also a means for his poems to keep on causing thought’.³ The future of thought is suggested by the unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, question that opens the third stanza: ‘But what is that clinking in the

¹ Louis MacNeice, Collected Poems, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 610.
darkness? Darkness has been shown in this study to carry the threat and promise of the mind in MacNeice’s writing and beyond: it is the terrible, unknown future; it is that area beyond the boundaries of the limited to which the mind aspires; and it is the common binding of the self that is like a community.

It was noted in chapter two that Lacan likens Freud’s *Trieb* to a *konstante Kraft*. What this thesis has aimed to show is that MacNeice’s writing of the self undergoes a constant crafting. As has been continually demonstrated, psychological discourses intervene throughout MacNeice’s lifelong ambition to write poetry, prose and drama that attends to the complex, layered and multiple nature of modern subjectivity. They offer vocabularies and frames of knowledge that mediate between his learning and his experience, connecting metaphysics and philosophy to the individual everydayness of waking life. The mind is the connective tissue by which, for instance, the classical problem of the One and the Many can be made vitally relevant to the shoreline tripper’s littoral negotiations. To a writer like MacNeice, these bigger questions are not confined to the status of metaphysical objects of enquiry. Instead, they are the very material from which the self is made. But he also knows that the self is partially unknown. What emerges from the analysis above is a MacNeice who continually strives to be faithful to all aspects of his selfhood, from conscious thought to unconscious desire.

The writing of the mind clarifies some of the terms on which MacNeice was in conversation with modernism as a whole. By explicating the ways in which he borrowed from, and baulked against, the psychological strands of his milieu, it has been possible to excavate a place for him within that climate of opinion that formed around psychology in the early- to mid-twentieth century. It has been shown that it influenced his approach to the classics and his dramatic work for radio. In turn, he
can be understood to be an important and underappreciated conduit for the dissemination of modern ideas about the mind to a national audience. Furthermore, it has been shown that his treatment of the century’s brutal history is rooted in contemporaneous discourses of anxiety, fear and perverse hope. As a result, the way that his work reflects a broad spectrum of war’s and society’s psychological consequences can be appreciated. MacNeice’s interactions and engagements with psychology were mutually enriching. As his poetics delve into questions of the mind, he expands the angles by which they may be approached.

For MacNeice, the ‘clinking in the darkness’ can be registered in two ways. The first is through language. At the end of an appendix to The Strings are False about MacNeice’s time in Marlborough and Oxford, John Hilton summarises MacNeice’s attitude towards ‘Practical Psychology’ thus: ‘Louis “had a way with him”’; but our means of assessing people were sparse: ‘nice’, ‘nasty’, ‘intelligent’, ‘stupid’, we said and sometimes added ‘very’, ‘rather’ or ‘fairly’ to these epithets’. As this passage suggests, and as this thesis has continually demonstrated, MacNeice’s writing of the mind is underscored by questions of how language can attend to mental life. Terms such as ‘manifest’, ‘latent’, ‘dream’, ‘nightmare’, ‘instinct’ and ‘parable’ are subject to shifts and recalibrations across a body of writing that seeks to understand and communicate the mind’s difficult topography. The second way is through form, as attested to by McDonald and Walker. His intermedial experimentation with verse has been shown to respond to a range of psychological contexts as he explores the limits, and possibilities, of communicating the mind through different kinds of writing. As Hilton points out, MacNeice always ‘had a way

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with him’ when it came to understanding the mind. His poetic development was a continual search to find the vocabularies and structures adequate to that which he felt keenly.

Another arc that this thesis has tracked has been the dialectical development of the relationship between self and other. Throughout the anxiety of the thirties, the shock of the war and the dull cycles of the post-war years, the question of how the individual responds to the pressure of the crowd is threaded throughout MacNeice’s *oeuvre*. As his thoughts on psychology and philosophy of mind develop, so too do his speakers seek different solutions to this constant problem through escape, destruction, rejuvenation, and finally through synthesis in the communal self. It is the mind that mediates and enables these answers, whether it is the mind of Aristotelian teleology, idealism, or the traumas and neuroses of psychoanalysis. Ultimately, the communal self of the memory poems in *Solstices* does not just contain others, but other selves that once were, or could be. In this way, the hopeful meeting beneath the mountain is not just between self and other, but between selves split by the porous borders between the conscious and the unconscious.
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