



B923254

*Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of What Happens:  
Thirties Literature as a Tool of Communication*

BA Dissertation

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Word Count: 10,000 words

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA in English  
Literature

9th May 2022

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the persons listed below, without whom I would not have been able to complete this research, and without whom I would not have made it through my English degree.

I would like to thank Doctor Clare Hutton for alerting me to MacNeice's significant works, as well as for the thought-provoking questions on Irish history and nationalism. Our discussions and conversations inspired me to look outside the usual literary realm and from many viewpoints in order to construct a thorough and honest evaluation of Louis MacNeice. Your gracious tolerance of my MacNeice obsession, as well as your sacrifices in accepting me as a dissertation student, have not gone unnoticed.

I am especially indebted to my parents, to whom this work is dedicated, for their support and concern. Firstly, the incredible Natalie, a brilliant author, gym partner, and an even better mother. Without inheriting your courage and conviction this piece of work simply would not have been possible. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my dads Andrew and Kevin, two incredible men who have always found my self-deprecating jokes funnier than I did. Not to mention Valerie and Stuart, who have become like my second parents; you are invaluable people who motivate me to be as modest, unselfish, and creative as you are.

This dissertation also has an elegiac feel to it, perhaps as I was motivated to write it in remembrance of my wonderful grandfather and uncle. I can only wish that you had had the chance to read this piece. I hope I have made you both proud, and when I was struggling to find inspiration, I would think of you both, and that helped incalculably.

I am thankful to everyone else who has written on or about MacNeice, you are all brilliant people that have helped me generate ideas that made this dissertation achievable. Critics, authors, and other students interested in MacNeice, in particular, your vast knowledge and wealth of experience have inspired me in both my academic and personal endeavours. For the most part, I am just glad to see that I do not stand alone when it comes to my fixation.

Finally, I would like to thank Louis MacNeice for writing the poem Meeting Point. Your poetry has provided me with the ambition I have always needed and is, of course, responsible for my first tattoo. Your inability to be easily defined has challenged me and taught me that the best poets are those who have their humanity and honesty at the forefront of their work and for me, that poet will always be you.

### Introduction:

In 1938 Louis MacNeice obtained his reputation as a truly outspoken poet by publishing *Autumn Journal*, where he “writes what he feels at the moment.”<sup>1</sup> This dissertation seeks to analyse the purpose behind poetry that goes beyond the ordinary compass of the twentieth century, such as artistic surface, unrequited love and subject matter. It is, therefore, the news agenda that is involved in the reading of MacNeice’s work, and an assessment of his critical response to the 1930s that will inspire this dissertation. In particular, it will examine how different notions of news and topicality can be found in, and applied to, MacNeice’s lyrics. This will be achieved through a detailed close reading of two selected topical moments in *Autumn Journal* and a subsequent analysis of three chosen thirties poems written by MacNeice that also accommodate the above assertions.

In the opening chapter I will look at the topicality of Louis MacNeice’s autobiographical long poem, *Autumn Journal* by closely analysing how MacNeice communicates through his lyricism. Throughout this journal there is a tribute to the social, economic and personal issues that are seen to have pervaded not just this text, but his entire oeuvre. With this in mind, I will closely analyse Cantos I and VI as they best encapsulate the mentioned themes.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998) prefatory note, p. v, following references for this text will have direct citations to the page number.

Firstly, Canto I will introduce the idea of seasonal change mirroring the physical surroundings of London. I will then be looking at the impact of the Spanish Civil War and its uncertainty that categorises the best of thirties literature. Additionally, the strength of this diary resides in its status as a confessional panorama, which, I shall argue, stems from its refusal to be anything other than veracious.

Similarly, I will examine how his poems from the 1930s, including *Valediction*, *Train to Dublin*, and *Snow*, relate to the uncertainty and surrealism that surrounded life at the time MacNeice was writing. I will achieve this through a focus of specific lines, its chosen language and ultimately how MacNeice's poetic honesty has epitomised thirties poetry. This is poetry guided entirely by personal experience; it is indeed, over all else, relevant to human existence.

*Autumn Journal* provides a moral consciousness that encompasses MacNeice's "private existence" (V) and "public events," (V) which are, as I will illustrate, both a personal record and a remark on political ramifications. This analysis seeks to aggrandise the importance of poetry as a form of communication and how MacNeice reports on the news, which is both a coping mechanism and a tactical device to extend literature, away from personal intimacy and towards disillusionment, war and most importantly, the course of history itself. However, through this approach, I will analyse the important aspects of MacNeice's selected work which is associated with topicality of various kinds, which have been overlooked in his existing studies.

MacNeice's mental reportage is categorised by some critics as rambling, trivial and convoluted. Yet, the notion of MacNeice as a historian, beyond his writer status, who unequivocally embraces the role of the "able bodied [...] poet,"<sup>2</sup> endorses the perspective of a reporter and creates news items through his lyrics. Such an unorthodox identity, I will argue, significantly damages our understanding of MacNeice, the poetry of the thirties and the connection between the two. What I am arguing is that this topical approach treats MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* and selected poetry as something other than literature, and that if we pay attention to the experience of news and documentation that characterises the best of literature, we will be more likely to pay deference to literary works as cultural interventions.

Furthermore, we understand thirties poetry to draw the reader's attention away from reader gratification and toward the real world, the war's discomfort, and psychological upheaval. I will prove that MacNeice reminds us that we can communicate news without sacrificing its poetic intrigue, nor the ethical and political responsibilities of the period.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry - A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. i

## Chapter One: Analysing Autumn Journal

As MacNeice powerfully depicts and rejects modern life, he treats myth, war and his expired love as subject to the same degradation as reality. I will examine *Autumn Journal* by analysing MacNeice's stylistic techniques and close reading, to explore the role of the journal, for the personal and everyday discussions within its wider milieu. As we will see, *Autumn Journal* became a time capsule for human history and feeling, as MacNeice witnessed the continuation of life, the unnerving question of what is left to salvage and what is approaching. Through such lyricism and this documentation on life, *Autumn Journal* becomes a worldly artefact and communicates with its readers, which very much becomes the epitome of thirties poetry.

Ezra Pound once made a statement that read "Poetry is news that stays news"<sup>3</sup> and William Carlos Williams later remarked that "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."<sup>4</sup> What we find in MacNeice's poetry however, goes far beyond mere reportage. Writing across many topics, *Autumn Journal* provides more than just news. It serves to maintain a search for communication in the midst of personal and political crises. As a result, MacNeice's writing does not suffer from a lack of information or difficulty; instead, he confronts the tragedies and beauty of existence. Through this appeal and quest for poetic honesty, *Autumn Journal* very much becomes the poetry of what happens. What is meant by this of course, is this piece of literature, (being a veracious moment in time) unblemished

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Burt, *Poetry: The News that Stays News* (Nieman Reports, 2013)  
<<https://niemanreports.org/articles/poetry-the-news-that-stays-news/>> (Accessed 14th March 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Burt, *The News that Stays News*.

and sincere, is the news of poetry. MacNeice writes *Autumn Journal* to contain a particularly important message that is bound to the paranoia embedded in his personal and international crises. MacNeice's lyrics are entangled in both his self-criticism and life's journey, combined with the political upheaval of the war.

MacNeice obtains a certain identity in *Autumn Journal*, poised between a diligent observer and your everyday man, reminiscing about how "summer is ending in Hampshire." (3) The poet discusses information about his location, its environs, and the ambiance; creating data about his own world-immersed experience by alternating between public and private settings. MacNeice gets caught up in the moment, describing the season change as "close" (3) but "slow." (3) The speaker is a witness who is enamoured by the associations of seasonal and physical conversion. As Hampshire is "ebbing away," (3) its slow pace and termination co-exist because there is an inability to accept its end. This recording of seasonal change metaphorically resonates with Northern Ireland's cultural remembrance of the war:<sup>5</sup> suspended but impending, "hung in the" (3) minds of its "retired generals and admirals." (3) Change infects the poet's thoughts, maybe recalling his thirties poem *August*, where he states, "For we, being ghosts, cannot catch hold of things."<sup>6</sup> In his poetry, there is a grasp of sentimentality that struggles with the actuality of transience which conveys a sense of this impermanent grasp, which intensifies MacNeice's distinguishable characteristic: his mortal contemplation of the thirties.

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Woodward, *Culture, Northern Ireland, and the Second World War* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2015), p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by E. R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 23



The poem confirms and denies the power of language that captures the anxiety of the public moment which is encapsulated through the line: “whether Stella will marry and what to do with / Dick.” (3) In this line, language is more than a form of aesthetic expression. MacNeice’s presence of lyrical talent is skilfully combined with the mundaneness of everyday life that can be applied to both thirties poetry and current topical anxieties. This poetic invasion of individual and collective lives is both parodic and serious. Seemingly unrelated details are placed together in order to record the poet’s fluctuation, using it to juxtapose the imperative language of news reportage.

We are then teased with a brief revival of warmth: “trumpets of nasturtiums / [...] sunflowers / [...] and mulberry trees.” (3) By directly using rich images the stressed syllables mirror the effect of the beating sun and generate a melodic momentum to divert away from nature’s ephemeral splash of summer. There is little concern with art or fantasy; rather, MacNeice plays with the concept of the autumnal season as one that never takes shape. The “ever-moving Stairs,” (5) for example, depicts the existential uncertainty that pervaded the thirties. The terminology employed refers to life’s constant evolution. As a result, *Autumn Journal* is an act of poetic honesty. It is this very truth about poetry’s ability to be simple and honest, rather than conforming to a target audience. This is MacNeice telling us that poetry is at its best when he transmits what he sees.

While the seasonal setting in Canto I may appear mundane, the unrehearsed flow of thoughts provide a much deeper significance. For example, MacNeice, who is not

shielded by warmth or familiarity, is aware that autumn is imminent. The poet, through his thirties identity, is incorporating history, realism, and digressive writing, while eschewing form and typicality. MacNeice goes beyond obvious seasonal parallels, infusing the autumnal awareness of mortality with a struggle to believe that another summer or normalcy will return. By using seasonal doubt as a gateway to poetic uncertainty, MacNeice has given us his personal journey through August 1938 whereby he transforms his ignorance into awareness. As Edna Longley reiterates, *Autumn Journal* “synthesises the loose ends of the 1930 into [...] seasonal symbolism [that] encompasses transition on many fronts.”<sup>7</sup> MacNeice employs fast shifting sounds and images: “planes that pass [...] Farmyard noises.” (3) Like the “burning bonfire” (4) and “The frost that kills,” (4) MacNeice layers image upon image, creating a tense, bustling atmosphere to convey the presence of society’s economic conditions that have fed into personal turmoil and political tyranny.

Although this registration of experiences is moving, there is no discussion of his emotions; instead there is a knowing disillusionment as he stares at the human waste around him. Being tied to the physical change of the earth is MacNeice’s thirties methodology in full force. The decay of life reflects MacNeice’s poetic uncertainty which is achieved through alternating parataxis and hypotaxis, switching between the harsh reality of vulgarity’s “growth” (3) and some form of daydreaming: “The building of castles in sand, of queens in snow.” (4) MacNeice’s disillusionment expands into London’s ingrained political and social structure as he personifies it with distaste, economically

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<sup>7</sup> Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 59

satiated through “laissez-faire;” (4) its “packed, stale, and pregnant air [...] / a symbol of the abandoned order.” (4)

He describes the world as having “so many failures [...] faded airs [and] dead leaves along a warehouse wall,” (4,5) indicating a total abnegation of care. Summer’s predicted vitality and splendour are eclipsed by its antithesis - the destruction of the physical domain. With the standard image of the autumn leaves falling and winter impending, darkness and political change encroaches, leaving MacNeice to communicate how “we find our daily nature or try to find it.”<sup>8</sup> We are very aware of the thirties nuances in *Autumn Journal*, namely through its digressions, topic changes and themes: “the benefit of MacNeice’s expansive style lies in its ability to move quickly through a series of interrelated feelings: relief, high hopes, low motives, disgust, bitter mockery, underlying self-interest.”<sup>9</sup>

MacNeice’s awareness of creative immobility in thirties poetry provides *Autumn Journal* with serious artistic hegemony. This reluctance to be influenced by the political restrictions of his time, and his poetry strives to communicate that which is disruptive, frightful, and unpleasant to the general taste. This ambivalence is exemplified further through the collapse of the poet’s marriage, stating that he “loved her between the lines and against the clock.” (5) There is a fight for romance against ruin, all to be later defeated by it, proclaiming that he “loved her with paper money / And with whisky on the breath.” (5) His faith in love is redeemed a year later as he writes in *Meeting Point* that

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<sup>8</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 63

<sup>9</sup> Peter Robinson, *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (Oxford: OUP Oxford 2005), p. 58

he believed that "Time" (167) could be "away and somewhere else." (167) This caprice represents the conflicted voice of thirties poetry, this is a representation of how poets were to reinforce typical subject matter alongside a total evasion of reality.

MacNeice's mind is infected by the destruction and decay around him, his romantic pursuits now mirror his surroundings: trivial, unstable and burdened by the ghastliness of physical existence. His wandering imagination constantly leads him away from affection and warmth and towards the cool autumn nights of London. Love, like everything else, has been worthless. Unable to counteract the devastation around him, MacNeice's tone is ambiguous and, as such, fully representative of the thirties.

The duality of autumn, where days can begin as warm as summer, or alternatively bitterly cold, bear the same feeling of uncertainty that MacNeice's marriage and affair with Nancy Coldstream embodied. Both the personal and political contexts have constructed worlds where nature's realm stands in contrast to the growing violent, disillusioned world, but also appears as a thirties communication article to understanding it. MacNeice's stream of consciousness writing style could be seen as an "unravelling" (4) of James Joyce's *Stephan Dedalus*, observing what he sees, with no rehearsed "mass-production of neat thoughts."<sup>10</sup>

The spontaneity, detached syntax and cadence represents the topical rupture in both public and private identities that is voiced through the thirties poet. "Written at speed as actions and events unfolded - a quality MacNeice gave linguistic body to with his fused

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<sup>10</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 15

sentences, lists, changes of register and mismatched subject happening.”<sup>11</sup> As stated previously, *Autumn Journal*’s divergent reputation has caused much controversy. Jonathan Hitchens writes that it is “a poem impossible to pack down into dimensions.”<sup>12</sup> Such an honest, revolutionary approach to literature has caused some people to believe that MacNeice deliberately thrives on the enigmatic.

When war was to begin, poetry would be silenced and somewhat erased from the historical timeline. Poets such as MacNeice did not fear criticism, nor a subversion of typicality. MacNeice’s courageous approach heightens his artistic honesty, especially as he subverts the reluctance and entrenchment that we identify with Northern Irish poets.<sup>13</sup> It is here then, that thirties poetry plays a fundamental part in literature and becomes a personal attestation that is communicated through poetry. Severing all diplomatic ties, he exposes his Irish upbringing for the enigma that it was, in *The Strings Are False* he tells us that “Dublin was hardly worried by the war.”<sup>14</sup> MacNeice therefore, is ambivalent that there will be a post-war voice, especially on his native country’s behalf, that is guaranteed to be honest, balanced and truthful.

*Autumn Journal* talks of political anxiety, self-portrayal, disillusionment, “And lots of other stuff.” (5) The reader obtains a sense of MacNeice’s multifaceted, mental archive that is ambivalent through its balance of colloquial and eloquent lyricism that does

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<sup>11</sup> Katie Evans Bush, *The Tawdry Halo of the Idle Martyr: MacNeice’s Autumn Journal* <<https://www.cprw.com/Bush/macneice.htm>> (Accessed 18th April 2022)

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Hitchens, ‘But freedom is not so exciting’: Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal*, (2020) <<https://wildcourt.co.uk/features/but-freedom-is-not-so-exciting-louis-macneices-autumn-journal/>> (23rd April 2022)

<sup>13</sup> Woodward, *Northern Ireland*, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Strings Are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 213

indeed depict “the poet’s various roles.”<sup>15</sup> This is best understood through his Anglo-Irish identity - because he was born in Belfast, MacNeice retains some allegiance to Northern Ireland’s neutrality during the war, as seen through his self-indulgent cantos. Yet, he also develops a moral outrage for his native culture which is prevalent in the larger percentage of this journal. Canto I, then, raises the idea that this journal will function as a gesture toward re-establishing lost social and political consciousness by encapsulating it as an evidential text guided by historical reference and individual communication via experience.

As we move onto Canto VI, the journal groups itself in a constellated structure and we understand *Autumn Journal* as an entire text. We see MacNeice’s identity as defined by his surrounding conditions which very much highlight this journal as a personal record that criticises human values and should be praised for its liberating honesty. The constant repetition of “With” (18) “The” (18) and “And” contrasts hugely with the calm, recollecting voice in the first few opening lines. The speaker’s tone is no longer forthright and unequivocal as it was in the beginning where he states: “I remember Spain / At Easter.” (18)

As the canto progresses we are subject to MacNeice’s stream of consciousness, he talks of the writings on the walls, place names and food. As readers, we are thrown into a mental kind of rambling. Yet in the process of reading, MacNeice’s lyrics crystallise the necessity of his unfiltered reportage which stands as a poetic experience in a world that

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<sup>15</sup> Teresa Brus, A Collection of Selves: Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal*, 22.2 2013, 187-213 (p. 27) <<https://www.connotations.de/article/teresa-brus-a-collection-of-selves-louis-macneices-autumn-journal/>> (Accessed 6th March 2022)

is now careening towards war and disruption on an unprecedented scale. *Autumn Journal*, therefore, is a voice of accumulated suffering and silence that begins and ends with the thirties. MacNeice's function as a civilian is expanded in this canto, and he becomes a secondhand witness to war. MacNeice's language in his thirties poem *Galway*: "the hollow grey houses, / The rubbish and sewage, / The grass-grown pier"<sup>16</sup> further reminds us of how surreal and impactful the war was, especially as he commented in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*: "As soon as I heard . . . of the outbreak of war, Galway became unreal."<sup>17</sup>

MacNeice embodies the Yeatsian ideal of the "barbarous truth [...] a primitive mode of apprehension that invests physical and geographical reality."<sup>18</sup> This terrifying truth allows MacNeice to oscillate between alertness and blindness, impressed by his archival work, yet horrified by his tourist status. He is traumatised by the barbarity of Spain: "haunted / faces / With writings on the walls." (18) There is an embarrassment to his recollections, he understands that as he continues to describe his surroundings there is simultaneously a failure to become more than a civilian receiver of war news. With this balance between the "cabarets that call the tourist" (18) and "The rotten guts and crumbled bones together" (19) MacNeice reinforces the journal's concern with being a mere bystander, identifying as someone who is unable to truly broadcast this event in history as he is not directly impacted.

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<sup>16</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 163

<sup>17</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 17

<sup>18</sup> Maria Thanassa, 'Across the Enamelled Sea: Ancient Greek Myth and Philosophic Thought in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats' [PhD] (King's College London, 2005), p. 122 <<https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/2931748/426219.pdf>> (Accessed 12th January 2022)

News then, is produced in numerous forms - through emotion, privilege and history. This solidifies the text's self-reflexivity, the elements of expedience and shame as MacNeice admires the culinary delicacies of Spain: "sherry, shellfish, omelettes." (18) The embellished language of "peeling posters / [...] Glory veneered / [...] Kept us half an hour with polish and pincers" (18,19) presents the canto's commentary as sometimes inessential, speaking only of privilege to walk around Spain and to not have its reek of death and destruction. MacNeice's avoidance of big political statements and focus on how "all [he] did / In that city was drink and think and loiter." (19) This is an interesting example of how civilian poetry uses ignorance as a critique of war news and how it was resistant and deceitfully transmitted to feed the public taste. MacNeice is also indicating that those who saw Spain before its political uproar were fortunate but also clueless about the destruction that was imminent.

Canto VI therefore, contains a greater degree of politics and more self-reflection than others. Torn between his moral obligations and burdensome ignorance, the sublime and the absurd, MacNeice highlights the thirties fabrication of news and writer's proclivity for artifice. As night is near, MacNeice states that "the windows shut among civil guards" (20) indicated that "There's going to be trouble shortly in this country." (20) There is fortune in his voice, but not quite enough to empathise. The sharp juxtaposition of Spain on the brink of a war and MacNeice having "Waited for the right light for taking photos" (20) paints the poet as something of a trespasser that is unaware especially as he has evaded becoming a direct casualty in an apocalyptic nightmare.



It seems that ignorance is more simple than acknowledging the upcoming human suffering. However, as MacNeice believes, “poetry must be honest before anything else” (V) rather than accommodating to the needs of its readers which results in a verdict that is “neither final nor balanced.” (V) He favours communication over historical silence, honesty over ignorance, the terrifying present over a pre-orderly past. This very climax of fragmentary thirties poetry refuses to furnish its viewers with filtered, scripted news. MacNeice has effectively accomplished the impossible: he has documented a record of silence. His honesty reflects his commitment to not just serve himself, but also to successfully inform his readers. *Autumn Journal* is a public and private discourse with an honest commentary at the forefront. In analysing MacNeice’s departure from typicality, I have concentrated on the role of truth-telling, which is central to thirties literature.

MacNeice’s anxieties are further prevalent in his unfinished autobiography *The Strings Are False*: “The terror that seized London during the Munich crisis was that dumb, chattering terror of beasts in a forest fire”<sup>19</sup> that then transforms into “hoots of laughter”<sup>20</sup> after “Newsreels featured the life of Chamberlain - the man of peace.”<sup>21</sup> He is ashamed by his own ambivalence about the war, which ranges from fear to hilarity. But what deeply concerns this study is MacNeice’s Anglo-Irish identity that is swept up by his nation’s complex relationship with the Spanish Civil War, MacNeice cannot help but jump from persona to persona. The poem’s argument is on the behalf of the non-intervening individual and the fervent Irish man that believed his home country

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<sup>19</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 174.

<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 175.

glorified carnage: “in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies”<sup>22</sup> which will be subsequently analysed.

It is through the meandering of the mind that we continuously see that makes a second and verbal reading of *Autumn Journal essential*. MacNeice explicitly frames *Autumn Journal* as a reaction to history and it thus becomes a raw communication material. Looking closely at Canto I and VI, as well as the journal as a whole, we cannot help but feel the extraordinary privilege of reading history in the form of poetry.

*Autumn Journal* articulates a key point of disparity between MacNeice and his contemporaries in the thirties, the point where his non-defeatist individualism takes on collective urgency as it is a shared worry: “Our grief, our aspirations” (21) that have thrust the national atrocities on to the reader. Abandoning his controversial methods of assessment, he illustrates how beneath the appearance of civilian ignorance, his humanist upbringing shines through. MacNeice’s panorama has the task of exploding the cruel myths of the upcoming war’s conflict with a plethora of reportage, self-indulgence and the meandering of the poet’s “mind.” (20) But, the idea of civilian ignorance, and certainly its perceived indifference, seems to be essential. As gaps in history are fundamental, MacNeice knows that through the voice of the thirties poet, the truth must be heard.

Poets should be concerned with external reality and should avoid emotional and political detachment, or as MacNeice puts it: the ideal poet is “a reader of the newspapers [...]

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<sup>22</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 52

informed in economics [and] actively interested in politics.”<sup>23</sup> *Autumn Journal* is ultimately the “spirit” (21) of the ordinary man who stimulates the development of news into a cultural force, that is simplified rather than distorted by the deceit of news. While politicians dictate for self-gain, thirties poets such as Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis sought to inform us of this new, thirties approach which is this unrehearsed poetic broadcast to national events.

MacNeice is vigilant of the sadistic pleasure that derives from the reception of violence and fascism. He also acknowledges that a cold mindset is somewhat unavoidable, for he cannot possibly exclude his own poetic lines from disdain; as seen through the “invective” (20) used throughout Canto VI. Attempting to achieve consolation however, his metaphor demonstrates that people on the home front are feeding on public commentaries and have no personal empathy for the soldiers as they are diminished to the status of “a rag-tag army.” (21) It is here that he trades his denial for awareness and decides he must communicate the absolute truth that is about to unfold upon the “Spanish” (20) lands.

This approach to the war necessitates a departure from the conventional range of literature and highlights the determination of MacNeice’s impure, disillusioned, and fiercely honest approach to poetry. The symbolism of the Spanish Civil War appears to be the beginning of many problems: destruction that will keep on going, at least, as far as MacNeice’s poetic broadcasting is concerned. MacNeice is criticising the flaws of poetry whilst also diagnosing the ignorance of humanity. The transition from a passive

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<sup>23</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. i

voice to a politically aware speaker is arguably the split between MacNeice's Irish nationalism and his British identity that is alarmed at Spain's upcoming destruction. As his neutrality crumbles, so do his tourist assertions, announcing what he had not been "realising." (20)

MacNeice's tone has changed from cynical to dignified. It is his way of identifying the wasteland of Spanish soldiers, which can best be understood as the portrayal of a mind that is aware of its frequent ignorance, but also decisive as a mind that occupies a deep historical awareness. The purposes of *Autumn Journal* then, are abundant. MacNeice's "various and conflicting / Selves" (80) which surround this journal can be easily translated into a projection of war's surrealism, such as the sense of traumatic aftermath and the apprehension of political demolition. *Autumn Journal* as a whole therefore, demonstrates the brilliant interrelation between poetic technique and war-time reality which elucidates how this was voiced through MacNeice's thirties protocol.

## Chapter Two: Analysing Thirties Poetry

This second and final chapter will look at three thirties poems by MacNeice, namely *Valediction*, *Train to Dublin* and *Snow*. While the concept of news gives the structural foundation to his poetry, the stylistic arrangement of MacNeice's poetry as both a didactic text and a thirties style of consciousness serves as a channel for poetic honesty and communication whereby experience is expressed. We once again observe MacNeice's ambivalent attitude take shape. Poems on violence, history, and religious pressure investigate the poet's ability to challenge the intractable potentialities lying in his subject matter.

If we concede that Belfast plays a crucial role in MacNeice's poetry we should notice that, in many of his poems, talk of Ireland is negative and revealing that serves as a universal declaration. Like in the war-based chapters of *Autumn Journal* there is a glorification of murder even when he talks of the place he was born, as *Valediction* reveals: "And slung like a dead seal in a boghole, beaten up / By peasants with long lips and the whisky-drinker's cough."<sup>24</sup> Again, as in *Autumn Journal*, there is a split between the pampered and the suffering, or rather, Ireland and its inhabitants. MacNeice is clearly reflecting on the normalisation of bodies being "slung" (52) and mistreated like disposable waste.

Through *Valediction*, MacNeice emphasises the urge to construct ties between Ireland and himself, as well as the need to sever the cords that bind him to her. There is no

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<sup>24</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 52, following references for this poem will have direct citations to the page number.

glamour to Ireland's history, nor its approach to war. Soldiers are denounced to mere piles of flesh, unrecognisable and decomposing. *Valediction* finds an empowering example in MacNeice's determination to reject his stereotype as merely separated from his immediate culture. His diverse abilities are not appreciated by a large population. His own contemporary Stephen Spender, for example, remarks that MacNeice's poetry is "difficult to 'place,' which means that it is impossible for a contemporary to criticise it."<sup>25</sup>

MacNeice's poetry, which is heavily inspired by his period and surroundings, is not one-dimensional and is motivated by the moment of experience. There is no reason to criticise a poet simply because he cannot readily fit into a genre; instead, we should consider how such skill may be acquired today. The honest essence of his poetry is just as strong throughout his critical essays of the thirties, separating MacNeice from the typical orbit of twentieth century literature. This self-inflicted exile permits him to leave Ireland and restore himself, in order not to "have my baby-clothes my shroud." (53)

Thirties poetry reveals its true character not as an abstract notion, but in the representation of the poet's perspective of reality as imprinted on his mind via individual experience. In this context, MacNeice's poetry from the thirties is interpreted as an uniting factor between the detached Irishman and society, which is regarded as an evident afterthought when the poet reflects on his youth. MacNeice's efforts are ultimately shaped away from the ordinary precipice of the twentieth century. He is

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<sup>25</sup> Beret Strong, *The Poetic Avant-garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 195

philosophical, mythological, and deeply personal, which enables him to coherently articulate his vision of Ireland that was ignored by his predecessors and, to some extent, his contemporaries. It is MacNeice's personal ideology, which seeks to shed light on his hometown's barbarity, that functions as a sophisticated code of communication.

Thirties poetry is summed up nicely by Seamus Heaney: "[T]he writers did not feel the need to address themselves to the specific questions of politics because they assumed that the subtleties and tolerances of their art was precisely what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerances of the public life."<sup>26</sup> The lines "At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies / Like old rings hollow-eyed without their stones, / Dumb talismans," (52) for example, are imperative and abrasive; he has no propensity to alter his work to fit public cravings or to submit to the dishonesty of tabloid features. His poetry therefore, is both revelatory and informative. Many of his readers, particularly those of Irish ancestry, must have been astounded by MacNeice's poetry as nothing short of the gospel truth. The reason as to his ambivalence in both *Autumn Journal* and his thirties poetry is made clear in *Valediction*.

MacNeice categorises Belfast as both "devout and profane," (52) Belfast in his eyes is ultimately flawed and contradictory that has haunted him since birth. His personal exile from Ireland reflects the universal experience of estrangement, which he expresses explicitly through his "indifference and sentimentality." (52) The contradictory lexis indicates that he feels nostalgic about his hometown and somewhat melancholy, but he

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<sup>26</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland*, (England: Trustees Of Dove Cottage, 1984), p. 40

primarily connects with disinterest and shame. The title of the poem and its vituperation implies that he is bidding goodbye to the constraints caused by Belfast; it is partly cathartic as this precise record portrays thirties poetry as a revitalising, social freedom. MacNeice is departing from old methods of thought, literary traditions and outmoded approaches to life.

Ireland achieves the pinnacle of its literary growth through poetry like *Valediction*. It is intended to be a farewell to Ireland, which is depicted as a country immobilised by its own cultural roots, where “history never dies.” (52) However, as MacNeice recognises, Irish history lives on uncontrollably, in an intimate, endless manner, within himself and his poems. He portrays his bond with Northern Ireland as maternal; Belfast is his “mother-city,” (52) while the surrounding mountains are his “paps.” (52) Belfast has both nurtured and tormented the poet. Speaking of Ireland in a familial manner requires the reader to grasp the poet’s anguish in saying farewell to the closest thing to home.

MacNeice’s literary output is expressed through his self being inseparable from Irish history. The difference between him and the majority of the modernist circle is his ability to unite honesty and literature through poetry as a communication article whereby the poem is free from the constraints of public needs and profit. The word choice “I can say” (52) is interesting. There is something of a breakthrough in his voice, verbalising what had once been just a thought that is now permitted to be heard. MacNeice states “I can say Ireland is hooley, Ireland is / A gallery of fake tapestries.” (52) It does not seem to matter to him, though, how much outrage his adverse poetics could generate. The



poet's entire reliance on the direct, undisguised medium of expression is going to be infused in his career, exposing him to criticism and attacking his forthright honesty. This can be witnessed through critical attention to the poet's popularity and significance in comparison to other thirties poets, having been described as living in W. H. Auden's shadow and so, "MacNeice scarcely rates a mention."<sup>27</sup>

*Valediction* occupies a documentary tone alongside a lyrical quality. He seems to be writing on the grounds of eroded memory and false knowledge that must be replenished and projected both artistically and honestly. Because of his outsider status, we believe that poetry has been silenced and that MacNeice is filling in the gaps via his honesty. His word choice thus fills in the blanks for our understanding of Ireland: "Of inbred soul and climatic maleficence / And pay for the trick beauty of a prism / In drug-dull fatalism."  
(53)

MacNeice does not rely on the conventional canon of poetry that celebrates his hometown, nor does he succumb to convention. His dedication to the cause is admirable, and it is the obligation of the thirties poem to explicate Northern Ireland's malice. Looking at Heaney's poetry collection *North*, we can see how Northern Irish writers utilised poetry as a medium of communication to provide access to Ireland's unfiltered reality. It is this disparaging view towards Ireland that excluded MacNeice from qualifying as an Irish poet and also poignantly provides critics with ammunition against him and his poetic methods.

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Ross, 'In Auden's Shadow: Louis MacNeice'  
<<http://mairangibay.blogspot.com/2020/04/in-audens-shadow-louis-macneice.html>> (Accessed 17th April 2022)

What most people interpret as rebellion, others will interpret as a process of self-protection and his artistic responsibility. It is MacNeice's "sentimentality" (52) that becomes his weakness: "But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed, / The woven figure cannot undo its thread." (53) His identity will always be Irish, and this inseparability disturbs him. Of course, the shame he mentions suggests that his identity is historically predetermined and inextricably entwined to his geographic surroundings. The imagery created conveys the idea of a very complicated individual, defined by a myriad of convoluted lineage threads which he wishes to detach from. MacNeice is successful by turning to the difficulties of communicating that our roots may frequently be troublesome, this again is not as explicitly discussed in the purview of literature. MacNeice's poetry is distinguished not by a narrowness of vision, but by the labour of his lyrical honesty, which acts as both a news piece and a kind of craftsmanship.

In the final lines: "Good-bye your hens running in [...] / Your absent-minded goats [...] / [...] Your drums and your dolled-up virgins and your ignorant dead." (54) In that freeing moment, when the lyric finds its uplifting culmination, when MacNeice reaches his national exhaustion, in those moments of self-justification and detachment, MacNeice is divorced from his history. As we have seen, it is in his thirties poetry that he is no longer grappling with the pressures of the outside world. Of course, the fact that we may identify this voice with the persistence of repression adds to its strength and importance for MacNeice's thirties poetry as a verbalised medium of communication.

The growth of Ireland's ecclesiastical authority following independence explains both the overall reticence of Irish authors to engage with modernist ideas and the increased urgency to uncover the truth about Ireland. This is why MacNeice's truthful experience with Ireland's historical process highlights it as something to have been stagnant and unsuccessful. The theme of history does, in the end, endanger the volume's closural inclinations because, as we are told, his past will never leave him. MacNeice continues to wield power through his poetic honesty and experience, yet the same onerous history and heritage that he believed he had escaped appears to have perpetuated: "The land will remain as it was, / But no abiding content can grow out of these minds / Fuddled with blood, always caught by blinds." (53) MacNeice carries us to the most intimate and urgent connection of the self to a public history of colonial oppression that is effacing itself as a now-devolving Ireland which has played a huge part of thirties poetry and its honesty.

It is an historical nightmare that MacNeice appears to be reawakening; this is the poet's awareness of national circumstances that have been transformed into a symbol of retaliation against Ireland for her anguish. Though not always, MacNeice's awareness of his poetic role as a voice for thirties poetry leads him to hold a stance that is at once paradoxical, ambivalence and coarse that is mentioned in much of his criticism.

MacNeice, like Brian Phillips, recognises that poets have conformed to the public appetite and "have lapsed into a kind of insensibility, a type of intellectual numbness, which is both a cause and a result of the poetry culture's residual worry."<sup>28</sup> Such a

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Phillips, *Poetry and the Problem of Taste*, Poetry Foundation, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/68917/poetry-and-the-problem-of-taste>> (Accessed 27th April 2022)

statement illustrates the intellectual and emotional honesty required to sustain poetry's capability that is created through MacNeice's communication methods.

MacNeice leaves behind the unity that was so important to Irish poets and society; he instead expresses his identity crisis through his upbringing and surroundings.

*Valediction* must be understood as topical rather than subversive in its readiness for the final disposal of Ireland and her cultural restrictions. Some have labelled MacNeice a minor and alienated poet, although his efforts to resist the eroding triviality of mainstream poetry have earned him a prolific title. Using poetry to please the reader's taste is what initially infected poetry. MacNeice is conscious of his work's form and substance, which establishes a communication platform about poetic honesty. He also helps to examine how society has allowed complexity, depth, and ingenuity to escape poetry's content.

In MacNeice's poem *Train To Dublin* his thoughts are existential and typical of thirties reportage. It begins "characteristically, [...] realistic, readerly and metonymic"<sup>29</sup> as David Lodge puts it. It accords with MacNeice's view that a poet is an ordinary man, who adopts an acute sensibility to things. After all, thirties poetry is a "plea for impure poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him."<sup>30</sup> The interplay of experience is illustrated in *Train to Dublin* through MacNeice's use of the train's rhythm and sound to mirror the act of perception and thinking.

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<sup>29</sup> David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Hodder Education, 1977), p. 212

<sup>30</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. i

The poetic description of the ephemeral pictures as the train passes by is supported by the attributes MacNeice has mastered throughout his career: tangible imagery and a complex texture of verbal articulation. This poem is ultimately perfect for tracing the development of MacNeice's personal thoughts. His thoughts are only half-formulated and initially questionable. The purpose of MacNeice's poetry is not to satisfy public wants, but to make the visual landscape he witnesses on the train mirror the complexity of his thoughts. As Robyn Marsack summarises, *Train To Dublin* "concerns not only what we think about but also the way in which we think."<sup>31</sup> Thus, MacNeice supplements the train as the poet's trajectory and as a principle governing its construction, which is also evident in *Autumn Journal*.

The conception of the train's journey as an emotional excursion rather than a meaningless activity is clearly articulated when MacNeice says "I can no more gather my mind up in my fist,"<sup>32</sup> for his "feelings are too mixt to disentangle."<sup>33</sup> The train serves the poet with a perfect way to grapple the complexities of life. In examining railroad verse, we will look at how the consciousness of the poet explores what trains are, because like many MacNeice poems, we are invited to articulate the language depths of the unconscious mind, which is the repository of primal, sensory images, whereby we may move toward a resolution with a conscious, ordered mind.

The image of the train embarks us on a subliminal journey of personal and spiritual freedom. MacNeice has no desire to accommodate his readers, informing them that we

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<sup>31</sup> Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 27, following references for this poem will have direct citations to the page number.

<sup>33</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 17.

must be satisfied with his “half-thought thoughts.” (27) He also comments that “facts” (27) are able to undergo the process of being “repatterned” (27) which is MacNeice commenting on life’s changeability and appropriation. MacNeice avoided the pitfalls of politically driven writing as he did not want to disregard authenticity and the slippage of life, experience and communication in poetry. In its stead, he offers something far more valuable: a celebration of the everyday, the real, and the truthful. This obscure opening to the poem reveals that he “can no more gather [his] mind up in my fist.” (27) These words, by far the most telling in the poem, demonstrate MacNeice’s delicate handling of these topical ideas and the difficulty in which he had to portray them.

One is made aware of the phenomena stated as unadorned existential things just there, signifying nothing, and of the poet’s honesty impelling them into meaning. Ultimately we must be satisfied with his unreliability. This is all the more rich because it is an experience informed by a wider public world of history that is firmly anchored in the perspective of the empirical poet. Moreover, it is always, however painful to the subject and others, honest: “At times we are doctrinaire, at times we are frivolous, / Plastering over the cracks, a gesture making good, / But the strength of us does not come out of us. / It is we, I think, are the idols and it is God / Has set us up as men who are painted wood.” (27) The language MacNeice employs must be read carefully. If the poet persists in his search for life’s understandable “pattern,” his mind (as evidenced by his “half-thought thoughts” (27)) will malfunction or potentially ramble. MacNeice supports the biological faculty that we are rewarded with. However, he also points out human limits,

remarking that we are only “painted wood.” (27) We are both natural and organic, as well as a composite material that exposes both human worth and human unworthiness.

MacNeice’s train thoughts are parts of a difficult process of self-discovery and self-evaluation that necessitates acceptance of human reality. He informs us, for example, that we mislead, lie, and avoid confrontation with the truth. He identifies the major flaws in mankind and how God appears to be at the foundation of these issues. We can make “good [...] gesture[s],” (27) for example, but a portion of us will always be “frivolous.” (27) As a result, it is quite natural that the poem concludes with the human situation within its boundaries, or, as he puts it, what he “cannot hold.” (28) Thus, MacNeice is most honest when he tackles every impurity that has permeated his work while still supplying us with poetic honesty that has not been available at this level before.

In relation to thirties poetry then, MacNeice will not reside in public pleasure and poetic form. To embrace thirties poetry, in its wholeness, MacNeice must affirm even what is “Held hollow to the ear [...] the monotony of fear” (27) which is a mark of poetry as communicating existential fears that surround the public and the individual. As he writes, he wants to inform his audience more, which connects to the concept of thirties poetry communicating their views in the same manner that important news is transmitted. Yet, there is this idea in *Train to Dublin* that implies there is much said in what is difficult to communicate and that there is an inadequacy to language here. As “the train goes on” (28) we are reminded that life will not be still nor silent, like that of the

train. Here, MacNeice emphasises two things: firstly, the poet's longing to feel everything in the entire universe, as well as his incapacity to do so. Secondly, he sees the treasures that life has to offer, which gives him hope as an individual and as a poetic observer.

Being alive, according to MacNeice, is "breathing gold" (28) and poetry should voice the riches that existence offers more clearly. Through thirties poetry, MacNeice draws our attention to this pre-conditioned isolation from topical poetry in an unmediated way that should be appreciated by critics today. In his poems, he discusses not just selfhood, but also the transformations he feels mankind must take in order to achieve a better society. MacNeice's poetry enables literature to transcend its place as an aesthetic object; its beauty remains, but he desires a public resignation from old thought that can be achieved through both the everyday man and the poet. There is both a retreat and a confrontation with reality, what poetry may communicate, and how mindfulness can be attained.

Unlike *Valediction* and *Train to Dublin*, *Snow* is a poem that has received a lot more critical attention than most of MacNeice's poetry and is often considered to be one of his best. As we have established, it is his poetry from the thirties that reveals that life's purpose in its entirety and that the poetic voice now has a different weight, encapsulating the bewilderment of existence. When we analyse how important thirties poetry was culturally in the inter-war period, we see that life's experience is a



fundamental factor. The duty MacNeice felt was to communicate honesty via poetry and to take a step aside from a distracted, and illusive world.

In *Snow* then, the poet's responsibility and concern is made public: "Soundlessly collateral and incompatible: / World is suddener than we fancy it."<sup>34</sup> MacNeice's choice of the pronoun "we," (30) symbolises a cohesive society through which poetry is conveyed, creating a metaphor of responsibility. It has a tone of culpability due to the use of "we," (30) making this poem into something of a collaborative experience, testing its capacity to develop a strong communal sense. The emergence of perception and communication teaches us that if poets had always been accountable and honest, artistic misunderstanding between public and private imperatives in the early twentieth century could have been avoided.

We can feel the atmosphere that MacNeice describes: "The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was / Spawning snow and pink roses against it." (30) Language becomes MacNeice's communicator in this sense - the lexical field of shock is perceived in an expressible fashion. I am concerned with the way in which the social commentary of MacNeice's poetic voice commences honesty from the grounds of the silenced history in the thirties, leading up to the war. MacNeice's unpredictable, fresh lyricism is depicted perfectly in *Snow*: "The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was / Spawning snow and pink roses against it." (30) What thirties poets such as MacNeice achieve is what previous ones have failed to do - they write with the

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<sup>34</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 30, following references for this poem will have direct citations to the page number.

awareness that their voices circulated publicly and with great power, can shape the voice of war-time literature.

Private utterances become human experience: “Soundlessly collateral and incompatible: / World is suddener than we fancy it.” (30) The “great-bay window” (30) symbolises our restricted vision of the world, because we can only see a “portion” (30) of what is on the other side of the glass. The term “incompatible” (30) thus fits perfectly; the world produces lovely flowers that blossom and flourish, but also snow, which causes them to wilt, becoming cold and unsightly. The poem features observable movement that is somewhat ignored; the shifting of seasons is seen as MacNeice meticulously portraying contrasts with the changeover to “snow” (30) and the “huge roses.” (30)

With no reference to sound-giving factors such as the weather or general commotion, the poem’s universe appears to be silent. When envisioned, its colour scheme, with the white of the snow setting off the deep tone of the roses, creates a dramatic yet simple contrast. Like the ambiance in the poem, we as readers and listeners of interest remain silent to hear MacNeice’s address to the universe and also posterity.

Furthermore, the continual use of unexpected terminology confirms MacNeice’s attentive intelligence, although he gets caught up in the “rich” (30) nature of the room’s suddenness. The reality of poetry’s dishonesty has been caught and rendered obliquely evident in this poem. For example, it is clear that MacNeice’s fixation determines the

individual's self-understanding and awareness of his surroundings. The sight offered is dynamic and lively through an overflow of sensory experience as the window is "spawning snow and pink roses." (30) MacNeice's poetic honesty is not disorder, but a synthesis of chaos that delivers a vision that neither his fellow poets nor onlookers could have formulated into poetry.

Through this perceptive style specifically, MacNeice converts life's chaotic unexpectedness into concealed turmoil and danger, yet it is through such fear that the world is rendered with such sensory capacity which we may ourselves feel. There is much to be said about MacNeice's famous line: "Soundlessly collateral and incompatible: / World is suddener than we fancy it." (30) Interestingly, he talks of two light, beautiful images that are not renowned for making sound, yet he states that they are "Soundlessly collateral and incompatible." (30) Again, this is a remark on the unpredictability and characteristics of life. Nao Igarashi interestingly comments on the equivocal derivation of the word "collateral," (30) which means "correspondence and difference at the same time; the "collateral" (30) things are neither identical nor mutually agreeable, they are just close to each other. The prefix 'co-', which seems to signify togetherness, clarifies in this case that there are two or more independent existences."<sup>35</sup>

MacNeice's poem encroaches on the limitations of language to explain the reality, but it is also a varied creation, having numerous inconsistencies that are clearly impossible to

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<sup>35</sup> Nao Igarashi, *The Poetry of 'Italicization': Acts of Perception in Louis MacNeice's 'Snow' and 'Train to Dublin,'* [Postgraduate] (University of Durham, 2017), p. 8  
<<https://community.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/ojs/index.php/pgenglish/article/view/196>> (Accessed 15th April 2022)

convey. *Snow*, like *Valediction* and *Train to Dublin*, should guide our reaction to thirties poetry, enhancing our evaluation of poetic difficulty and how poetry is a tool of communication. In this way, we would better honour MacNeice's range and outstanding ability to express what he felt could not be communicated. Overemphasising communication problems in thirties poetry recognises that when art's power is seen to be troubled, as MacNeice is correct in arguing, the lack of relevant social, cultural, and political communication in literature becomes paramount in his thirties poetry and articulated cleverly through these poems.

Poetry has a progressive effect: the lexis is crisp and clear. He expands on his point by saying, "The world is crazier and more of it than we suppose, / Incurably plural." (30) This phrase suggests the variety and fullness of human experience, which is frequently misinterpreted or, in some circumstances, overlooked. For a while, this poem, like most of MacNeice's work, pauses and is cyclical rather than perfectly linear. He is engrossed in the present, but also in amazement and horror at the world's fast-paced, inexplicable wildness. Poetry's proximity to mass communication is both frightening and indicative of poetry's increased strength.

MacNeice is doing more than just a restorative service; his lyrics provide a higher level of clarity so that the truth may be obtained and utilised in future situations, both in life and in literature. This is how MacNeice formed the poetry of what happens, giving us a perspective on life from every viewpoint and from a variety of backgrounds, and therefore a heightened awareness of his surroundings. MacNeice's thirties poetry

speaks and listens, aids decision-making and is oriented to all readers. Although political events had eclipsed the value of literature by the thirties, this only added to MacNeice's power: perception is best explained via his capacity to see beyond what meets the eye, or as he puts it, "there is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses." (30)

MacNeice demonstrates the force of his remarkable insight while claiming it as pointing out what is always there to be seen in the seemingly everyday. Furthermore, it is via this suggestive and persisting capacity that MacNeice discovers his mechanism for transmitting thirties topic matter. In MacNeice's ideas, as we have seen, poetry is the symbol of human discovery; it is our personal vocation, embracing the difficulties in communication; and it is the poet's obligation to create documentation from both a personal and historicist perspective. He transitions from the universal witness to the free-thinking man, as indicated by the personal pronoun that begins the sixth line: "I peel and portion / A tangerine and spit the pips and feel / The drunkenness of things being various." () The accumulating alliteration, "peel [...] portion" (30) and overlapping internal rhyme "spit [...] pips" (30) as well as the crowding of certain verse lines with repeated stressed syllables, generate a harsh sound that grabs attention, particularly polysyndeton, which lengthens the lines.

The recurrence of the letter "p" allows the poem to launch into a frenzied campaign for an alternative approach to poetry, encouraging intuitive awareness and understanding, which is prone to divert away from ordinary subject matter. For example, the simplicity

of peeling an orange ironically takes up the challenge of explanation. Therefore, the verbal implications of stupefaction in “I peel and portion / A tangerine and spit the pips” (30) gives way to the digestion of reality that is ultimately “The drunkenness of things being various.” (30) The celebration of random actions such as the peeling and portioning of an orange indicates the speaker’s recognition of the momentariness of the perceived actions and the act of perceiving and writing.

It is through spitting out the pips that MacNeice becomes occupied with the world’s plurality and the difficulty in communicating it. The lyric’s vocal intensity is purposeful once more; the poem is an appraisal of the circumstances for thinking and communicating in thirties writing, and our response to them evokes an acknowledgement of the gap between traditional subject matter and unmediated methods of thought. What we have then, is MacNeice sensitively enabling his readers to think about what lies beyond “snow” (30) and “the roses.” (30) Or, in simpler terms the overarching order of the life’s cycle which becomes the enclosing factor of the poem which invokes responsibility for both the poet and reader.

The lack of punctuation creates a galloping cadence which enforces a reading which makes each line a stage in the gradual and impure progression towards MacNeice’s realisation of his words and their capability. Through the tremendous effort of MacNeice seeking to understand the world, he produces a static image of snow and flowers colliding. It might be said that the poet expresses the world truth: “And the fire flares with a bubbling sound for world / Is more spiteful and joyous than one imagines— / On

the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—" (30) It defies scientific calculation and visual comprehension, reserving it for the poetic rather than the factual.

To inspire thought, MacNeice knows that a poem must cherish both the world's simplicity and its diversity; by remarking on such everyday images all around us and peculiar references as "a bubbling sound for the world [...] / On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands;" (30) poets must be listened to and answered, it is this appeal to comprehend the world as something cruel but enjoyable, it gives just as much as it takes.

Finally, MacNeice concludes that the goal of poetry is not to fit into wordly categories in order to appeal to its audience, but rather to resist this appeal in order to communicate and be honest. What validates poetry, in MacNeice's view, is its ability to express what is impossible to express and the shaping of the individual as a poet and as a human being. Critics have said that it was MacNeice's own personal fear that solidified his shortcomings, yet I believe that such fears have inspired some of his best poetry. The hazard of modern writing that worried MacNeice was how a balance was to be achieved between the personal view and the tendency towards propaganda in the highly politicised decade of the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> However, recognising that a balance was never his intention, nor would it be feasible, makes us, as readers and humans, grateful for the honesty of MacNeice's thirties poetry.

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<sup>36</sup> Wikiwand, Autumn Journal <[https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Autumn\\_Journal](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Autumn_Journal)> (Accessed 23rd March 2022)

### Conclusion:

MacNeice believed that providing a balance is untrue, since reality is disproportionate and cannot be measured. As demonstrated by this analysis of topical moments in *Autumn Journal* and his selected poetry, MacNeice desired literature to remain separate from the triviality and indifference that had permeated existence; poetry's capability and isolation from the falsehoods of life, relationships, and culture, in MacNeice's opinion, is what makes poetry an integral part to the universe. After encountering MacNeice's work, the reader's understanding should diversify. Poetry was feared to have fallen into the category of pleasing readership rather than being veracious; literature and art were jeopardised as they fell into lyrical eloquence and public gratification.

Through *Autumn Journal* and his thirties poems, we now know that poetry has succumbed to this dishonesty, complexity, depth, and invention are pushed out of reach. Furthermore, by adopting a unique and individual turn in his poetry, MacNeice's poetic transformation is one that may be characterised as the epitome of thirties poetry, that communicates, contains no fabrications and universally relates to its audience. His honesty is a gift to other poets, readers, and critics, serving as a tool for creating a connection with the indestructible truth that articulates the difficulties he encountered in his endeavours of the thirties.

Honesty has had revolutionary implications for MacNeice. He not only had the strength of honesty in his thirties poems, but he has left an influence on modernism decades



after his death. Having not polished his poems, his honesty is a communication technique that has impacted historical chronology, causing his audience to question the truth of past and prospective poetry. How can a poet both single out the reader and allow them to collectively feel part of his poetry? In MacNeice's thirties poetry, its seriousness and its relevance in exposing the parameters of communication between individuals, is at the core of its success.

Poetry serves as a communicator as well as a solace for the unalterable truth of human existence. MacNeice's poetry develops from an oscillation between the necessity to control the chaos of politics, war, and life's reality toward the allure to be immersed by it. With the frontiers of history and communication blurred, the politics of honest expression is at the centre of his poetic objectives. Or, more specifically, its capabilities: the reflection and change that honesty may bring. It is through this approach to poetry that we should applaud the Irish poet's honesty and thank him for his poetic performance of truth and not resent him for his unorthodox approach of communication.

Word count excluding bibliography and footnotes: 9543.

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