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MACNEICE AND LARKIN: A NEGLECTED AFFINITY

In his introduction to Louis MacNeice's *Selected Poems* Michael Longley writes about two parts of MacNeice's poetic imagination, the first of which being metaphysical, the second – empirical.¹ This twinning of two seemingly contradictory perspectives can serve as a very accurate characterisation of the complexity of MacNeice's poetic outlook, allowing us to evaluate MacNeice as a poet with a recognizably distinct voice, as well as to introduce one of his main themes: the dialectic of the flux and the permanent pattern.

For long MacNeice has been seen as a member of the largely imaginary entity called jointly MacSpaunday, the group of four poets of the Thirties whose main concern was to make poetry respond to the social and political crisis of the contemporary world and whose political sympathies were located firmly on the far left. Much recent criticism breaks free from that pressure to “package”,² or syndicate, a talent as great as MacNeice's and tries to retrieve the poet as an independent writer, far too original to follow the paradigm of the Auden circle or the poetic orthodoxy of the age.

Liberating MacNeice from this constricting historical label rescues that aspect of his poetry which Longley calls “metaphysical”, and which is

¹ Michael Longley, “Introduction”, [in:] Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

² “If there is a MacNeice problem, it is not one of nationality or quality but of what might crudely be termed packaging. Poetry packages are a critical or journalistic convenience which (whether the wrapping adopts the patterns of Women's Poetry, Thirties Poetry or Ulster Poetry) work to the benefit of the least talented members, allowing them to profit from an unearned association with their betters.” Dennis O'Driscoll, “The Turning Perch,” *Poetry Review* 81/2 (Summer 1991): 30.

perhaps most fully elaborated upon by Terence Brown in his important and pioneering study.³ These new readings point to a characteristic trait of MacNeice's poetry: his keen attention to things, his "fidelity to what we can see of objects"⁴ does not exclude the possibilities of a symbolic, metaphysical, or semi-religious perspective. To quote Longley again, "although MacNeice rejected orthodoxy, he kept his mind open to religious possibility."⁵

MacNeice's polyphonous poetry, embracing contradictions and inconsistencies, spreading from empiricism to metaphysical seriousness, or (as Edna Longley phrased it) from reportage to symbol⁶, with the latter aspect generally neglected and overshadowed by the more obvious realist attitudes, brings to mind the poems of another poet, belonging to another generation, whose poetry had also for a long while been interpreted solely as an exposition of English empiricism and refutation of metaphysics, before it was recognized as carrying metaphysical or symbolist potentials. The poet I have in mind is Philip Larkin.

It is my intention here to demonstrate that MacNeice not only exerted an important influence on Larkin's style by introducing him to urban landscapes and urban-demotic, but that the two poets, however different they are, share some basic philosophical assumptions and take surprisingly similar attitudes.

MacNeice's particular brand of a metaphysical outlook comes as a result of his disenchanted view of the human condition, which to many critics is radical enough to be called nihilism. Manifestations of nihilistic attitudes can be traced in such poems as for example "Cradle Song for Miriam" ("No one pays attention / No one remembers us"); "Perseus" ("and one feels the earth going round and round the globe of the blackening mantle, a mad moth"), "Eclogue from Iceland" with the line about "the cosmic purposelessness," "Bagpipe Music" or "Greyness is all." However, to speak of MacNeice's nihilism even on the evidence of these poems, is risky: one has to remember the dialectical character of MacNeice's poetry, which allowed him to articulate – alongside his unequivocally pessimistic views – also words of positive, sometimes utopian hope, as in the picture of an ideal kingdom of individuals ("The Kingdom") or in his affirmative statement: "even in the most evil picture, the good things are still there round the corner."

³ Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin 1975).

⁴ Geoffrey Grigson, quoted after: Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice. A Study* (London: Faber and Faber 1988), p. 63.

⁵ Michael Longley, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

⁶ Edna Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art," [in:] Michael Keneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 285.

Similarly, the charge of nihilism has often been levelled against Larkin. Critics would point to his obsessive fondness for negatives,⁷ describe Larkin's outlook as life turned meaningless by the inevitability of death and complain that his poetry lacks the humanity of comfort.⁸ Larkin's uncompromising pessimism, which is so methodical and self-conscious that it can be seen as his temperamental feature, shows great affinity, surprising yet well-grounded, with the philosophy of the founder of modern pessimism, Arthur Schopenhauer.⁹

In both cases this pessimistic tone goes beyond the mere critical concerns about the ailments that the contemporary world suffers from, and can be understood as an articulation of the two poets' intuition of the existential meaninglessness that underlies human condition. Commentators on the poetry of MacNeice would be ready to speak of his "cosmic nihilism."¹⁰ It should be noticed here that in both cases the pessimist views are grounded in the poets' self-conscious scepticism. "Nihilism presents itself to the sceptic as a valid philosophical and emotional option."¹¹ Terence Brown, the author of these words, devoted his book-length study of MacNeice's poetry to prove that the poet's scepticism is not only the underlying tone of all his work, but that this sceptical attitude has philosophical seriousness and integrity.¹²

MacNeice belonged to the generation of the questioning intellectuals, guided by the command to doubt – this particular attitude may have been inherited from Freud and Marx, the two thinkers that the Auden group was influenced by, but MacNeice's scepticism went even further than that of his colleagues: he did not embrace any of the so-called alternative worlds offered in the place of the compromised ideologies. "He had no belief in a better Socialist or Communist world. Neither Marxism, nor metaphysics, nor religion provided a solution for him."¹³ Whereas Auden, having supported Communism, turned afterwards towards the certainties of Christianity, MacNeice was ready to write in 1940 that "in brute reality there is no road that is right entirely." It is characteristic that MacNeice did not phrase his belief in a more categorical, authoritative form: all roads

⁷ See e.g. Christopher Ricks, "The Whitsun Weddings," *Phoenix* 11–12 (1973): 8–9.

⁸ John Haffenden, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin," *London Magazine* (April, 1980): 86.

⁹ Jerzy Jarniewicz, "Rituals and Their Meaning in Philip Larkin's Poetry," *Folia Litteraria* 29 (1990).

¹⁰ Terence Brown, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry. Modernism and After* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

are wrong, all ideas – misjudged. His suspicious attitude, self-limiting, and sceptical even about the virtues of its own scepticism, corresponds with the equally reserved attitude of being **less** deceived that one finds in Larkin's poetry. Both poets are aware of the danger of their scepticism turning into another dogma, an outlook equally misjudged and arbitrary as the ones it has managed to curb. MacNeice, like Larkin, is the poet of the less-deceived.

The disillusioned stance, which prevented the poet from being deceived by the flux of various ideologies, cults, and clichés, that haunted the history of the twentieth century, has been pinpointed by Peter Forbes whose review starts significantly with the observation that MacNeice “saw through the fashionable nostrums peddled by his contemporaries, the embracing of the Proletariat, the cult of technical excellence, the child cult, the cult of sex.”¹⁴ To identify this disillusioned stance seems to be an appropriate opening for an article which focuses on the virtues of the poet's love poems and makes a claim that “MacNeice was the first poet of modern love (and the first poet was the best poet).” In the light of this his immunity to the all-too easy traps of romantic idealizing gains an even greater significance. Larkin was not a love poet, but he was equally sceptical about “the fashionable nostrums peddled by his contemporaries.” It is interesting that the catalogue of the panacea given by Forbes can be applied also to Larkin with the only real exception of the first one. Larkin, of course, was one of the greatest deconstructionists of the cult of the child, as well as the author of the most disenchanting poems about the powers of sex.¹⁵ Peter Forbes' remark: “his work is a casebook of how to live provisionally, without comforting myths of religion or nationality,”¹⁶ can be moved from his article on MacNeice and inserted into any critical account of Larkin's poetry.

Similarly, MacNeice's portrait of the modern poet can well be translated into the Fifties to stand as the characterisation of Larkin's anti-romantic understanding of the role of the poet: “I would have the poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.”

MacNeice, like Larkin, is well aware that the age of supportive, all-embracing and all-explanatory systems has gone, the world has passed through the post-Christian stage and faces now the realities of being left without any credible system of convictions. Both MacNeice and Larkin reject consolatory illusions (ideologies and religions, including the religion

¹⁴ Peter Forbes, “The Miller of Hell,” *Poetry Review* 85/1 (Spring 1995): 14.

¹⁵ See Larkin's poem “Dry Point” from “The Less Deceived.”

¹⁶ Peter Forbes, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

of art), which only serve to dress and falsify the ultimate meaninglessness of reality. Both are aware that "this valueless world cannot be escaped by indulgence in romantic reverie or escape into subjectivity."¹⁷ The world offers no possibility for the existence of an Absolute sanction, a permanent hierarchy that imposes order and sense on things. But what is interesting, both poets, feeling that this being not only a liberation, but also a loss, agree to accept the necessity of the metaphysical alternative. MacNeice went as far as to say that "man cannot live by courage, technique, imagination alone. He has to have a sanction from outside himself."¹⁸ Religion is retrieved, as one of the aspects of human life: in 1943 MacNeice declared that "we need all the sense we were born with; and one of those is the religious."¹⁹ His poem "Jigsaws" suggests that the idea of God may be in the end necessary to make human life meaningful:

But, to be frightened or be brave,
 We crave some emblem for despair,
 And when ice burns and joys are pain
 And shadows grasp us by the hair
 We need one Name to take in vain,
 One taboo to break, one sin to dare.

The end of the poem discriminates between religion based on certainty, argumentation, proofs, the religion which seems no longer to pass muster, and the new religious awareness which professes its ignorance and yet claims the importance of religion, as it answers some deeply held human need:

That God exists we cannot show,
 So do not know but need not care.
 Thank God we do not know; we know
 We need the unknown. The Unknown is There.

In the phrasing of these final lines and in the use of ellipsis the sceptical knowledge, or the negative knowledge of not-knowing, is identified with the positive knowledge of the need of the Unknown. MacNeice's "There" is echoed, albeit in a different tone, as "Here" in Larkin's poem of that title, an epiphanic premonition of the numinous:

...Here is unfenced existence:
 Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

MacNeice's metaphysical strain is palatable because of his other aspect, the empirical one: his attentiveness to particulars and to things. For him,

¹⁷ Terence Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹⁸ Quoted after Terence Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

“close observation has become an aesthetic which carries moral and political implications.”²⁰ MacNeice’s poetry can be read as one of the most accurate literary portraits of the age. The landscape is recognizable: Britain, and Ireland, of the industrialized twentieth century, with its cheap consumerist mass culture. It is worth pointing out that Larkin’s landscape, sometimes referred to as Larkinland,²¹ is similarly located in the *hic et nunc*, according to some critics the secret of his poems’ appeal lies in Larkin’s ability to evoke familiar scenes of the contemporary world. Both poets assume a humble attitude towards facts and things, both try to record the changing surfaces of the world they inhabit, the world familiar to their readers. In both cases one could say that in doing this they are motivated by the fear of losing touch with reality, of being deluded by great words (MacNeice’s “pitiless abstractions”) and theoretical systems.

This empiricism, without which both poets’ metaphysical perspectives would appear groundless and pretentious, is nowhere as evident as in their fondness for the catalogue form. The catalogue, a list of things, leaves things to themselves: things speak in their own name, revealing at the same time the heterogeneous, disordered character of the contemporary world. If as MacNeice himself once said “the poet’s first business is *mentioning* things,”²² then the most natural form of such mentioning is the catalogue. “Like most true poets he relished making catalogues,” notices Longley.²³ All the examples of MacNeice’s catalogues can be supplemented by parallel ones taken from Larkin’s poems. The run-on, unpunctuated lines of “Birmingham”

Cubical scent-bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops

are echoed in Larkin’s accumulation of objects from “Here”:

Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers ...

In “Belfast” MacNeice’s catalogue-like description of supermarkets bears strong resemblance to Larkin’s account of a “Large Cool Store,” a poem written nearly three decades later:

And in the marble stores rubber gloves like polyps
Cluster; celluloid, painted ware, glaring
Metal patents, parchments lampshades, harsh
Attempts at buyable beauty.

[MacNeice]

²⁰ Edna Longley, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²¹ Neil Powell, *Carpenters of Light* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), p. 106.

²² Michael Longley, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. xvii.

...past the heaps of shirts and trousers
 Spread the stands of Modes for Night:
 Machine-embroidered, thin as blouses,
 Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose
 Bri-Nylon Baby Dolls and Shorties
 Flounce in clusters.

[Larkin]

In the catalogues of both these poets one finds predilection for what I called elsewhere "the dissonance effect."²⁴ MacNeice's "marble stores" are contrasted within one line with "rubber gloves," the stanza filled with a succession of images of cheap consumer goods is followed by an image of the "garish Virgin." Dissonant juxtapositions of objects characterize much of Larkin's poetry: "tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives" ("Here"), "the last confetti and advice were thrown" ("The Whitsun Weddings"), "where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet" ("The Whitsun Weddings").

The world of consumer goods is the unreal world which incites consumers, its unwilling, unknowing victims, to search for the perfect world which they promise. The denizens of Birmingham try to "pursue the Platonic Forms with wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to the fickle norms," Larkin's consumers "stare beyond this world, where nothing's made/As new or washed quite clean" ("Essential Beauty").

Both poets often adopt the stance of an outsider or a distant observer: the perspective which enables the poet to present a detached, critical, and yet detailed picture. Being outside guarantees a critical, "less deceived" perspective on things. Larkin exercised this attitude in a series of his now famous poems, such as "Reasons for Attendance" or "The Whitsun Weddings," MacNeice also used it as one possible stance. It is significant that the latter's poetic oeuvre offers a wide range of poems in which the central image is that of a window: "Train to Dublin," "Corner Seat," "The Window," "Windowscape," "Solitary Travel," "Restaurant Car," "Country Week-end," and of course "Snow." MacNeice's windows introduce the theme of being "in-between," but they also suggest an enclosed space, a confinement: the speaker of "Snow" is confined in a room, as much as he is imprisoned in his subjectivity. Similar confinement is implied by the final image of Larkin's "High Windows" where the speaker observes the skies behind the glass: this is a moment of illumination in which the speaker realizes his limitations (i.e. his ignorance) and yet discovers the existence of the Beyond. To Larkin as well as to MacNeice escape into subjectivity is no escape from "this valueless world."

²⁴ Jerzy Jarniewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

Both poets are fond of journey poems: looking at the world through a window of a travelling train or a car offers another opportunity to introduce the stance of a detached observer. Louis MacNeice's poems "Train to Dublin" or "The Wiper" correspond with famous train poems of Philip Larkin: "Here," "The Whitsun Weddings," "I Remember, I Remember."

The literary affiliation between MacNeice and Larkin has been touched upon by several critics and literary historians. One cannot speak simply of a similarity or parallelisms between the two poets, who otherwise developed independently. If some lines from Larkin's poetry echo with MacNeice's voice there is more to it than pure coincidence. As has been noted by a few literary critics Larkin was under the influence of MacNeice's poetry early on in his poetic career, especially during the war years. Andrew Motion, Larkin's biographer, presents a list of books which the future author of *The Less Deceived*, then an undergraduate, borrowed from the Bodleian Library.²⁵ Since "the majority have nothing directly to do with his tutorials," the list can be seen as reflecting the poet's literary interests at that time. Apart from the collections by Auden, Betjeman, and Empson, there are books by Louis MacNeice.

That Larkin was an intent reader of MacNeice's poetry is further testified by his juvenile poems, which, as many critics observe, bear traces of strong influence of MacNeice. Motion notices that a poem which Larkin wrote in 1940, when still in Coventry, "Last Will and Testament," "leans heavily on 'Their last Will and Testament', written by Auden and Louis MacNeice, and published in *Letters from Iceland*."²⁶ When A. T. Tolley discusses the early influences on Larkin's poetry, he observes that before Larkin's switch to Yeats' neoromantic rhetoric, a model much commented upon in Larkin's criticism, he used to be under the influence of the Auden group, including MacNeice, from whom he learnt to "bring the details of the modern world into poetry."²⁷ According to Tolley, the influence of Louis MacNeice and other poets of the Thirties can be found not only in Larkin's undergraduate, pre-Yeatsian verse, but also in his later poems: "it was in the use of a natural language for poetry, begun by the modernists and developed by Auden and MacNeice and their contemporaries, that Larkin showed his great originality, expanding the linguistic range of British poetry."²⁸ Tolley by paying attention to the neglected importance

²⁵ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin. A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 42-43.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

²⁷ A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and Its Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

of the Thirties to Larkin confines himself almost entirely to crediting Auden, MacNeice and other Thirties poets with providing Larkin with a new linguistic stimulus, both in his poetry and in his prose ("The realistic, contemporary idiom of the fiction linked up, at that point, with the poetry of his earlier admirations, Auden and MacNeice, making them again available as models"²⁹). It is worth noticing that in all these cases MacNeice's name is mentioned always in conjunction with Auden; MacNeice is seen only as a representative of the Thirties diction.

Terry Whalen was one of the first critics to write specifically about MacNeice in the context of Larkin's poetry. In his 1986 study *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* he wrote "it is worth saying in passing that Thomas Hardy, William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice are figures who come to mind as influences whose effects on Larkin are likely continually to be noticed and detailed by future critics,"³⁰ and adds in a note: "I am unaware of any study which details Larkin's affinities with Louis MacNeice, but the anti-Modernist, directly experiential temper of much of the poetry of the 1930s is strongly present in both Larkin's aesthetic of poetry and his poetry itself."³¹ Whalen himself, as he noted in the Introduction, only touches upon the subject, specifically in his analysis of "Show Saturday," where he says that the celebratory tone of the poem "in its observation of the plural tumble of life is reminiscent of Louis MacNeice."³² Terry Whalen's expectations that future critics would elaborate on the issue of MacNeice - Larkin affinities proved however mistaken. Despite the proliferation of criticism on Larkin this aspect has not been elaborated, neither did the MacNeice critics comment on the connection between the two poets. Stephen Regan's monograph is to my knowledge the only book, published after Whalen's remark, to return to this issue. Regan repeats several times in his short study, aware that he is working "against the grain," that "the most significant and lasting 'influence' on Larkin's work was the poetry of the 1930's, especially that of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice."³³ Regan stresses the impact of the Thirties poets on Larkin's wartime poetry, claiming that their influence was greater than that of Yeats. In this the critic again sees MacNeice only as the representative of the Thirties aesthetics. But more interestingly he also tries to detect specific influences of MacNeice in Larkin's poems of the later period. The two poems that serve as examples are "Here" and "Show Saturday." In analyzing "Here" Regan quotes Lucas's opinion that Larkin's technique

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

³⁰ Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 8.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 101.

³³ Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 10.

recalls the work of Louis MacNeice, especially in its "abundant compound nouns and adjectives and its tumbling catalogues of objects."³⁴

MacNeice, having suffered from critical negligence in the post war years, has been revalued. It is now evident that his poetry, which cannot be confined to the aesthetics and politics of the Thirties, exerted influence on many poets of the younger generation. Nowhere is this influence better seen than in the works of a group of Irish poets, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin. It is understandable that Irish critics and poets try to reclaim MacNeice as a poet who belongs to the Irish tradition – an aspect of his writing that has long been neglected. But MacNeice, as an individual, not as the Thirties author, nor an Ulster poet, proved an important source of inspiration also for English poets, Philip Larkin being one of them. It seems appropriate to conclude this article with an obituary of MacNeice written by Larkin:

When we were young ... his poetry was the poetry of our everyday life, of shop windows, traffic policemen, ice-cream soda, lawn-mowers, and an uneasy awareness of what the newsboys were shouting. In addition he displayed a sophisticated sentimentality about falling leaves and lipsticked cigarette stubs: he could have written the words of "These Foolish Things." We were grateful to him for having found a place in poetry for these properties ...³⁵

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

³⁵ Quoted after Michael Longley, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.