"Vouching for Louis' Nationality"; Identity, Belonging, and the Anglo-Irish Tradition in the work of Louis MacNeice

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Synopsis:

The title of this paper, "Vouching for Louis' Nationality", is drawn from an entry found in Derek Mahon's appendix to Louis MacNeice's autobiography, *The Strings are False*. The entry glosses a clerical error in a telegram sent by MacNeice's friend, John Hilton, to the poet's parents, in which Hilton mistakenly requests that they "Vouch for Louis' Nationality".[1] What Hilton actually intended to write – according, at least, to Mahon's gloss – was "Vouch for Louis' Rationality", a far less socially charged phrase.[2] As far as MacNeice as poet is concerned, however, Hilton's error gestures to a broader and far more significant debate. It is this debate, and the various literary concerns that sustain it, that this paper will illuminate. Tracing a lineage of cultural and national identity in MacNeice's work, I will chart his evolving negotiation of Anglo-Irish heritage, ultimately arguing for a reassessment of MacNeice as a poet uniquely positioned in the genealogy of Anglo-Irish writing. In doing so, I hope to move beyond criticism that reduces MacNeice to a mere Auden-group adjunct, while simultaneously questioning reassessments – such as those advanced by Edna Longley – that classify MacNeice as Anglo-Irish writer *par excellence*.[3]

[1]In an Appendix to MacNeice's autobiography, *The Strings are False*, London: Faber and Faber, 1965, p. 279.
[2]For a more in-depth reading of this miss-quote see Eamon Grennan, 'In a Topographical Frame: Ireland in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Summer/ Autumn, 1981, Vol. 70, No. 278/279, p. 145.
[3]For Longley's full argument see Edna Longley, 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland', *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Contemporary Culture Debate.

I: Introduction

Born in 1907, "in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries," yet educated in Dorset, "far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt mines/ And the soldiers with their guns", Louis MacNeice perfectly embodies the paradox of his origins.[4] On paper, the poet typifies the Irish Protestant Ascendancy, as "the rector's son, born to the Anglican order, / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor" (1-2). In reality, however, MacNeice always found himself uncomfortable in "the Scotch quarter", privately abhorring its "line of residential houses", and its "voodoo of the Orange Bands, / Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster".[5] This dual heritage obscures any simplistic political labels that attempt to categorise MacNeice's cultural identity, a complexity reflected in the mixed critical reception of his work. While some commentators have opted to classify MacNeice, in simplistic terms, as an English poet – merely "an adjunct to the Auden group" – others have advocated for a reassessment of MacNeice as "a major Anglo-Irish writer", whose body of work captures the intricacies of a dual heritage.[6]

While this revaluation provides valuable insights, it fails to consider MacNeice's unique position within the genealogy of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition, a tradition that, by his time, was already in decline. Ostensibly, MacNeice's work negotiates this decline, capturing both the tradition's residual presence and its gradual disintegration. Read in light of its biographical contexts, his poetry articulates a distinctly Anglo-Irish sensibility poised on the edge of obsolescence. This reading resists earlier critical tendencies that reduced MacNeice to a mere Auden group adjunct or subsume him into the broader category of Anglo-Irish writing.

[4]Louis MacNeice, 'Carrickfergus', *Collected Poems*, ed. E. R. Dodds, 2nd edn, London: Faber, 1979, pp. 1-2. Subsequent references to MacNeice's work are given in parentheses after quotations.
[5]Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by E. R. Dodds, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 72–118. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.
[6]McDonald, Peter, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*, 1991, Oxford: Clarendon.

II: MacNeice in England

Until the mid 1960s, critical opinion largely classified Louis MacNeice as an English writer, with an Anglocentric poetic outlook. When read in their contexts, such assessments are spurred by biographical accounts of the poet that locate him, both socially and geographically, in an English framework. Rooted in fact, these accounts emphasise the outward aspects of MacNeice's life and career in England, portraying him as a poet whose life and work are firmly embedded in the English literary establishment. Such accounts predominantly focus on MacNeice's long-standing residence in England, particularly in London, where he spent much of his personal and professional life. In her extended effort to "repatriate" MacNeice, for instance, Heather Clark draws on an account of the poet's English upbringing and education: "even if MacNeice was not English by birth, his identity had been shaped by years at public school (Marlborough and Oxford) […] where he was educated from the age of 10".[7] Similarly, in his attempt to "prove" MacNeice's Englishness, George Hughes emphasises the years MacNeice spent in England: "[he] spent much of his life as an expatriate in England: it was the English literary world in which [his] work was published, and in which [he] became [an] important literary figure".[8] So too, in his discussion of MacNeice's "English subject and style", does John Press argue for the "inseparability" of MacNeice's work from "the literary milieu of England, where he spent the majority of his adult life".[9]

Those intent on positioning MacNeice as an English writer also frequently reference the poet's professional relationships, most notably his collaboration with W.H. Auden and the collective of British (and especially English) writers with whom he associated. As Samuel Hynes observes in his review of Longley's edition of MacNeice's *Selected Poems*, MacNeice existed for much of his personal and professional life in the "orbit" of the Auden collective, a phrase that suggests a significant degree of creative collaboration, if not of total poetic subsummation.[10] In a similar vein, Peter McDonald reads MacNeice's decision to move to America as proof that the young poet had "joined Auden, Isherwood, and the rest in escapism", a clear sign that he had been "subsumed by the political fervour of the Auden group".[11] MacNeice himself acknowledged his stylistic alignment with this collective, recognising in his work a common poetic sympathy that connected him to Auden. In a letter dated August 1939, MacNeice reflected on his early connection with the poet:

[7]Heather Clark, 'Revising MacNeice', *The Cambridge Quarterly,* 2002, Vol. 31, No. 1, Special Issue on Contemporary Poetry I, 2002, p. 81.
[8]George Hughes, 'The Problem of the Anglo-Irish Expatriate: Elizabeth Bowen and Louis MacNeice', *The Harp*, 1994, Vol. 9, p. 60.
[9]John Press, *Louis MacNeice,* London: Longman, Green & Co., 1965.
[10]Samuel Hynes, 'Like the Trees on Primrose Hill', *London Review of Books*, 2 Mar, 1989, pp. 5-7.
[11]McDonald, Peter, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*, 1991, Oxford: Clarendon, p. 91.

> I do feel that you and I [Auden] have much in common, though I have often said that I have always been a little more interested in the problems of the individual than you have. Still, I think we have both been influenced by the same intellectual climate, and in that way we are kin.[12]

This acknowledgement of kinship would not only underpin MacNeice's subsequent poetic endeavours but also shape his ongoing partnership with Auden. Throughout his professional career, the two would collaborate on several notable projects, the most famous of which would be *Letters from Iceland* (1937). As David Dwan argues, their shared authorship of this text solidifies the collaborative nature of their bond, reflecting a shared intellectual and stylistic sensibility that, in Dwan's view, "places MacNeice firmly within the boundaries of Auden's intellectual circle, thus reinforcing the association of his work with the political and literary currents of English modernism".[13]

Aligned with the Auden collective, MacNeice's Englishness has been further evidenced through accounts of the anti-Irish political sentiments he inherited from (or shared with) this group. As Peter McDonald has suggested, MacNeice's relationship with the Auden circle reflected the poet's "ambivalence towards his Irish heritage", suggesting an "alignment" with the twentieth century British political establishment.[14] This association, McDonald argues, became particularly evident in MacNeice's wartime work, where his stance on Ireland's neutrality reflects a larger alignment with British political interests.[15] Expanding on McDonald's point, Heather Clark has observed the poet's "aggrievement" at Ireland's "wartime neutrality", which she sees "most obviously reflected in the poem 'Neutrality'" in which MacNeice "admonishe[s] Ireland for doing nothing while her Irish American kin drowned in U-boat attacks".[16] In his discussion of MacNeice as an Irish ex-patriate, George Hughes identifies a similar strain of English political sympathy, citing MacNeice's decision "to remain in London and write BBC propaganda during the second World War" as proof of the poet's anti-Irish polemical stance.[17]

Ultimately, therefore, in light of his extensive engagement with the literary and political life of England, his close professional ties with figures like Auden, and his complex relationship with his Irish roots, there is compelling evidence to support MacNeice's classification as an English writer.

[12]Louis MacNeice, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Jonathan Allison (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 152. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.
[13]David Dwan, 'The Ancient Sect: Yeats, Hegel, and the Possibility of Epic in Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 12.2, 2004.
[14]McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 92.
[15]McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 93.
[16]Clark, 'Revising MacNeice', p. 78.
[17]Hughes, 'Anglo-Irish Expatriate', p. 70.

III: MacNeice in Ireland

However, despite the evidence cited in support of such claims, accounts that categorise MacNeice as an exclusively "English poet" are ultimately unhelpfully reductive. Such accounts obscure the significant influence of MacNeice's Irish heritage on both his personal identity and poetic development, negating the ways in which Ireland – as both literary trope and geographical topos – informs the poet's thematic preoccupations, ideological stances, and aesthetic choices.

As with arguments made in favour of MacNeice's Englishness, claims for the poet's Irish identity can be substantiated with biographical evidence. Crucially, MacNeice was born in Belfast, where he lived – predominantly in the Irish quarter – until the age of 10. Moreover, his parents – key figures in his early development – were from Western Ireland, specifically Connemara, an area largely unaffected by the influence of English settlers.[18] That MacNeice was inspired by this area – impressed by his family's fondness for it – is evidenced in his autobiographical work *The Strings are False*, where he recalls "knowing [Connemara] in the blood" long before he had ever seen it:

> Connemara was different: it was a part of me and I of it; its hill and bogs were my meat and drink, its people my people […] and the people's voices were different there, soft and rich like my father's […][19]

When he did at last visit, MacNeice went to the roadless island of Omey where his father had been born and where his grandfather had worked as a missionary. For the young poet, the experience of actually visiting Connemara only reaffirmed his affinity for the place. "It was", he recalls in *Strings*, "a country I had always known, mournful and gay with mournful and gay inhabitants, moonstone air and bloody fuchsias." (112).

Evidence for the poet's connection to Ireland extends beyond these biographical accounts, becoming equally apparent in his poetry. In poems that engage directly with Ireland's political and topographical landscape, MacNeice intertwines the country's national concerns with his own personal reflections, a synthesis that highlights the poet's enduring connection to his birthplace. This process of fusion is inscribed with a particular potency in the following passage from *Train to Dublin*:

[18]For a deeper account of MacNeice's childhood in Ireland, see Christopher Fawkse, 'A Life Merely Glimpsed: Louis MacNeice at the End of the Anglo-Irish Tradition', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Jul 1994, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 17-29.
[19]Louis MacNeice, *The Strings Are False* (London: Faber, 1965), pp. 216–17. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.

I give you the toy Liffey and the vast gulls,
I give you fuchsia hedges and whitewashes walls.

I give you the smell of Norman stone, the squelch
Of bog beneath your boots, the red-bog grass,
The vivid chequer of the Antrim hills, the trough of dark
Golden water for the cart-horses, the brass
Belt of serene sun upon the lough.

(27)

What language and rhythm combine to insist upon here is a changeless, unchanging link – a connection between poet and environment that transcends distance and displacement. The list of images – the "red-bog", "Antrim hills", and "serene […] lough" – stand as icons of Irish topography, which collapse into the poet's emotional and intellectual journey as he traverses through the landscape. The accumulation of vivid, sensory details – the "squelch" of the bog and the "smell" of the stone – create Ireland not only as a physical space but also as a sensory memory, deeply embedded in the poet's consciousness. This connection is only re-affirmed by the steady, quasi-meditative movement of the lines, the unbroken continuity of which mirrors the poet's sense of Ireland as an eternal, unyielding presence – one that endures despite physical and temporal separation. In *Valediction*, MacNeice offers a more succinct summary of this bond:

I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,
The woven figure cannot undo its thread.

(43)

These lines, subtly evoking the themes explored in *Train to Dublin*, stand as MacNeice's eloquent testimony to his Irishness. The metaphor of the "woven figure" and its "thread" speaks to the inextricable link between identity and heritage, as MacNeice implies that his Irish origins extend beyond historical fact to pattern the very fabric of his personal identity. Moreover, the notion of being 'wed" – imbued as it is with both religious and marital significance – suggests the permanence of this union, MacNeice's inability to deny his connection to Ireland.

MacNeice was keenly aware of how his Irish antecedents effected his writing, reiterating throughout his career the importance to his work of Ireland and all things Irish. In *A Personal Essay*, among the things that "conditioned [his] poetry", MacNeice principally lists "having been brought up in the North of Ireland".[20] Moreover, in his final radio broadcast for the BBC, aptly titled *The North Began*, MacNeice reflects extensively on his childhood in Ireland, describing the country as integral

[20]Louis MacNeice, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 88. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.

to his identity and imagination. He speaks, in particular detail, of Carrickfergus, describing it as a "landscape of the heart", while emphasising its paradoxes – its "beauty and bitterness", its "timeless tractions" and "historical struggles" – as contradictions central to his poetry and understanding of life.[21]

The influence of Ireland on MacNeice is not merely a matter of personal and poetic reflection but impacts also upon his political considerations. When first grappling with his position regarding the second world war, for instance, MacNeice fails to achieve a certainty of conviction, a deficiency of action that suitably allies the writer with Irish poets of the period given the hopelessness and futility of the violence in Northern Ireland. In a letter to E.R. Dodds dated October 1939, MacNeice writes:

> It is all very well for everyone to go on saying 'Destroy Hitlerism' but what the hell are they going to construct? I am now falling into a sort of paradox which is: - if the war were a rational war leading somewhere, I should want to stay out of it in order to see where it led to: but if it is a hopeless war leading nowhere, I feel half inclined to take the King's shilling and escape – more likely than not – the frustration to come…All this boosting up democracy – it seems to me just throwing sand against the wind.[22]

The moral deliberation and "wartime ambiguity" that MacNeice reveals here collapse personal ambivalence with an empathetic understanding of the Irish plight, where his belief in the futility of global conflict mirrors the complex, unresolved tensions within Ireland itself. It is, perhaps, this undeniable strain of Irish political apathy that led MacNeice to distance himself from the more ideologically rigid Auden collective following the second world war. Indeed, as Stephen Spender noted of his compeer, "MacNeice, with his Irish background, seemed always to stand at a slight remove from the ideological ferment of the group, though we respected him greatly for the sincerity and depth of his reflections.". [23]

[21] *The North Began*, in *Varieties of Parable: Selected Radio Plays of Louis MacNeice*, ed by E. R. Dodds, London: Faber & Faber, 1965.
[22] Louis MacNeice to E. R. Dodds, Oct 1939, Oxford: Bodleian Library, with permission from David Higham Associates, accessed through Heather Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, p. 84.
[23] Richard Danson Brown, 'Your Thoughts Make Shape like Snow': Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Autumn 2002, Vol. 48, No. 3.

IV: Repatriating MacNeice

Taken together, MacNeice's Irish heritage, Irish poems, and Irish political sympathies collectively serve as compelling evidence of his intrinsic Irish identity. These evidential points directly challenge arguments, made to the contrary, that seek to categorise MacNeice as an English writer and, as such, work to highlight the limitations of a purely Anglocentric reading of his work and life.

In 1966, this conclusion, and the various assumptions that sustain it, became the centre of a major literary reassessment when, in honour of the publication of E. R. Dodd's *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, Irish poets Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon came together to give a commemorative reading.[24] This event was the first in a sustained campaign to win back MacNeice from his position as a minor English poet (overshadowed by Auden), and to reclaim him as an Irish poet of major significance. Heaney read 'The Dowser' and 'Turf-Stacks', followed by ahon with 'Prayer Before Birth' and 'Snow', while Longley finished with 'The Mayfly', 'Carrick Revisited', and 'Death of an Actress'. Each selection revealed, in an act of kinship and homage, MacNeice's influence on this new generation of Irish poets. Through the act of reading, the poets were able to give recognition to MacNeice as their literary benefactor and, in turn, be recognised as his heirs, a mutual appreciation conducted with the aim of restoring MacNeice as a poet of significant Irish literary importance.

The success of this effort was revealed in the years following the reading, as critical opinion shifted to recognise MacNeice as an essentially Irish poet. As Michael Longley wrote in his introduction to MacNeice's 1988 *Selected Poems*:

> A new generation of poets from Northern Ireland have helped to change perspectives. They have picked up frequencies in his work which were inaudible in London or Dublin.[24]

Longley's observation highlights the ability of the Ulster poets to offer a fresh, localised interpretation of MacNeice's poetry – one free from the dominant English metropolitan "frequencies" that might otherwise obscure the true essence of his work.[25] This shift in interpretation was not isolated. Other critics, Neil Corcoran perhaps chief among them, echoed similar sentiments in the years following the reading. In *Keeping the Colours New*, Corcoran writes:

[24]For a deeper analysis of this reading and its cultural significance see, Michael Allen, 'Louis MacNeice and Michael Longley: Some examples of Affinity and Influence', in Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (eds), *Louis MacNeice and his Influence* (Gerrards Cross 1998), pp. 99-113).
[24]Michael Longley, 'Introduction', *Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, London, 1988, pp. xxiii.
[25]Longley, 'Introduction', pp. xxiii.

> The reappropriation of MacNeice has […] been virtually coterminous with the development of the poetry of Northern Ireland since the mid-1960s; and it represents a concerted and strategically successful form of accommodation and recuperation of a kind for which I can think of no contemporary parallel.[26]

Here, Corcoran argues that the very act of "reappropriation" is not simply a matter of rediscovery but a deliberate and politically charged act of reclamation within the context of Northern Ireland's own literary and cultural evolution. Corcoran's point would be proven several years later when MacNeice would be included in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. This inclusion marked not only the formal acknowledgement of MacNeice's Irish identity but also a broader recognition of Northern Irish voices in the shaping of the national literary canon.[27]

A further tangible symbol of the Ulster poets' achievement was revealed in 1968, when James Simmons selected a photograph of MacNeice for the cover of his inaugural *Honest Ulsterman* (Figure One). The image of MacNeice superimposed, as it was, onto a round tower from Antrim, formed a clear allusion to Yeats and Thoor Ballylee. This allusion was telling, suggesting the extent to which Ulster had its own distinct poetic traditions into which it could tap, and that it need not look southward for poetic models. The North, Simmons intimated, had 'towering' poets of its own, Louis MacNeice standing as a foundational figure in this new literary pantheon.[28]

Figure One, Simmons, James, *Honest Ulsterman*, Accessed through the Honest Ulsterman Magazine Archive Network.

[26]Longley, 'Introduction', pp. xxiii.
[27]Angela Bourke et el (editors), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volume IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2002.
[28]James Simmons, 'Louis MacNeice: Some Thoughts', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 1/1, May 1968, p. 39

V: The Anglo-Irish Reassessment

However, while nobody disputes that Heaney, Mahon, and Longley worked hard to rescue MacNeice from Auden's shadow, the inevitable and enduring result of their effort is contestable. Still difficult to negate, even since the reading of 1966, are MacNeice's English influences – the hallmarks of Anglocentrism that colour his personal, poetic, and political persuasions. As Heather Clark writes:

> […] despite their various successes […] modern Irish poets engaging in processes of repatriation [Heaney, Mahon, Longley] have been less comfortable addressing MacNeice's Englishness – particularly the strain of Englishness which led him to remain in London and write BBC propaganda during the Second World War. This loyalty, evident in his anger over Ireland's neutrality and his willingness to sacrifice his creative freedom for the war effort, presented the Belfast poets with examples of political activism and English investment they could not negate.[29]

According to Clark, the closest the Ulster poets could come to "negating" these English influences was to turn away from the true, historical MacNeice of 1938 to 1945, and to turn towards the lyric, nostalgic, and apolitical MacNeice, writer of 'Carrick Revisited' (Heaney), 'Snow' (Mahon), and 'Mayfly' (Longley).[30] In Clark's words:

> Each chosen poem works as a talismanic emblem, embodying the respective poet's chosen sensibilities: for Heaney, MacNeice is a self-divided peacemaker, for Mahon, he is a latter-day metaphysical, and for Longley, a love poet.[31]

What Clark's assessment exposes here is the essential "fakeness" of the Ulster poets' recreations. In reframing MacNeice, the poets engage in an act of selective appropriation, openly censoring and distorting elements of the poet's life and work that do not fit their chosen narrative. This process of reimagining involves more than just simplification – it actively supresses the complexities of MacNeice's national identity. As Clark writes:

[29]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, p. 78.
[30]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, p. 78.
[31]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, p. 79.

> The Belfast poets have, perhaps quite unintentionally, engaged themselves in such a process of rewriting MacNeice over the past decades […] it is, unfortunately, MacNeice's reputation which has suffered, posthumously, from this sustained attention [….] as they have 'rewritten' many of his ideological and philosophical concerns in their own work.[32]

Crucially, the selective appropriation Clark identifies here speaks to a larger issue: to frame MacNeice as exclusively Irish, to set him apart from England and the Auden circle, is to engage in a form of reductionism that erases the more complex, hybrid nature of MacNeice's actual national identity.

In 1986, in her seminal essay *Poetry in the Wars*, Edna Longley proposed a more nuanced approach to classifying MacNeice that directly tackled this issue. Framing MacNeice as "not exclusively British or Irish" but classifying him instead as an "Anglo-Irish Expatriate", with a "poetic corpus shaped by a dual allegiance", Longley successfully highlighted the complex interplay between MacNeice's two competing national identities.[33] In her own words:

> MacNeice's work enacts a constant negotiation between the Irish and British aspects of his background, a duality that resists any simplistic national categorisation.[34]

In the wake of Longley's essay, 'Anglo-Irish' became the dominant epithet used by critics to categorise MacNeice, supplanting both the 'English' and Irish' designators. In 1986, for example, Thomas Kinsella argued that MacNeice's poetry provided "the Anglo-Irish spatial antecedents" upon which Northern Ireland built its literature.[35] Similarly, in 1987, Tom Paulin found in MacNeice a temperament indicative of the "twentieth-century Anglo-Irish voice", "at home nowhere and a visitor everywhere".[36] Likewise, James Simmons linked the 'Anglo-Irish' label to the formal and theoretical experience of "feeling like a holiday visitor in one's own country" – a form of foreign allegiance he had previously identified in MacNeice's work.[37] The term 'Anglo-Irish' also resonated with Heather Clark who acknowledged, in her 2002 revisions, the label's capacity to encapsulate MacNeice's liminal identity:

> As both outsider and insider, possessed and dispossessed, MacNeice was an "inner émigré", an Anglo-Irish writer.[38]

[32]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, pp. 80-81.
[33]Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986, p. 156.
[34]Longley, *Poetry*, p. 156.
[35]Thomas Kinsella, ed. *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986, p. xxx.
[36]Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984, p. 75.
[37]Simmons, 'Some Thoughts', p. 39.
[38]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, pp. 80-81.

Clark even intimated that the Ulster poet's original fascination with MacNeice extended beyond their explicit mission to establish him as an Irish writer, reflecting also their mutual experience of dual nationality. In her own words, "as a modern proponent of the Anglo-Irish sensibilities" MacNeice became "a model of cultural transience and displacement for poets such as Mahon, Longley, Simmons, Muldoon, and Heaney, all raised on the literal and metaphorical frontier between England and Ireland".[39]

The widespread acceptance of the 'Anglo-Irish' label in critical discussions of MacNeice is, in many respects, unsurprising. Biographically, the term proves far more appropriate than the overly reductive English or Irish labels that had been previously applied. Broadly conceived, 'Anglo-Irish' refers to the Protestant settlers in 19th- and 20th- century Ireland – individuals whose ambivalent existence, fraught relationship with the land, and eventual displacement are central to cultural narratives of this period. MacNeice, in many ways, embodies the quintessential characteristics of this class. His parents epitomised the Protestant Ascendancy: born in Ireland, members of the Church of Ireland, socially privileged, and politically conservative. His father, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, ultimately served as the Bishop of Down, Connor, and Dromore. Similarly, MacNeice's grandfather was a Church of Ireland missionary who, despite the limited reach of English influence in the region, spent much of his career working in the West of Ireland. MacNeice himself was acutely aware of the 'Anglo-Irish' nature of these familial roots. In an early essay from *Selected Prose,* he described 'Eire' as his "only home", asserting that he had "never really thought of [himself] as British" (82). Yet, paradoxically, he also acknowledged his "hopelessly Anglicised" disposition, going so far as to characterise himself as "an example, par excellence, of uprootability".[40] This self-awareness highlights the complex and often contradictory dynamics at play within the identity of the Anglo-Irish, reflecting MacNeice's position as a striking manifestation of both the privileges and dislocations intrinsic to this historical and cultural category.

However, while biographical evidence supports the classification of MacNeice as an Anglo-Irish national, the term itself carries significance beyond mere biography. As a literary term, the epithet denotes a very specific set of poetic characteristics, encompassing not only structure, form, and language, but also thematic concerns and cultural signatures. To position Louis MacNeice within this literary canon – to align him with other writers of the Anglo-Irish tradition – is to frame his work through this very specific set of literary markers. That is to say that, in order to assess MacNeice's place within this tradition, it is essential to identify how the thematic and stylistic markers that signal the Anglo-Irish experience manifest within the unique contours of his poetry.

[39]Clark, *Revising MacNeice*, p. 81.
[40]Fauske, 'Anglo-Irish Tradition', p. 18.

V. I Anglo-Ireland and Hell

Crucially, despite being cultural intermediaries, Anglo-Irish writers often inflect their work with English sympathies and anti-Irish polemical stances. These inclinations are an enduring expression of the bifurcated vison of Irish writing that dominated the eighteenth-century cultural consciousness. According to this vision, Ireland produced two distinct literatures that never touched or intersected – one in English, the language of print, and the other in Irish, the language of manuscript. This division entrenched the idea that the Anglo-Irish strain, rooted in the English literary tradition, could never fully dislocate itself from English political and cultural sympathies. Certainly, early Anglo-Irish writers exhibited little to no interest in the Irish language, often dismissing it as "barbarous", and were largely indifferent to the plight of Ireland's Catholic poor.[41] Furthermore, many of these writers – Edmund Burke, George Farquhar, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Sheridan – chose to establish their careers in England, where they wrote with a clear orientation towards an English audience and were guided by English cultural norms and political attitudes.

With these pre-formed sympathies in mind, early Anglo-Irish writers often depicted Ireland as a land steeped in darkness and brutality, foregrounding themes of stagnation, petrifaction, and paralysis. These themes not only reflected the country's fraught political history but also mirrored the recurring cycles of violence – social, sectarian, and sexual – that defined Irish society, at least from the English perspective. In highlighting these motifs, Anglo-Irish writers crafted, however inadvertently, a quasi-demonic vision of their homeland, which would go on to define the tradition's emerging cultural imagination. William Butler Yeats, for example, regularly depicted Ireland as a land of spiritual and cultural decay, a representation inscribed with a particular potency in his 1928 poem *The Tower*. Within this poem the Irish nation is portrayed as a land of spiritual disintegration, trapped in a cycle of perennial decline. Such ideas are mediated by Yeats through descriptions of the titular building:

> I pace upon the battlements and stare
> One the foundations of a house, or where
> Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth[42]

The images of decay that Yeats focuses on here – the crumbling foundations of a house, and a "sooty" tree – evoke Ireland's severance from its past vitality. Brought to sorrow by this macabre vision of decline, Yeats turns to an effort of imagination:

[41] The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. (n.d.). *The 1960s and beyond*. In *Irish literature*. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/art/Irish-literature/The-1960s-and-beyond.
[42] W. B. Yeats, 'The Tower', *Collected Poems*, New York: MacMillan, 1956, p. 39.

And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.[43]

Here, attempts to construct an Ireland of memory ultimately fail, and Ireland declines into further "ruin". This failed appeal to imagination ultimately underscores the tragic impossibility of reclaiming a lost Ireland, as the country's ruin becomes not only physical but also deeply existential.

Yeats was not the only early Anglo-Irish visionary to write of Ireland in such terms. In his seminal drama *The Playboy of the Western World*, John Millington Synge presents a similar vision of Ireland as a land deeply entrenched in mythic violence and backwardness.[44] The play's setting – the rural west of Ireland – becomes a microcosm for a broader, parochial world resistant to change. So too do the play's characters embody a larger sense of paralysis, caught in stasis between romanticised notions of heroism and the harsh realities of their insular existences. More contemporaneously, Derek Mahon's poetry has explored the disillusionment with Ireland's post-independence trajectory. In *A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*, Mahon projects a macabre vision of neglect and decay onto a wooden shed – a symbol of Ireland's failure to build a new national identity after years of English occupation.[45] The shed "left to rot", reflects Mahon's larger fear of historical paralysis and unfulfilled potential, guiding his meditation on Ireland's post-colonial cultural stasis.[46]

These nightmarish visions of stasis and stagnation colour and inflect MacNeice's poetic representations of Ireland – a similarity that serves as compelling evidence of his connection to Anglo-Irish sensibilities. As far as the land's social and political realities are concerned, Ireland is principally figured by MacNeice as a demonic space, hellishly unstable and communally threatening. In the 1938 book *Zoo*, he recalls his first memories of Belfast as a "city of smoke and dust", "essentially evil […] grey, wet, repellent", its inhabitants "dour, rude, and callous".[47] He remembers being "frightened" by "the mill girls" and repulsed by the alcoholics lounging and spitting on street corners, waiting for the pubs to open (79). Such horrors are recalled again in the 1931 poem 'Belfast', in which the speaker's horror transmogrifies the city into a desolate wasteland: a chapel becomes "a cave of gloom", the sea transforms into "salt carrion water", and the ship-yard gantries appear "like crucifixes" (17). Life

[43]Yeats, 'The Tower', p. 39.
[44]John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, ed. Christopher Collins, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
[45]Derek Mahon, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', *Collected Poems*, London: Gallery Press, 1999.
[46]Mahon, *Collected Poems*, pp. 380-1.
[47]Louis MacNeice, *Zoo* (London: Michael Joseph, 1938), p. 78. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.

freezes into a nightmarish tableau, people stiffen into inanimate objects (a man appears to be made of "basalt and mica", a woman is "shipwrecked…before the garish virgin"), and even the small joys of life are "harsh attempts at buyable beauty" (17).

In his 1934 poem 'Valediction', MacNeice figures Belfast in a similar way, as a place "devout and profane and hard", where life's benign juices have turned stagnant, like "callous lava cooled to stone" (52). Once again, the city is transformed into a frozen wasteland, a process of petrification that effects even the passage of time:

> Time punched with holes like a steel sheet, time
> Hardening the faces, veneering with a grey and
> speckled rime
>
> (52)

Here, MacNeice transforms the North into something like Dante's hell, a place where past, present, and future are compressed together and immobilised. This temporal paralysis is mirrored by the poet in his observations of social immobility, the "terrible inability" of the Northern people to change:

> And the North where I was a boy,
> Is still the North, veneered with the grime of Glasgow,
> Thousands of men whom nobody will employ
> Standing at the corners, coughing
>
> (133)

Here meter and language collapse together to insist upon an unchangeable circumstance, a demonic status quo which traverses through the north of Ireland. MacNeice's important and sufficient conclusion, articulated in 'Valediction', is that "history never dies,/ At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies" (52). In framing Ireland in such terms, MacNeice aligns himself with the broader Anglo-Irish literary tradition, echoing the works of Yeats, Synge, and Mahon – an allegiance of representation that not only reflects but further solidifies his own Anglo-Irish identity.[48]

[48]For further discussions of these hellish imaginings, see Grennan, 'In a Topographical Frame', pp. 145-8.

V. II Anglo-Ireland and Heaven

Crucially, however, representations of Ireland in Anglo-Irish writing are rarely straightforward, often embodying a complexity that transcends overt depictions. While Anglo-Irish writing is undeniably marked by the visions of a demonic, chaotic Ireland aforementioned, equally prominent within the tradition is an impulse to reimagine Ireland as a paradise, a kind of idealised, quasi-mythical utopia. Competing directly with the impulse to demonise Ireland, this mode of representation is again rooted in the historical politics of Anglo-Ireland, deeply intertwined with the 'Englishness' of the Anglo-Irish identity. By creating Ireland as an idealised, quasi-mythical paradise, Anglo-Irish writers could render the place effectively unreal – a strategy that neutralised the tangible social threats associated with the country. This imaginative reconfiguration allowed Anglo-Irish writers to distance themselves from the pressing realities of Irish nationalism – an ideological position they were understandably ambivalent towards as a result of their hybridised identity. Moreover, this ambivalence served English ends, as the projection of a tranquil, mythologised Ireland aligned more readily with colonial narratives, obscuring the more complex and uncomfortable truths of Anglo-Irish involvement in Irish history. In a less partisan vein, the impulse to depict Ireland as a paradise can also be traced to the fact – aforementioned – that many Anglo-Irish writers lived in England as expatriates, leading them to form limited, often hyper-idealised views of the Irish nation, shaped by childhood nostalgia.

As with demonic representations, the impulse toward idealisation can be seen in the work of William Butler Yeats. Yeats frequently depicts Ireland as a place of mystical beauty, spiritual depth, and timeless allure. In *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, for example, Yeats evokes an Ireland that exists outside the turbulence of history, where the narrator can retreat into nature's tranquillity, away from the social and political unrest of his time.[49] The lake, a vision of peace and isolation, becomes a space in which (Irish) political struggles are muted or entirely absent. As Yeats writes, "I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow".[50] Similarly, Seamus Heaney engages throughout his poetry in a process of idealising Ireland. In *The Tollund Man*, Heaney's depiction of "the bog bodies" – corpses preserved for centuries free from putrefaction and disease – evokes themes of timelessness and prosperity.[51] This vision of preservation creates Ireland itself as a land untouched by the passage of time or the imposition of modernity, a land of poetic reverence rather than of current political struggle.

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of his demonic representations, MacNeice's view of Ireland is also never one of simple rejection. Seen throughout his poetry – parallelling the Anglo-Irish impulse to

[49]Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', p. 45.
[50]Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', p. 45.
[51]Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out,* London: Faber and Faber, 1972, pp. 47-48.

create Ireland as a heavenly space – is a broad embrace of Ireland and all things Irish. When fused with his childhood memories, this embrace frequently transforms Ireland into a kind of "paradise lost", a place elegiacally recalled and bound to the purificatory experience of time. This positive vision predates MacNeice's poetry. In the opening chapter of *The Strings are False*, MacNeice recalls a self-preservatory habit, first adopted in childhood, of constructing "various dream worlds" based upon "the West of Ireland" (216-17). What this summoned landscape gives him is a freedom both imaginative and sensual; it is, as Eamon Grennan has helpfully articulated, "a place of exuberant generosity and spiritual emancipation".[52] In the poet's own words:

> It appeared to be a country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet, with drowned palaces beneath them, and seals and eagles and turf smoke and cottagers who were always laughing and who gave you milk when you asked for a glass of water.
>
> (216-17)

Throughout his life, and in different parts of the Irish countryside, MacNeice rediscovers this sense of ecstatic freedom. In an earlier chapter of *The Strings are False*, he describes a trip to Dublin from England, in which the Irish landscape offers both personal solace and creative inspiration. Here, the factual sensation of release verges on the mystical, as the poet describes a process akin to Edenic rebirth:

> I felt I was born again, to be able to go to Dublin on my own […] I felt that the world was open.
>
> (147)

The poems MacNeice sets in the Irish landscape themselves testify to this felt sense of paradisical emancipation. As the infernal aspects of Ireland are marked by images of mechanical petrifaction, paralysis, and immobility, the images that express his paradisical vision of the same place are fluent, free, and sensually immediate. This autonomy is imbued with a particular potency in 'Train to Dublin', in which MacNeice likens purificatory freedom to the experience of walking in the Irish countryside:

> For during a tiny portion of our lives we are not in trains,
> The idol living for a moment, not muscle-bound
> But walking freely through the slanting rain,
> Its ankles wet, its grimace relaxed again.
>
> (27)

The sense of freedom MacNeice conveys here resonates powerfully across the Irish landscape, as he transforms the natural world into a vibrant "dynamics of sensation", capturing the immediacy and vitality of his surroundings:[53]

[52]Grennan, 'In a Topographical Frame', p. 149.
[53]Grennan, 'In a Topographical Frame', p. 150.

I give you the smell of Norman stone, the squelch
Of bog beneath your boots, the red big-grass,
The vivid chequer of the Antrim hills, the trough of dark
Golden water for the carthorses, the brass
Belt of serene sun upon the lough.

(28)

In this vision of Ireland, all experiences are fluent and alterable: hard stone becomes a subtle smell. The bog – elsewhere in Irish literature a dangerous homicidal mass – here gives way to the soft sensation of boots sinking into soil. Even metal imagery is effectively cleared of its inimical associations, related instead to richly golden water and ecstatic sunlight. All the senses relax in this paradise of natural pleasures.

This neutralising prerogative also underscores MacNeice's political representations, as seen, for instance, in the following extract from 'Valediction':

Water-shafted air
Of amethyst and moonstone, the horses feet like bells of hair
Shambling beneath the Orange cart, the beer-brown spring
Guzzling between the weather, the green gush of Irish spring

(52)

Here, the ecstatic seasonal energy and the other near magical elements combine to neutralise the historical and political implications of "the Orange cart". Transforming the Irish landscape into a Edenic vision, MacNeice creates a kind of pastoral refuge from the unpleasant world of history and politics, and his elected responsibility in these social realities. This is the very essential project seen across Anglo-Irish literature, where presenting Ireland as a paradise serves not only as an imaginative escape but also as a means of aligning with an idealised, albeit detached, vision of the nation. Ultimately, then, with his frequent depictions of Ireland coloured by visions of paradise and paradisical emancipation, Louis MacNeice's affinity with the Anglo-Irish tradition is further affirmed.

V. iii Anglo Ireland and Exile

Anglo-Irish representations of Ireland do not end, however, with the infernal and paradisical visions thus far examined. A third and final hallmark of the Anglo-Irish literary voice is found in the articulation – both formal and theoretical – of exile. As George Hughes notes in his study of the Anglo-Irish expatriate, "Anglo-Irish writing is strongly coloured by a personal sense of estrangement from

[…] modern Ireland".[54] This estrangement is rooted in both cultural and historical disjunctions: the collapse of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency in the aftermath of Irish independence left many writers grappling with a fractured identity, feeling displaced from both the Irish nationalist majority and the English imperial centre. Literary expressions of this exile frequently articulate themes of nostalgia and alienation, with the home country imagined as a lost Eden or an unattainable ideal, reflecting what Declan Kiberd describes as "a simultaneous attraction to and estrangement from the land of one's origin".[55]

Examples of this figuration are as frequent and pervasive as they are unsettling. In the poem, 'The Wild Swans at Coole', for example, W.B. Yeats projects anxieties of Irish transformation onto the unchanging beauty of swans.[56] The swans, with their constancy and grace, symbolise an idealised permanence, untouched by the passage of time or turmoil. Yeats's speaker, in contrast, exists in a state of personal and national flux, estranged from the stability he observes in the animals. Similarly, in her novel *The Last September*, Elizabeth Bowen portrays the declining Anglo-Irish ascendancy in the context of the Irish War of Independence, capturing the pervasive uncertainty and alienation of a class on the brink of obsolesce.[57] Bowen's characters exist in a liminal space – physically rooted in Ireland but increasingly detached from the country's evolving political and cultural realities. James Joyce's work, while distinct in its focus on urban Ireland, also exemplifies the theme of exile, a strain of representation particularly apparent in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Here, through the story of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce records his own progressive rejection of environment and nation.[58] We see Stephen (who is Joyce) rejecting one by one his home, his religion, and finally his country, growing ever more aloof and proud, exclaiming "Non serviam ('I will not serve") to all the representative bodies of Irish cultural convention.[59] Ultimately Stephen's success as artist – the structural goal of this novel as Künstlerroman – requires a choice of exile, the decision to leave Ireland.

In a further act of literary reduplication that reinforces his 'Anglo-Irish' affinity, Louis MacNeice consistently grapples with themes of exile and estrangement. In the year he died, MacNeice gave the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, which were later published as *Varieties of Parable*. In the lectures, as in the written text, MacNeice included his last and most acclaimed volume of verse, 'The Burning Perch'. For all its accomplishments, 'The Burning Perch' is MacNeice's darkest work, marked

[54]Hughes, 'Anglo-Irish Expatriate', p. 70.
[55]Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*, London: Vintage Penguin, 1996, pp. 185-6.
[56]Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole, p. 87.
[57]Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September*, London: Vintage Classics, 1998.
[58]James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Paladin, Grafton Books, London (1988)
[59]Joyce, Portrait, p. 106.

by a profound sense of foreboding and anxiety that, however unintentionally, belies the poet's imminent death. Throughout this collection, Ireland is internalised by MacNeice as an icon of exile – a kind of Miltonic 'Paradise Lost', recalled elegiacally yet absent in reality. The most crucial event in this parable – the loss of an Edenic past – is conveyed by the poet through an extended meditation on his childhood in Ireland. MacNeice begins this meditation in the collection's opening poem 'Soap Suds', in which he recalls a central feature of his childhood: his 'second house" in Ireland and the "garden" – "enormously large (an acre) with a long prairie of law and virgin shrubberies" – that surrounded it (37). Symbolically, this space takes on a prelapsarian dimension, as paradisical descriptions of the house and the garden quickly supplant the prosaic actualities of MacNeice's childhood:

> And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
> Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
> A studded black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
> A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.
>
> (37)

Here, the list of objects and features evokes a prelapsarian sublimity, uncorrupted and self-contained. The joys of the house – the "tower with a telescope" and the "two great faded globes" – suggest both curiosity and a connection to a wider, almost cosmic order, while the "walled garden with bees" and the "rabbit warren" reinforce Edenic connotations, creating the garden as a protected, sacred space, unspoiled by the chaos of the external world (37). Notwithstanding the idealistic aspects of this environment, however, a sense of imminent, impending loss shadows MacNeice's descriptions. The phrase "these were the joys" implies distance – a separation between the speaker and the world he describes (37). This separation is further implied in the poet's description of a ball game, an activity initially portrayed as "fine" and "play[ful]", which soon dissolves into fragmentary chaos:

> […] the ball
> Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and then
> Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn
> 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
>
> (37)

Here, the dissolution of the hoops and the surrealist image of the grass growing "head-high" convey a world overtaken by disorder, in stark contrast to the ordered, Edenic garden of the earlier lines. The ball game becomes an allegory for the fleeting nature of childhood and the inescapable erosion of memory, as even the tools of play – "the ball" and "mallet" – are "lost" (37). The transitions from structure to disintegration, and from bounty to loss, revealed through the game, parallel MacNeice's broader theme of exile, where the Edenic space of his Irish childhood remains ever present in memory yet irrevocably lost in reality. As the poet notes, all through childhood "there was always a sense of loss because things could never be replaced" (37).

Elsewhere in MacNeice's poetry, this sense of loss manifests as actual, enforced exile. In 'The Strand', an elegy for his father, MacNeice describes feeling physically expelled from the Irish landscape. Imagining himself walking along the beach, 'carrying his boots and paddling like a child", he sees his "bright reflection" blotted from the shoor-pools so that "no sign/ Remains of face or feet when visitors have gone home" (226). In 'Last Before America', MacNeice applies this experience of personal estrangement to the Irish landscape itself, as he imagines the Western Islands as "cubs that have lost their mother" (226). In, 'Western Landscape', he takes this figuration to its representational acme, as his personal dilemma becomes an allegory of all human exile:

> [We have] lost the right to residence
> […] [we are] disenfranchised
> In constituencies of quarts and bog-oaks
> And ousted from the elemental congress
>
> (257)

Ultimately, in casting Ireland as an icon of exile, Louis MacNeice partakes in the thematic traditions of his Anglo-Irish predecessors. His work reflects the hallmarks of this literary tradition: an enduring sense of estrangement, a complex relationship with memory, and a preoccupation with Ireland as both a physical place and a symbolic construct. When combined with his tendency to create Ireland as both a heaven and a hell – a land of pastoral beauty and mythic childhood, marked simultaneously by constraints, divisions, and irretrievable loss – it becomes clear that MacNeice's poetry exemplifies the dualities central to the Anglo-Irish identity. Thus, to categorise MacNeice as an Anglo-Irish writer – to situate him within the broader cultural and literary framework of the Anglo-Irish tradition – seems apposite, certainly more appropriate than reducing him to an adjunct of the Auden group or categorising him as an Irish writer *par excellence*.

VI: Further Issues

Welcome though the major reassessment of MacNeice is, however, the application of the Anglo-Irish label is not without its own potential disadvantages. If applied without the correct qualification, the label risks oversimplifying MacNeice's position within the genealogy of Anglo-Irish writing, obscuring the complexities of his work that both challenge and, at times, transcend the boundaries of this traditional category.

Crucially, there is a sense, pervasive throughout his poetry, that MacNeice existed at the end of the Anglo-Irish tradition, as a man disillusioned with the modern Anglo-Irish dream. Viewed through a biographical lens, this disillusionment seems to stem not just from the poet's personal experiences but from his timing – or, more accurately, his *mistiming*. Born in 1907, when the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was already in decline, MacNeice grew up in a period of rapid political and social upheaval. He arrived too early to escape the influence of his father's generation, who remained committed to the vision of a united Ireland shaped by Anglo-Irish ideals of Protestant liberalism, but too late to fully engage with or partake in that vision. In 1921, when he was just fifteen years old, Ireland was partitioned, severing any hope for a unified national identity. The young poet, who had once been an Ulsterman, could never again visit Connemara – or any part of the Free State – in the same way. The Ireland that emerged after partition was fractured, politically and culturally divided, and increasingly shaped by Nationalist ideologies that left little room for the Anglo-Irish vision. A publicly constructed Ireland – a country as wilfully understood and idealised as had been Yeats's Ireland – was unavailable to MacNeice in any meaningful form. Indeed, in his own examinations of Yeats, MacNeice dismissed the older post's posturing as an "obsolete bravado, and insidious bonhomie, and a way with horses", a criticism that reflects both MacNeice's nostalgia for a unified past and his awareness of its irretrievability.[60]

This criticism and the socio-political stance that underlies it, extends beyond personal opinion to influence MacNeice in his capacity as poet and commentator. Across his writing, MacNeice frequently recognises Anglo-Ireland's failure to successfully project a cohesive communal identity. At times, he goes further than this, extolling old Anglo-Irish ideals of independence, and rejecting the aspects of Anglo-Irish politics that subordinate individual aspirations to collective needs. Central to this critique is MacNeice's recurring focus on the "everyman", a figure who embodies a resistance to communal politics and ideological conformity.[61] Neither a pattern of virtue nor a potential saviour, MacNeice's "everyman" is an ordinary individual who, as Aristotle might suggest, possesses virtues

[60]Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 1967), p. 97. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.
[61]For more on MacNeice's creation and projection of the "everyman" or "common-man" character see, Fauske, *A Life Merely Glimpsed*.

proper to his own nature. Through this character, MacNeice elevates the ordinary human experience, positioning it as a necessary counterpoint to the overbearing force of collective ideology and the reduction of personal identity to social or political categories.

This "everyman" finds its fullest expression in MacNeice's autobiographical verse *Autumn Journal*. In this text, MacNeice's speaker reflects extensively on his fragmented and uncertain identity, resisting the allure of grand narratives or collective ideologies in favour of a deeply personal, honest engagement with his own experiences. This "everyman" is not a figure of moral certainty or philosophical conviction but rather one who navigates the complexities of modern life with self-awareness and scepticism. This is evident in Section VI of the poem, where the speaker conveys his disillusionment with political movements – particularly the polarized factions of the Spanish government – through a subtle pun that intertwines the concepts of "rain" and "reign," linking natural and political forces:

> And we thought the papers a lark
> With their party politics and blank invective;
> […]
> And cursed the Spanish rain
>
> (VI)

Here, the speaker's refusal to align himself with either side reflects a broader resistance to collective ideology, and a struggle to reconcile personal integrity with the demands of political or social affiliation. This tension resurfaces again in Section VIII, when the speaker reflects on the strained negotiations preceding World War II, expressing cynicism toward the appeasement policies of the Munich agreement:

> And here we are – just as before – safe in our skins;
> Glory to God for Munich
> And stocks go up and wrecks
> Are salved and politicians' reputations
> Go up like Jack-on-the-beanstalk; only the Czechs
> Go down without fighting
>
> (VIII)

This biting critique of appeasement and political expediency is juxtaposed by the speaker with his depiction of everyday life, as seen in the same section:

> The comedian spilling the apple-cart
> Of double entendres and doggerel verses
> And the next day begins
> Again with alarm and anxious
> Listening to bulletins
> From distant, measured voices
>
> (VIII)

Here, MacNeice contrasts the mundane distractions of routine entertainment with the looming threat of war, highlighting the disconnect between ordinary individuals and the sweeping historical forces that shape their lives. This ambivalence – the privileging of personal experience over historical event – exemplifies the "everyman" character, as someone alienated from the forces of ideology and power. Through such moments, *Autumn Journal* becomes a testament to the "everyman's" voice — fragmented, uncertain, and profoundly human — always in opposition to collective conformity and dogmatic ideology.

The everyman's resistance to such impulses is irreconcilable with the Anglo-Irish dream, a vision necessarily predicated on the success of a collective political identity. Embracing the voice of the everyman, MacNeice is forced to lament the loss of communal coherence. This is seen throughout his poetry, but is dealt with most explicitly in the hauntingly personal verse 'Autobiography':

> When I was five the black dreams came;
> Nothing after was quite the same.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> The dark was talking to the dead;
> The lamp was dark beside my bed.
>
> (27)

Here, the speaker's reflection on childhood – "when I was five the black dreams came" and "nothing after was quite the same" – suggests a pivotal moment of loss or disillusionment that marks the start of his fractured identity. This internal disintegration mirrors the collapse of a larger community identity,

particularly evident in the speaker's reference to those who are "dead" (27). The acknowledgment of an absent community is reconfirmed as the "lamp" beside the speaker's bed – a symbol of solace, safety, or clarity – becomes "dark" (27). This darkening of light is not merely a physical loss but metaphorical: the lamp's light represents guidance, protection, and the possibility of order, all of which extend from a body external to the speaker, and all of which are ultimately extinguished. Left alone in the dark, the speaker is forced to navigate the world without a safety net of communal or institutional support:

> When I woke they did not care;
> Nobody, Nobody was there.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> When my silent terror cried,
> Nobody, Nobody replied.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> I got up; the chilly sun
> Saw me walk away alone.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> (28)

The repeated refrain, "Come back early or never come", serves as a haunting plea that underscores the absence of those who once provided care or community (28). Its cyclical nature reflects the speaker's futile longing for connection, a yearning that remains unanswered as "Nobody, Nobody was there" or "replied" (28). The final image of the speaker walking away under the "chilly sun" captures a stark reality: he must face life's uncertainties alone (28).

This sense of communal loss finds voice in MacNeice's poems that deal explicitly with Ireland. Of Dublin, MacNeice writes:

> This was never my town,
> I was not born nor bred
> Nor schooled here and she will not
> Have me alive or dead
> But yet she holds my mind
> With her seedy elegance
> With her gentle veils of rain
>
> (14-20)

In focusing Dublin through this lens, MacNeice skilfully weaves his rejection of community and communality with his vision of Ireland. In this thinking, he goes beyond typical Anglo-Irish visions of exile and estrangement, offering instead a nightmare of total communal failure. It is not just Ireland he feels distanced from, but the very framework of the Anglo-Irish character – its aspirations, its sense of entitlement, and its failed attempt at maintaining a cohesive national identity. The ideal of a unified, cultured Ireland – the intellectual and social world that the Anglo-Irish sought to preserve – has disintegrated, leaving only a fragmented, disenchanted space where neither the past nor the future can comfortably cohabitate.

For MacNeice, the challenge of such chaos is only met by accepting the necessity of individual action in the midst of limitless potential, a perspective further reinforced by Anglo-Ireland's failure to project a communal character. The very collapse of the Anglo-Irish vision, with its focus on a collective identity and social unity, leaves the individual as the only viable agent in the face of an unpredictable, divided world. MacNeice does not simply lament this collapse; he recognises that it forces the individual to confront their own agency and responsibility in shaping their path, unmoored from the ideals of a dying tradition.

VII: The Dark Tower

MacNeice brings this conclusion to its representational acme in his post-war radio play *The Dark Tower*. Within this play, MacNeice explores the conflict between those who embrace individuality in order to move towards a more hopeful future and those who fight the heroic but ultimately meaningless battle of an earlier, communally focused age. This battle is essentially that between the Anglo-Irish communal vision and MacNeice's common man.[62]

In a dramatic reimagining of Robert Browning's 'Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came', MacNeice's play follows the adventures of a medieval knight errant, the youngest son of a family who have all succumb to a mysterious dragon. On his path to fight the dragon, Roland quite sensibly enquires "What would happen/ If we just let it alone?".[63] In response to this questioning, Roland's tutor projects a nightmarish vision:

> Well…some of us would live longer; all of us
> Would lead a degraded life, for the Dragon would be supreme
> Over our minds as well as our bodies. Gavin -
> And Michael and Henry and Denis and Roger and John –
> Might still be here – perhaps your father too,
> He would be seventy-five – but mark this well:
> They would not be themselves
>
> (27)

Here, the tutor stands in as a proponent for communality, encouraging Roland to embrace and find courage in his family's fate – his predetermined role – despite the risk this poses to his life. Opposing the tutor, however, is Sylvie, who stands to remind Roland of his individual autonomy, and the existence of people who:

> […] keep themselves to themselves or rather to each other,
> Living the sane and gentle life in a forest nook or hill pocket,
> Perpetuating their kind and their kindness, keeping
> Their hands clean and their eyes keen, at one with
> Themselves, each other and nature
>
> (35)

[62]Fauske moves towards a similar conclusion in *A Life Merely Glimpsed*, though his claims are more historical than social in focus. He suggests that MacNeice moves away from the Anglo-Irish past more generally – it is not specifically an Anglo-Irish communal vision that he sees him rejecting.
[63]Louis MacNeice, *The Dark Tower*, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 1967), p. 27. Subsequent references are given in parentheses after quotations.

Here, Sylvie articulates MacNeice's vision of individuality, encouraging Roland to stand as his own man in spite of his birthright. Despite this advice, however, Roland ultimately chooses an inherited communal vision. Fearing his tutor's warnings, he makes the same decision as the family members who came before him, arriving at the dark tower and challenging "you Dragon or whatever you are/ Who make men beasts, come out – here is your man" (66). Roland dies and Sylvie is left alone to her impossibly rural retreat, apparently as isolated, as out of date, as the Irish peasants of the poem 'Turf Stacks':

> For we are obsolete who like the lesser things
> Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads;
> It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia
>
> (13-16)

Despite the foregone hopelessness of this conclusion, MacNeice ultimately firms Sylvie's individualist approach. Notwithstanding its admirability, Roland's courage in the face of family history is of the terminal kind. Sylvie's vision of individuality, on the other hand, provides the antecedents on which her survival is built. There is a sense that, if combined with Roland's strength of character, this vision would even offer the possibility of remaking the family's destiny.

This whole saga effectively parallels MacNeice's poetic journey as he grapples with the growing irrelevancy of the Anglo-Irish communal vision. Moving from Roland to Sylvie, MacNeice's poetry begins by yearning to capture Anglo-Irish poetic antecedents and finishes by confronting the consequences of lost illusions. Somewhere in that movement from an ideal to a hard heeled realism, MacNeice acknowledges the loss of community that underscores the failure of the Anglo-Irish vision. It is here that the Anglo-Irish vision, in its traditional, communal form, effectively dies.

It is not, however, a process of total, uncompromised destruction that MacNeice engages in. Granting faith to the common man and his individual integrity, MacNeice informs a sensibility which mediates communal disappointment through the promise of individual achievement. In doing so, MacNeice provides a new archetypal framework upon which Northern-Ireland can rebuild its literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while MacNeice's poetry does give voice to a strain of Anglo-Irish thinking, he should not be placed without qualification among the ranks of the Anglo-Irish. Ultimately, what emerges in his work is a sharp and poignant regret over the failure of an ill-defined and idealistic Anglo-Irish culture, one in which communal politics are placed above individual needs and aspirations, often to the detriment of personal identity. This is not to say, however, that MacNeice would be better read as an 'English' or 'Irish' poet. His 'regret' over the failure of the Anglo-Irish poetic vision does not exclude him from this poetic genealogy, but actually further confirms his connection to it. Despite its distinctive personal nature, his poetry stands as a testament to Anglo-Irish struggles, and ultimately offers a new, invigorating framework for this devolving genre. Ultimately, therefore, MacNeice ought to be recognised as a poetic visionary within the broader tradition of Anglo-Irish writing – one who navigates, interrogates, and reshapes its contours, offering a more dynamic and nuanced engagement with both the cultural legacies and the evolving realities of his time.

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