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# Louis MacNeice: Radio, Poetry and the Aural Imagination

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D

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THESIS  
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## SUMMARY

### **Louis MacNeice: Radio, Poetry and the Auditory Imagination**

The aim of this thesis is to give serious consideration to the relatively neglected radio dramas and features of Louis MacNeice, showing how they were an imaginative and innovative development of what was at the time an avant-garde art form. It gives extensive treatment to radio plays such as MacNeice's *Christopher Columbus* (1942) and *The Dark Tower* (1946) which were a *tour de force* in the genre. MacNeice's radio writing may be underestimated by those approaching it in poetic terms but this is because sound drama is written to be spoken, to be heard; whether in verse or in prose it is not strictly 'poetry', but pure sound. As only a very small number of MacNeice's radio programmes have been preserved as sound recordings, it has been necessary to develop a critical approach to his recorded scripts which is sensitive to the fact that they were primarily intended to be experienced aurally and were written explicitly for a pure-sound medium. There is a need to read his scripts by ear with an auditory imagination. In order to gain as full a sense as possible of how MacNeice's unrecorded scripts would have sounded when broadcast, it has been useful to consult, where possible, the relevant production files in the Written Archives Centre. These files contain MacNeice's detailed notes on his scripts, including descriptions of sound-effects, instructions for tone and quality of voice and the types of music he required; many also contain audience research surveys (or 'Listener Reports') specifically on MacNeice's programmes, and these reports offer a fascinating snapshot of the general public's reaction to the poet's dramas and features, helping to assess more precisely the popular reaction to his radio writing. Through extensive archival research at the Written Archives Centre, it has been possible to provide, in this study, a more comprehensive critical analysis than previous critics of certain radio programmes and to understand more accurately MacNeice's major achievement in the field of British radio.

Despite MacNeice's remarkable success as a radio artist his critics have tended to view his radio writing in terms of how it negatively affected his poetry. This study, however, challenges such notions and shows that MacNeice's work in radio was not, in fact, deleterious to his poetry but rather that it had a considerable creative impact upon his poetic method. The poet's work in the BBC allowed him to test and hone his aesthetic to the point that he was able to bring a compellingly innovative approach to the lyric mode when he returned to it in the mid nineteen-fifties. Indeed, it will be shown that the startling originality of form, tone and overall aural effect of many of MacNeice's later lyrics may well have been impossible of the poet had not first worked in the BBC.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>LMAS</i>	Edna Longley, <i>Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study</i> (1998)
<i>LMPC</i>	Peter McDonald, <i>Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts</i> (1993)
<i>LMSV</i>	Terence Brown, <i>Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision</i> (1975)
<i>SAF</i>	Louis MacNeice, <i>The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography</i> , Ed. E. R. Dodds (1965)
<i>SCLM</i>	<i>Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice</i> . Ed. Alan Heuser (1987)
<i>SPLM</i>	<i>Selected Plays of Louis MacNeice</i> , Ed. Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald. (1993)

All quotations from MacNeice's poetry in the thesis have been taken from the *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*. Eds. Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald (2007). Throughout the thesis, I have italicised all published radio scripts by MacNeice. Unpublished scripts have been placed in inverted commas. All quotations from published plays have been from the *Selected Plays of Louis MacNeice*. Eds. Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald. When quoting from unpublished scripts, I have used the original page number on the script. See Bibliography for further details on unpublished scripts.



## PREFACE

Louis MacNeice's reputation as a writer has been rising steadily since the acceleration of interest and scholarship from the 1970s<sup>1</sup> right up to the present and he is now firmly established as a central poet of the twentieth century. However, his considerable achievement as a poet has somewhat overshadowed his pioneering work in the field of radio. Between the years 1941 and 1963, MacNeice wrote (and often produced) just over 120 radio scripts while working in the BBC. As will be shown, during his career at the BBC MacNeice was to write several radio plays which innovatively and imaginatively developed the radio form and which made a significant contribution to the evolution of British radio drama in the twentieth century. As well as seventeen original radio-plays, MacNeice also made important adaptations of literary material for radio and contributed much semi-dramatized reportage on a diverse range of subjects. However, this achievement in radio remains largely undervalued outside a small group of radio critics. This study considers MacNeice as a major BBC radio dramatist and, for the first time, gives an extensive treatment to radio plays such as MacNeice's *Christopher Columbus* (1942) and *The Dark Tower* (1946) which were a *tour de force* in the genre. In terms of how MacNeice's radio writing is analysed, it is necessary to read his scripts 'by ear', as Alan Heuser recommends (155), for it must be remembered that, although a small portion of MacNeice's radio texts have been published, his scripts are written and designed specifically for a purely aural medium. By approaching MacNeice's radio work with a greater sensitivity, than previous critics, to the ways in which it impacts upon the auditory imagination of the listener, a much more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of his radio art can be achieved.

The second central preoccupation of this study is to examine the complex relationship between MacNeice's poetry and his radio writing. Through analysis of MacNeice's early poetry, it will become apparent that he was an artist who was profoundly sensitive not only to sound in general but also to new forms of aural experience emerging in his lifetime. It will be shown that MacNeice's almost preternatural, aural sensitivity and striking auditory imagination, as revealed in his early poetry, meant that he was well placed to capitalise on the artistic opportunities which the medium of pure sound offered when he began to work for the BBC in 1941. MacNeice's radio work, therefore, can be seen not as an unfortunate deviation from his poetry writing, as some critics have argued, but rather as a continuation and development of his earlier concerns with the aural as reflected in his earlier poetry. It is important to note that when MacNeice began working in radio it was still an exciting, *avant-garde* medium. As Peter McDonald argues, radio:

... seemed, to MacNeice and many others, essentially a new dramatic form, the creative demands of which imposed novel and liberating disciplines upon the imaginative writer. Radio drama was ... a fresh (and, importantly, collaborative) form within which the poetic intelligence might be braced by encountering the demands of the mass audience. (*SPLM* xii)

Although this 'mass audience' for radio was to shrink significantly by the end of MacNeice's career at the BBC, the poet continued to take his work there seriously, investing a large amount of time and effort into writing and producing radio scripts up until his death in 1963. Despite MacNeice's remarkable successes as a radio artist his critics have tended to view his radio writing in terms of how it negatively affected his poetry, helping to foster a general consensus that the poet's radio work siphoned off creative energies which could have been better applied to his poetry. This study, however, challenges such notions, arguing that MacNeice's work in radio was not, in fact, deleterious to his poetry but rather that it had a considerable creative impact upon his poetic method. The poet's work in the BBC allowed him to test and hone his aesthetic to the point that he was able to bring a compellingly innovative approach to the lyric mode when he returned to it in the mid nineteen-fifties. Indeed, it will be shown that the startling originality of form, tone and the overall aural effect of many of MacNeice's later lyrics may well have been impossible if the poet had not first worked in the BBC.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> It was not until almost a decade after Louis MacNeice's death in 1963 that critics of the poet began to produce criticism commensurate with the quality and complexity of his oeuvre. William T. McKinnon stresses the philosophical and metaphysical elements in MacNeice's poetry in his study *Apollo's Blended Dream* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). Terence Brown does full justice to MacNeice's cultural background in Ireland, and provides further analysis of how subtly and pervasively MacNeice's philosophical seriousness informs the poetry in his study *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1975.) In 1982, Robyn Marsack provided further overview of MacNeice's work, making extensive use of archival and manuscript material to elucidate the techniques and evolution of his art, in her study *The Cave of Making the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982.) In the later nineteen-eighties Edna Longley produced a popularly accessible account of the reach and complexity of MacNeice's work in her book, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber 1988.) Peter McDonald, in his *Louis MacNeice: the Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), stressed the multi-contextual importance of MacNeice's work in a well documented study following closely on Edna Longley's acute, succinct and similarly well-balanced study. In 1995, Jon Stallworthy's biography - *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1995) – provided a much needed comprehensive survey of the full familial, social, educational and historical background to MacNeice's career as a writer. Finally, Richard Danson Brown's recent study, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2009), seeks to show MacNeice as the pre-eminent poet of everydayness while also arguing that he is a writer of political and moral non-conformism.

## CHAPTER 1: RADIO, SOUND AND POETRY.

### I

On 30th October 1929, the editor of the *Listener* Harold Nicolson wrote an article outlining contemporary attitudes to the new technological device of radio. It was felt that although the 'wireless' was proving extremely popular with the public at large, intellectuals were on the whole reluctant to become involved with the new mass communications medium:

It is somewhat curious to reflect that the intellectual, who is usually ahead of the herd in matters political, artistic, and literary, appears to be much more cautious and conservative in turning to account those great mechanical inventions which are almost as capable of revolutionizing our mental as our physical life. This is no doubt accounted for by the fact that the intellectual is ordinarily an individualist, very much afraid of having his mental craftsmanship degraded or superseded by mental mass-production. Therefore it has happened that, whilst the common man has avidly reached after that which can give him more cheap entertainment and more variety of enjoyment, the intellectual has often looked upon these things somewhat as we may imagine the last medieval illuminator to have looked upon the first printed books – marvellous achievements, but how mechanical and how easily perverted in their use!

But now we are happy to see all this changing.' (qtd. in Avery 35)

Although Nicolson reports that intellectual attitudes were changing, this passage underlines the ambivalence with which radio was initially received by the critical and artistic establishment. On the one hand it was seen by certain modern writers as an exciting *avant-garde* technology which had created new possibilities for expression and communication; however others saw it as a vulgar medium which threatened traditional forms of theatre and offered hardly anything of artistic significance (Rodger 38). In terms of how radio was received critically, it suffered particularly badly and when broadcasting began in Britain few critics of any standing prophesied that it would ever produce anything of aesthetic value. Unfortunately this attitude has tended to persist into the present and radio artists have been, on the whole, undervalued in the canons of twentieth and twenty-first century criticism (Avery 4-7).

Cyril Connolly's obituary to Louis MacNeice in the *Sunday Times* in 1963 (qtd. In Rodger 45) is symptomatic of this critical prejudice. In it, Connolly argues that MacNeice's

work for the BBC was a waste of his talent and creative energy. According to the radio critic Ian Rodger, Connolly's ignorance of MacNeice's achievement in radio is indicative of a skewed view of the poet's importance to the history of the radio medium:

Though he [Connolly] must have listened on more than one occasion to one of the poet's plays and features on radio, he refused to acknowledge in his obituary that MacNeice had made brilliant use of this miraculous device which allows the poet to share his mental voyaging with a million minds. If he had been blessed with a more perfect historical perspective, Connolly would have remarked that MacNeice belonged to the first generation of poets to be handed this wonder of the air. But Connolly was possessed of an intellectual prejudice which presumes that radio is a waste of time and he could not bring himself to admit that many of MacNeice's plays are classics of the radio genre and that his work had already had an enormous influence upon the work of younger writers. (45)

John Press, in his study of the poet, *Louis MacNeice* (1965), is as dismissive of MacNeice's radio writing as Connolly, arguing that the published scripts, 'for all their ingenuity and skill', are 'unsatisfying and strangely insubstantial'; he goes on to comment that 'their probable fate is to lie neglected in the BBC archives or, at best, to achieve the status of cultural exhibits, like the Masques of the early twentieth century' (22). Such opinions fail to register MacNeice's extremely valuable role in the development of the genre of radio drama and his place within the tradition of experimentation in sound in the early twentieth century. While more recent critical studies and articles have begun to acknowledge the full extent of MacNeice's achievement in radio<sup>i</sup>, at present, Barbara Coulton's *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (1980), is the only published study primarily focused on MacNeice's BBC work; and while Coulton's book is a useful guide through the personal and professional contexts of MacNeice's radio writing it offers only a superficial treatment of his radio texts and also fails to examine, in any depth, the relationship between MacNeice's radio writing and his poetry. MacNeice's radio dramas have still not been analysed to the same degree as the dramas of other prominent radio dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. And this is despite the fact that MacNeice is regarded by many radio artists and radio critics as one of the most important radio dramatists of the twentieth century (McWhinnie 63-69; Rodger 65-70; Drakakis 1-14). One of the purposes of this study is to offer critical perspectives on his radio writing which are more aware of and informed by these contexts and histories. Moreover there is an attempt to regard MacNeice's radio work with a greater degree of seriousness and to acknowledge him as a brilliant pioneer of the radio medium.

Apart from the persistent critical prejudice against radio drama as a genre - the radio critic Tim Crook argues that radio drama has been 'one of the most unappreciated and

understated literary forms of the twentieth century' (1) - another reason why MacNeice's radio dramas remain undervalued and under-represented in the works of MacNeice criticism is that they have generally been judged as unimportant or 'subsidiary' to his poetry (Longley *LMAS* 117) or as an imaginative drain on the more serious business of poetry writing. Derek Mahon, in his essay 'MacNeice, the War and the BBC', suggests that the MacNeice's BBC work was an unfortunate distraction from his poetry and argues that in his last play for radio, *Persons from Porlock* (30<sup>th</sup> August 1963), the poet provides a veiled account of how 'radio impaired his own poetry.' (75) Christopher Holme, in his essay 'The radio dramas of Louis MacNeice', adopts a similar position to Mahon, arguing that the BBC, while 'warm and indulgent' to MacNeice, was ultimately a disruptive influence on his poetry (71). In a similar vein, Robyn Marsack argues that MacNeice's radio writing 'must ... have reinforced tendencies towards superficiality and concentration on detail' (83). Jon Stallworthy contends that 'the scriptwriter's work for the BBC upset the natural balance of the poet's perceptions.' (330) It will be shown in this study that MacNeice's work in radio was not deleterious to his poetry but that its benefits to him as an artist far outweighed any negative effects it might have had. Indeed, his late poetry, in particular, would probably not have achieved such originality of form and voice had MacNeice not first written for the medium of pure sound.

While it may seem that MacNeice's first interaction with experimental sound technology came when he joined the BBC in 1941, it will be suggested here that MacNeice was alive to and artistically engaged with new forms of auditory experience emerging from new and existing sound technologies (such as radio, the gramophone and the telephone) even before joining the BBC in 1941. The poet's early experimentation with sound and sound effects in his early work can be seen usefully within the context of experiments in sound technology by other artists attempting to pioneer new forms of aural experience. MacNeice's engagement with sound media in his poetry is two-fold in that he not only conveyed the changes in how sound and information through sound were being produced and transmitted, but also pointed to the psychological impact and the changing acoustic environment brought about by new sound technologies for a new generation of listeners.

Before discussing MacNeice's early poetry in terms of its relationship to experimentation in sound, it will be useful to give a sense of the contemporary developments in sound technology and to outline certain acoustic experiments in radio and film that contributed to the development of radio technique in the early twentieth century. It will also be pertinent to examine the theories of several audio *avant-gardists* whose work directly or indirectly relates to MacNeice's use of sound in his early poems and provides a more comprehensive context for his subsequent radio work in the BBC. When we return to MacNeice, it will be possible to consider his pre-war poetry within the context of contemporary changes in sound technology and the tradition of experimentation in sound which emerged from these technological

advances. In addition, it will be possible to gauge more accurately what aspects of his pre-war poetry anticipate his later successes in radio and to establish what it was about his poetic imagination that allowed him to adapt so quickly and successfully to working in the medium of sound.

The advent of the new sound technology of radio was part of a larger revolution in technological communication and transportation occurring at the turn of the century and the majority of people living in the West – particularly those living in urban areas - would have had some exposure to these technological developments. As early as 1913, the Italian futurist F. T. Marinetti was pointing to the possible implications of these changes:

Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the aeroplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life) do not realize that these various means of communication, transportation and information have a decisive influence on their psyches.

An ordinary man can in a day's time travel by train from a little dead town of empty squares, where the sun, the dust, and the wind amuse themselves in silence, to a great capital city bristling with lights, gestures, and street cries... For the keen observer, however, these facts are important modifiers of our sensibility because they have caused the following significant phenomena: Acceleration of life to today's swift pace. Physical, intellectual, and sentimental equilibration on the cord of speed stretched between contrary magnetisms. Multiple and simultaneous awareness in a single individual. (Marinetti 49)

While we may be wary of his bombastic language, Marinetti's commentary is useful in that it emphasizes the psychological effects of these various types of communication and transportation. He points to the transformation in perception which was occurring in the minds of those living amongst these new technologies and the changes that were occurring in their environment: the greater rapidity of movement, the quicker and more compact dissemination of information and the increased exposure of a single mind to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives emanating from different locations simultaneously. While Marinetti attempts to record the effect of new media technology on the public at large, the present study is also concerned with how artists were developing sound technology from within and how writing in a purely aural medium was challenging and changing modes of expression and provoking new means of communication.

The nineteenth century had created, through the phonograph, expectations of a new world of sound reproduction, but the early twentieth century realized new possibilities for sound generation. The 1920s saw the development of the first electrical instruments, such as the

Theremin and the first electronic organ. Wireless telephony opened up vast new possibilities for sound distribution and for mass communication. In 1920, the first radio station to transmit regular broadcasts went on the air in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; on November 1922, the BBC made its first broadcast, establishing itself as the first radio station in Europe (Crook 21-36).

These new technologies had helped to create new types of soundscapes and the environment and atmosphere that could now be evoked through sound had the potential to be radically different to the domestic world of the listener. Just as works of art could be mass-produced in print, the unique performance of a virtuoso violinist or the subtle tones of a lead baritone could be recorded for all time, to be replayed at will. Sound could now be objectified and removed from the agency producing it. For the first time ever the general public could hear voices or music from opposite ends of the globe, emitting from a single audio device in the comfort of their own homes. Marshal McLuhan was undoubtedly right in his realisation that modern electronic communications were creating a 'global village'; yet his empirical and philosophical exploration of this notion was certainly predated by Rudolph Arnheim's book *Radio*, written in 1936, which gives a sense of the wonder and excitement which radio generated when it first emerged onto the world stage. He devotes his 'Introduction' to a lyrical description of sitting in the harbour of a southern Italian fishing village. The café proprietor tunes in a large radio set and fishermen watching their catch being brought home hear an English announcer introducing folk songs in German. Then the dial is returned to an Italian station playing a French chansonette: 'This is the great miracle of the wireless. The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overlapping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importance of culture on the waves of the ether, the same fare for all, sound in silence.'(13-14) When one realises that there were forty million radio sets scattered around the globe in 1936 it is tempting to see parallels between the emergence of radio in the 1930s and the proliferation of the internet in the 1990s (Crooks 9). Indeed, it seems plausible to suggest that the ever expanding global village of today has its roots in radio, although radio's early network of communications has transmogrified into a multi-dimensional nexus of world media. If new sound technologies such as radio were having a profound impact in the socio-cultural sphere as Arnheim suggests, then they were also a radical influence on certain artists and writers, inspiring them to think creatively about the use of sound and the effects and challenges of communicating purely in the aural medium.

One of the centres for innovation in the use of sound in the 1920s and 30s, particularly in radio, was Germany. Radio attracted numerous innovative theorists and practitioners who were encouraged in their pursuits, according to Mark Cory, by the pluralism characteristic of Weimar culture (Cory 323). As in Britain, broadcasting was initially a state monopoly; nevertheless, a specific genre of *Horspiel* ('play for hearing') developed, which included drama written expressly to exploit the resources of radio and an *avant-garde* radiophonic art, which



used sound materials in a way that was not only non-visual but non-text based as well. Composers in this new experimental art created works that were variously described as ‘sound symphonies’, ‘sound portraits’ and ‘acoustical film’ (Cory 339).

The term ‘acoustical film’ was coined by the German radio producer Alfred Braun and used to describe a work devised by him called ‘The Sounding Stone’ which was broadcast on German radio in 1926. Describing what he meant by the phrase, he reveals how the methods and practices of the new technology of film had evolved into and affected those of radio - its younger cousin:

Acoustical films - so we called a piece for radio in those days in Berlin in which a radio director had to create both his own original material and his working script – were works which transferred quite consciously the techniques of cinema to radio, so that images, superimposed images, alternating and blending close-ups and distant shots. Each of the short images was positioned on a particular acoustical plane, surrounded by a particular set:

- 1 minute street with the loud music of Leipzig
- 1 minute protest march;
- 1 minute stock market on the day of the crash;
- 1 minute factory with its machine symphony;
- 1 minute soccer stadium;
- 1 minute train station;
- 1 minute train underway. (qtd. in Cory 341)

The influence on radio of the slightly more mature medium has long been acknowledged and here we see the application of the cinematic technique of the ‘mix’. This particular method was applied regardless of whether an extant drama was being adapted for radio, a literary piece created especially for the new medium, or a series of sound images assembled into an acoustical film. Arnheim writing from the perspective of 1936 praises ‘filmic wireless plays’ by which he means works using pre-recorded material on film strips ‘cut properly afterwards and mounted as sound film’.(25)

The only German film filmmaker of note to contribute directly to radio art during the Weimar period was Walter Ruttmann, whose 1927 documentary *Berlin – Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin – Symphonie einer Grostadt*) has become a cinematic milestone for its skilful use of montage. In 1928 Ruttmann recorded a brief sound montage, which was broadcast as *Weekend* (*Wochenende*) (Cory 340). There was no picture, just sound (which was broadcast). It was the story of a weekend, from the moment the train leaves the city until the whispering lovers are separated by the approaching, home-struggling crowd. It was a symphony of sound,

speech fragments and silence woven into a poem. The economy, brevity and precision of this acoustic mosaic were to become a key signature of *avant-garde* radio art.

Cinema's influence on radio was certainly significant, but the relationship was not one-sided and the stimulating effects of new sound technologies could also be felt on the visual medium. The new way of hearing environmental sounds precipitated by innovations in sound art appeared in numerous contexts. For example, Dziga Vertov, the Russian artist whose development of the theory of *kino-glez* or camera eye gave birth to *cinema vérité*, was propelled towards new cinematic techniques through a sudden prescient intuition of what might be done with recorded sound:

Upon returning from the train station, there lingered in my ears the signs and rumble of a departing train ... someone swearing ... a kiss ... someone's exclamation ... laughter, a whistle, voices, the ringing station's bell, the puffing locomotive ... whispers cries, farewells...And thoughts while walking: I must get a piece of equipment that won't describe, but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise it's impossible to organize, edit them. They rush past, like time. But the movie camera perhaps? Record the visible...Organize not the audible, but the visible world. Perhaps that's the way out? (qtd. in Kahn 57)

This way of hearing environmental sound is evident in Marinetti's use of the war zone in his 'onomatopoetic reportage' and sound poetry which Douglas Kahn describes as a 'phonographic celebration of militarism'(68). In their 1933 manifesto 'La Radia' Marinetti and Pino Masnata included - along with more fantastic claims - many of the specific features of the new treatment of sound: 'The utilization of noises sounds chords harmonies musical or noise at various distances, that is, spatial drama joined with temporal drama' and 'The characterization of the silent or semi-silent atmosphere that surrounds and colours a given voice sound or noise' (qtd. in Kahn and Whitehead 265-266). In 1925 the German composer Kurt Weill similarly announced the goal of 'searching through the entire acoustical landscape for sources and means - regardless of whether they be called music or sounds - to structure one's own art.' (qtd. in Kahn and Whitehead 12) As this vast universe of sound pressed upon artists' imagination and began to pattern out their work, a reconceptualization of the listener as a more strongly active and creative participant was also encouraged or required. Marinetti and Masnata quote Alfred Goldsmith of Radio City for his view that Marinetti's electric theatre 'cannot do without a work of integration, an effort of intelligence on the part of the spectators.'(qtd. in Kahn and Whitehead 267).

Bertolt Brecht claimed that the existing limitations of radio lay in the one-sided use of what could be a two-sided medium and he argued for the conversion of radio from 'a

distribution system to a communication system.’ For Brecht this meant transforming ‘the reports of [the] rulers into answers of the questions of the ruled’ and ‘confronting excluding powers with an organisation of the excluded’(Brecht 119). It also meant experiments such as *Lehrstück* (pedagogical piece) – a dramatic form that assigned a spoken or sung part to *der Horer* (the listener) as a way of developing ‘a collaboration between participant and apparatus’ as well as inculcating a communal ethic among a group of listeners (Brecht 120). The listener’s role, it is true, involved the strict coordination of choral recitation, but Brecht’s purpose was to prevent the kind of free association and indulgence in personal emotion that he thought habitually distracted audiences away from the music. Brecht was not simply suggesting that radio should be employed as a mechanism that required a uniform response from its audience, he allowed his listener to be a free thinker: ‘But possibly you will come to quite a different conclusion. To which I am the last person to object.’(124)

In Britain, the BBC had been creating a small body of works that paralleled the development of radio art in the Weimar culture in Germany. The British system created a radio-specific environment that allowed producers to manipulate sound on the model of film shots and cuts. The BBC’s emphasis on radiophonic invention began with its first chief engineer, Peter Eckersley, who was formerly an engineer for the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company. Eckersley became one of the original staff members of the newly formed British Broadcasting Company, handpicked by John Reith, the company’s first general manager (later to become its first Director General when the BBC became a public corporation in 1927). Eckersley was a brilliant inventor and his legacy to the BBC at the time of his departure in 1929 included, in addition to the powerful long-wave transmitter at Daventry, a laboratory culture committed to realizing the technical and artistic vision of a new breed of engineer-artist and producer-artist (Fisher 72-72). Partly because of Eckersley’s formidable influence, an elite research unit was mandated by Reith to nurture the radio form as unique medium of expressiveness: ‘The original Research Section was formed in 1928...with an undefined roving commission to browse over the whole field of programmes, to initiate ideas, to experiment generally.’ (Gielgud 27) The organization of such a unit fell to Lance Sieveking who, together with Archie Harding, developed an independent laboratory of sound in the midst of an institution that was otherwise highly prescriptive and firmly controlled.

Sieveking joined the BBC in 1924, commencing his acoustic experiments in 1926 with a one studio/one microphone<sup>ii</sup> dramatised documentary called *The Seven Ages of Mechanical Music*. His 1928 piece *First Kaleidoscope, a Rhythm, Representing the Life of Man from Cradle to Grave* was a dramatic work for radio which was striving to be acoustic art on its own terms (Sieveking 30-35). As Ruttman would do for *Weekend*, Sieveking utilised jazz to signal changes from one psychological state to another. Sieveking refused to describe the work as a play or radio drama, and called it ‘a study in rhythm,’ its sounds ‘welded together’ into a

‘music shape and rhythm’ with an ‘original and compulsive effect.’(qtd. in Geldgud 27). Sieveking also coined the term *radiogenic* to describe the modern sound and experimental design of new programmes, billed as ‘features.’(2)

One of the most important features in these early years of the BBC was Archie Harding’s *Crisis in Spain* 1931 (rpt in. Scannell and Cardiff 234-256). The programme was a drama of distances - a collage of dance and military music, speeches, street sounds, and voices from within Spain. Harding subjected these elements to interruption and commentary by the international and national press in their diverse languages. According to Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, the programme goal was to make the issues come alive just before a discussion programme about the abdication of the Spanish monarchy, sponsored by Hilda Matheson’s Talks Department. (154). By using the filmic principles of montage (contrast, close-up and distance ‘shots’, superimposition, juxtaposition, and interruption), Harding was able to create an impressionistic collage of sound that occurred in ‘altered’ time. According to Margaret Fisher: ‘What kept the collage of sound focused on the civil war in Spain was his [Harding’s] creation of two limited menus of sound. One contained the recognizable diurnal rhythms of life in Spain; the other was made up of the sound of news reports about Spain from around the world’(79). The function of the news reports, which did not refer directly to the sounds heard, was to offer indirect commentary on the unfolding daily changes in the quality of life, as indicated by the following production note from the script: ‘The following sequence expresses the irresistible advance of the revolutionary movement in terms of announcements from radio stations all over Spain, interrupting rather ironically the even tenor of daily commercial broadcasting of dance music.’(qtd. in Scannell and Cardiff 257). Through this method Harding had managed to promote the listener’s psychological involvement in the drama, so that the listener formed impressions as if he or she had experienced events directly rather than through a producer or a narrator. Between them, Sieveking and Harding had allowed radio to take huge strides forward in terms of what was artistically possible and taken major steps towards finding the true form for the new medium.

Taken together, these various aural experiments in radio fostered a new approach to sound: the use of all sounds and noises as artistic materials, the treatment of all sounds and musical materials as equal, pointillism and montage techniques, and an opposition to the passive model of technological reception with a concern about the active engagement of the listener. What was evolving and emerging therefore during the early decades of the twentieth century was a new acoustical perception, one closely related to the experience of listening to and working with new electronic media. It is my belief that, allowing for the difference in the medium, we can recognise this new acoustical perception in the poetry of Louis MacNeice.

## II

Before relating MacNeice's poems directly to these ideas about radio, sound technology and new forms of acoustical experience, it will be necessary to examine how sound and aural experience operated in the world of his poetry. That he was a poet whose five senses were alive to the world of experience is a fact borne out by so many of his poems and in particular his shorter early lyrics such as 'Snow' (January, 1935), 'Morning Sun' (1935) or 'Mayfly' (1929). In such poems the reader is brought into a highly sensuous world in which sounds, sights, tastes and smells are juggled together in apparent disorder and unrefined delight; yet when one looks below this dazzling surface, there lies a kernel of meaning, a series of signature motifs or symbols which are controlled and directed by MacNeice's exacting intelligence and personal vision. In order to unlock the deeper resonances in MacNeice's work, critics have tended to focus on *visual* motifs - the colour of his poetry - such as the pattern of darkness in opposition to light. Edna Longley for example, reads MacNeice's early childhood experiences of light and colour into his later concerns as a poet:

Psychoanalysing his early poetry ... MacNeice notes "images of fear, anxiety, loneliness or monotony ... He also diagnoses reaction against a "stone death" in the shape of "an excessive preoccupation with things dazzling, high-coloured, quick moving, hedonistic or up-to-date". "When We Were Children" recalls the initial attraction of his very medium as colour and dazzle: "words were coloured...And language was a prism". Thus MacNeice's poetry like (Yeats's) was founded on contraries, on a "basic conception of life [as] dialectical". And his dialectical frequency pits darkness against light, petrification against flux, Puritanism against hedonism. Light is the inclusive symbolism for all the positives...' (Longley *LMAS* 17)

While Longley offers a precise recognition of one of the primary oppositions from which MacNeice's poetry fires, it should be noted that the aural dimension of MacNeice's work – the sound effects and the images of sound – are equally important in tracing the roots of his art.

MacNeice himself was conscious of this dimension to his work and in charting the connections between his earliest experiences and his later poetry in 'Experiences with Images' 1949, he points to the artistic significance of the sounds which pervaded his childhood mind and which were to sustain in his adult memory:

I was born in 1907 in Belfast and brought up on the northern shore of Belfast Lough, i.e., in a wet, rather sombre countryside where linen mills jostled with primitive rustic cottages and farmyard noises and hooters more or less balanced each other. Thus the factory entered into my childhood's mythology long before I could place it in any social picture. As for the sea,

it was something I hardly ever went on but there it was always, not visible from our house but registering its presence through foghorns. It was something alien, foreboding, dangerous and only very rarely blue. But at the same time (since I was ten I had only once crossed it) it was a symbol of escape. So was the railway which ran a hundred yards below our house but N.B. the noise of trains – and this goes for the foghorns and the factory hooters too – had a significance apart from what caused the noise; impinging on me before I knew what they meant, i.e. where they came from, these noises had as it were a purely physical meaning which I would find it hard to analyse...These things sound trivial but they form an early stratum of experiences which persists in one's work just as it persists in one's dreams. (SCLM 158)

The difficulty that MacNeice had as a child in analysing sounds and attempting to demystify their more oblique significance is suggested in the poem 'Carrick Revisited' (June, 1945):

Fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell  
Half-heard through boarded time as a child in bed  
Glimpses a brangle of talk from the floor below  
But cannot catch the words. Our past we know  
But not its meaning – whether it meant well. (263)

Here, MacNeice's past is invoked through the sounds which framed his early childhood and his attempt to clarify that past is figured as a child (a young MacNeice we may imagine) fumbling for words and for sense in a squabble of noisy talk which is happening just beyond the bounds of his perception. MacNeice's description of himself as glimpsing or seeing the squabble of talk suggests a complex synaesthetic response to aural events - sound becomes something visible (or tactile even) as auditory impression transforms itself into visual description.

From his earliest childhood and right through his adult life, MacNeice was highly alert to the signifying potential of the aural world as well as the visual; he was aware too that the droning foghorns, the piercing sirens and the chugging trains in the distance had sunk deep into his psyche, becoming enmeshed in his own private patterns of meaning to be arranged and rearranged subconsciously before surreptitiously entering his poems, having been freighted with greater symbolic power. Sounds acquired meaning aside from the purely literal, becoming abstracted from their environmental context and mapped on to the 'esoteric mythology' which MacNeice formulated to structure his early poems (MacNeice, *Blind Fireworks* 1). This early poetry became for MacNeice, aside from many other things, a way of making sense of these remembered sounds and by proxy a way of making sense of his first childhood traumata.

In the poem 'Reminiscences of Infancy' (1926) we see how integral sound is to the 'mythic terrain of MacNeice country' and how it functions in MacNeice's private mythology (Stallworthy 142):

Trains came threading quietly through my dozing childhood,  
Gentle murmurs nosing through a summer quietude,  
Drawing in and out, in and out, their smoky ribbons,  
Parting now and then, and launching full-rigged galleons  
And scrolls of smoke that hung in shifting epitaph.  
Then distantly the noise declined like a descending graph,  
Sliding downhill gently to the bottom of the distance  
(For now all things are there that all were here once);  
And so we hardly noticed when that metal murmur came.  
But it brought us assurance and comfort all the same,  
And in the early night they soothed us to sleep,  
And the chain of rolling wheels bound us in deep  
Till all was broken by the sound of the sea,  
That steel-bosomed siren calling bitterly. (615)

The trains, which assure, comfort and soothe to sleep with their gentle murmuring and 'smoky ribbons', invoke the poet's mother who is expressed elsewhere simply as 'gently, gently, gentleness'. Yet this description takes on a more melancholy aspect if seen in the context of MacNeice's mother's tragic death when he was just seven and the smoky scrolls of 'shifting epitaph' must certainly relate her death. The poet's memory of his mother's presence is primarily one of hushed slow movement and harmonious, unspoken connection. This aural world of MacNeice's childhood is cleverly conveyed in this poem as sibilant and assonant phrases roll off one another, rendering the hiss and chug of the passing trains with a subtle precision. The reader too becomes susceptible to the soft downward *glissando* of sound generated by the poem's cadences and this aural perception is expanded into the visual (even geometrical) sphere as the poet imagines the train's noise declining like a descending graph and sloping into the far distant horizon.

However, the tranquil world of nostalgic daydream is abruptly shattered in the final two lines by the sinister 'steel-bosomed siren' calling bitterly from the sea. The poem's last-minute *volte face* from relaxed, lyrical reminiscence to stark, menacing nightmare is achieved to great effect through the jarring repetition of 'b' sounds ('bound', 'broken', 'bosomed', 'bitterly') which jolt the reader out from the dozy languid rhythms of the previous twelve lines. It is significant too that the sound of the sea, which had formerly registered its 'alien and

foreboding presence' in MacNeice's infant mind as distant foghorns, has now become a '*steel-bosomed siren*'; After his mother's death, MacNeice was left in the care of his father and to MacNeice's childhood mind the man who 'made the walls resound' seemed almost her binary opposite – 'My mother was comfort and my father was somewhat alarm' as he writes in his unfinished autobiography *The Strings are False* (1965) (32). As Jon Stallworthy observes, the poem 'makes the same transition from comfort to alarm, the voice he would forever associate with his mother's replacement, "The steel-bosomed siren calling bitterly"' (132). Commenting on this poem in 'Experiences with Images', MacNeice makes no reference to either his mother or his father, suggesting that this was not an entirely conscious representation of this transition. It seems highly possible therefore – particularly in the context of his other early poems - that MacNeice, in writing this poem, dipped into his early stratum of experience and spliced the foghorn-noise of the ocean with the alarming tones of his father's voice, forging in the smithy of his imagination a new and terrifying incarnation which is made manifest in the final lines. This process was perhaps a means of catharsis or a way of organising traumatic and deeply confusing experiences into definable shapes and figures which could at least be identified and faced or heard directly.

A similar pattern is again discernable in another poem from the same volume; in 'Child's Terror' (1926), we initially find the poet in a kind of prelapsarian state – a garden in which 'Each arbor'd tongue / lisp'd me music, the rain dropped me music, / and I replied to music being young.' (615) Yet shadows soon emerge over this world of Innocence

Then Autumn came, deciduous and bland,  
 And drew its yellow lace across the window  
 While Maria practiced pianoforte scales  
 And the clock was practicing scales. But I planned  
 To mount the swing and escape – prance, swing, prance,  
 A bride to meet the surpliced choir of clouds;  
 Climb the heights of cathedral chime;  
 Can you not hear their nuptial voices calling? (616)

Just as a dialectic emerges between the colours of Innocence and those of Experience in the poem, the sound of a mechanical clock ticking and the dull repetition of scales in fixed time begin to infringe upon the natural music as heard and responded to by the young poet. Yet the narrator still strives to ascend the sky and marry into its redemptive harmonies, seeking in the music of the clouds a means of escape. MacNeice's association between cloud, music and escape may well have begun while listening to his mother play songs when he was young: 'in the dining room there was a harmonium and in the drawing room there was a piano and, if my



mother drew up her chair to either, something would come out like a cloud – A Green Hill Far Away which was the same as a Fairy Mount’ (*SAF* 37). Music implied movement and ascent to a distant and alluring landscape, a kind of fantasy or dreamland. The narrator however does not reach this hoped for destination and the desired union collapses as the child’s ‘laggard swing’ breaks. It is not long before the tone changes and former dreams are lost.

I fell in a nightmare down suddenly  
Into a hole without bottom. Music  
Died above my head, died in silence.  
Mute is the lute and the flute and the drum  
And the trumpet dumb; and I have lost my swing  
That I thought would climb the sky. But now falling,  
Dropping plumb, listening to silence ... (616)

Underneath the world of flux, the world of spring sunlight and raindrop music where trees are voluble in song, there lurks an underworld of dark and deadening silence that renders life’s music mute. The narrator again moves abruptly into nightmare as the pitch of the poem is lowered. Like the child we are left syntactically in silence by the poet’s strategically placed ellipsis; there is also an implication that whatever is happening has been repressed or that it is too horrifying for words. In this sudden vacuum of sound, only the machinery of a clock can be heard and as the poem ends the child frantically calls to the nurse: ‘Only tell me I am alive again / ... And stop the clock, nurse, stop the clock’ (617). The ticking clock only serves to punctuate the silence rather than relieve it and its turning hands insidiously connote the march of time and the decay, atrophy and death that it will render. The child’s plea to stop the monotonous and repetitive sound may well have been inspired by the dreams experienced by MacNeice when he was younger. As he grew up these dreams ‘got worse and worse’:

Where earlier I had had dreams of being chased by mowing machines or falling into machinery or arguing with tigers who wanted to eat me I now was tormented by something much less definite, much more serious. There was a kind of a noise that I felt rather than heard, ‘ah...ah...ah’, a grey monotonous rhythm which drew me in towards a centre as if there were a spider at the centre drawing in his thread and everything else was unreal.’ (*SAF* 45-6)

If we examine the poem ‘Intimations of Mortality’ (July 1935), the riddle of this ambiguous and harrowing sound may become slightly clearer. The context is again the world of a young

boy fearing the onset of disturbing dreams. As the boy falls to sleep his reality begins to grow strange:

The shadows of the banisters march march,  
All is above board, order is restored,  
Time on horseback under a Roman arch.

Then the final darkness for eight hours  
The murderous grin of toothy flowers,  
The tick of his pulse in the pillow, the sick  
Vertigo of falling in a fanged pit.

...

The night watchman crossed his thumbs  
Grows an idol. The Kingdom comes ... (22)

MacNeice's nightmare has clearly made its way into his poetry here and it seems that the grey 'monotonous rhythm' which he felt may well have been the beat of the blood in his veins. Even the sound of his own pulse, the physical sound of his very existence, signifies the beat of time as the shadow of death lurks ominously over life.

Sounds for MacNeice were not only harbingers of fear and loss. They also deeply affected his conscience, invoking feelings of guilt and a sense of evil. In *The Strings are False*, MacNeice describes how, when he was twelve, sounds from the outside world acted as catalysts for the inner turmoil brought about by his mentally disabled brother Willie returning to care in Scotland:

When he left in a fortnight to return to his institution I felt a great relief but a guilt that more than balanced it. And the bloom had gone off the Dorset hills. And the boys at Sherborne seemed suddenly terribly young; I had learned their language but they could not learn mine, could never breathe my darkness. I invented a prayer to keep off the evil, would say it to myself any hour of the day in the house or the street, putting my hands over my ears to keep out the noise of the world. My stepmother asked me if I had pains in my ears, perhaps I really ought to see a specialist. (75)

The noise of the world seems to echo the confusion MacNeice feels about his brother's departure and the only strategy of avoiding the wave of guilt he feels is to retreat into an inner sanctum in which an invented prayer acts a shield to these malign thoughts. Chanting a prayer he had created - his own words in his own rhythms - was perhaps a means of control; a method

of resisting the loneliness of living in an uncertain world harassed by sinister sounds over which he was powerless to stop.

In 'The Ear' this state of helplessness and vulnerability to the signifying power of sound is disturbingly expressed:

There are many sounds which are neither music nor voice,  
There are many visitors in masks or in black glasses  
Climbing the spiral staircase of the ear. The choice  
Of callers is not ours. Behind the hedge  
Of night they wait to pounce. (201)

MacNeice, here, renders an extraordinary image of the inner ear open to unknown sinister figures ascending its complex spiral structure. Emphasis is placed on the sheer physicality of the act of hearing and the insidiousness of certain sounds for MacNeice. In the second stanza the poet argues that it would be desirable to 'lie alone in a deaf hollow/ Cocoon of self where no person or thing would speak'. For MacNeice however, who is particularly sensitive to the world's phenomena (due perhaps to the poetic cast of his imagination), this strategy of attempted escape into silence is doomed:

In fact we lie and listen as a man might follow  
A will o'the wisp in an endless eyeless bog,  
Follow the terrible drone of cockchafer, or the bleak  
Oracle of a barking. (202)

MacNeice cannot prevent himself from processing these sounds, or from mulling over their meanings as they reverberate along his consciousness. The sounds act as aural stimulants which energise the demons and dark figures that haunt his waking mind and people his nightmares.

It is clear then that an acute perception of sounds and noises was an integral part of MacNeice's early stratum of experience. In his earliest poetry these aural perceptions are usually confined to the private sphere of MacNeice's consciousness. The voices heard tend to be those of his family and the noises are usually experienced in the private and domestic context. While these sound-symbols may at times acquire a universal resonance, the poems often tend to deal with more obscure private significances. As MacNeice evolved as a poet he became more open to public sources of inspiration and more aware of the realities of life for the normal city dweller in England. After attaining a double First in 1930 from Oxford University, where he studied Classics and Philosophy, MacNeice took a lecturing position at Birmingham University. He was appointed to the post while still an undergraduate, not least because of the

benevolent influence of E.R. Dodds, who was also lecturing there and who would go on to become MacNeice's friend and mentor. Dodds encouraged MacNeice to pay more attention to what was going on in the world around him and to expand his horizons from the narrow world of English boarding schools, Oxford, and academia. After MacNeice's first wife Mary Ezra left him this process became even more rapid; being very lonely in the house which he had previously shared in nuptial happiness, he 'began to go out a great deal and discovered Birmingham. Discovered the students were human...' (*SAF* 154). This process of discovering a city was reflected in the changing aesthetic of MacNeice's writing. In the poetry of this period we begin to see MacNeice's private stock of sound-symbols become enmeshed in the larger soundscapes of urban and suburban Britain (i.e. in the cities of Birmingham, London, and Belfast.) As his perspective became more outward looking and more inclusive, his poetry begins to include an expanded repertoire of sounds, noises and voices and to tap into the changing aural culture of the time.

In the poem 'Sunday Morning' for example, it is possible to trace MacNeice's private patterns and soundscapes as applied in a more public sphere – in this case the suburbs of Birmingham. The poet initially focuses on the escapist, leisurely potential of a Sunday afternoon.

For this is Sunday Morning, Fate's great bazaar;  
Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now.  
And you may grow to music or drive beyond Hindhead anyhow,  
Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast  
That you can catch a fringe or two of the windy past,  
That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time  
A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme. (21)

Again, the poet presents the motif of a transcendent music to which one can ascend. It is a music which grows outside the normal perception of time; a music which can only exist in a heightened state of awareness, a quasi dream-like state or hyper-reality comparable to the feeling of travelling at high velocity – the heady rush of a speeding car poised dramatically on two wheels between accelerated movement and potential destruction. In this enhanced form of consciousness time becomes increasingly relative, bending and stretching far enough, perhaps, to clutch one's past. Yet the idea of time as malleable only exists and sustains in the abstract formulae of Einstein's physical universe or in such fantasy literature as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; in other words, to evade the constricts of normal time involves a profound imaginary leap and a stretching of the boundaries of what's accepted as possible or plausible.

As the poem will show, 'normality' or 'real life' soon catches up with the means of escape – the car will eventually stop and the vision inevitably collapse.

Just as the feeling of comfort and the hope of transcendent synthesis are undermined and haunted by the sinister sounds of clocks in 'Child's Terror', or sirens in 'Reminiscence of Infancy', the hermetically sealed seemingly boundless 'small eternity' reached for in the poem is blown apart by the tolling of another sound from MacNeice's private stock of sound symbols – the church bell. The previous lines, with their steady stream of conjunctions building to a crescendo, create a subtle momentum which is abruptly lost before the poem's final sequence. The pause between the first stanza and the final sequence is effectively exploited by the poet, who unleashes a highly evocative sound in the silent air created by the poem's form. The last sequence begins in a very different tone: 'But listen, up the road, something gulps' (21). The poet directs the reader to focus on the aural sense, contextualises the sound about to be heard and then begins his disturbing description. The clipped rhythm created by the short phrases, combined with the sinister mood invoked brings the reader back to a bleak reality; the looming sound effect seems to strain outwards no longer safely 'self-contained in rhyme': 'the church spire /Opens its eight bells out, skulls mouths which will not tire/ To tell how there is no music or movement which secures/ Escape from the weekday time which deadens and endures.' (21) Again music and movement are undone by the mordant tolling of time as symbolised in this instance by the church bell. As MacNeice tells us in 'Experiences with Images', this sound had a particular and personal significance which takes on a slightly different meaning in the poem:

My father being a clergyman, his church was a sort of annex to the home – but rather a haunted annex (it was an old church and there were several things in it which frightened me as a child). Which is one reason, I think, though I would also maintain that the sound is melancholy anyhow, why church bells have for me a sinister association, e.g. in my poem 'Sunday Morning' (1933) ... in this example, however (where I was thinking of the Birmingham suburbs) I have rationalized or twisted my original association which would have suggested rather 'escape from *Sunday* time' ... which had seemed to preclude music and movement and the growth of anything but stalactites and stalagmites. (*SCLM* 159)

In this poem, therefore, MacNeice has begun to weave his own imaginative response to the sounds from his past into the lives of those living in English suburbia in the present. They too are subject to Time's deadening force, just as the reader is.

Bells are a recurrent symbol or leitmotif in MacNeice's poetry and may be understood as signifying across a number of private and public contexts. In 'An Eclogue for Christmas' (December 1933) for example, the 'evil bells' ring out, hinting at the social and political crises of the thirties. In 'The Sunlight on the Garden' (1937), tintinnabulation coupled with 'every

evil/ Iron siren' are set against skyward flight and freedom. Like much of MacNeice's early poetry these sounds ripple across a private layer of MacNeice's consciousness invoking loss, rupture, guilt and longing; the idea of a garden's boundaries being threatened by exterior sounds is a well worn trope in MacNeice's work at this point. Yet these sounds have acquired a more popular significance, functioning as public omens of war, especially the siren which would soon become a universal symbol of bombing and mechanised destruction. Indeed the siren could be described as an iconic sound of the period, as potent in aural culture as the swastika became in visual culture.

Yet bells do not *always* toll ominously for MacNeice. In the poem 'Meeting Point' (April 1939), the poet experiences a temporary stay against their deathly chime. The poem recounts MacNeice's experience of sitting at a table in a restaurant with Eleanor Clark, an American writer with whom he had fallen in love while in America. For MacNeice life seemed to stop in timeless, motionless equipoise as Love rendered its own sacred silence immune to workaday time.

The bell was silent in the air  
Holding its inverted poise –  
Between the clang and clang a flower,  
A brazen calyx of no noise  
The bell was silent in the air. (183)

In contrast to the poems mentioned earlier, the poet's experience of life in transcendent harmony is not brutally undercut – 'the streams music did not stop' he tells us. In this strange timeless zone in which two people are fleetingly unified as one, clocks forget them and a 'radio waltz' flows to them mysteriously 'like water from a rock'. For once the integrity of the moment holds (in the poem in any case) and the imperatives of time, as represented by the bells and clocks, do not register their aural presence. The bell remains 'silent in the air' and the poet outside of time in the amber world of Love's forgetfulness. However 'Meeting Point' is an unusual poem in MacNeice's oeuvre for the very fact that time does indeed remain 'away'. The poem 'Morning Sun' (1935), for example, is more typically MacNeicean in that any connections observed by the poet become susceptible to Time's destructive force. Set in a city street in Birmingham, the poem also underlines MacNeice's expanding aural awareness when compared to his earlier poems: 'Crowds of people all in vocative, you and you / The haze of morning shot with words.'<sup>15</sup> MacNeice delights in the sensory pleasure of the crowd's voice with words flitting across the morning light as people call to each another. This sense of joyous connection and communication is blessed by the sun which seems to unify the whole. And it is

not just human voices that we hear, music and mechanical noises are also woven into the rich soundscape.

Everything is kissed and reticulated with sun  
Scooped-up and cupped in the open fronts of shops  
And bouncing on the traffic which never stops.  
...  
Whistled bars of music crossing silver sprays  
And horns of cars, touché, touché, rapiers retort, a moving cage,  
A turning page of sound and shine ... (15)

Yet as in the other poems set in childhood, the harmony cannot persist and as evening encroaches the rich patterns of sound and light dissolve:

But when the sun goes out, the streets go cold, the hanging meat  
And tiers of fish are colourless and merely dead,  
And the hoots of cars neurotically repeat and the tiptoed feet  
Of women hurry and falter whose faces are dead ... (15)

Car horns become vacant singular noises repeating with the inevitability of a ticking watch or a tolling bell. As the evening falls and the day passes, the once vibrant landscape becomes merely silent and dark, with only the sound of hurried tiptoed feet to echo furtively across the mute city. The energy and bounce of the early morning has utterly collapsed and the vivid tapestry of music, voice, colour and light become ossified as Time moves relentlessly forward. However, the memory of the morning's moment is retained in the poem and it stands as an artefact to the ephemeral synthesis achieved.

In the poem 'Train to Dublin' (September - October 1934), this pattern of syntheses occurring and collapsing is again described, yet the speed of each formation and collapse is quickened to the rhythm of the train in which MacNeice journeys. Like the Russian artist Dziga Vertov discussed earlier, MacNeice seeks to somehow organise and record the world's phenomena as they rush past. The challenging process of accurately recording life's particularities – a veritable deluge for the senses - is suggested in the first stanza:

Our half-thought thoughts divide in sifted wisps  
Against the basic facts repatterned without pause  
I can no longer gather my mind up in my fist  
Than the shadow of the smoke of this train upon the grass ... (17)

The poem, which is hinged obliquely to the pulse of the train's wheels, begins in *medias res*, as if the reader has entered the mind of the poet as he grapples with the task of representing the vast stream of life as it flies past. There is a sense that human beings can not only be connected with each other but that they can also become integrated and harmonised with the phenomenal world. The poet focuses resolutely on perceiving life's flux while at the same time resisting the inclination to filter it through abstract human ideas and ideals:

I will not give you any idol or idea, creed or king,  
I give you the incidental things which pass  
Outward through space exactly as each was. (17)

MacNeice is exacting with his words, providing a clear conduit in his poem between the reader and external life. He proceeds to convey a broad variety of seemingly random sounds and images, reinforcing the idea that the reader is receiving the plurality of life unfettered by human order or pattern. He offers up 'the laughter of the Galway sea/ juggling with spars and bones irresponsibly' and continues: 'I give you the smell of Norman stone, the squelch/ Of bog beneath your boots, the red bog-grass' (18) MacNeice's descriptive technique in this poem could be described as cinematic at certain points. The perspective flits from close-up shots to panoramic wide views and the scenes are spliced together almost in homage to the methods of montage pioneered in contemporary experimental film. Yet there are also parallels to be drawn with methods pioneered in radio and the poem hints at previous experiments in sound by pioneers at the BBC such as Archie Harding and Lance Sieveking discussed earlier. Sounds emerge from different directions and at various distances: we become aware of the close and unrelenting rhythm of the train, then an echo of a sea-shell 'Held hollow to the ear, the mere / Reiteration of integers, the bell / That tolls and tolls', then the onomatopoeic 'squelch' of the bog under foot and finally the 'sea's / Tumultuous marble, / With Thor's thunder.'(18)

MacNeice displays, as well, a willingness to allow the reader a part in the artistic process, enlarging the poem in the final lines to include a broader community of individuals whose own perceptions are just as valid:

I would like to give you more but I cannot hold  
This stuff within my hands and the train goes on;  
I know that there are further syntheses to which,  
As you have perhaps, people at last attain  
And find that they are rich and breathing gold. (18)



The reader therefore is not just a passive spectator caught up in MacNeice's vibrant sense of things but is acknowledged as a free agent - an actively engaged observer with the creative potential similar to that of the poet. In this poem, MacNeice is opening up some of his more esoteric and private perceptions to a broader field of experience and is attempting a more inclusive poetry. Through attempting to avoid dogmatism, political extremism and philosophical abstraction and cherishing the 'incidental things' of experience, MacNeice keeps the narrative focused on the primacy of sense perceptions. The effort is to perceive a pattern in worldly sound and colour rather than to create a humanly constructed pattern. There is no definitive closure offered to the dialectic of pattern as 'given' or 'what we make', but what does emerge is an implication that the poet and reader are part of an inter-relational existence of human beings and the external world.

As has already been noted this desire for a synthesis of art and life - for a precise expression of life's essence in poetry - is a consistent drive in MacNeice's writing; yet it is nearly always counterbalanced by a looming awareness that time passes - that artistic representation will inevitably become static artefact in the face of the world's flux. In MacNeice's poem 'August' (August 1933) a contrast is made between visual and aural perception which seems to imply this metaphysical dialectic:

We jump from picture to picture and cannot follow  
The living curve that is breathlessly the same  
While the lawn-mower sings moving up and down  
Spiriting its little fountain of vivid green,  
I like Poussin, make a still-bound fête of us  
Suspending every noise of insect or machine  
... But all this is a dilettante's lie ... (27)

Just as the painter's still life misrepresents life, so the poet's words are inadequate to the task. The complex flow of life - its rhythms, its particularities, its movement underscored in the poem by the singing lawn-mower and the hum of insects - is frozen and falsely framed in art. MacNeice is in self-reflexive mode here and the poem underlines the artistic struggle to keep up with the variety of life's experience and to convey the mutability of the world's phenomena which exist and move in real time. It is appropriate therefore that he chooses sound as the symbol of unrepresented life infringing upon and undermining his poetic creation. For sound, by its very nature, invokes life's movement and its temporariness; it is bound to exist and move in time - emitting from one point, vibrating across the air and then dying away.

MacNeice's conception of what a poet should be was intrinsically democratic and he sought to include in his poems the whole array of life as experienced by the community in

which he wrote. His prescription in his critical study *Modern Poetry* (1938) for the prospective poet reveals a man of eclectic interests who is yet an ordinary man writing of ordinary things:

I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions. (23)

The poem which seems to embody this manifesto most accurately is his masterpiece *Autumn Journal* (1939). As Longley notes: ‘all the currents of MacNeice’s writing during the 1930s flow into *Autumn Journal* and find a new dynamic there: lyrics, eclogues, prose, the Audenesque play *Out of the Picture*, images, strategies ... His entire creative kaleidoscope breaks up and reforms.’ (Longley, *LMAS* 56) Describing it to T. S. Eliot in a letter in November 1939 MacNeice states that:

It is written in sections averaging about 80 lines in length. This division gives it a *dramatic* quality, as different parts of myself (e.g. the anarchist, the defeatist, the sensual man, the philosopher, the would-be good citizen) can be given their say in turn. It contains rapportage, metaphysics, ethics, lyrical emotion, autobiography, nightmare ... The writing is direct; anyone could understand it. I think this is my best work to date; it is both panorama and a confession of faith. (qtd. in Stallworthy 232)

The poem does indeed reflect MacNeice’s changing state of mind as his perception flits dramatically between one mode of thought and the next; but we are also exposed to a whole cast of characters and voices, a whole range of sounds. In the course of the narrative, distant voices, broadcasts, songs, mutterings on the street, the echoes of mechanical machinery as well as natural and animal noises all intermingle to create a dissonant and haunting soundscape reflecting the sense of moral discord and political indeterminacy of the period. The poet’s representations of London are characterised by vivid sense impressions and in section V of the poem MacNeice gives special attention to the aural world of his fellow countrymen and the sounds that augur war and catastrophe:

And we cannot take it in and we go to our daily  
Jobs to the dull refrain of the caption ‘War’  
Buzzing around us as from hidden insects  
And we think “This must be wrong, it has happened before,  
Just like this before, we must be dreaming;  
It was long ago these flies

Buzzed like this. So why are they still bombarding  
The ears if not the eyes?"  
And we laugh it off and go round town in the evening (109)

The threat of war looms all around in this description as MacNeice taps into communal fears giving expression to the thoughts and sounds which echo in the minds of his countrymen. Indeed, as in 'The Ear' this passage suggests that one's aural sense is more subtle than the visual: the insidious buzzing flies imply a lingering, deathly aura evident only through auditory perception. This passage also suggests a community in crisis, yet MacNeice is careful to integrate their voice into the fabric of the poem. There is an emphasis on the contradictory choices available to the man-in-the-street who must decide upon and interpret the various speeches, reports and analyses coming to him via various forms of media; the most evocative and provocative of which must surely have been radio:

And the individual, powerless, has to exert the  
Powers of will and choice  
And choose between enormous evils, either  
Of which depends upon somebody else's voice (110)

The power of actually hearing voices and speeches on the radio, as opposed to reading newspaper reports, is described by Ian Rodger, who also reveals in his account how radio was changing the way a new generation of media users interpreted the world around them:

The radio set had knobs by this time and I used to twiddle them to catch Radio Luxembourg and all the languages of Europe. When I was eleven, I tuned in accidentally to a speech by Hitler and, though I could not understand German, the voice conveyed to me a message of terror which my elders, who were mostly newspaper readers and not radio fanatics, found hard to appreciate. When the war came, I tuned into Warsaw and knew when the station went off air that Poland had fallen. (1)

Yet, as MacNeice suggests in section VIII of the poem, hearing one's own deluded politicians speak with calm reassurance on the radio could provoke just as much alarm as the grating tones and bombast of Hitler in full swing:

And the next day begins  
Again with alarm and anxious  
Listening to bulletins

From distant measured voices  
Arguing for peace  
While the zero hour approaches  
...  
Save my skin and damn my conscience.  
And negotiation wins,  
If you call it winning ... (119)

Here MacNeice records the moral uncertainty of allowing Czechoslovakia to fall, and the unreality of listening to these cataclysmic events through the 'measured voices' of far off figures which seem to ignore the terrible sense of doom approaching. However, as in MacNeice's earlier poems other sounds infringe upon this uneasy peace, auguring nightmares close at hand:

Nor can we hide our heads in the sands, the sands have  
Filtered away  
Nothing remains but rock at this hour, this zero  
Hour of the day.  
Or that is how it seems to me as I listen  
To a hooter call at six  
And then a woodpigeon calls and stops but the wind continues  
Playing its dirge in the trees, playing tricks,  
And now the dairy cart comes clopping slowly  
...  
And now the woodpigeon starts again denying  
The values of the town  
And a car having crossed the hill accelerates, changes  
Up, having just changed down.  
And a train begins to chug and I wonder what the morning  
Paper will say ... (111)

The various sounds within the city become imbued with new meaning as war approaches; yet, as in 'Train to Dublin', these sense impressions are recorded largely as they are and there is sense here - and indeed throughout the whole poem - that the aural environment is a level plain in which all sounds and voices are recognised as different parts of a pluralistic whole.

The way that MacNeice hears and records his environment in *Autumn Journal* is remarkably similar to the acoustical perception displayed by Virginia Woolf in *Between the*

*Acts*. Both texts are set on the eve of war and convey a troubled sense of imminent threat and as Melba Cuddy-Keane makes clear, Woolf's approach to description of sound and perception of sound is similar in many ways to that of MacNeice:

As if the microphone had been set up in a village on a day in June in 1939, *Between the Acts* records a multiplicity of disparate, varying, and often contradictory voices, diffused through time and space yet sounding together. The literal chorus of medieval pilgrims, weaving in and out of the trees at the back of the stage, weaves into itself the words of the play, fragments of choric conversation in the audience, the great yearning bellows of the cows, the scratching and trillings of the gramophone...simple single notes played on a piano, feet crunching on the gravel, the "ding dong" of the cracked old church bell, the scrunch of automobile wheels, the hush of silence in an empty room...The voice of a clergyman, "summing up", is broken up by the sounds of leaves rustling...As in "Kew Gardens", human, natural, and mechanical sounds are enfolded in each other... (93)

As with Woolf in *Between the Acts*, I would suggest that in *Autumn Journal* MacNeice conveys a new sense of sound and a new way of hearing. The poem implies the democratic potential of the new sound technologies such as radio and suggests how traditional hierarchical models of sound representation are breaking down; voices, sounds and music cut across one another indiscriminately in the text as the task of relating them to each other (the composition) is left up to the listener - sounds are left to resonate as open-ended fragments, not heavily weighed down as vehicles for man-made theories.

This sense that traditional models of sound are breaking down is brilliantly conveyed in MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' (1937). Nowhere is the poet's genius for constructing new form and music in poetry more evident than in this poem which seems to resonate with and perhaps partially define the zeitgeist in pre-war Britain. Described by MacNeice as 'a satirical elegy for the Gaelic districts of Scotland and indeed for all traditional culture' (qtd. in Stallworthy 212) it lampoons and amalgamates all sorts of different assumptions, theories, philosophies, objects, gods, concepts and institutions:

It's no go the Yogi Man, it's no go Blavatsky  
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the heather  
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.  
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,  
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the puncture. (95)

MacNeice comments that ‘the bad feminine rhymes are meant to suggest the wheeze of the pipes’ (qtd. in Stallworthy 212) and certainly the skirl of bagpipes is suggested by the poem’s rasping rhythm. The air of hasty improvisation in the poem also suggests a new culture emerging in which old harmonies and traditional verse forms are being overrun. As Stallworthy notes, MacNeice reaches a near perfect synthesis of form and content in this poem helped by his acute sense of timing: ‘Time – the Decline of the West – is at one level what the poem is about, and nothing in it is more brilliantly controlled (while seeming to abandon control) than its timing: “Bagpipe Music” quickens to a climax with the pumping repetition of “It’s no go...”, then growls to a halt doom-laden note...’ (213). The poem also suggests how old forms of music and sound representation – the ballad and the pipe band - are being superseded by a new culture with its own dissonances and rhythms, and a new means of structuring art – montage and pastiche - which is perhaps more indiscriminate yet more inclusive.

MacNeice’s profound sensitivity to sound meant that he was open to new types of acoustical experience emerging in his lifetime. Through experimentation with technique, form and content as displayed in many of his early poems he suggested the changing nature of aural perception emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century. This ability to experiment – having the talent and flexibility to mould language to fit an audience whose auditory understanding of the world was shifting - was certainly one characteristic necessary for the prospective radio dramatist, especially considering that radio drama was a genre whose form had not been fully determined. Yet, there were other aspects of his pre-war poetry which suggest his suitability for writing radio drama and this final section looks at these other qualities of MacNeice’s poetic technique and imagination which presage his later success in radio.

It was realised early on by those working in radio that writing a drama purely in the medium of sound required a different approach than conventional drama. A purely stage performance on the microphone was ineffective and the search began for those illusive qualities, which could transform a dramatic performance simply *relayed* by radio into a ‘broadcasting’ performance using the *medium* of radio. There was a keen awareness that it was through experimentation with the medium of ‘sound’ (voices, words, music, etc) that radio drama would create its own unique dramatic performance codes (Crook 78-85).

The world’s first drama composed specifically for radio was *Danger*, written by Richard Hughes, and it was broadcast live in 1923. It was designed more as a radiophonic experiment featuring three miners facing a crisis in a Welsh coal-mine, and although studio based, it was acoustically set in a collapsed and darkened mineshaft. *Danger* set an early point of departure for radio drama and demonstrated from the beginning the potential power of the right words combined with the right sounds upon the listeners’ imagination. Within six years of

*Danger's* broadcast, radio had clearly differentiated itself as a genre that was separate and independent of the stage (Drakakis 4-6). In 1929, Cecil Arthur Lewis<sup>iii</sup> attempted to define a theory of difference between the approach of the stage writer and that of a radio writer:

The task of the wireless play-writer differs from that of the stage author because, although in broadcasting limitations of inaudible 'stage business' are very narrow, the limitations of action and mise en scène are bounded only by the imagination of the listener himself. The stage author deals in scenes and situations which can be presented to the eye. The wireless author may make use of practically any scene or situation which can be conceived by human thought and imagination' (qtd. In Rodger 14)

In Tyrone Guthrie's play *The Flowers Are Not for You to Pick* (1930), an early and successful exploitation of the new genre, the audience is taken directly inside the mind of the play's tragic hero, Edward, in the final scenes of the play as his life flashes before him as he drowns in darkness (McWhinnie 25). Guthrie realised that radio could be most effective at conveying the abstract: the inner psyche, the mind's eye. He grasped that radio does not move in space but almost wholly in time, even though it can by sounds and descriptions give the illusion of place, and even though voices can be heard from near and far, depending on their relationship to the microphone, to give the impression of depth. Radio cannot however give a precise rendering of three-dimensional space in the same way a stage or film can. Its true element in fact is rhythm. Guthrie showed that radio is good at creating drama out of situations where there is literally nothing else to see. However, Guthrie does not simply bring the listener into a situation where no light exists in a material sense as Hughes had done in *Danger*; he brings him or her into the unseen mind of the main character and provides access to the various thoughts and memories happening internally. Ronald Hayman terms this process the 'dramatization of consciousness' and it was to become a stock device in the writing of radio drama (149).

MacNeice himself drew on Guthrie's example<sup>iv</sup> when writing his own radio dramas, often drawing the audience into the inner psyche of his characters. Yet MacNeice's use of this device also relates to his own understanding of lyric poetry which he sees as inherently dramatic:

The word 'lyric' has always been a terrible red herring. It is taken to connote not only comparative beauty but a sort of emotional parthenogenesis, which results in a one-track attitude labelled 'spontaneous' but verging on the imbecile. In fact all lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are *dramatic* –and that is in two ways. (1) The voice and mood, though they may pretend to be spontaneous, are yet even in the most 'personal' of

poets such as Catullus and Burns a *chosen* voice and mood, set defiantly in opposition to what they must co-exist with; there may be only one actor on stage but the Opposition are on their toes in the wings – and crowding the auditorium; your lyric in fact is a monodrama. (2) Even in what is said (apart from the important things unsaid) all poems, though again in varying degrees, contain an internal conflict, cross-talk, back-wash, come-back or pay-off. This is often conveyed by sleight-of-hand - the slightest change of tone, a heightening or lowering of diction. A rhythmical shift or a jump of ideas. (*SCLM* 126)

It is evident therefore that the underlying aesthetic which formed the basis of many of MacNeice's poems could be very effective when applied to writing radio drama with its stress on dramatic opposition and internal conflict and discord. Indeed, the 'sleight-of-hand' techniques MacNeice uses to create internal conflict in his poems are particularly suitable for the radio medium which can bring into high resolution any variance in tone, diction and rhythm.

In radio drama, the method of making the inner consciousness and conscience of a character's mind available to the listener often takes the form of two voices in counterpoint. It is a method which works very effectively and one that MacNeice exploits successfully in his early poetry. In 'Eclogue Between the Motherless' (1937) the poem is split into two voices which are both patently analogues of the self. As Robyn Marsack argues: 'Although the speakers are identified as 'motherless', their discussion concerns their loverless state, and the connection is more disturbing for its remaining un-stated, hovering.' (28) Speaker A describes harrowing snippets of memory concerning his mother, obviously drawn from MacNeice's own experience:

I remembered my mother standing against the sky,  
And saying 'Go back into the house and change your shoes'  
And I kept having dreams and I kept going back in the house,  
A sense of guilt like a scent – The day I was born  
I suppose that that same hour was full of her screams ... (84)

This sense of guilt that surrounded MacNeice's memory of his mother was due to the poet's sense that on some level his birth had caused the illness that eventually led to her death. In a letter to John Hilton in 1929, MacNeice outlines how his birth was to play a part in his mother's death:



I will now start at the beginning: my father was engaged to my mother for God knows how long & it seemed to me that when they did marry they made rather a hash of all the more material side of it e.g. not taking proper precautions at childbirth etc. My birth was managed so rottenly that my mother had eventually to have a hysterectomy; after which she was ill off & on till she died for obscure reasons when I was just 7. Even the operation was done in a very crude manner which my sister tells me is now obsolete. (qtd. in Stallworthy 138)

While MacNeice argues that the treatment his mother received by doctors is the prime cause of her death, the connection between his birth and her death is nevertheless made. And, as Jon Stallworthy points out, MacNeice's choice of epigraph for his book of poetry entitled *Poems* reveals unspoken feelings of guilt; the poet figuring himself as the young boy 'who chases a winged bird' after having brought 'intolerable affliction on his people' (*Poems* [1935] 1) As already noted, Speaker A experiences similar feelings of guilt as he remembers his past and the sound of a distant dog barking invokes lonely childhood nights paralysed by fear – 'In the night at the lodge / a dog was barking as when I was little in the night / And I could not budge in the bed clothes' (85). Speaker A has decided to marry yet he hears outside in the rain on the gravel the unsettling 'steps of all my mistresses', wondering 'which was coming or was she dead'. These mistresses however have been destroyed and splintered in his memory:

They are all distorted now the beautiful sirens  
Mutilated and mute in dream's dissection,  
Hanged from pegs in the Bluebeard's closet of the brain,  
... Whom recording  
The night marked time, the dog at the lodge kept barking  
And as he barked the big cave opened of hell  
Where all their voices were one and stuck at a point  
Like a gramophone needle stuck on a notched record. (85)

In this nightmarish sequence, feelings of guilt and loss merge with images and sounds of horror and violence. The sound motif of the dog barking ties together moments from the poet's past and present as the voices of the women in his life are heard in harrowing unison; they endlessly repeat as a record malfunctioning on a gramophone and this conceit implies the fractured memory of all their voices circling his mind as he strives to decode possible or future meanings. As before, the poem suggests a poet trying to demystify the sounds that made up the early stratum of his experience; yet in this poem he has inscribed the mechanism of the

gramophone into this process and revealed how new sound-technologies were changing the way people listened to sound and also modifying how people remembered and understood it.

This sequence of the poem also displays many of the reasons why MacNeice took to radio so easily. The description moves swiftly from one image and soundscape to another and it is difficult to assess what is real and what is fantastical. Yet this style of writing, as he himself was to state, is very conducive to radio drama. In remarks made at the end of his life MacNeice highlights the fact that one of the things that makes radio so unique was its ability to move through space and time so rapidly. In his introduction to his published radio plays, *The Mad Islands and The Administrator* (1964), MacNeice writes:

First and most important, they are both essentially 'radio', i.e. with all their jumping about, whether in time or place and between actual and the fantasy, they could not be anything else...Compared with plays written for the stage, works such as these may appear very bitty until you get used to them. I find myself that one of the attractions of radio is that you can move so fast, almost as fast as dreams do: this is why the medium is a good one for dealing with dreams and why, the other way round, a dream technique suits the medium (*SPLM* 405)

MacNeice was a poet who was particularly concerned with the meaning and structure of dreams and his interest (bordering on obsession) in his own dreams and nightmares as reflected in his poetry meant that by the time he came to write radio dramas such as *The Dark Tower* or *Persons form Porlock* (both have dreamlike sequences) he had already begun to experiment with forms with which to reflect his unconscious thoughts.

MacNeice's acute sensitivity to sounds strongly conditioned his poetic conveyance of sounds and in poems like 'A Cataract Conceived as the March of Corpses' (1927). The sense and meaning of the poem unfolds in the sounds created by its words and rhythms:

The corpses blink in the rush of the river, and out of the water their chins  
they tip,  
And quaff the gush and lip the draught and crook their heads and crow,  
Drowned and drunk with the cataract that carries them and buries them  
And silts them over and covers them and lilt and chuckles over their bones... (3)

It is not so much what the words actually mean which strikes the reader at first but the rich onomatopoeic flow of the poem; the surging rhythm and the insistent internal rhymes come together to form a rich aural pattern invoking the mad rush of the river which impacts on the reader at a more primitive level of understanding. MacNeice displays a type of musicality in

poetry here and demonstrates his ability to invest his words with an aural meaning in addition to what they signify in a semantic sense; in this way his poetry can function on at least two levels - initially the aural (sensuous) effect created by the sound creates one stream of meaning operating at an elemental level of consciousness. In time the reader/listener will go on to consider the poem in a more cerebral sense, unpicking the signified meaning of the words, and symbols, thereby modifying the initial impression created. MacNeice's ability to compose poems in this manner makes him ideally suited to radio drama where the sound of the word and the meaning of the word must be considered together as contributing to an overarching unity or pattern in the drama itself. This point is made clear by Rudolph Arnheim:

The meaning of the word and the significance of the noise are both transmitted through sound, and have only indirect effects. It is difficult at first for most people to realise that, in the work of art, the sound of the word, because it is more elemental, should be of more importance than the meaning. But it is so. In radio drama, even more forcibly than on the stage, the word is the first revealed sound, as expression, embedded in a world of expressive natural sounds, which, so to speak, constitute the scenery. The separation of noise and word occurs only on a higher plane. Fundamentally, purely sensuously, both are first and foremost sounds, and it is just this sensuous unity that makes possible an aural art, by utilising word and noise simultaneously...It should be realised that the elemental force lies in sound, which affects everyone more directly than the meaning of the word, and all radio art must make this fact its starting point. (23)

Arnheim's theory of sound in language may possibly have grown out of T. S. Eliot's concept of the 'auditory imagination' which Eliot defines as:

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word: sinking the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin, and bringing something back, seeking the beginning in the end: It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated, and the trite, the current, and the new and the surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality. (74)

Nowhere is the auditory quality of language more amplified than in radio, and it provided artists such as MacNeice with a new means of renewing art; for it offered the writer a more subtle range of sound production and a greater ability to manipulate the auditory perception of the listener in the manner outlined by Eliot. Yet it was not only modernist concerns with sound and phonetics which radio artists could develop in new and unique ways, many other modernist themes could be tapped: the exploration of dream, the unconscious and memory, as well as the

move away from linear space and time, were all things which radio was particularly suited to exploiting. Indeed it could be said that radio drama was one of the most important *avant-garde* arts of its day propelling writers towards a re-invention of dramatic language which was more suited to a purely aural means of communication and transmission.

During MacNeice's time working in radio, the BBC Radiophonic workshop was established as a specialist unit with the aim of constructing new sounds derived from natural sounds or everyday noises. As recording technology improved, the palette of sound available to radio dramatists was greatly expanded. Sound effects could now play a more significant role in radio drama and could evoke the object which they signified with greater precision. The timing, choice and placement of sound effects in a radio drama is absolutely integral to the overall effect and requires a particularly sensitive ear to correctly translate the sound cues in the script into realistic reflections of the sounds intended. Given that MacNeice produced, as well as wrote, many of his own radio dramas his acute sensitivity to sounds must have proved beneficial to him as he sculpted the aural environments of his radio dramas for his listening audience. That MacNeice was a poet who was alert to the variable meanings and repercussions of sound has already been established; what is also evident from his early poetry is that he had an extraordinary ability to translate environmental sounds accurately into his writing. His poems are full of onomatopoeic sounds - ticks, squawks, hoots, clangs, murmurs, lashes, peals, shuffles and clatters. He was obviously a poet who sought to reflect the whole gamut of the world's sound effects and this awareness would prove crucial in writing for radio

One of the major debates surrounding radio drama when MacNeice entered the BBC concerned the use of narration. Some commentators thought the use of overt description for scene changes necessary for the listening audience to comprehend what was occurring. It was argued that the most effective form for radio therefore was the narrative play or the dramatised story (Rodger 40-54). This dramatic form harked back to the famous public readings that Dickens used to give in the Victorian age, offering the added bonus of dialogue performed by a group of actors and not by a single voice. While this method had proved successful early on in the life of radio, the listening audience had become more sophisticated and many commentators felt that it was a rather one dimensional way to craft a radio drama. Julian MacLaren Ross, who was later to make some brilliant adaptations of novels for radio, put this point well when he first made contact with the BBC in April 1938, when submitting the play *Gallows Alley*. He wrote to Moray McLaren:

I have listened to many plays on the air and it seems to me that, while some of them achieve a very high standard, the full possibilities of the medium have not yet been exploited. For example it should not be necessary for the announcer to outline the scene

where the play is being enacted, or for stage direction to be read aloud; everything should be conveyed to the listener by means of sound and dialogue. (qtd. In Rodger 27)

Listeners had become more sophisticated and the challenge for writers like MacNeice was to find new ways to convey context and setting without resorting to the rather hackneyed device of an omniscient narrator interrupting the dialogue and describing the setting. MacNeice would later find ways around this problem in his radio dramas and he often established the setting of a drama and the scene changes through dialogue alone. Yet this method was one which he had already developed in his poetry and the first sequence of the poem 'Eclogue from Iceland' (1936) demonstrates his ability to set the scene for his reader purely through 'sound and dialogue'. In this section Ryan and Craven (thinly veiled versions of Auden and MacNeice) meet the ghost of Icelandic saga hero Grettir.

R. This is the place, Craven, the end of our way;  
Hobble the horses, we've had a long day  
C. The night is closing like a fist  
And the long glacier lost in the mist.  
R. Few folks come this time of year.  
What are those limping steps I hear?  
C. Look, there he is coming now.  
We shall have some company anyhow.  
R. It must be the mist he looks so big;  
He is walking lame in the left leg.  
G. Good evening, strangers. So you too  
Are on the run ... (72)

As the poem moves forward, driven by the simple rhythm and rhyme, subtle aspects of the environment are gradually built up in the mind of the reader. MacNeice manages to intersperse details of the weather and the local geography as well as building a portrait of Grettir's ghost. Yet this is all done through dialogue and the tightness of description displayed here would serve MacNeice well in his craft as a radio dramatist. Indeed, with the addition of a few well placed sound effects the opening lines of this poem could easily serve as a very effective opening to a radio drama.

When MacNeice began working for the BBC, new media had already opened up the margins of what was possible through sound. Yet artists were constantly remodelling fictional forms so as to make full use of the new means of communication and expression that were now at their disposal. While MacNeice did have to adapt his style of writing to the new medium, he

brought his own aesthetic and voice to the genre. The sounds and soundscapes of his early poetry emerge again and again in his dramas and it is important to establish the private meanings and the 'internal' contexts of such sounds his radio work was to become a means of personal expression as well as a public medium of communication.

MacNeice's profound sensitivity to sound, as revealed in his early poems and autobiographical writings, meant that as he developed as a poet and became more open to public sources of inspiration, he also became more alert to the new forms of aural experience; his experimentation with sound in his pre-war poems conveyed the ways in which new media and sound technologies were affecting and restructuring auditory perception. Seen in this context, his work for the BBC is not so much a distracting departure from his poetry, but rather a continuation of the poet's earlier engagement with a tradition of artistic experiment in sound. Indeed, when MacNeice started working in radio he was entering a medium which was still very much in its adolescence; radio writing offered him an exciting new challenge and provided huge scope for further experimentation in sound.

MacNeice, however, was initially sceptical about working in radio in the early 1930s and although he did listen to it he writes: 'I then thought it to be a degrading medium both vulgar and bureaucratic and not even financially rewarding. I may have been a snob at the time.' (qtd. in Stallworthy 287) However, his attitude was soon to change and by December 1938 he was writing a letter to the *Listener* arguing that entertainment value should be placed before highbrow attitudes in compiling programmes of poetry. Significantly, he goes on to state: 'Poets should certainly write plays, and probably certain other forms of verse, expressly for broadcasting purposes.' (qtd. in Coulton 41) It is perhaps around this time that he began to think of radio as medium which was suitable for poets; and in particular poets such as himself, who believed in transmitting ideas to a larger community and who were willing to experiment with new forms of sound and new ways of hearing. He was not alone in these opinions and the renowned radio critic Grace Goldie believed that MacNeice and his fellow poets had the right vitality and freshness of approach to write for radio. Responding to MacNeice's letter to the *Listener* Goldie argues that MacNeice was indeed writing the sort of verse that would work extremely well on the BBC. She then challenges MacNeice:

Why, then don't poets write for radio? Have they overlooked this market, these possibilities? Or do they refuse to tackle the problems of the medium? Or have they found it impossible to get help about these problems from the B.B.C.? ...Or doesn't it offer them enough money? What *is* the difficulty? Will Mr MacNeice tell us? (qtd. in Coulton 42)

MacNeice soon answered Mrs Goldie's call to arms and he did not shirk the problems or overlook the possibilities that radio presented; he would become in the process one the greatest radio dramatists of the twentieth century.

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<sup>i</sup> See Richard Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s*. (Tavistock: Northcote, 2009) 21-2; Terence Brown, 'MacNeice and the Puritan Tradition' In *Louis MacNeice and His Influence*. Eds. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998.) 22-33; and Heather Clark. 'Revising MacNeice'. *Cambridge Quarterly* 31.1 (2002): 77-92; and Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*. (Oxford, Clarendon, 1991.) 157-177.

<sup>ii</sup> Before the introduction of the dramatic control panel in 1928, complete BBC broadcasts were made from a single studio. The technological innovation of the dramatic control panel allowed the simultaneous use of a number of studios, enabling sound to be 'faded in' and 'faded out' from each studio as required. For more information, see John Drakakis, *British Radio Drama*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.) 4-10.

<sup>iii</sup> Cecil Arthur Lewis was one of the founding members of the BBC and the author of some of the first action thrillers for radio. For more information on Lewis, see Ian Rodger, *Radio Drama*. (London, MacMillan, 1982) 14-16.

<sup>iv</sup> In an Introductory Note to *He Had a Date* published in the *Radio Times* (11<sup>th</sup> February 1949) before re-broadcast of the play in 1949, MacNeice states: 'The final sequence [of *He Had a Date*] relies on an old but still, I think, legitimate device which Mr Tyrone Guthrie used most effectively in the early days of radio; voices from Tom's past come in on his drowning consciousness, these fragments succeeding each other against a background of music ...' (*SPLM* 72).



## I

MacNeice's decision to join the BBC in 1941 was by no means a straight forward affair for the poet, for not only did it mean actively committing to the British cause during the war, but it also meant engaging in propaganda work which was, as Edna Longley points out, the 'inevitable fate of intellectuals [in war-time]' (*LMAS* 78). The war created a crisis of conscience for MacNeice testing many of his allegiances, not least among which was his complex relationship to Ireland (now neutral), which he had struggled to clarify in poems such as 'Autumn Journal' (1938) and 'Valediction' (1934). Complicating further his identification with Ireland, was his sense of affinity to English society and its culture, particularly the high culture of English intellectual life. In addition, since the Spanish Civil War, he had been committed, however wearily, to the anti-fascist cause. The Second World War would also test his artistic and poetic commitment to honestly recording the world as he understood it. For in writing propaganda scripts for the BBC in the early war years, MacNeice was forced to portray reality in a manner which was more determined by political necessity than by his personal or artistic prerogatives.

MacNeice was in Galway when war broke out and his initial reaction to the 'catastrophe' is stirringly recorded in his poem 'Galway' included in the poem sequence entitled 'The Coming of War' (1939-40) (later to be called 'The Closing Album'). The poem's refrain - 'The war came down on us here' - suggests the depressive shock MacNeice felt on hearing of Hitler's advance into Poland (680). Yet while in Ireland, MacNeice remained partially insulated from the conflict. It was the radio that provided a constant and powerful reminder of the tragedy unfolding on the European stage. In the poem 'Cushendun', also from 'The Coming of War', MacNeice points a striking contrast between the muted and idyllic atmosphere of a rural Irish homestead and the insistently articulate and intimate voice from the little radio, which speaks, incongruously, of remote European warfare and public devastation to come.

Forgetfulness: brass lamps and copper jugs  
 And home-made bread and the smell of turf or flax  
 And the air a glove and the water lathering easy  
 And convolvulus in the hedge.

Only in the dark green room beside the fire  
 With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves  
 There is a little box with a well bred voice:

The ominous sound of the radio steals into the poem at the very last moment (like the 'steel-bosomed siren' in 'Reminiscences of Infancy' or the ticking clock in 'Child's Terror') and abruptly shatters the sedate and tranquil environment evoked earlier. Yet this section of the poem also starkly implies the choices which were now available to MacNeice: whether to wait out the war, away from the conflict, trying to live in 'Forgetfulness', or whether to commit himself (and his talent) to the British cause as the 'well-bred voice', no doubt, was urging its listeners to do. As MacNeice travelled between Dublin and Belfast for the rest of the year, these choices must have been uncomfortably underlined for him; for 'gloomy' Belfast was 'full of patriotic placards and soldiers', while Dublin seemed 'hardly worried by the war; her old preoccupations were still her preoccupations.' (MacNeice, *SAF* 72)

Some insight into MacNeice's thinking on the war is provided in a letter to E. R. Dodds written in October 1939 in which MacNeice states: 'It's all very well for everyone to go on saying 'Destroy Hitlerism' but what the hell are they going to construct? ... All this boosting up democracy – it seems to me just throwing sand against the wind.' (qtd. in Clark 34) However, a letter from MacNeice to Dodds a month later reveals a changing attitude and outlines his growing sense that the war may well be – on balance – a valid and justifiable one, which could possibly have long-term positive effects on British society and also, perhaps, lead to the disintegration of an outdated Empire:

My conscience is troubling me about this fool war. I am beginning to think this may be my war after all ... Obviously there is plenty wrong with the British Empire & especially India & no doubt our present Government have no intention of ending this state of affairs. However, the war they are supposed to be running may mend it in spite of them. I find myself liable to use things like India or interferences with liberty at home to rationalize my own cowardice. It does however seem to be clear that, in this choice of evils, Mr Chamberlain's England is preferable to Nazi Germany (& anyhow it won't, if people have sense, remain Mr C.'s England.) (qtd. in Longley, *LMAS* 79)

It is clear that on a rational level MacNeice had judged Nazism as the greater of two evils. Perhaps more importantly though, the poet had begun to feel instinctively or intuitively that it is his war, that his conscience (that 'still small voice') is compelling him to take an active role in the conflict. In the same letter MacNeice even goes as far as to say that 'if it is my war, I feel I ought to get involved in one of the more unpleasant ways...in my case it would mean allowing myself to be, in my proper time, conscripted'. It is clear then that MacNeice was prepared to

take a moral and physical stand in the war, but exactly how and when he was to contribute were another matter.

In the meantime, the poet had decided to go back to America in January 1940, ostensibly to teach at Cornell, but in the main to see Eleanor Clark, a short story writer with whom he had fallen in love while in New York the previous year. The poet would have left earlier but was waiting for a decision on the outcome of his application for a teaching post in Trinity College, Dublin, for which he was unsuccessful. His trip was also an attempt to clarify his thoughts on the war, as he recounts a year later: 'I thought I could think things out there, get myself clear before I went back to the maelstrom.' (*SAF* 56) To his surprise, MacNeice enjoyed teaching at Cornell very much and when tentatively offered an extended contract he was sufficiently encouraged that he cabled his resignation to Bedford College (his previous employer) in late April. However, as events continued to deteriorate back in Europe, the German army sweeping into Denmark and Norway (and, on the domestic side, MacNeice's son Dan contracted scarlet fever), his hoped-for romance with Clark also began to take a turn for the worse. It is apparent from the letters exchanged between the two that Clark's affections had, by that time, cooled to friendship, while MacNeice was left to play the frustrated troubadour. This was perhaps one major reason for returning home, but in a letter to Dodds in March of that year, MacNeice revealed a new philosophy formulated in America, which also implied a return to wartime London: 'Freedom' he wrote 'means Getting Into things and not Getting Out of them.' (qtd. in Clark 85)

It is obvious then that MacNeice felt a sense of duty to return to Britain and contribute what he could to the war effort; yet while this commitment may have been healthy and right according to his values and beliefs as a man, its benefits to his artistic self were another matter and in an essay entitled 'The Poet in England To-day: A Reassessment' written for the *New Republic* in March, 1940, MacNeice outlines the problems facing the artist in war:

The artist's freedom connotes honesty because a lie, however useful in politics, hampers artistic vision. Systematic propaganda is therefore foreign to the artist in so far as it involves condoning lies. Thus, in the Spanish Civil War some English poets were torn between writing good propaganda (dishonest poetry) and honest poetry (poor propaganda). I believe firmly that in Spain *the balance of right* was on the side of the government; propaganda, however, demands either angels or devils. This means that in the long run a poet must choose between being politically ineffectual and poetically false. For the younger English poets the choice has now been simplified. A poet adopts a political creed merely as a means to an end. Recent events having suggested that there are too many slips between certain means and certain ends, the poet is tending to fall back on his conscience... The poet

is once more to be a mouth instead of a megaphone, and poetry, one hopes, is to develop organically from the organic premises of life – of life as it is lived, not life when it is dried into algebra. (*SCLM* 111-14)

MacNeice's later decision to join the BBC and write as part of their rather suffocating patriotic propaganda campaign may now seem at odds with such views, as if the poet had compromised his poetic integrity and sacrificed his artistic vision in the service of the BBC war effort. Yet, as has already been discussed, MacNeice was a poet particularly suited to the possibilities which the radio medium offered and, as will be shown, it would aid and develop his poetry both formally and thematically in ways which would prove largely beneficial to him. It is also important, at this point, to distinguish between what radio as a medium offered and what the BBC as an institution compelled MacNeice to write. Certainly, during the war, the poet was restricted in what he could write and was often directed by administrators to write scripts on themes and events for purely expedient purposes. Yet, it must also be remembered that radio drama and features were relatively new dramatic forms, the creative demands of which were to impose novel and liberating disciplines upon an imaginative writer like MacNeice.

The BBC first approached MacNeice, somewhat ironically, the very month that his above essay (arguing against the merits of propaganda) appeared in the *New Republic*. In March, 1940 Faber and Faber had forwarded a letter to MacNeice from T. Rowland Hughes of the BBC Features and Drama Section, who wrote:

I have been discussing with Mr. Val Gielgud and Mr. Laurence Gilliam the possibility of persuading you to write for radio. I wonder if some aspect of the Nazism and its influence on its victims would appeal to you as the theme of a radio programme. What I have in mind, of course, is something in the style of MacLeish's "Fall of the City" and "Air Raid". We in this country have not yet been able to secure a first class poet for such radio programmes and I feel convinced that your lines would speak well. (qtd. in Stallworthy 256)

Like MacNeice, the American writer Archibald MacLeish felt that radio was a medium which was particularly conducive to a poetic sensibility. In 1936 his acclaimed verse drama *The Fall of the City* was broadcast on C.B.S. radio and in the introduction to the text version of the drama published in 1937, MacLeish outlines some of the unique qualities of the radio medium emphasising how it allows poetic language to be experienced as never before. Of primary importance to MacLeish was the fact that radio permitted the spoken word to be experienced without any distraction or stimulation of the other senses: 'Over the radio verse has no visual presence to compete with. Only the ear is engaged and the ear is already half poet. It believes at

once: creates and believes ... The ear is the poet's perfect friend, his only true audience. And it is radio and only radio which can give him access to this perfect friend.' (MacLeish x) MacLeish also noted that radio offered a much larger audience for the poet, even though this audience was neither immediate nor capable of generating instant feedback. This 'infinitely greater audience' was a key factor in MacLeish's enthusiasm for the medium, a consideration which 'alone should deeply move the American poet whose present tragedy is his isolation from any audience vigorous enough to demand his strongest work' (MacLeish xiii) There were, however, certain drawbacks with radio according to MacLeish who argued that a verse drama could not exceed thirty minutes, for beyond that the listener would lose interest: in addition, obscurity was to be avoided: 'To do the trick bold and legible themes must be used... Poetry to be understood must be simple and clear, and that is the keynote of success in writing for air' (qtd. in Dunlap 'Radio Challenges'). MacNeice would largely confirm and develop some of MacLeish's theory on the structure and construction of radio drama in his own introduction to his radio play *Christopher Columbus*, which was published seven years later. Yet, while MacNeice and MacLeish may have both believed in the artistic potential of poetry on air, the two poets were not in agreement as to the function and purpose that poetry, in general, should take. As we shall see, MacLeish's radio play *The Fall of the City* cast strong judgements on MacNeice and his generation and the liberal/left ideology with which they had been aligned.

## II

MacLeish's script, which puts his theory into practice, is relatively short in length and contains verse sequences that are always simple and clear and a theme which is consistently bold and legible. The play opens in a large and crowded public square in an unnamed city. Through an announcer (originally played by Orson Welles), who sits to the side of the square with an 'on site' microphone, the events of the narrative are made know to the audience. The play centres on the spectacle of a dead woman who has recently appeared to the people of the city in the main square uttering disturbing, cryptic descriptions of a catastrophic future. The last of her dark prophecies tells how 'The city of masterless men/ will take a master/ There will be shouting then: Blood after.' (7) The woman's prophecy results in panic which intensifies when a messenger arrives with word that a conqueror has landed. However, the crowd's frenzy is temporarily subdued by a pacifist, 'liberal', orator urging people to follow a non-violent course of action.

Voice of Orator:

Force is a greater enemy than this conqueror –  
A treacherous weapon.

Nevertheless my friends there *is* a weapon!  
Weakness conquers!  
Against chainlessness who breaks?  
Against wall-lessness who vaults?  
Against forcelessness who forces? (15)

This attitude is contrasted with the voice of one of the city's Generals who advocates a strong resistance to the impending attack. However, the citizens are happy to acquiesce in the liberal pacifist position and when The Conqueror does finally appear, clothed entirely in armour, the people cower at his feet, trembling and wretched. As the armoured figure lifts the visor of his helmet, it is left to the announcer to reveal the disturbing twist at the play's end:

Voice of the Announcer:

There's no one at all! ... No one! ... The helmet is hollow!  
They don't see! They lie on the paving. They lie in the burnt spears:  
The ashes of arrows. They lie there...  
They don't see or they won't see. They are silent ... (32)

It is the announcer, too, who points the moral of the play in his role as a one man Greek chorus:

The people invent their oppressors: they wish to believe in them.  
They wish to be free of their freedom: released from their liberty:  
The long labour of liberty ended!

They lie there! (32)

When the crowd begins shouting happily with their 'new freedom', the announcer's final words ring out the close of the play as he states: 'the city has fallen.' (33)

*The Fall of the City* met with public acceptance and critical acclaim when it was first broadcast on CBS radio network, New York, on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1937, and represented the first attempt by an American poet to create a verse play expressly for radio. Geoffrey Bridson's verse drama *The March of the 45* (1936) had opened up the possibility of 'poetic drama' on British radio, but MacLeish was a pioneer of the genre in America. What was perhaps particularly striking for contemporary listeners of the broadcast was the powerful realism of the sound effects. The technical aspects of the antiphonal chorus sounds, crowd responses and individual speakers required the careful placement of and mixing of four microphones in a vast building with difficult acoustics. Ralph Thompson, writing for the *New York Times* on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1937, saw it as a seminal moment in radio history: 'This Broadcast proved, perhaps for

the first time, that radio has an enormous artistic potential and that music is not the only means by which its commercial banalities may be tempered.’(21) Orrin Dunlap, writing in the *New York Times* on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1937, felt that MacLeish had opened up the possibilities of radio to other poets through his development of the verse drama genre pointing the way for ‘talented poets, who have been shy of the microphone.’(sec. 9: 12)

Given the success of *The Fall of the City* and MacLeish’s subsequent play *Air Raid* (1938) it is perhaps unsurprising that when the BBC approached MacNeice, they suggested he write something in the mould of the America poet. However, MacNeice never responded to the initial letter from the BBC written by Hughes and ended up writing to the Director General instead when he returned from America. In any event, MacNeice may well have been piqued by the suggestion that he write in the style of MacLeish. It is unclear whether MacNeice did in fact read *The Fall of the City* but it seems probable that he would have interpreted the Pacifist Orator character as a thinly veiled indictment of himself and his generation. For MacNeice, MacLeish’s play would have seemed to judge from afar while at the same time falsely systemising the world into narrow mathematics of right and wrong. Earlier in the year MacLeish had criticised the contemporary writer (and MacNeice was certainly one of those) as ‘one who thinks without responsibility to anything but truth of feeling’, and ‘observes with honesty and truthfulness and without comment’; MacLeish had gone as far as to argue that the scholars and writers of the current generation had ‘abdicated their responsibility to fight fascism and thus had unwittingly helped to disarm and demoralize Western democracies.’ (qtd. in MacDonald, *LMPC* 121) MacLeish’s polemic must have struck MacNeice with a particular force given that it cut to the core of his own poetic sensibility, which - as he tells us in his introduction to *Autumn Journal* - sought to place honesty ‘before anything else.’ (*Autumn Journal* 1) Indeed, MacNeice was sufficiently affected by the criticism to write a poetic riposte in 1940. In ‘The Ballad For Mr. MacLeish’, MacNeice attempts to defend his position in poetry (and the position of others from his generation), yet he does not totally deny the charges:

We have not set the epoch right,  
We would not if we had to lie;  
Writers by trade we have tried to write  
By evidence of mind and eye;  
The day for that is perhaps gone by,  
Truth is unfashionably slow  
And shuns the opportune reply:  
You need not tell us what we know. (766)

MacNeice underlines his conviction that writing should attempt to do justice to the experienced particularities of existence and affirms his belief that artistic truth emerges only in its own time, subject to no-one. Yet there is also a feeling within the poem that writers have a responsibility to their community, and a wider moral or political obligation and 'duty' to those victims without hope: 'the prisoners who needed sky', 'the blind and bogged who needed light' and (more ominously) the 'puzzled masses doomed to die.'(766) There is a definite sense of struggle within the poem as MacNeice attempts to defend the artistic integrity of the current generation of writers while simultaneously admitting that he and they have knowingly failed in their aims as artists. Yet what the poem fails to make clear is how MacNeice intends to confront the challenge of writing in war-time when 'truth' becomes yet more elusive and the 'evidence of mind and eye' increasingly less dependable (MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* 1).

However, by the end of MacNeice's time in America in 1940 he would encounter the work of another major figure in American radio, Edward R. Murrow. MacNeice was impressed by Murrow's short-wave broadcasts from London which provided eye-witness accounts and reports from the city as the war escalated. The America reporter offered a close-hand account of the war which was both vivid and compelling yet which avoided overt polemic and didacticism. Murrow sought to reveal the chaos and turmoil of the war's progress and the specific effect that it had on individual citizens. Murrow's method was, to a large degree, based on first-hand empirical observation and he often provided a powerful impression of London's changing landscape or the mood of its citizens through the careful juxtaposition of acutely observed incidents. On the broadcast of 30<sup>th</sup> May 1940 for example, when the German war machine had levelled all in front of it and the British Expeditionary Force was falling back on Dunkirk, Murrow offers a striking sense of the atmosphere in the city:

The Londoners are doing their best to preserve their sense of humour, but I saw more grave solemn faces to day than I have ever seen in London before. Fashionable tea-rooms were almost deserted; the shops in Bond Street were doing very little business; people read their newspapers as they walked slowly along the streets. Even the newsreel theatres were nearly empty. I saw one woman standing in line waiting for a bus begin to cry very quietly. She didn't even bother to wipe the tears away. In Regent Street there was a sandwich man. His sign in big red letters had only three words on it: WATCH AND PRAY. (24)<sup>1</sup>

While Murrow did fulfil the traditional role of war-reporter, conveying to the public important facts, figures and political developments, his broadcasts were also interspersed with highly descriptive passages and electrifying moments of sense impression. One aspect of Murrow's reports which must surely have appealed to MacNeice's poetic sensibilities was their sensitivity



to the changing aural dimensions of the city. While the citizens of London were used to a bustling environment at night filled with the sound of traffic and people moving along streets, the Blitz and the enforced blackouts had changed the urban environment into a ghost town intermittently lit up by fire and haunted by the encircling noise of exploding bombs and roaring sirens. Under such conditions Londoners must surely have become preternaturally alert to the auditory dimensions of their city, given that it was often only through listening that any impression or extent of the bombing could be gauged. Indeed, Murrow's broadcast on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1940 reveals the difficulty of comprehending the scale of the destruction when night has fallen:

The bombs have been coming down at about the same rate as last night. It is impossible to get any estimate of the damage. Darkness prevents observation of details. The streets have been deserted, save for a few clanging fire engines during the last four or five hours. The planes have been high again tonight, so high that the searchlights can't reach them. The bombing sounds as though it was separated pretty evenly over the metropolitan district ... We ought to get the all clear in about two hours. Then those big German bombers that have been lumbering and mumbling about overhead all night will have to go home. (37)

What must also be remembered is that Murrow's broadcasts were often conducted on site as the action unfolded; he often spoke as bombs were falling within dangerously close proximity. The listener could therefore experience in real time the aural environment of London as it suffered German bombardment. The distant drone of the Luftwaffe bombers or the hurried footsteps of Londoners seeking refuge was transmitted across thousands of miles of ocean and several time zones to millions of Americans as part of their daily news. The shocking immediacy of Murrow's broadcasts and the very real soundtrack of destruction over which he spoke must surely have impacted strongly on MacNeice whose imagination was particularly receptive to such auditory stimulation. Indeed, it may well have stoked MacNeice's eagerness to witness the events for himself and persuaded him that he was 'missing out' artistically speaking.

Murrow had sought to open up his listeners to the uniquely disturbing realities of warfare as it affected the London populace and he became, to borrow from MacNeice, 'a mouth' not a 'megaphone' (*SCLM* 114). His war-reports display an eagerness to convey his personal experience of the city, and the personal experiences of others living there; he steered clear of overt moralising or ideological rhetoric and sought rather to give a clear idea of the reality of life as it was lived in the city. Certainly, he was against the Axis powers but by foregrounding the determined fortitude and daily sacrifices of the British (particularly

Londoners) as opposed to railing against Fascism and those who had supposedly allowed it to happen, Murrow offered a more artful form of propaganda for the British cause.

That Murrow's understated yet highly evocative style appealed to MacNeice is confirmed for us by Clair Willis in *That Neutral Island*<sup>ii</sup>. And further evidence of MacNeice's admiration for Murrow is contained in a review for the *Spectator* he wrote in February 1941 of the film *This is England* which had a commentary by the Murrow. MacNeice comments that the film 'is an extremely able piece of work and very good propaganda without underlining.' He continues:

The photography is excellent; there are some beautiful shots of roof-tops and factory chimneys. Directed by Mr. Humphrey Jennings and with a commentary – in an American voice – by Mr Ed. Murrow, it presents a moving and vivid picture of England, particularly industrial England, at war. The men and women selected in this film to be spokesmen of the working classes are all of the right type and speak their pieces well. We need more films like this; they are especially valuable for export to the United States. (31)

MacNeice not only finds Murrow's commentary moving, but notes how the film becomes more convincing by its disinclination to over-emphasise its arguments. The inclusion of 'working class' speakers is also seen as important in converting the United States to the British cause. Murrow's tendency to convey the war as a socially levelling force on British society was indeed a potent means of selling the war to the American public, many of whom saw it initially as an imperial war. Such an approach helped to nurture the idea in American hearts and minds that Britain was facing the war honestly and without class distinction. As we shall see MacNeice learned from Murrow, and in his early scripts, many of which were directed at America, he was careful to include characters or voices from all classes so as to convey the idea of the nation as a whole under attack coming together for the common good.

### III

Early in the New Year MacNeice was called to interview at Broadcasting House and on January 9<sup>th</sup> he met E.A. (Archie) Harding, Chief Instructor for the BBC's Staff training school for the first time. Harding was, like MacNeice, an Oxford intellectual with strong Left wing sympathies and the pair took an instant liking to one another; both had a genuine desire to do something useful with radio and both conceived of it as a democratic medium designed, above all, for communication. According to Geoffrey Bridson, Harding's 'whole attitude to the medium was stimulating and somehow exciting ... In Harding's view *all* people should be

encouraged to air their views, not merely their professional spokesmen ... The air at least should be open to all, as the Press quite obviously was not.’(qtd. Coulton, 42) Despite such aspirations the BBC remained a tightly controlled institution when MacNeice began his work there; the prerogatives of war and the Ministry of Information tended to take precedence over experiment and radicalism and innovators like Harding had to check their most adventurous ambitions. In Canto IV of *Autumn Sequel* MacNeice recalls an early meeting with Harding (referred to as ‘Harrap’) which reveals the nature of the work MacNeice was expected to do:

‘There will be need  
For the moment of course,’ said Harrap, ‘for much work  
Of a purely ephemeral kind; you will have to feed

The tall transmitters with hot news – Dunkirk,  
Tobruk or Singapore, you will have to set  
Traps for your listeners, Yank or Turk,

While your blacked out compatriots must be met  
Half way – half reprimanded and half flattered,  
Cajoled to half remember and half forget;

For that is propaganda. Bored and battered  
And sleeping in long tubes like suspect germs  
They must be told that what they once thought mattered

Still matters. It is not much; but Goebbels’ terms  
Of reference are worse. (389)

It is clear that MacNeice was expected to manipulate audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, cajoling them to a particular point of view, yet it is also clear that this was not to be as extreme as the disinformation peddled by Goebbels. There was certainly to be a definite focus on drawing other Allies into the conflict and buoying up the public mood, but this shift in emphasis was less extreme than the hegemonic propaganda produced by Goebbels and his staff.

In the first months of the phoney war, *der Sitzkrieg*, the BBC proved singularly ineffective at inspiring public confidence as people became increasingly irritated with the scores of public announcements, pep talks by ministers, and hundreds of gramophone records which became the standard fare for listeners. The tone set by the BBC seemed patronising, elitist and out of touch with the majority of its listeners. The ‘Forever England’ style of

programming, which might typically include speeches of Queen Elizabeth I, linked by snatches of Elgar to the inevitable sonnets of Rupert Brooke, left audiences unmoved and uninspired. There was a distinct failure to write *for the medium* as writers and producers created work which lacked the necessary spontaneity and verve to draw the listener in; indeed much of the programming must have seemed rather stilted to the ear as poetry, music and dramatic writing were crammed together unsuccessfully, failing to achieve the fluidity and coherence necessary to create a genuinely motivating or touching broadcast.

In the autumn of 1939 a trickle of complaint against the BBC turned into a deluge of scorn and people began switching to foreign radio stations in search of entertainment. For the rest of 1939 the national Press launched a bitter offensive against Britain's wartime programming, giving voice to the disillusioned mass of listeners who felt patronised and misunderstood by the BBC (Briggs 145). Ernest Newman, for example, writing in the *Sunday Times* on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1939, remarked that 'The BBC pours out into the air day by day an endless stream of trivialities and silliness, apparently labouring under the delusion that in any time of crisis the British public becomes just one colossal moron' (qtd. in Briggs 177). In October, the more specialized periodicals and weeklies added their voice to the chorus of complaint and the furore became so great that the matter was even discussed in Parliament: 'There is very wide criticism of broadcasting', Clement Atlee told the House on 26th September. 'I am not a habitual listener, but I must say that at times I feel depressed when I listen in. You should not be depressed listening in.' (qtd. in Briggs 177).

By early 1940 the BBC had begun to take note of the public disdain (as revealed by their Listener Research) and the standard of programming began to gradually improve. Particularly effective were broadcasts which brought eye-witness accounts of warfare (at sea and on land) to the general public as the BBC began to bridge the gap between the barbarity and excitement of war and its rather oblique and stuffy reporting of the conflict. Indeed, by April of 1940, BBC broadcasting had improved and developed to such an extent that there were even programmes satirizing the broadcasting of the first months of war. Such satire was particularly successful for it solved one of the great problems of broadcasting satire - that of finding a subject with a sufficiently wide base of general experience for its point to be seen by the whole nation - while at the same time taking some of 'the starch out of the BBC.' (Goldie 673).

Home Front programming and propaganda were gradually gaining in subtlety and depth by the time MacNeice joined the BBC at the beginning of 1941. Yet there was still a paucity of truly definitive or iconic radio plays or features and, from an aesthetic point of view in particular, there was huge scope for experimentation and evolution within these relatively unexplored and ill-defined genres. MacNeice worked, initially, as a freelance for the BBC before being taken

on as staff in May for a trial period of three months (later confirmed in his post). For MacNeice, the Features department of the BBC was a new world. He was blessed to have Laurence Gilliam as his head of the department and found in him a superior and friend whom he could respect. Another member of the Features staff at this time, Douglas Cleverdon, offers a useful account of Gilliam:

Gilliam himself was experienced in journalism, and had a particular enthusiasm for radio documentaries; he was also a man of wide-ranging interests and of inspiring integrity; he was compassionate and courageous, and would always back a project that had a chance of success rather than reject it because it might fail. He was also a *bon viveur*, unpunctual and extremely good company, and a tower of strength to his subordinates. To him mainly was due the development of BBC features as a radio form. (qtd. in Coulton, 34)

The first series that MacNeice worked on was aimed at America and according to Coulton the poet had 'made his interest in such propaganda clear in his original application to the BBC.'<sup>(42)</sup> The series was called 'The Stones Cry Out' and took as its theme old buildings symbolising traditional values and Anglo-American heritage under threat of bombardment. MacNeice had already written one script for this series before his formal appointment called 'Dr Johnson Takes It' (5<sup>th</sup> May 1941), a dramatized visit to the damaged house in London's Gough Square, where Johnson wrote his dictionary. The programme uses the figure of the heroic lexicographer as a personification of British tenacity and by implication a celebration of the language uniting the British and American peoples.

Another programme written as a freelance, called 'Cook's Tour of the London Subways' (25<sup>th</sup> March, 1941), had also shown his skill in writing for an American audience. This fifteen minute playlet follows a Young Man who encounters a Mrs Van Winkle Brown who has not been in London since 1930. The Young Man takes her on a tour of Underground stations converted to air-raid shelters. Mrs Van Winkle Brown and the thousands of American listening in are then introduced to a series of voices of Londoners – suffering but stoic, and ready to resist and overcome. MacNeice wrote to Mrs Dodds that he had demanded 'all sorts of sound effects' for the script – a sign that he was relishing the aural possibilities of the new medium and perhaps the thrill of having his work on air. (qtd. in Stallworthy 292) 'Cook's Tour' was also MacNeice's first published radio work, having been shortened and adapted for *The Listener* a month after its broadcast, and appropriately set aside sketches reminiscent of Henry Moore's haunting paintings of Londoners in the Underground.

Undoubtedly, MacNeice's best script for the series was titled 'Westminster Abbey' and was originally broadcast on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1941 for the Overseas Service. However, the script was again

used on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1941 for Home Service consumption. The date is significant: it was the first anniversary of the beginning of the blitz. From the outset, the announcer sets a solemn tone: the Abbey is a shrine at the heart of Englishness: ‘The building is a beautiful church but it is something much more than that. It is the repository of English history and an acknowledged national symbol. The history contained in its walls and the nation of which it is a symbol still remain alive after a year of devastation.’ (1) The script is forty-five minutes long and focuses on the hit taken by the Abbey during an air-raid on May 1941. The thrust of the piece is similar to MacNeice’s previous scripts – it reinforces the shared history between the American and British people while also emphasising the spirit and resolve of the British men and women who are represented in a range of different voices from various different classes. What is more interesting about the programme is the way that MacNeice controls the aural elements of the script. MacNeice utilises the whole range of his sound palette here, deftly interweaving voices and skilfully incorporating a range of different sound effects, hymns and chants into the programme, establishing a dynamic rhythm to the narrative. Yet MacNeice also exploits another acoustic effect which is uniquely powerful on radio - silence. After the announcer’s first paragraph we are brought into the world of Westminster Abbey and asked to dwell on its captivating soundscape:

LIGHT VOICE:	You are listening to a choir singing in Westminster Abbey.
WOMAN’S VOICE:	Voices floating among pointed arches.
DARK VOICE:	In a forest of fretted stone.
WOMAN’S VOICE:	And now you are listening to the Abbey itself,
DARK VOICE:	Now you are listening to silence,
	(Pause)
LIGHT VOICE:	We will take you into this silence. (3)

Given that MacNeice is attempting to foreground certain abstract or immaterial qualities linked to the Abbey – its history, its tradition and the atmosphere of solemn serenity within its walls – the decision to draw the listener into noiseless ‘dead air’ is effective. As the radio critic Andrew Crissel makes clear, silence, if used correctly, can add an extra dimension to a radio programme: ‘Because radio silence is total (unlike film and theatrical silences, which are visually filled) it can be a potent stimulus to the listener, providing a gap in the noise for his imagination to work.’ (53) In ‘Westminster Abbey’, the silence provides a pause in the action so that the listener can begin to conceptualise the Abbey in his or her mind’s eye; while at the same time it mimics the mysterious and dignified aura of the building with its soundless, pregnant air. It also has the effect of drawing the listener into the imaginary world of the text

where Kings can speak from the grave and historical moments from the Abbey's past be revived for the listeners' entertainment and edification.

There is perhaps another reason why MacNeice may have sought to foreground silence and dwell on its elusive properties, one closely related to the changing aural climate of British cities which were now under German bombardment. In radio, as in life, the meaning of silence is defined by the context in which it exists – the silence at a memorial for example is different to the silence before a concert soloist begins to play. In a war-torn city silence usually has an entirely different meaning to silence in peace-time and for a city under regular nightly bombardment one would assume that a cessation of the constant thud of bombs would be a relief. However, the following broadcast by Murrow, from London on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1940, reveals that silence, far from functioning as a redemptive pause in the action, could actually have an insidiously destructive effect on morale:

This is London at three thirty in the morning. This has been what might be called a 'routine night' – air-raid alarm at about nine o'clock and intermittent bombing ever since. ... The aircraft barrage has been fierce but sometimes there have been periods of twenty minutes when London has been silent. Then the big red buses would start up and move on till the guns started working again. That silence is almost hard to bear. One becomes accustomed to rattling windows and the distant sound of bombs, and then there comes a silence than can be felt. You know the sound will return. You wait and then it starts again. That waiting is bad. It gives you a chance to imagine things. (57)

In another raid nine days later Murrow again reveals how disturbing the silence could be yet his view is more nuanced: 'I'm standing again tonight on a rooftop looking out over London, feeling rather large and lonesome. In the course of the last fifteen or twenty minutes there has been considerable action up there, but at the moment there's an ominous silence hanging over London. But at the same time a silence that has a great deal of dignity.' Silence then could be an elevating force invoking, perhaps, the quiet stoicism of the people, connected by a common burden and resisting without fuss; yet it could also be a terrible pause for reflection, a palpable void in which the isolated mind is buffeted by imaginary thoughts of mutilation, total destruction and mass death. In 'Westminster Abbey', MacNeice shows his sensitivity to the heightened significance of silence in war-time Britain and his script suggests an attempt to recode such silences in positive terms by reminding his listeners of inspirational figures, now buried in the Abbey, whose words ring out in memory:

WOMAN'S VOICE:            Dryden wrote the 'Annus Mirabilis' a poem describing  
   A year when England was fighting for her life

DARK VOICE: 'Never had valour, no not ours, before  
 Done ought like this upon Land or Main:  
 When not to be o'ercome was to do more  
 than all the conquests former kings did gain'

WOMAN'S VOICE: It was also the year of the plague and the year of  
 The Fire of London

DARK VOICE: 'Yet London, Empress of the Northern Clime,  
 By an high fate thou greatly didst expire:  
 Great as the World's, which, at the death of time,  
 Must fall, and rise, a nobler frame by fire.'

.....

WOMAN'S VOICE: He [Dryden] has gone into silence but his words ring in our  
 ears.

DARK VOICE: The words of the poets are written on the silence.  
 On the silence of the solitary mind; on the silence  
 of the empty church. Listen to the silence  
 of the aisles.

(Pause)

The Abbey is afloat on the night of London ...  
 with all these dead aboard her – a crew or cargo  
 of bones. But echoes of a past life cannot be  
 completely destroyed. The past continues to live  
 and the silence is ready to talk.

WOMAN'S VOICE: Echoes in the poet's corner – echoes of rhythmical  
 language. (6)

The striking image of the Abbey as a ship afloat in the darkness of London suggests that though the physical reality of the Abbey may prove temporary, the values which it symbolises will persevere, echoing into the darkness, freighted only to the mind that is alive to understand them. The Abbey is stirringly imagined here as a moveable feast for the inner ear, an echo-chamber for the auditory imagination.

As well as reinforcing notions of Englishness and English values rooted deep in race memory, 'Westminster Abbey' also turns its attentions to the German bombers which have come close to destroying the building:

WOMAN'S VOICE: On September 7<sup>th</sup> last year a horde of shadows flew over  
 London.



DARK VOICE: Ghosts of an evil past, prophets of an evil future.

LIGHT VOICE: Dark-winged shadows flitting across the roofs, shadows of destroying birds.

DARK VOICE: Shadows of the Crooked Cross.

WOMAN'S VOICE: The eagles with yellow eyes flew in from over the Channel. They hovered over the dome of St. Pauls ... and over the towers of the Abbey ... (7)

The vocabulary is highly evocative: MacNeice has reconceptualised the bombers as spectral birds in thrall to the crooked cross - *der Hakenkreuz* - the swastika, which stands in opposition to the cross we would imagine in St Pauls or the Abbey. MacNeice also draws a contrast between the silence of the Abbey and the terrible sounds of the German planes roving overhead:

WOMAN'S VOICE: Listen; what is that?

(Drum roll representing planes)

PLEBIAN VOICE: What do you think?  
 LIGHT VOICE: Who is on the watch tonight?  
 PLEBIAN VOICE: Tom, Dick, Harry; Robinson and Brown.  
 PREACHER: We made a prayer unto our God and set a watch against  
 Them, day and night, because of them.

(Drum roll louder)

PLEBIAN VOICE: Waiting by the hydrants; waiting with sandbags and Hydrant pumps.  
 LIGHT VOICE: Some on the triforium level. Some on the roof level

(A.A.Gunfire)

PREACHER: Let them be as chaff before the wind and let the

Angel of the Lord chase them.  
 DARK VOICE: Heinkels and Junkers – a tangle of metal.  
 PREACHER: They return at evening and make a noise like a dog  
 and go round about the city.

(Noise of bombs) (8)

MacNeice attempts to recreate on air the sounds of the bombardment while also building the atmosphere of panic which the bombing creates. In the poem ‘The Trolls’ written at the same time as ‘Westminster Abbey’, MacNeice again seeks to reflect the aural experience of the German attacks: ‘In the misty night humming to themselves like morons / they ramble and rumble over roof tops, stumble and shamble from pile to pillar / in clodhopping boots that crunch the stars’ As Edna Longley notes: ‘The sound and fury of the Blitz give MacNeice’s onomatopoeia grim licence’ (*LMAS* 87) in this poem; yet as in ‘Westminster Abbey’, MacNeice counters the terror of warfare and destruction through an emphasis on ‘incarnate value’ and the power of human expression to transcend the ravages of existence:

Halfwit demons who rape and slobber, who assume  
 That when we are killed no more will be heard of us –  
 Silence of men and troll’s triumph.  
 A wrong - in the end – assumption.  
 .....  
                   they think to  
 Be rid for ever of the voice of men but they happen  
 To be – for all their kudos –  
 Wrong, wrong in the end. (217)

In a sense radio itself serves as a metaphor for the poem’s message – despite the destruction of cities and the death of thousands, the ‘voice of men’ transmits across the ether, sounding in homes around the country and reverberating in the ‘solitary mind’ of the listeners.

#### IV

Germany’s invasion of Russia in June 1941 meant that MacNeice now had to turn from emphasizing the links between America and Britain to underlining Britain’s solidarity with its new ally. To this end, he was commissioned to adapt for radio Sergei Eisenstein’s cinematic

masterpiece *Alexander Nevsky* which had been made three years earlier. The play formed part of a BBC campaign to change attitudes towards Russia and MacNeice had already written a script charting the life of Chekov as part of this process. Eisenstein's film had taken as its focus, the great hero of Russian history, Alexander Nevsky (1220-63). Nevsky had been the subject of a medieval hagiographic biography and was revered in Russian culture as a leader and statesman of courage, tenacity and cunning. His most famous act had been to lead the Russian forces in an epic victory over the invading Teutonic Knights in the mid thirteenth century. Eisenstein's choice of Nevsky as his subject was a shrewd one for it was ardently nationalistic and sufficiently large in scale to satisfy Stalin's megalomaniacal taste for the pompous and grandiose. The story had an obvious topical relevance too, given that Nevsky's greatest achievement had been to crush the imperialistic aspirations of the invading German forces. However, what Eisenstein had not foreseen was Stalin's changing relationship with Hitler, which veered from apparent friendship in August 1939 to hatred after the Nazi attack in June 1941: such shifts, for a time, complicated the fate of Eisenstein's rabidly anti-German film, but its cachet as an innovative piece of cinema remained high outside of Russia (Robinson 22-4).

Russia's entry into the war on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1941 provided a 'propitious moment' to adapt Eisenstein's film for broadcast and Dallas Bower, who was to produce MacNeice's script, described its propaganda value as 'inestimable' in light of its resonance with the current developments in the war and its potency as a parable for the times. Bower was ideally placed to produce the play for he was an experienced radio producer and possessed an in depth knowledge of the material – he had used the film to teach producers film technique when he was in charge of Film production at the Ministry of Information at Alexandra Palace (Bower considered the film 'in technique about five years ahead of anything that has yet been done' [BBC memo, 23<sup>rd</sup> July]<sup>iii</sup>). *Nevsky* was also Eisenstein's first completed sound film and one of the first Soviet sound film epics; its vivid use of music and sound was one of the reasons it was chosen for radio adaptation. The spell-binding score had been written by Sergei Prokofiev and was a crucial element in the film's success. Both Director and Composer agreed that the music should be an active (not just accompanying) role in the film and Prokofiev's innate ability to interpret musically the rhythms of a given scene and to delineate the rhythmic/emotional contrast between shots and scenes (montage) amazed Eisenstein, as did the overall fluidity of the composition - he remarked on the film score: 'Prokofiev's music is incredibly plastic; it never becomes mere illustration.' (qtd. in Robinson 23)

MacNeice's work with *Nevsky* then was to engage him with an avant-garde artwork which experimented with new ways to express narrative using a dynamic and highly cohesive composite of sound and vision. Previously, Eisenstein had relied on a technique known as *dialectic montage* - the juxtaposition of contrasting images - to evoke emotions or ideas

through an impression of conflict. In *Alexander Nevsky*, he opted for another, more widely used approach, *vertical montage*, which seeks to achieve an organic unity between the various elements of the film, such as sound and image. What was particularly innovative about Eisenstein's application of this method was that he often filmed scenes *after* Prokofiev had already written the score for them, ensuring that the visual rhythms of the film harmonized with the cadence of its music. Thus, the overall construction of the film was based on an imaginative cross-fertilization of aural composition into visual composition (and vice-versa) – a collaborative example which MacNeice could, and did, learn from.

Before beginning his script, Bower arranged for MacNeice to see the film along with Francis Dillon and brought in Ivor Montague to translate the film's dialogue from the original Russian (Montague later provided MacNeice with copies of his translated dialogue for the play, giving MacNeice his first taste of writing for radio from translated material). MacNeice seems to have responded very positively to the project and, in a letter to Montague, dated 15<sup>th</sup> September 1941, Bower comments that 'he [MacNeice] has now become very excited at the prospect of handling so magnificently topical a subject on an historical basis.' However, despite his enthusiasm, MacNeice wanted to take his time with the script and wrote to Bower on 14<sup>th</sup> October saying that the writing was going well but cautioned: 'this is the sort of script one cannot force.' It is perhaps unsurprising that MacNeice needed time to finish the play given that he was also writing other programmes for the BBC and writing poetry of his own. Yet aside from his gruelling workload the task of adapting the film was a daunting and highly complex project; for he not only had to streamline an epic cinematic experience into a more succinct aural drama, but also had to establish a continuity between the subtle dynamics of the film's score and the structure of his own script.

The play was eventually broadcast on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941 from the Bedford Corn Exchange, where the BBC's Music Division was based during the war. The production went out live on the Home Service and included a full cast along with the BBC Chorus, the BBC Theatre Chorus and the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. Before the play, a recorded announcement, written by MacNeice and spoken by the Soviet Ambassador Maisky, was to be played. Yet, just as the broadcast was about to begin, an indefinite delay was ordered for an incoming news bulletin: it announced the attack on Pearl Harbour. Thus, in a remarkable night for radio listeners the air continuity was Roosevelt, Churchill, and then Maisky announcing his tribute to Russia. Such a prelude must have given the subsequent drama a new depth of field and the announcement of what was clearly a momentous turning point in the war certainly set the tone for the epic broadcast that was to follow.

On the whole *Alexander Nevsky* made for a successful radio-drama production and MacNeice showed himself to be a sensitive craftsman of the medium. One particularly successful section of the drama is the scene in which Nevsky's gathered army first encounter





phase begins with Juri saying: 'What is that other noise? Yet Juri also provides a meta-textual gloss on the medium itself, implicitly defending it from the charge of its blindness and showing that aural perception is just as valid as visual perception in the quest for insight and knowledge; he reminds us of Lear's striking exhortation to Gloucester: 'A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears.' (IV.6.146-52)

Aside from providing various characters' perspectives on context, another method MacNeice used to give a sense of the unfolding action was to write certain passages in a somewhat stylised or poetic form of language designed to catch the rhythm of the action. In a memo to Bower (dated 14<sup>th</sup> October) MacNeice describes how he sees the later portions of the play, in particular, as being 'nearer to actual verse' than the earlier sequences while also being more sharp and driven than the 'slow and heavy' beginning. This technique is effectively employed towards the end of the battle when the Russian horse led by Nevsky's lieutenant Gavriilo, outflank the German Knights:

MARYA:	It's Gavriilo
IGOR:	Gavriilo is coming to take them in the flank Russian horses at the gallop, Russian hoofs on ice, Curved swords flashing in the sinking sun, The black Knights wheeling to meet them, only too late, Caught on the turn, knocked from the saddle, Clatter of German targes and helmets, The white plumes red and the tall knights low, Riderless horses rearing and lances Shivered as if by lightning ... (49)

The rhythms of MacNeice's words blend well with Prokofiev's music at this point as the 'Battle of the Ice' section of the score comes to its dramatic end: the strings veer furiously up and down while the wind instruments (horns and trumpets to the fore) combine to create an overall effect which is by turns triumphant, neurotic, whimsical and melancholy. There is definite sense throughout the final scenes of the play that MacNeice's writing has incorporated musical as well as visual ideas from the film into his work; this is most clearly reflected in the rhythmical plasticity of the language, which can quickly shift gear from languid or pensive description to rushing accelerating rhythms, to quick, staccato bursts of dialogue.

It is undoubtedly true that MacNeice's lines 'speak better' (100), as Bower observed, than when read flat on the printed page, but descriptive passages such as the above lose even more when detached from voice and the music they were designed to cohere with. What must

also be remembered is that the play was designed, on one level, to respond to a specific political context; and that while it gained a certain resonance for contemporary listeners through its cultural relevance, parts of it may seem dated to the modern audience. Yet some sense of the effect that the play may have had on contemporary listeners is given by the Listener panel reports compiled by the BBC and the reaction of contemporary radio critics. According to the Listener report the play was generally received extremely well with 'unreserved praise' for the music, singing and many of MacNeice's descriptive passages (particularly, 'the approach of the German Knights over the ice, and the death of the German Grand Master'.) It was thought a 'coherent picture' of a particular event which 'brought out well the various characters' involved. However, some Russian listeners felt that some of the language sounded 'like an intellectual exposition of modern political philosophy' thereby creating the impression that 'the whole feature was twisted for a modern purpose.' Certainly Nevsky's references to the 'Violation of the Rights of Man' are markedly anachronistic for thirteenth century Russia, but this is perhaps unsurprising given that the play, like the film, was commissioned and designed as a form of propaganda.

Highest praise for the broadcast was given by the radio critic for *The Listener*, Grace Wyndam Goldie, who reviewed the play for her radio column in the magazine on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1941:

For nearly seven years I have clamoured for programmes like 'Alexander Nevsky'. For nearly seven years it seemed possible that one day we might get more feature programmes, better feature programmes, programmes written specially for broadcasting, programmes in which poets would use verse to create new effects at the microphone and the microphone would bring poetry back into a living and necessary relationship to ordinary and contemporary life. And here at last we have something of all that. Here we have Louis MacNeice taking a Russian film and turning it into magnificent radio; here we have the physical excitement which sight gives the cinema translated into the physical excitement of the rhythm of the spoken verse. (Goldie 892)

What must surely have pleased MacNeice most about such praise was the idea (however real) that radio had given him a platform to bring poetry into a closer and 'necessary' relationship to 'ordinary' life – an achievement which was consistent with his democratic conception of poetry as outlined in his book *Modern Poetry* (1938) published three years earlier.

In praising MacNeice's use of verse in his play, Goldie points to D.G. Bridson's earlier play, *The March of the 45*, as an example which MacNeice may have learned from. However, Goldie argues that in Bridson's play, the effect of the verse had been romantic, whereas in *Nevsky* MacNeice had achieved the feel of an epic, of 'the stately and primitive, of great men



moving against a barren landscape ...' (892) Goldie also felt that the verse, combined with the music, created 'that quality of urgent movement which is as necessary to radio as it is to film.' She concludes that the play as whole was a 'new landmark in the development of the radio feature', that it was 'radio conquered at last.' (892)

## V

Almost immediately after 'Alexander Nevsky' had been broadcast, a large scale programme was commissioned as a tribute to the United States (another ally), who had entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbour. Due to the success of 'Alexander Nevsky' Bower and MacNeice were again chosen to work together on this ambitious new project. The theme of the new play was to be the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus and MacNeice's model and source for the script was to be Samuel Eliot Morison's Pulitzer prize-winning biography of Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. This was, in many ways, as epic in scope as Eisenstein's film and would require a similar scaling down to operate effectively as radio drama. The new production was intended to build on the success of 'Alexander Nevsky' and the full resources of the BBC Music department were again at MacNeice's and Bower's disposal. The broadcast was originally planned for mid-March and Bower was eager to have William Walton write the score, but the composer was already engaged in writing two film scores: J.B. Priestley's script *The Foreman Went to France* and Leslie Howard's *The First of the Few*. Consequently, Walton was unable to accept Bower's request and in a letter dated 27<sup>th</sup> January 1942, he makes his position clear:

This is most irritating - there is nothing I would like better than to accept ... Unless you can get the Corp. to postpone the date to mid-May instead of mid-March, I don't see how I can do it ... In fact I don't see how you can do it, as there are precious few composers about nowadays. I don't suppose it would be possible to get Alan Rawsthorne out of the army again ... Benjamin Britten is by way of returning from America ... but I gather he joins the RAF music dept. on landing.<sup>iv</sup>

Bower replied to Walton a few days later indicating that he was prepared to wait and enclosed a prospective outline of the programme which had been written by MacNeice. In this scheme, MacNeice states that the drama was to be 'essentially a one man, one idea programme' and the hero, Columbus, was to be carefully characterised and balanced throughout on two planes: 'as permanently motivated by a mystical *idée fixe*' and 'as an egotist, uncompromising and difficult in his dealings with other people.' The central theme of the play, according to the scheme, was to be the discovery of a New World and the excitement of 'achieving the

impossible'. MacNeice envisaged that the music for the play should act as an integral part of the production, used 'not only for the purposes of linking sequences, but to reinforce and illuminate the dominant themes.' Indeed, he goes on to provide a detailed outline for each section of the play showing a burgeoning awareness of the different tones and textures which music could add to his script.

The start of *Columbus* establishes the dialectical structure of the drama, and also introduces the thematic dichotomies that will pervade the narrative: known versus unknown, faith versus doubt, future versus past, stasis versus movement, provincial versus global, the imagined versus the unimaginable. The opening bars of the score strike an epic tone - the music is expansive, brisk and regal, creating a sense of anticipation and forward momentum. However, the atmosphere rapidly becomes more sinister as the music slows and darkens, and a solitary, menacing drum beat leads into the opening voice of Doubt:

DOUBT:                         No it cannot be done, it cannot be done.  
                                       Here on the shore of the final sea  
                                       Our windows open on unreality,  
                                       The bitter rubric of the sinking sun –  
                                       Ne plus ultra. This is the Western edge  
                                       Of the established world, the ocean wall  
                                       Beyond which none may pass. To pass  
                                       Would lead to nothing at all. (7)

After the single voice of Doubt has finished speaking, a furtive drum roll leads us into the chanting chorus of Doubt, whose slow, dissonant harmonies evoke the haunting impossibility of Columbus' sea quest to the west; their words would almost certainly have had a secondary resonance with the listening public who were still all too aware of 'The Battle of the Atlantic' which was raging to the west.

DOUBT CHORUS:             West of Europe all is dark  
                                       Water and uncertainty;  
                                       Never seaman dare embark  
                                       On that desert of the sea;  
                                       On those waves of nullity  
                                       Never venturer may sail -  
                                       All who try shall fail, shall fail. (7)

What awaits Columbus is not just the end of his life, but the end of existence itself - an utter void – and there is a sense that the quest is not simply a physical journey into uncharted seas, but also a metaphysical crossing into a perceived other world, a doomed passage to a deeply uncertain reality. Walton's choral arrangement of MacNeice's lyrics imbues them with a surreal and ghostly aspect, and slows the rhythm to an ominous and lethargic trudge. Yet momentum is breathed back into the drama as soon as the voice of Faith, spoken by Laurence Olivier, delivers his first lines imploring Columbus to sail 'Westward! Westward!' to find the 'Legendary isles' which 'call our ships to sea'. The Faith Chorus then completes the antiphonal pattern of the opening section chiming in ethereal unison and revoking the impossibility of Columbus's venture. This sense of musical resolve echoes the rhyming scheme of the verse for the two speakers and semi-choruses, which mirror each other identically.

FAITH CHORUS:                    West of Europe lies a world  
    Never heard of never seen,  
    But the sails that still are furled  
    Soon shall reach a new demesne.  
    All the things that might have been –  
    When we cross the Western Sea,  
    All those things, shall be, shall be. (7)

In his introduction to the play written in 1963 MacNeice underlines the role and function of these vocal interludes and semi-choruses:

It will be noticed that the two verse-speakers and the two semi-choruses are neither characters nor, in the ordinary sense, narrators but are mouthpieces of two opposed principles, doubt and faith – a projection as it were of Columbus's inner dialectic; being thus projected outside the protagonist, they allowed me to keep him as simple and wedge like as I wanted. (*SPLM* 5)

The mouthpieces of Doubt and Faith recur intermittently throughout the narrative echoing Columbus's triumphs and failures and projecting diametrically opposite futures for the hero. However, while the verse-speakers and choruses function very effectively at the opening of the play, providing a suitably august and awe-inspiring introduction to such an epic tale, the choral interjections can seem somewhat vapid and tautological as the action unfolds; indeed, there are several occasions when these non-diegetic, otherworldly interludes disrupt the momentum of the drama, seeming to jar against the naturalistic environment in which most of the action is played out.

A more subtle means of contrasting Columbus's various successes and set-backs is provided by Walton's deft use of certain musical phrases and fanfare, which are frequently employed to indicate the predominance of a certain viewpoint or principle at various points in the play<sup>v</sup>. For example, when Columbus's first proposed voyage has been sternly rejected by the Royal Commission headed by the acerbic Bishop Talavera, the fanfare used to present the Bishop earlier is echoed musically in the following scene as Columbus leaves the court defeated and dejected. Thus, Walton provides an elliptical reference to the supremacy of Talavera's position at this point and the cynical parochialism which he embodies. In a similar way, when Columbus eventually makes landing on San Salvador 'his' fanfare echoes that of the Duke of Medina Celi, a man of action and imagination, who had previously supported and sheltered Columbus when he had little hope of success<sup>vi</sup>. Walton, therefore, not only aligns Celi with Columbus, but suggests that their project has prevailed, and that the imaginative and active have triumphed over passive and complacent.

Although the verse-speakers and choral sequences may, at times, interrupt the flow of the narrative in *Columbus*, the play as whole moves along remarkably smoothly given the immensity of the subject. And while Walton's score is an important component in tying all the different locales and environments of the play together, MacNeice's script utilises an impressive array of structural devices in order to drive the story forward in a lucid and dynamic manner. As in *Alexander Nevsky*, MacNeice chooses not to rely on an omniscient narrator to describe the action and instead weaves the necessary description and characterisation into the dialogue. One particular example of MacNeice's proficiency in shifting scenes at pace, while maintaining audience interest and conveying important background detail, occurs when Columbus first seeks an audience with Queen Isabella of Spain in order to garner support for his voyage. Instead of simply beginning the scene *in media res* with Columbus presenting his case to Isabella in her chambers, MacNeice pans into the action, providing a brief glimpse of Columbus through the eyes of other characters before he actually begins his discussion. Initially, Columbus is seen by two Lackeys who spot him in the ante-room 'walking up and down ...the carpet like a caged tiger.'(19) The first lackey notes that: 'He [Columbus] looks no better than us', while the second comments, 'He's one of those mad foreigners, / You ought to have heard how he spoke to me - / Looked right through me as if I was a sieve.' (19) The audience, therefore, is quickly made aware of Columbus's uncouth and unkempt appearance as well as his maniacally focused, slightly unhinged state of mind. The scene quickly cuts to the Queen's room where she is discussing Columbus's imminent arrival with her closest friend Marquesa de Moya, who is desperate to steal a glimpse of Columbus. Marquesa is promptly dismissed to the adjacent room by Isabella, yet the focus remains with her as Columbus enters the Queens chambers:

MARQUESA:                   What can he be like? Perhaps if I just creep over ...  
 Very dishonourable of me ...  
                                   (*Faint murmuring of Isabella's voice;*  
                                   *then of Columbus*)  
 That is Columbus now ...  
 Perhaps if I just open it, just the tiniest chink...  
 I *must* see what he's like...

COLUMBUS:                    (*from next room*)  
 Your Majesty,  
 I must beg leave to correct you.

MARQUESA:                   God preserve us!

COLUMBUS:                   You used the word impossibility.  
 What I am proposing is a certainty

MARQUESA:                   God in his mercy protect us!  
 So that is Christopher Columbus!  
 The man who corrects Isabella. (21)

The passage deftly draws the audience into the discussion between Columbus and the Queen as listeners experience the action vicariously through the somewhat comical Marquesa, who seeks to eavesdrop on the half-heard conversation in the adjacent room. Her exclamatory commentary also provides a sense of perspective for the audience, underlining the impudence and unwavering conviction of Columbus in the presence of the highest powers. And while the scene may seem slightly ordinary when flat on the page, it makes for convincing and compelling listening and reveals MacNeice to be fully adept in, and aware of, the emerging grammar of the medium.

As demonstrated above, MacNeice was more than capable of varying the audience's perspective in order to keep the story lively and entertaining; yet over the course of the two hour drama the momentum does slow somewhat and in his commentary on *Columbus* written in 1963 MacNeice suggests that the play's weaker stretches may have been caused by the type of hero he was obliged to present.

Since *Christopher Columbus* is so long, the sequences too are unusually long and the build unusually leisurely. It therefore looks more 'literary' than most radio scripts while it lacks those surprises and twists which in a script of normal length are often required to make a point in a flash – a dynamic *multum in parvo*. I rather regret the absence of such tricks but the work did not require them and they might have conflicted with the one way dignity of

the theme. The temptation to stunt in this way might also have involved the wider temptation to debunk the Columbus legend. (*SPLM* 5)

The passage hints at a certain straining on MacNeice's part against the dignified and heroic image of Columbus which the occasion required him to present. And also, perhaps, shows his awareness that the play was, at times, lacking in truly gripping and densely resonant writing; that the terse and imaginatively rich economy of diction implied by the phrase *multum in parvo* (much in little) was perhaps absent in the play's more languid sequences.

Yet that is not to say that there are not plenty of instances of dramatic intensity in *Columbus*, and one such moment occurs in the Second Act, just before Columbus makes the first sighting of land. The scene begins with two sailors, Bartolomé and Franciso, discussing their lot as 'galley slaves' aboard Columbus ship. Both conclude that their captain must surely be mad and Franciso duly recounts how he has seen him standing up on the forward castle of the ship 'like a statue up on a church – and talking to himself'. The sailor then continues: 'his face didn't seem to move but he were a-talking to himself - talking right out loud to the sea and the moon.'(48) Immediately after this scene, night-music links us to Columbus doing what Franciso has just described:

(Night-music now throws a light on Columbus talking to himself)

COLUMBUS:

'Where shall wisdom be found and where is the abode of understanding?

God makes the weight for his winds and he weigheth the waters by measure.'

They knew that I was to come.

Isaiah and Esdras and Job and John the Divine -

They knew I was to come.

And the Roman poet, Seneca, knew it too –

... 'venient annis

Saecula seris quibus oceanus

Vincula rerum laxet' ...

'The time will come in a late

Century when the sea

Will loose the knots of fate

And the earth will be opened up

And the rolled map unfurled

And a new sailor sail

To uncover a new world.'

'The time will come...' The time has come already.

There are strange things happening. (49)

This short soliloquy wonderfully encapsulates Columbus's passionate and urgent curiosity while reinforcing the idea that he is a solitary visionary existing, almost, on a different plane of reality than those around him. By quoting the various biblical and classical sources, which he sees as prophesising his mission, Columbus reveals the sheer depth and scope of his obsession while also placing himself as a sort of deiform saviour of the Old World. Indeed, the quotation from Seneca (MacNeice appropriately used Columbus's own translation) interprets Columbus's journey as a glorious, mythical quest of cosmic importance; yet it also seems to project an eerie, almost apocalyptic atmosphere onto the scene. The accompanying music responds sensitively to the script dividing the soliloquy into two sections: a delicate air of suspense pervades the first section which ends with the final line of the Latin quotation of Seneca, and is followed by a sudden intensification and heightening of pitch and rhythm in the more dynamic and robust second half of the soliloquy. The full passage, when combined with Walton's music, and Olivier's brooding, electrifying delivery, adds up to a *tour de force* of radio-dramatic production and collaboration – a truly spell-binding and explosive auditory composition primed to inject a visceral feeling of awe and apprehension, yet also suffused with a sense of metaphysical wonderment and inquiry. Indeed, this episode represents the climax of the play as a whole more so than Columbus's triumphant return to Barcelona, for the drama never quite achieves the same level of tension or interest after this enthralling soliloquy. Another reason why the above passage stands out so strikingly in the drama is that it seems to give a deeper insight into Columbus's rather idiosyncratic personality and mindset. While his innate confidence and certainty of position have been apparent from the outset, this scene brings into sharp focus his intuitive sense of destiny and the sheer scale of his ambition.

On the surface then *Columbus* may seem an elegant and dignified celebration of the discovery of America – a straightforward tribute to Britain's new ally. Yet there is a definite note of ambivalence with regard to the hero of the drama at certain points in the play. While Columbus may have the vision to find land in the west, he has little or no understanding of human relationships, lacking empathy with anyone but himself. This is evident in his final exchange with Beatriz before he sets sail:

BEATRIZ: I heard your were due to sail

I came on horseback from Cordoba

COLUMBUS: That was a mistake, Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: I wouldn't have come but I had something to tell you

COLUMBUS: You cannot have anything new to tell me.  
 BEATRIZ: Yes, I have. Something entirely new.  
 Or perhaps I should say it is something very old –  
 Old for the race of women but new for me.  
 COLUMBUS: If you want me back, Beatriz –  
 BEATRIZ: I do not want you back, Sēnor.  
 I know you are going away for ever –  
 But then you've always been away.  
 When you and I were together in a locked room  
 You still were further away than the furthest planet.  
 COLUMBUS: If you know that, why've you come here now?  
 BEATRIZ: Because I have something to tell you.  
 COLUMBUS: Then for God's sake tell me. I have no time to spare.  
 BEATRIZ: No ... I cannot tell you. You have no imagination  
 COLUMBUS: I have no imagination! (43)

MacNeice points a tragic irony here as we discover that Columbus is capable of imagining a New World in the west, but fails to understand what Beatriz is clearly trying to tell him – that he will soon be a father. In the play as a whole Columbus seems more concerned with transcendent ideas than the everyday stuff of existence; and as a consequence he undervalues and misunderstands personal relationships as well as feeling no sense of community with or responsibility for the other human beings around him. Indeed, by the end of the play the audience's sympathy may well lie with other minor characters such as Beatriz, Escovedo and the Prior who takes Columbus in at the monastery of La Rabida when he is destitute. For while they may not have achieved the glory of Columbus, they seem more humane and more in touch with quotidian reality than the Great Navigator. It is their qualities of humility, kindness, quiet endurance and determined fortitude which are the truly admirable virtues of the play. This is perhaps a more subtle reading of the drama, which may have resonated with many who listened in war-torn cities across Britain.

*Columbus* was well received by the public and critically acclaimed and admired - Asa Briggs has noted that it 'created a sensation in artistic circles on both sides of the Atlantic'(56). However, one critic in particular - Alan Dent, who had replaced Grace Wyndam Goldie as radio-drama critic for *The Listener*<sup>vii</sup> - was decidedly tepid in his response to MacNeice's script in his review of the broadcast on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1942. Although Dent had previously admired MacNeice's work in radio, describing 'Alexander Nevsky' as 'vivid and superb radio drama of a kind to take any man with a mind away from his book or his pub or his potting shed' (736), he judges the script for *Columbus* to be 'not quite good enough' describing certain choral



passages as 'austerity brought to the point of baldness' while commenting that some of the more descriptive passages were 'inadequate' and 'bathetic'. Dent does, however, temper these comments by admitting (somewhat paradoxically) that MacNeice provided 'a well-written, extremely varied, highly practicable script' which "'got away with it'" to the extreme satisfaction of millions' (736). While Dent was certainly overly harsh in describing some of the more lyrical writing as 'bathetic', his criticism of the choral sequences seems, at least partly, justified. It is worth noting too that MacNeice never subsequently used this method in radio again suggesting that it didn't ring true for him either. There are several memos in the BBC file on *Columbus*<sup>viii</sup> from fellow BBC staff members complimenting MacNeice and Bower for their broadcast and many were of the opinion that the play had broken new ground artistically in terms of radio drama and had been a very moving and dignified piece. The BBC Listener panel report shows an equal enthusiasm from members of the public who gave high praise to the music, the acting (in particular Olivier) and to the script which was deemed a fine example of radio – one listener described it as a 'milestone in the history of broadcasting'. The report also mentions that many listeners were enthusiastic about the work of MacNeice in particular suggesting that he had begun to develop a following and a recognisable voice on radio. Certainly, *Columbus* had enlarged MacNeice's reputation as a radio-artist considerably and the play was even performed as theatre, particularly in schools, after it had been published. Yet *Columbus* is important not just in terms of MacNeice's developing career in radio, but also in how it expresses his own creative sensibility at that time and in its relationship to his subsequent poetic development.

## VI

Despite the deliberately objective approach to characterisation, and the fact that the play was designed to serve an explicitly political function, I would suggest that MacNeice was unable to escape his own psychological reactions to some of the issues which the subject matter of the play invoked. Indeed, even in the fairly straightforward opening sequence of the drama, there is a trace of MacNeice's own psychological make-up. The phrase used by the semi-chorus: 'All the things that might have been', is of particular interest here as it echoes a line from the poem 'Reminiscences of Infancy', discussed earlier, which describes the noise of trains (symbolic of his mother) from his childhood as 'sliding downhill gently to the bottom of the distance/ (For now *all things are there that all were here once*)' ([my italics] 61) There is similar implication of a lost past which has been geographically relocated to a distant horizon – a horizon, one suspects (in the poem at least), which will never yield up what is expected of it. Seen in this context, it is possible to detect a note of melancholy woven into this passage which is more

suggestive of MacNeice's own imaginative/emotional/artistic response to the distant edge of things than that of his main character's religious devotion to the West.

The most imaginatively potent and creatively enabling of all the themes running through the play, however, must surely have been the idea of an heroic quest into the unknown immensity of the ocean. From a very young age MacNeice had been drawn to such adventures, whether in the Celtic, Nordic, Classical or Romantic tradition and Jon Stallworthy describes this aspect of MacNeice's character in describing his visit to America in 1939:

Much as MacNeice loved well-lit cities and the hum of the hive, nothing so quickened his imagination as lonely journeys in the darkness and silence beyond: 'it is easy', he wrote in his Introduction to *Varieties of Parable*, 'to identify with St Brandon and the others in the adventures of the western sea...Such a voyage, like any form of quest, has an immemorial place in legend.' (*VOP* 11-12) In March 1939, he had himself embarked in search of legend: 'America...for people in the British Isles is a legend', especially, he might have added, for Irishmen brought up within sight of the Atlantic. (MacNeice qtd. in Stallworthy 241)

America (and the concept of the 'West' more generally) had held a great allure for MacNeice for it signified to him a misty other-worldliness, ('Should I remember that I ever met you – Once in a another world', he mentions of his romance with Clark in his autobiography [qtd. in Stallworthy 248]) and became a kind of fairytale place, a potential utopia and an interregnum in which history and the past could be shed, however momentarily. Equally potent for MacNeice was the western Atlantic which, from a very early age, was a symbol of absolute space, limitless movement and transcendent timelessness. It was a truly sublime presence within his imagination, enlarging his understanding of reality, yet remaining ultimately unfathomed and addictively unfathomable.

The Atlantic was already for me the biggest thing this side of God but so far I had only appreciated its size head on, my back to the land and nothing but water in sight. Now I found it even more revealing suddenly to perceive the shore outlining and underlining the ocean till both disappeared simultaneously as one's eyes strained after them. Magilligan Strand – not that I then knew its name – is one of the longest and smoothest strands in Ireland ... No one of course had told us where we were going, but suddenly we came round a corner and there it was, unbelievable but palpably there. Once again as it was with my first sight of the Atlantic or the unfelt wind beyond the wall, I had a sense of infinite possibility, which implied, I think, a sense of eternity. And once again it met me over the brow and round the corner ... (*SAF* 220)

It is this awareness of infinite possibility of the western ocean, the intuitive sense or vision of something beyond the realms of surface or quotidian reality, which informs Columbus's first monologue of the play:

COLUMBUS:                    Give me a ship  
   And I will pass the gates of the West and build  
   a bridge across the Future. Look out there –  
   all you see is a waste of waters, the heaving  
   bosom of the indifferent childless sea,  
   the drunken marble of the toppling wave,  
   the edge of the horizon of the explosive  
   filigree of spindrift – That is all you see  
   but I see so much more. (17)

But there is another aspect to Columbus's urge to sail west which may well suggest another dimension to MacNeice's fixation with Western horizons. In the play Columbus is initially rebuffed by the Spanish Royal Commission in his attempts to gain support and finance for his voyage. After this rejection, the audience is brought forward several years to find a solitary Columbus drinking away his sorrows in a humble tavern. Two revellers – Manuel and Juan - approach him and ask him the cause of his sadness and what he is trying to forget; his answer illuminates (and is illuminated by) MacNeice's own imaginative responses to the West:

COLUMBUS:                    When you have seen someone then you can forget them.  
   But what you have never seen – that is what sticks in your  
   mind.  
MANUEL:                        Don't understand what you mean.  
COLUMBUS:                    Look at it like this.  
   You know what it is to be homesick?  
MANUEL:                        I have never been away from my home.  
COLUMBUS:                    That makes no difference.  
   Maybe you've been homesick for a home you've never had  
MANUEL:                        That makes no sense either.  
COLUMBUS:                    Oh yes, it does. Go and look at the sunset  
   when the sky is a lather of crimson and coral  
   and the bulging sun over-ripe with knowledge,  
   glides back into the womb of the sea.

Don't you feel as you watch him sink –  
don't you feel an envy of the sun? (29)

Earlier in the play Columbus states that he is a 'man from Nowhere' (14) and later that he is a citizen of no city, his country being 'the Future' (26). There is a sense in the above passage then that Columbus's feelings of deracination and of longing for a former (imagined or real) happiness of place or time have been transmuted into a romanticised future beyond the known world. In attempting to clarify Columbus's motives for his voyage, MacNeice may well have elucidated his own thought processes (whether cognitive or non-cognitive) with regards to travelling West. The phrase 'homesick for a home you never had', is key here for it implies the paradoxical state of missing something which never was, and suggests a desire to collapse or reverse time through creating a past, a sense of origin, in a seemingly boundless future. This, of course, can never be realized yet the doomed impulse remains and the poem 'Nostalgia', written the month that *Columbus* was broadcast, draws directly on images and forms of expression from the above passage from the play:

In cock-wattle sunset or grey  
Dawn when the dagger  
Points again of longing  
For what was never home  
We needs must turn away  
From voices that cry 'Come' –  
That under-sea ding-donging.

Dingle-dongle, bells and bluebells ... (227)

As in the *Columbus* passage the sunset invokes a sense of yearning for a home that doesn't exist. However, unlike Columbus, described as 'Bondsman of the Voice', MacNeice is self-reflexive and sceptical enough to realise that the voices calling him are his own romantic and deluded dreams, the euphonic 'under-sea ding-donging' merely an aural projection of his unconscious desires.

In some senses, Columbus personifies that part of MacNeice, which sought a romantic, even artistic, ideal in the New World. However, having travelled to America, which had previously held legendary status in his mind, MacNeice found that the actuality was somewhat disappointing (that he had in fact created a country 'in the air'<sup>ix</sup>). MacNeice's poem 'Last

before America' (1945) dwells on the duality of MacNeice's relationship to America as he imagines it from the perspective of those in the west of Ireland who emigrated there in the past:

Pennsylvania or Boston? It was another name,  
A land of a better because impossible promise  
Which split these families; it was to be a journey  
Away from death – yet the travellers died the same  
As those who stayed in Ireland.

Both myth and seismic history have been long suppressed  
Which made an unmade Hy Brasil – now an image  
For those people who despise charts but find their dreams endorsement  
In certain long low islets snouting towards the west  
Like cubs that have lost their mother. (264)

MacNeice, whose own mother was originally from the West of Ireland, identifies with the 'long low islets' seeking westwards. Yet 'Hy Brasil', like America, remains an elusive dream and an 'impossible promise'. As Longley observes, MacNeice's West is 'a state of yearning rather than fulfilment: a means of questing.' (*LMAS* 32)

The above poem forms part of a series of poems from the mid 1940s, such as 'Western Landscape' (July, 1945) and 'The Strand' (1945), in which 'western landscapes function as a topography of metaphysical inquiry' in which the 'human presence faces problems of orientation amid a relativistic flux of space and time.' (*LMAS* 32) Yet the idea of the west as a space to investigate humanity's position within the universe and as a testing ground for philosophical theory may well have some roots in *Columbus*. For the play is more than simply a search for a new passage to Asia, it is an epistemological as well as geographical search, an attempt to discover not just a new topographical reality but to achieve a new understanding of the World. Columbus seeks to overturn the static, accepted notions of the shape of the earth propagated by the Royal Commission, whose opinions he describes as 'so many dead leaves...*A labyrinth of lies*.' (27) His mystical faith in his mission leads him eventually to redraw the map of the world, to find something where previously there seemed nothing – to prove that World (as formulated in the poem 'Snow') is indeed, both literally and figuratively, 'crazier and more of it than we think' (26).

MacNeice, who was never happy to accept totalizing philosophies or reductive world-views, must surely have been drawn to Columbus's dissatisfaction with the contemporary paradigm. Yet once Columbus discovers a new land, he too falsifies the world in the same way that his predecessors have. Significantly his notary brings up the possibility that the island

which they have found may not be an island off the coast of Asia (as Columbus believes) but may actually be a 'new mainland'; Columbus makes an arrogant dismissal:

COLUMBUS:                      Senior Escovedo you are my notary.  
I tell you, Senor, what we have done  
Is to find the western passage to Asia  
This island on which we stand is off the shore of Asia.

Ironically, Columbus is shown to dismiss half of the earth in the process of discovering it. Because of his overreaching ego, Columbus assumes that the world will conform to his internal perception of it. Yet for MacNeice this is ultimately untenable and in the poem 'Mutations' MacNeice makes the counter-claim that no-one (not even Columbus) can truly perceive the world in its entirety:

For every static world that you and I impose  
Upon the real one must crack at times and new  
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose  
And old assumptions yield to new sensation. (216)

MacNeice then could identify with Columbus's quest, his will to search for unknown lands, but he could not accept (although perhaps understood) his solipsism, which had led him ultimately to postulate a static and illusory world of his own making.

*Columbus* marked a new phase in MacNeice's radio work, bringing his talent as a radio dramatist to the world stage and increasing his stock as one of the brightest new contemporary radio artists at the BBC. But he had already shown in pieces such as 'Alexander Nevsky' that he was capable of writing to a standard which was far above the regular fare produced by his colleagues. His technical mastery as a poet, and his earlier experiments with dialogue (discussed earlier) in poems such as 'An Eclogue for Christmas' (December, 1933) or 'Eclogue from Iceland' (1936), had an undoubted beneficial influence on his radio writing; for MacNeice was eminently capable of moulding rhyme and meter to meet the requirements of the narrative, amplifying and streamlining the action as needed. From the rhythmical plasticity of language in 'Alexander Nevsky' to the controlled and dignified structured verse in *Columbus*, MacNeice was beginning to display his formal range as radio artist and discover the aural possibilities of the medium. In programmes such as 'Westminster Abbey', MacNeice had also displayed his sensitivity to the transformed aural climate of London and other urban centres in Britain, which had had to endure blackouts and blitz warfare. He had attempted to inspire his fellow citizens with sound-images and word-sounds which would give comfort during the deathly silences

between raids. And in general, his more lyrical radio-writing provided rich fuel for the auditory imagination assuming a high degree of aural sensitivity from the audience.

While MacNeice's technical skill and auditory awareness as a poet enriched his radio writing during this period, his work in radio was also starting to influence his poetry as themes and ideas explored in radio began to filter in to his poetry. The model of the quest narrative, as explored and developed in *Columbus*, and to a lesser extent 'Alexander Nevsky', would return in MacNeice's later poetry in more condensed form. Yet his most important radio work, in terms of its effect on his poetry and indeed the genre of radio drama itself, was still to come. But his efforts as a propaganda writer should not be dismissed: as Heather Clark argues, his propaganda work was 'not a question of prostituting his talent, but rather of fighting fascism.' (92) Inspired by Murrow and other radio pioneers, such as Gilliam and Harding, MacNeice's radio scripts had helped to overhaul the one-dimensional, elitist and largely ineffectual rhetoric of early-war BBC programming, which had alienated and aggravated many of its listeners; for he had brought a degree subtlety, lyrical energy and sensitivity to his audience that was sorely missing from the BBC in the early months of the war (and which was still missing in many of their programmes). His was a more artful form of propaganda than the usual BBC stock-in-trade – nuanced, self-reflexive, and complex - and his best scripts adopt a more democratic mode of address by assuming an audience who can think, feel and judge for themselves.

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- <sup>i</sup> All broadcasts are quoted from, Edward Murrow *In Search of Light: the Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, 1938 – 1961*. Ed. Edward Bliss Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1968).
- <sup>ii</sup> Wills comments that ‘MacNeice was impressed by Ed Murrow’s accounts of the atmosphere in London, after Dunkirk and later during the London blitz.’ In *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War*. (London: Faber, 2007). 198
- <sup>iii</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all memos, letters and Listener Reports quoted in relation to *Alexander Nevsky* are stored chronologically in, BBC File: ‘R 19/325: “Alexander Nevsky”, 1941-1943’ in the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham, Reading.
- <sup>iv</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all memos, letters and Listener Reports quoted in relation to *Columbus* are stored chronologically in, BBC File: ‘R 19/ 397: “Christopher Columbus”, 1942’ in the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading.
- <sup>v</sup> Walton, of course, had written the score after several conversations with MacNeice, and according to MacNeice’s detailed instructions as to the functionality of the music in each individual scene.
- <sup>vi</sup> For further discussion of the musical intricacies of Walton’s score and how it relates to his overall oeuvre, see: Zelda Lawrence-Curran, ““All the things that might have been”” in *William Walton: Music and Literature* Ed. Stewart R. Griggs. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). 132-157
- <sup>vii</sup> Grace Wyndam Goldie was replaced by Alan Dent at the beginning of April, 1942.
- <sup>viii</sup> All memos contained within BBC File: ‘R19/397: “Christopher Columbus”, 1942’.
- <sup>ix</sup> In 1957, MacNeice proposed a new kind of travel book to be titled *Countries in the Air*, the purpose of which, was “to explore, in the light and shade of my own experience, the corroborations and refutals of my myths, the frustrations and illuminations I have found in various travels.” (qtd. in Stallworthy 237)



### CHAPTER 3: FROM D-DAY TO THE DARK TOWER

#### I

The success of *Christopher Columbus* had firmly placed MacNeice as one of the brightest new writers working in the BBC and underlined his outstanding ability to innovate in the medium. However, it was to be his radio work in the latter part of the war that saw the full blossoming of his talent. In this period, he wrote his first programmes in forms and genres which he would repeatedly return to and experiment with for the rest of his career – popular drama, fantasy, parable, dream narrative and folk tale. Many of these programmes were experimental in bent, and some were not wholly effective. Yet, the successes (and failures) were key both to the development of his radio-writing aesthetic and to the development of British radio drama more generally. Radio also became a testing ground for forms of writing which would ultimately filter into his poetry (both concurrently and subsequently); and it allowed him a space to clarify and to make sense and pattern out of the chaos and destruction of warfare that raged around him. In addition, his radio programmes (as well as his poetry) allowed MacNeice to engage with certain traumata both public and personal, which affected him profoundly during these years, not least among which were the deaths of his father and his great friend Graham Shepard. Yet, the BBC would also demand a lot of his talents and in 1943 alone his output increased to a total of nineteen scripts, most of which were half an hour in length. He was also producing most of his own material, which was in turn improving the general standard of his radio-writing; as he states in his 1944 introduction to *Christopher Columbus*, he became more ‘studio conscious’ and began thinking more ‘in terms of sound rather than words alone.’ (MacNeice, *SPLM* 399)

Having already contributed to commissioned feature series such as ‘The Stones Cry Out’ and ‘The Black Gallery’ he was now encouraged to present his own ideas in a new series entitled ‘The Four Freedoms’. This series was to be broader in scope than previous propaganda programmes MacNeice had been involved in and the poet was initially enthusiastic about the series outlining his schema for it in notes and a memo to Laurence Gilliam, dated 28<sup>th</sup> December 1942: ‘Start with a big bang with the French Revolution as fountainhead of so many of our modern conceptions and also linking up with the struggle for revival and/or survival of the French people today.’ (qtd. in Coulton 62) To lead on from this programme MacNeice proposed features on the Early Christians and Pericles, and suggested features on the Renaissance, Milton and Lenin as well as a final programme to ‘summarise these various contributions to human liberty and to balance the pros and cons’ (qtd. in Coulton 62). He eventually scripted all of the proposed features (except Lenin, perhaps realising the ‘cons’ were overwhelming in the final analysis of his contribution to human

liberty). He produced all except ‘The Renaissance’ (produced by Walter Rilla). Significantly, Benjamin Britten was commissioned to write the music for ‘Pericles’, which MacNeice wanted to be suggestive of early Greece; this was a rather special request, which Britten completed with skill, and this collaboration between poet and composer would be repeated with great success for MacNeice’s later play *The Dark Tower* (1946) for which ‘special music’ was again required. ‘Pericles’, the first feature of the series, outlines the intent of the programmes to investigate ‘the concept of Freedom as illustrated in history’ (1)<sup>i</sup> and quickly takes the reader on a trip to ancient Greece and the golden age of Periclean Athens. Pericles, the undoubted hero of the piece is judged ‘a lover of humanity’ and his faith in humankind and belief in self-determination are virtues which are identified and emphasised throughout the series. However, despite MacNeice’s initial enthusiasm for the programmes, one begins to detect in his later features a certain falling off in his writing suggesting he had lost faith in the concept. He begins to include ‘voices’ representative of the general public who would question the content, tone and message of the features. In ‘The Renaissance’, for example, the programme begins with a ‘Heckler’ asking: ‘How can you present the Renaissance – or Leonardo [da Vinci], who is almost as big a subject – in a miserable quarter of an hour?’ (1) The Heckler then accuses the programme of seeking to ‘cook the accounts’ by fooling the listeners into ‘thinking that Renaissance Italy exhibited political freedom.’ (2) While the script goes on to celebrate Leonardo Da Vinci as a symbol of the ‘freedom of intellect’, the text remains rather unconvincing and unconvinced in terms of the authenticity of its message. The final programme of the series, ‘No. 6: “What now?”’, is similarly uncertain in its argument and again includes sceptical listeners-in voicing their frustration with the BBC. The script begins with an innovative (postmodern) flourish as an elderly woman, Miss Evelyn, attempts to tune her malfunctioning radio in to the very programme the audience is supposed to be listening to. When she explains her predicament to her friend Robert, noting that the programme on ‘Freedom’ is the last in the series, he makes the dismissive reply:

ROBERT:                    Oh, I know; I’ve heard them. I don’t think I need to hear the last. I can tell you exactly what it would be like. A series of clarion calls. Freedom from Fear: fanfare. Freedom from Want: fanfare. Freedom of worship: organ. Freedom of –

MISS E:                    Don’t be so cynical, Robert. It’s a serious subject, isn’t it?

ROBERT:                    Oh yes, it’s a serious subject. That’s just why – look here, did you hear these programmes? The first of the lot, if I

remember, dealt with Periclean Athens. All very nice and simplified. You heard a great deal about Free Speech and you heard old Pericles himself saying his bit from Thucydides.

(f/u Cecil Trouncer's voice on disc)<sup>ii</sup> (3)

Cecil Trouncer, the actor who played Pericles in the first programme of the 'Four Freedoms' series, is then heard expounding the virtues of Athenian democracy. Yet his words cut no ice with the character of Robert who sceptically retorts: 'But they didn't point out the snags in Athenian democracy – slave-labour at home and imperialism abroad. The BBC just left that out of the picture...I think they're afraid that, if they put in the shadows, their public will get all confused.' (4) Of course, it is true that one of the reasons MacNeice included such questioning voices in his scripts was to prevent listeners from feeling patronised, and through their greater openness these features may well have seemed more credible in what they sought to convey, allowing, as Clair Wills argues, 'some of the weariness with morale boosting war talk to be addressed openly.' (199) However, one senses too that such satirical, meta-textual voices are not simply a means of giving more balance or zest to the writing, but are, in fact, revelatory of MacNeice's own attitude to the didactic, and categorically optimistic/nationalistic/patriotic rhetoric of propaganda he was required to produce. Increasingly, his propaganda features began to seek out new ways to express ideas and concepts which, through repetition and over-emphasis, had lost their original pith and vigour.

MacNeice's desire to write and produce more innovative and dynamic forms of propaganda, found expression in his last explicitly propagandist feature written for transmission on 'D-Day' (but to be recorded several days beforehand on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1944). Laurence Gilliam had asked MacNeice to write the feature as part of a larger series of programmes designed 'to catch and repeat the greatest moment of tension in our time almost as it was being lived.' (qtd. in Stallworthy 324) Although Val Gielgud was sceptical of employing MacNeice for this task he decided that he would not prevent him from writing it 'if the proposal struck a really creative note' in the poet. (qtd. in Coulton 67) MacNeice, for his part, was determined not to use the high-flown, rhetorical style favoured by Gilliam and in a note accompanying the draft of the script, outlining his narrative method, he suggests a desire to provide a more accurate portrayal of the conditions of war: 'I have used the narrator as a bridge between the inarticulate fighting man and the listener who wants to hear expressed those things which the fighting man *acts on* but does not normally express to anyone.' (qtd. in Coulton 67) The script itself begins with the narrator drawing attention to the various different nationalities (French, Canadian, British, American etc.) involved in the vast military operation and focuses on the plethora of different jobs that the men in the invading force will carry out (Sappers, Signallers, Lorry-drivers, Tank-commanders etc.) As the various sounds of

machinery – tanks, lorries, bulldozers – all destined for Normandy are faded in, the narrator re-directs attention away from this ‘total sum of noise’ to the ‘silence of each man’s minds’ and asks ‘what went on in that silence?’(4) Instead of ascribing to the men noble sentiments and austere ideals, MacNeice offers a more realistic, humane account of what runs through a man’s mind before he faces the appalling horror of modern warfare. As the script roves over the private consciousnesses of each soldier, the listener discovers that many soldiers are simply focused on their specific role in the operation; one French soldier hums a tune (the haunting popular song, ‘J’attendrai’) in his mind (7), while a Signaller states plainly: ‘I wish to Gawd I was anywhere else but ‘ere.’(9) In general, the soldiers’ voices rail against the ideas and words which have been used to explain their willingness to go to war. As American soldier puts it:

2ND AMERICAN:            I’ll tell you what I think. These words  
like Liberty, Equality, Democracy – they  
probably meant something once but they’re  
like guys who were once pretty good guys  
but they made a lot of money and now they’re  
just stuffed shirts. (11)

The narrator then makes a telling reply:

NARRATOR:                Hm. Speaking as a radio man I think I know  
what he means. During this war we have  
sometimes put out programmes where an actor  
would speak certain lines as the Voice of  
Freedom – or maybe the Voice of History.  
I’ve often wondered how far the public can accept this ... (11)

MacNeice then proceeds to present satirical snippets of his and the BBC’s propaganda campaign as a ‘Burlesque voice’ speaks lines as ‘the Voice of Freedom’, ‘the Voice of Democracy’, ‘The United Nations’, and ‘The Spirit of England’ repeating phrases and invoking texts and documents and treaties which have perhaps lost import. The narrator can only respond by concluding that the ‘medium I am using is distrusted’ and that even ‘words are distrusted’. (12) Having emphasised the increasing emptiness of certain forms of propagandist rhetoric and the difficulty of effectively communicating - purely in terms of language - the thoughts of fighting men and their motivation

for war, the programme eventually allows a 'European woman' to make her case for the allied invasion. She speaks in the in the plainest possible formula:

DISC: (f/u pre-war Hitler on disc and to background)

EUROPEAN WOMAN: If that man lives, we die. If that man lives,  
we die. If that man lives....

DISC: (Hitler out and peak to close)

EUROPEAN WOMAN: We die.  
Yes and we did die – believe this please – and we  
are dying still. (17)

The woman pleads with the listeners stating: 'Believe this please, it is not propaganda'(18) and as if to further emphasize the point a German cradle song ('Schlafe mein Prinzchen') is faded up in the background. The narrator justifies this seemingly incongruous piece of music by arguing: 'In the midst of death and destruction we fall back on the opposite – on the idea of birth. Birth, or if you like, re-birth.'(18) Here MacNeice reveals the dialectic cast of his imagination; for the juxtaposition of cradle song against the carnage and bloodshed of war implies that even in the worst of times there is something positive round the corner – renewal is always possible. Yet the haunting lullaby also has a more disturbing, contrary resonance which MacNeice allows his narrator to draw out: 'There are countless women – all over Europe – for whom there are no more cradle songs anyway. Their children are dead and they will have no more.'(18) After the music is faded out one listener interjects that this is not the 'sort of thing I expected to hear in a programme on "D"-Day' to which the narrator retorts:

I know. Guns, bombs, shells, tanks: the whole boiling of battle. As if we could get those noises – in their full volume and horror - in at one end through a tiny mike and out at the other through your radio sets. So that just where you sit, gentlemen – right in your office, your drawing room, your club –you could be in at the death. No we didn't attempt it. Because it was bound to be inadequate.(18)

One senses in this passage MacNeice's frustration at programmes which convert the brutal, inhuman slaughter of battle into a media commodity and one is reminded of the poem 'Bar-room Matins'(1940) in which MacNeice criticised the imagined American audience who are seen as distant observers 'entertained' by human suffering and death:

Pretzels crackers chips and beer:  
Death is something that we fear  
But it titillates the ear. (579)

The verb 'titillate' here invokes the superficial aural thrill which such radio-programming promotes and suggests a highly selective and cursory approach to war-reporting which MacNeice was attempting to avoid.

In addition to the ethical problems of representing a conflict where so many would be killed or maimed MacNeice, in this feature, is also self-reflexively grappling with the *aesthetic* difficulty of expressing the chaos of war as well as the problem of how to communicate to the listener the internalised world of a soldier before battle. MacNeice's solution is to focus on an aural experience which is at least common to both listener and combatant:

EFFECT: (f/u ticking and to background)  
NARRATOR: Hear that, listeners? Which clock is that? Or  
All clocks the same from 'D' Day on?  
.....  
We cannot bring you the  
noise of 'D' Day, we cannot paint that incredible  
picture in words – but watch any clock in the  
world that is going and listen to how it ticks.  
EFFECT: (up ticking – on orchestra? - and to background)  
NARRATOR: It just ticks, you see. No, it doesn't say  
anything. We in this radio studio are not  
going to try any fakes. We won't make the  
clock speak. We just let it tick – and listen.  
EFFECT: (up ticking and to background) (18)

As opposed to the frenetic and action-packed sound collage of warfare that the listener was perhaps expecting, MacNeice instead foregrounds the steady, inexorable pulse of time (the sound of a ticking clock has been recurrent aural theme, proving a structural underpinning for the feature). This potent appeal to the auditory imagination attempts to transport the listener into the harassed and tormented world of an Allied soldier as he conscientiously counts down the seconds to what could be his final moments on earth (and, as will be shown later, MacNeice uses a similar device in his later play *The Dark Tower* to generate a slightly different effect). Yet aside from the purely

visceral and enervating effects of this ominous ticking clock and its topical relevance to the expertly synchronised operation unfolding IN Normandy, the sound-motif also invokes a consciousness of history itself: the ineluctable and uncanny pattern of humanity's recurrent development and decline at a moment of monumental global significance.

## II

Aside from programmes that the BBC commissioned MacNeice to write, this period also saw MacNeice make his first suggestions for his own programmes in which he began to express his attitude to the war in language closer to his own sensibility. In October of 1943 he produced the first feature which he himself had suggested and scripted– 'The Story of My Death'. The feature may well have been suggested to him by two previous programmes focusing on the death of freedom-loving poets, which he had written and produced earlier in that year – 'The Death of Byron' and 'The Death of Marlowe'. The programme was centred on the real-life story of the Italian poet Lauro de Bosis who, in 1931, had piloted a plane in a daring suicide mission over Rome distributing anti-fascist leaflets in a last gesture in a campaign against the Fascist Italian government. The play uses various inter-texts to flesh out its argument including, De Bosis' own poetry, the poetry of Shelley (beloved of De Bosis' father) as well a verse play *Icaro* which De Bosis writes in his tower in Ancona in the first part of the feature. One of the central themes or questions which the feature seeks to address is: what is the function and role of poetry and the poet amidst a political regime which suppresses individual freedoms and stifles cultural and artistic expression? In a passage covering De Bosis's lecturing stint in America (for which MacNeice must surely have drawn from his own experience), the issue of how far poetry or art should engage with politics is fore-grounded. De Bosis is questioned by one of his American students with regards to his previous lecture on the 'Risorgimento'(the re-birth of Italian freedom) and it is this challenge which sparks De Bosis to reconsider his responsibility as an Italian and an artist in relation to Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship:

- BILL: Mr. De Bosis, I understand you're a poet and also the son of a poet. You've been telling us now for an hour that poetry goes with freedom. Well, sir, how does that apply – in your own country – today?
- LAURO: Today?
- VOICES: That's right. What about today?
- BILL: That Risorgimento of yours is ancient history,

isn't it? Things have happened since then. Well.  
How does a poet like you make out with the Duce?  
How do you like the suppression of free speech?

.....

When you go back to  
Italy, what is your line? Maybe you just retreat  
into an ivory tower. Is that it, Mr De Bosis?  
When you get back to Italy. You shut yourself up  
in a tower. (9)

This conversation is a turning point in the feature for it leads De Bosis, after some soul searching, to finally wake up to the stark reality of life for many of his countrymen and attempt to change the current political system in Italy. In his essay entitled, 'The poet in England To-day: A reassessment', which MacNeice wrote while lecturing in America in 1940, the following statement seems pertinent to the course of action which De Bosis adopts:

The poet is tending to fall back on his own conscience. This does not mean a retreat to the Ivory Tower or to purely private poetry. To assume that it does is bad logic. If the artist declines to live in a merely political pigeonhole, it does not follow that he has to live in a vacuum. Man is a political animal, not a political cog. And to shun dogma does not mean to renounce belief. I.A. Richard's wrote in the twenties, in *Science and Poetry*: 'It is never what a poem says which matters, but what it *is*.' This may be a half-truth but it is nowadays worth emphasizing, the poets of the thirties having been so much concerned with what they were saying, and to whom, and with whose approval. ... The poet is once more to be a mouth instead of a megaphone. (*SCLM* 110)

This statement provides a useful meta-text for 'The Story of My Death' for De Bosis's main failing according to this code is his ignorance and naivety which are symptomatic of living in a political vacuum. Once his outlook has been challenged, his conscience is engaged and he is able to make his own judgements for himself. This is exactly what he attempts to pass on to the rest of his fellow citizens by distributing leaflets and letters, yet he also seeks to avoid totalizing dogmas or ideologies which inevitably downplay the role of the individual. As he makes clear to his Marxist collaborator 'Shorty', his goal is to spark political transformation which will permit a democratic and free-thinking society: 'We can't deal in Utopias. There are thousands of People in Italy who've got minds and hearts. Knock down the Fascist regime and all those people, Shorty – for the first



time for years – will be able to think and feel. Once they can think, they will act.’(20) Essentially, De Bosis outlook is, broadly speaking, liberal and humanist. His model for the future is a community of free-thinking citizens who are able construct an improved social and political regime – it is a somewhat vague and rough-hewn ambition, but the intention is there none the less. However, like his hero ‘Icaro’, who describes his wings as sweeping ‘away all barriers from the earth’ and bringing ‘the blue freedom of birds’ to the ‘human race divided and blind with hate’(32), De Bosis will die in his pursuit of his dream of a better future for humanity.

De Bosis, though, must surely rate alongside other persons included in MacNeice’s long poem ‘The Kingdom’ (1943) written the same year as the feature. For he too is one of the ‘catalytics/ To break the inhuman in humanity’ having ‘the courage/ of their own vision and their friends good will...’(249). He will leave behind not only the memory and example of his magnificently heroic gesture, but also and equally importantly his artistic legacy - his verse play and his poetry which survives. Indeed, the underlying message and importance of De Bosis’s life is self-reflexively revealed in the text when the poet himself comments on his own character Icaro saying: ‘Yes, he falls into the sea. But the point is, he was a poet.’(11) A poet of course means (among other things for MacNeice), a person of conscience, humanity and vision, who is engaged with the world and alive to other and better futures. Even though neither Icaro nor De Bosis come anywhere close to achieving their dream, their words will survive to strengthen ‘the sinews of man’ and like a ‘flame flash’ in the ‘vast night - of Eternity’ (32).

Aside from the obvious topical relevance<sup>iii</sup> of ‘The Story of My Death’, the character of De Bosis can also be read as an emblem of, or epitaph to, the fate of MacNeice and other thirties poets who had failed in their aims for social reconstruction; as MacNeice argues in an ‘Epitaph or Liberal Poets’ (December, 1942), though they and those aims may die, their poetry will leave behind ‘certain frozen words/ which someday, though not certainly, may melt/ And for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst.’(232) ‘The Story of My Death’ was also tinged with another more private subtext for MacNeice as he was prompted to write the feature by the death of one of his closest friends Lt. Graham Shepard, who had died at sea in September of that year, while serving aboard a navy Corvette sunk by an acoustic torpedo.

MacNeice remembered his friend in the moving elegy, ‘The Casualty’ (1943) whose first stanza echoes Shelley’s great elegy to Keats, ‘Adonais’, which MacNeice has De Bosis quote in ‘The Story of My Death’<sup>iv</sup>:

Damn!’ you would say if I were to write the best  
Tribute I could to you, ‘All clichés’, and you would grin  
Dwindling to where that faded star allures

Where no time presses and no days begin –  
Turning back and shrugging to the misty West  
Remembered out of Homer but now yours. (237)

Critical responses to the poem have tended to examine its relationship to Yeats's famous poetic elegy, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory': McDonald refers to the 'ghostly presence of Yeats's elegy' in MacNeice's poem (*LMPC* 127) while Longley asks the reader to 'compare' the two poems. (*LMAS* 91) However, it is Stallworthy who makes the strongest claim for the direct influence of the poem when he states: "'The Casualty", subtitled "(in memoriam G.H.S), is ... indebted to Yeats's elegy for an Irish airman killed – like Lauro de Bosis – over Italy' ([My italics] 321) Stallworthy concludes, however, that MacNeice's 'honesty – and his respect for Shepard's honesty' undermine the poem and 'prevent it from taking its place with ... Yeats's masterpiece of rhetorical inflation.'(322) Yet, this perhaps misunderstands the type of elegy MacNeice was attempting to write and places too much emphasis on Yeats's poem as an artistic model for MacNeice's. If Yeats is an important influence on the poem it may be more as subject of another elegy by another poet, W.H.Auden, than as an elegist himself. In Auden's 'In Memory of W.B.Yeats' (January, 1939) there lies a more recent and relevant poetic model for MacNeice as prospective elegist. Reflecting perhaps a modern scepticism of idealization and consolation, Auden intersperses criticism with his praise of the great poet defining him famously as 'silly', while another elegy to Freud, 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (September, 1939) mixes praise and critique in a similar way, stating that Freud 'wasn't clever at all' and was often 'wrong' and 'sometimes absurd'. Yet both poems speak very warmly of their subject and the personal tone and candid mode of address of certain passages disarm the reader in a way that a more classical, impersonal elegy, such as Yeats', does not. Such a strategy, however, far from diminishing the emotional force of the poem, does in fact modernise and democratize the elegiac form, allowing it to survive and develop in a new age.

MacNeice's poem not only draws from Auden's example but also reflects the influence of his radio-writing in terms of its adoption of the technique of flash-back and the compression of a life (before death) into a series of highly vivid, swiftly intercut scenes or moments. The poem may also have been inspired by Tyrone Guthrie's seminal radio drama, *The Flowers are not for You to Pick*. As discussed earlier, the drama charts the life of a rather tragic character named Edward and the opening announcement makes clear what fate awaits him before the action begins:

ANNOUNCER:                   It is said that their past lives float before the  
  eyes of drowning men. From a ship, bound for

China, a young clergyman has fallen overboard...  
even now he is struggling for life in the water...

(The sound of waves fade in.)

His name is Edward. And before his eyes float  
pictures ... voices sound in his ears ... voices  
... voices ... his past life ...

(The waves fade as the first scene begins) (141)

The drama goes on to present a series of scenes which capture Edward at different stages in his life, running from childhood to adulthood. The final scene allows Edward one last soliloquy before he drowns, aurally projecting to the public the private unknowable thoughts of a man as his life flashes before his eyes (and echoes over his ears) before repeating a series of images and phrases representative of that life, presumably, as they streak across Edward's mind. However, if Guthrie dramatizes Edward's life in flash-back solely for the ears of the listening audience, MacNeice's poem paradoxically presents the dead Shepard as subject *and* audience of a flash-back of various scattered moments in his own life:

Look at these snapshots; here you see yourself

Spilling a paint-pot on a virgin wall  
.....

Here you are swapping gags in winking bars

With half an eye on the colour clash of beet

Lobster and radish, here you are talking back

To a caged baboon and here the Wiltshire sleet

Riddles your football jersey – here the sack

Of night pours down on you Provençal stars.  
.....

Here you are barracking the sinking sun

Here you are taking Proust aboard your doomed Corvette. (239-240)

The poem is intimate, convivial even, as MacNeice converses with Shepard as if they were both recollecting shared moments together; he even directly questions Shepard as to what the after-life

is like: 'How was it then? How is it?'(238) Yet MacNeice's words, like prayers, garner no direct or immediate response; the conversation, curiously, has only one speaker and in this it mimics certain forms of radio narration in which an actor addresses an unseen audience who will never reply. Yet the poem consoles with the knowledge that it is without words or sound that the poet and Shepard are/were most strongly connected; for MacNeice says of his friend:

If ten

Winds were to shout you down or twenty oceans boom

Above the last of you, they will not sever

That thread of so articulate silence ... (237)

MacNeice was to return to Shepard's death six months later as the poet decided to commemorate his friend more publicly by writing a radio-play which he initially titled 'Portrait of a Contemporary'; it was eventually re-titled 'He Had a Date' thereby linking it obliquely to 'The Casualty' which says of its subject 'you cannot from this date/Talk big or little ...'(236)

### III

While MacNeice was inspired to write *He Had a Date* by the life and death of his friend, the narrative also draws on MacNeice's own autobiography intermixing many of his own experiences at various points. In an outline of the play, dated 6<sup>th</sup> May 1944, MacNeice argues that despite the hero's middle/upper class, public school, Oxbridge background, he has 'avoided being moulded and so can serve as a symbol of the various discontents of this country between the two wars.' The central character, named Tom Varney, moves through a series of unsatisfactory jobs and failed relationships, even a failed marriage, yet through all this, he is, according to MacNeice 'gradually clarifying his outlook.'<sup>v</sup> The play was to be the first of several plays in a genre which MacNeice would term 'Morality-Quest' and it sought to break new ground formally while also drawing on the techniques he had already learned writing wartime programmes. As he states in his introduction to a re-broadcast version of the play in 1949: 'In form the programme was something of an experiment – the application to a fictitious character of a radio method generally reserved for factual histories; though the story is invention, the form is that of feature programme.' (MacNeice, *SPLM* 71) Certainly, the programme draws on techniques which MacNeice had already developed in previous features such as 'The Story of My Death' and 'The Death of Byron', such as

constructing a character's personal history through a series of swiftly intercut scenes linked seamlessly by music, image or dialogue. However, another obvious influence on the structure and form of the play, which MacNeice himself points to in his 1949 introduction, is Guthrie's play, *The Flowers are not for You to Pick*; in particular, the final sequence of MacNeice's play, in which voices from the central character's past 'come in on his drowning consciousness' (*SPLM* 72), is very similar to the method used by Guthrie in the final scene of his drama.

The play, as the announcer tells us, is conceived: 'as a private news-reel of episodes from one man's life' (75) and the story begins with the hero, Tom Varney, on watch aboard a navy vessel. When he spots something approaching the ship (a torpedo), he is asked by his commanding officer: 'What bearing?' (76) and this question - this 'suggestive phrase' (76) - is subsequently expanded to apply to his life, the lives of those closely connected to him and implicitly to his generation as a whole. The drama plays on the semantic dualism of the phrase; in one sense it connotes the will to identify or plot the future co-ordinates of oneself and one's society; but it also suggests the important impact (or bearing) that the socio-political context has on the individual as he tries to steer a course in life.

Tom Varney's biography in the play is by no means a precise account of Graham Shepard's life, and in one early scene, in particular, Tom seems to express something at the core of MacNeice's own childhood experience of nightmare:

MOTHER :            (*calling*) Tommy! I've told you already. You're *not* to go out on that rock.  
TOM:                    (*intimate*) I will go out on that rock; I will, I will, I will. Mummy  
                              is just wicked. If I can get hold of that seaweed to hang on the wall  
                              by my bed, I'll know when it's going to rain. And I *will* enjoy myself,  
                              I *will* forget these nightmares. The big black Jack-in-the box that  
                              jumps out of the night. And sometimes it talks like Dad and sometimes  
                              it talks like Mum but most times it talks ... like ... like something  
                              you never heard. And it wants to eat me up, that big Jack-in-the Box;  
                              It wants to eat me up. (77)

It is likely that MacNeice is addressing his own demons here through the mask of Tom, for the image of the hungry, babbling, multi-voiced Jack-in-the-box seems to cluster a series of images and objects which haunted the poet's own childhood. One is reminded of MacNeice's fear of the 'savage champing machines' at the yarn mill near his childhood home which 'would hunger and wait' for him 'at night' (MacNeice *SAF* 37); And the Jack's frightening vocalisation as Tom's 'Dad' echoes MacNeice's own experience of lying in bed and fearfully listening to his father

'intoning away' as part of his disturbing 'conspiracy with God.'(38) However, the most disturbing acoustic image is that of the Jack talking 'like something you never heard' - it is the deeply ambiguous nature of the sound that really makes the skin crawl and it relates to the worst class of nightmare which MacNeice experienced as a child in which he was 'tormented' by something 'much less definite' and 'much more serious' than previous nightmares: 'a kind of noise that I felt rather than heard' (MacNeice *SAF* 46). As discussed in the first chapter this experience is alluded to in the poem 'Intimations of Mortality'. Yet in that poem the experience was portrayed as sheer, unadulterated terror whereas in the play the symbol of the Jack-in-the-box comes to integrate and imply a whole spectrum of emotions and abstract notions as it recurs throughout the text: fear, guilt, missed opportunities, shock, death, and reckoning. Tom refers to it when he feels unsettled by one of his teachers (an alcoholic suffering from shell-shock) losing his job because of his reaction to the cruel ribbing of the pupils; and when his father dies suddenly he regrets having not taken his wife Mary to meet him: 'I ought to have taken her to see him. Too late now; that Jack-in-the Box again.'(95) Importantly, the final scene references the image just before the hero's death:

TOM:    (*to self*) What bearing, eh? This time I needn't answer. Here it comes, this is the end, Tom Varney. The tin fish, the old black Jack-in-the-Box. And then the drums of blindness. Not that *we'll* hear The explosion. (108)

In his final moments he will face death and judgement (as represented by the Jack-in-the box), and the various voices which follow in a steady rush represent a swift summation of his life; including both his failures and his triumphs, whether moral, political or personal. Indeed, Tom's final soliloquy sounds almost like the last words of a man on trial who has come to terms with his death-sentence and accepted the evidence against him:

TOM:    ...Was I a misfit?  
Maybe. I hurt my mother, my father, I hurt Jane and Mary. And I leave nothing behind me – child, work, or deed to remember. But I tried, you know, I tried. Believe it or not, I did have ideals of a sort. But I could not quite get the bearing. (109)

Tom then is a rather unusual hero: an uncertain and unsuccessful misfit. As MacNeice notes in his 1949 Introduction to the play: 'He is not a "heroic" hero; he has a vitality but even in his last phase, when he to some extent "finds himself" on the lower deck, it has not been properly

canalized; he remains confused and inconsistent'; unlike the character of Columbus, Tom is not 'idealized (that is simplified)' (MacNeice, *SPLM* 71). This new brand of hero perhaps reflects the higher degree of sophistication that MacNeice was assuming from his audience and also reveals (as did 'The Story of My Death') a more rounded approach to characterization; for in earlier plays such as *Columbus* (described as a 'stylised treatment of simple heroic theme') and 'Alexander Nevsky', MacNeice's main concern had been 'theme rather than character' (MacNeice, *SPLM* 4).

*He Had a Date* represented not only an evolution in terms of characterisation for MacNeice but was also the first radio-play in which he used popular music as part of the basic fabric of the drama. In a letter (dated 1<sup>st</sup> June 1944) to John Waterhouse, whom MacNeice had come to know when working in Birmingham, the poet outlines his plan for the placement of music within the play: 'I am planning to have no incidental music in the ordinary sense, but to place the milestones in the chap's life by introducing each sequence with one of the most utterly stock topical tunes of the day.' As MacNeice makes clear the play's music was designed to tap into a shared (but fading) aural history which was still richly resonant for the mass of listeners. By using the most popular tunes of the recent past, MacNeice aimed to make each sequence in the play more palpable within the auditory imagination of the listener. So, when we enter a scene with Tom at the sea-side (circa 1914) we hear 'I do like to be beside the seaside', a tune popular at that time. Similarly we hear 'Tipperary' when Tom's uncle is leaving for war and 'Himno de Riego' when Tom takes part in the Spanish civil war. Through this process of aural association MacNeice circumvents the need for an overarching narrator to provide contextual details for the audience, and thereby allows a greater formal fluidity to a narrative which necessarily moves rapidly and fleetingly through various historical periods. Even for contemporary listeners, who are probably more readily responsive to the music indicative and constitutive of their own zeitgeist, listening to snippets of forgotten classics such as 'Bye Bye Black Bird' or 'It's a Long, Long Trail' may well evoke powerfully and vividly something of the bygone era in which the play is set (even if only an artificial or illusory evocation).

Aside from the use of music as an historical index to 'set the scene' (a sort of radio-dramatic *mise-en scene*), MacNeice also employs music thematically, often as a subtle cross-current to the action, foregrounding certain tensions latent in dialogue or narrative. For example, as MacNeice notes in his 1949 introduction to the play, the very fact that the songs are popular and demotic acts as an 'ironic chorus' to Tom's high seriousness and narrow intellectualism (MacNeice *SPLM* 72). Yet music is also used in a more directly emotive manner in the play and in attempting to analyse how music functions at an emotional level in the drama, it is useful to adopt the theory of music-in-film proposed by the critic Michel Chion in his book *Audio-Vision*. Chion suggests that there are at least two dominant modes through which music can create a certain emotion (give 'added value')

in relation to the scene unfolding on screen. ‘On the one hand’, he argues ‘music can directly express its participation in the feelings of the scene, by taking on the scene’s rhythm, tone, and phrasing ... In this case we can speak of *empathetic music*, from the word empathy, the ability to feel the feelings of others.’ (8) His second category of music is defined, in contrast, as ‘*anempathetic* ... in which music exhibits a ‘conspicuous indifference to the situation’ unfolding on screen (8). While radio lacks a tangible ‘screen’ for music to play over, I would argue that Chion’s categories are still relevant to the study of radio-drama, for the listener creates a scene within his own mind which background music emotively enhances and affects. An example of Chion’s former category of *empathetic* music in the play occurs in an early scene in which Tom’s parents are discussing how quickly times are changing:

(Fade up Choir: ‘Margie’ – and behind)

MOTHER: Dear me, how quickly the years pass  
 FATHER: ’m Tempo of everything seems to be quickening up. You and I’ll have to look alive, dear; this is what they call the Jazz Age

(Peak Choir, accelerando, and out)

.....

FATHER: Yes, yes, yes, the world’s moving faster and faster. But am I wrong or is it also getting out of tune.

(Fade up school bell, speed up and out)

TOM: Sunday ... Sunday letter ... ‘September 25<sup>th</sup> 1921... (80)

MacNeice uses the choir here to express Tom’s parents’ growing sense of bewilderment in the face of contemporary culture; their feeling of being out of touch and out of key with the times. As the action cuts from Tom’s father to Tom in boarding school, MacNeice aurally links the two scenes with the alarming sound-music of a school bell whose accelerating (malfunctioning) rhythm bespeaks the father’s unsettling sense that the familiar and traditional socio-cultural patterns of the previous (his) generation are dissolving in the rapid whirl of the seemingly overheated and dissonant present. Indeed, by using the sound-motif of a school bell in this way, MacNeice is able to conflate two generations (father and son)- one fading and one emerging – yet also evoke the socio-cultural differences separating Tom from his father.

While the above scene can be seen as using *empathetic* music for its effect, the predominant use MacNeice makes of music in the play relates to Chion’s second theoretical category as outlined



above: *anempathetic* music. A particularly effective scene employing this form occurs towards the end of the play when Tom's jilted wife Mary discovers that he is on leave from the navy and wants to meet her. However, the yearned for reconciliation is tragically dashed at the last minute when Tom is recalled to sea and all hope of a rapprochement is cruelly quashed:

(f/u factory noise, mix with  
choir – 'You are my sunshine' – and behind)

FOREMAN:           There you are, lass! We've got it installed at last. Music  
                          While You Work! How do you like it?  
MARY:                It's all right.  
FOREMAN:            Eh, Mary, what' wrong with you this morning?  
MARY:                I'm sorry, Mr Higgs, I –  
FOREMAN:            Headache or summat?  
MARY:                No, Mr Higgs, it's just I'm disappointed. I had a date today but  
                          ... Och well, that's just life.

(Lose factory noises, bring up choir,  
then fade out slowly) (107-8)

The joyful, jaunty tones of the famous song (and of course the upbeat romantic lyrics) seem cruelly at odds with the heart broken Mary, whose working life is intrinsically bound up with the more monotonous, mechanised rhythms and insidious noises of the factory floor; sounds which MacNeice describes as 'the jabber of mad machines' in the poem 'Swing-Song', which uses a similar method to the above scene in terms of its ironic synthesis between a sing-song form and an underlying sobriety of theme (222). Mary, like the subject the poem, must stoically continue in her drab job, while her 'young man' is off fighting in the war. The most powerful scene where music is used *anempathetically*, however, occurs in the play's final moments as Tom is dying in the water after the torpedo has hit the ship:

(Pause, bring in disc of 'Rockabye Baby,' and to background')

TOM:                 I *didn't* hear the explosion. This must be death, I take it. Weight of  
                          water without any surface. Down, down and down, no object for the  
                          eyes. But in my ears are voices. (109)

As in *D-Day* MacNeice does not attempt to construct a detailed soundscape of warfare, and chooses instead to foreground a simple cradle-song as the hero speaks his final, tragic soliloquy with past voices flowing over and around him. Formally, the play has come full circle; for the song and indeed Tom's phrase 'I am asleep at last' (108) and the image of a Japanese flower opening echo the first scene with Tom as a baby when his mother gently sings 'Rockabye baby' to him. However, for this final scene, MacNeice had the song specially arranged for strings by Alan Rawsthorne (as opposed to simply sung) and this orchestration distances the listener from the previous version sung with warmth by Tom's mother and also, more generally, from the sense of intimacy and contentment which the song invokes. By inverting the popular significance of the song, MacNeice instigates an audio-imaginative recalibration on the part of the listener; the nursery rhyme is remade as an otherworldly echo of the original, seeming strangely unsympathetic to the tragic and dramatic scenes over which it is played. However, as Chion argues, such *anempathetic* music can create a 'backdrop of "indifference"', and this backdrop 'has the effect not of freezing emotion' in the scene, but rather of 'intensifying it, by inscribing it on a cosmic background' (8). This would certainly seem to be the process at work as the play ends and the cradle song is faded up; for as the strings play out the lullaby and Tom sinks below the waves, the force of his dying words seems heightened and accentuated by the apparently indifferent musical soundscape emerging behind him. The music invokes the quiet loneliness and the terrible calm of Tom's final moments as he sinks into the dark depths. This final combination of words and music would also seem to enlarge or universalize the character of Tom by suggesting that he, as with all humanity, is inevitably subject to ineluctable winds of fate which blow and buffet from the cradle to the grave.

#### IV

*He Had a Date* was an important play for MacNeice as it marked an important evolutionary step in terms of the aesthetics of radio and, even though it has been classified as a dramatic piece, in terms of form and technique it is heavily indebted to (and consistent with) MacNeice's radio features on historical figures such as 'The Death of Marlowe' and 'The Death of Byron'. This of course raises the now perennial problem in radio studies as to what constitutes a radio feature and what a radio drama. Laurence Gilliam, the Head of the Features department where MacNeice worked seemed, to offer a straightforward distinction between the two forms when he asserted: 'Features deal with fact, Drama with fiction.' (qtd. in Gielgud 42) However, if this formula is applied to *Christopher Columbus*, one of MacNeice's most theatrical and conventionally dramatic radio-plays, one would be inclined to classify it as a feature; for MacNeice drew heavily on historical data in writing his

text and in his introduction to the play he emphasises his attempt to remain faithful to the general historical outline or 'facts' of Columbus's great discovery. Indeed, the major problem with Gilliam's definition as it applies to MacNeice's radio programmes (and the writing of many other great radio-artists) is that in much of the writing there is no categorical method of determining whether one is dealing with fact or fiction and therefore no way to decipher whether it constitutes a play or feature. Indeed, most of MacNeice's radio drama is predicated on the idea that there is, patently, 'fact in fantasy (and equally fantasy in "fact")' (MacNeice, *SPLM* 113); and, as will be discussed later, this formulation became a structuring principle for many of his best plays. Unlike Gilliam, the eminent BBC producer Douglas Cleverdon prefers to focus on the formal (as opposed to thematic or epistemological) distinctions when attempting a definition of the radio play, and having produced such masterpieces as *Under Milk Wood* he had a keen awareness of what had been achieved under the aegis of Features:

A radio play is a dramatic work deriving from the tradition of theatre, but conceived in terms of radio. A radio feature is, roughly, any constructed programme (that is, other than news bulletins, racing commentaries, and so forth) that derives from the technical apparatus of radio (microphone, control panel, recording gear, loud speaker). It can combine any sound elements – words, music, sound effects – in any form or mixture of forms – documentary, actuality, dramatized, poetic, musico-dramatic. It has no rules determining what can or cannot be done. And though it may be dramatic in form, it has no need of a dramatic plot. (Cleverdon 17)

Cleverdon, then, distinguishes between the two forms according to the tradition from which they derive. Yet this classification seems as complicating as Gilliam's for, *in general*, there is no hard and fast means to decipher whether an original programme for radio derives from a purely theatrical or purely radio tradition. Even MacNeice himself can offer no clarification on this matter as his definition of a feature seems to suggest that many of his plays, including *He Had a Date*, are in fact features. He defines the feature broadly as: 'the BBC name for a dramatised broadcast which is primarily either informative or propagandist (propaganda being taken to include the emotive celebration of anniversaries and gestures of homage – or of hatred – to anyone or anything dead or alive)' (MacNeice, *The Dark Tower* 17). It is perhaps significant that neither Cleverdon, nor Gilliam, nor MacNeice can offer a workable classification of the radio drama/feature form even though they are all eminently qualified to do so. The inadequacy of their classifications reflects the traditional ambiguity of the two forms and suggests that when MacNeice was writing they were still in a gradual state of evolution, ripe for experiment and pliable to the author's needs. The writer Muriel Spark underlines this point when introducing her published radio-plays in *Voices At Play*,

stating: 'By definition they [the radio plays] were supposed to be 'features' rather than proper plays. I never quite grasped the distinction between dramatic features and plays except to discern what was in my favour, namely the freedom to do as I pleased with characters and voices without thought of conforming to a settled category.' (7) As Spark makes clear, writing within the uncertain limits of the radio drama/feature genre, while confusing, could also be liberating for writers for it meant that there was greater space to generate their own aesthetics and more opportunity to bend the medium into forms of their choosing. This, one feels, is the process occurring in *He Had a Date*; for MacNeice points out in his introduction to the play that 'in form the programme was something of an experiment - the application to a fictitious character of a radio method generally reserved for factual histories; though the story is an invention, the form is that of a feature programme.' (SPLM 71) It could be argued that with *He Had a Date* MacNeice was expanding the boundaries of what was possible within the feature form in the service of a dramatic impulse; yet given that the play has been critically accepted and published as a radio-play it is perhaps better to state that he had advanced the form of radio drama by appropriating methods common to features, including the device of flash back and the swift intercutting of scenes from various contexts. What is certain is that the generically hybrid play marked a new phase in MacNeice's radio career as he began to work towards a more rounded, allusive, and symbolically rich style of radio dramatic writing.

Even though *He Had a Date* represented a major achievement in radio, MacNeice was apparently unsatisfied with his play and in an introductory note to *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts* (1947) MacNeice comments: 'In a programme called *He Had a Date* I attempted the chronicle of a fictitious man of our time and characterised him throughout by understatement, and while I did not succeed with him, I see nothing wrong with the method.' (SPLM 405) MacNeice does not explain why he felt he had failed with his character, although it is worth noting that the above introduction was written two years before the expanded and reworked version of the play was re-broadcast on the Third programme when it could finally be 'heard as it was written' and for which 'earlier crudities' were eliminated (MacNeice, SPLM 72) Yet the amendments MacNeice made to the later script did not fundamentally alter its theme or meaning and MacNeice's sense of failure is perhaps tied more closely to his initial idea for the central character to be largely 'typical' of his generation and to serve 'as a symbol of the various discontents of this country between the two wars'<sup>vi</sup>. Even though his hero was a member of the intelligentsia, MacNeice hoped that his rejection of the role society and his parents had forced him into would mean that he did not have 'too minority an appeal'<sup>vii</sup> with listeners. The Listener Research Report on the play, which MacNeice read, reveals that to a large extent the hero's appeal was considerably more limited than

he had hoped even though a select few listeners thought the story 'heartbreakingly true'. The Report tells us that:

The character of the hero aroused both sympathy and criticism. Although a considerable minority (20%) said their own experiences had, in some ways, been similar to those of this 'contemporary', to the majority such experiences, as well as the mental atmosphere that went with them, belonged to a strange world ... But listeners' criticisms were not only concerned with the hero's credibility; in fact many who did not deny that such a character was possible, disapproved of the broadcast, either because they felt he was too rare a phenomenon to be typical of a generation, or because they considered him ... an unworthy and depressing subject for a programme<sup>viii</sup>.

According to the report the play had not resonated with the majority of listeners as MacNeice had hoped, and in this sense it had perhaps failed within his own terms. It is perhaps for this reason that MacNeice introduces his play in 1949 with the heading 'Portrait of a modern man' (with all the suggestiveness of the epithet 'modern') as opposed to the earlier 'Portrait of a Contemporary' and describes Tom as being 'typical of his *kind*' and true to his '*class*' as well as his '*time*' ([Italics mine] *SPLM* 71). For he had perhaps accepted by that time that his character's world was too exclusive and too unfamiliar for the majority of listeners to feel that he represented their experience between the two wars: any parallels or affinities were more likely to be partial if at all.

Critics and colleagues however, did not generally share MacNeice's dissatisfaction with his play and Douglas Cleverdon has rightly described it as a 'brilliant example of sceneless composition' (qtd. in Coulton 65). R.D. Smith (who himself produced the play when it was re-broadcast in 1974) considered *He Had a Date* a 'major achievement' in radio arguing that MacNeice displayed a 'disciplined tightness of writing' in producing a work of 'heartbreaking immediacy' (Smith 94). Coulton writes, in the same vein, that the play 'remains a very effective one, both from the point of view of feeling and technically.'<sup>(65)</sup> However, Christopher Holme posits a somewhat contrary view arguing that the play 'now seems psychologically bare and innocent with stock characters in stock situations ... it was tremendously apposite to a wide range of ordinary lives, and in the heightened circumstances of that time it had an heroic quality and earned its success' (Holme 53). Holme's assertion that the play had an 'heroic quality' and that it was 'tremendously apposite' to a broad section of society does not square with the evidence of the Listener Reports from either 1944 or 1949, both of which revealed that many listeners felt the hero, in particular, to be too psychologically complex and hypersensitive as well as unheroic in the conventional sense. And while it is possible to sympathise with the view that the presentation of

character in the play may seem somewhat anachronistic to present-day listeners, it is worth remembering that MacNeice's mode of psychological representation is based on a process of 'implicit logic' whereby a character can reveal himself symbolically under the cover of apparently naturalistic dialogue; as MacNeice argues in his General Introduction to *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts*, 'for explicit psychology' MacNeice argues 'we go to textbooks' (MacNeice, *SCLM* 404). This dialogic doubleness, while reflecting MacNeice's covert and reserved style of psychological expression is also a product of writing for radio in which an omniscient narrator, who can give character history or information, is not always desirable. This lack of an objective correlative may well have been the reason some listeners found the character of Tom 'incredible' or 'inconsistent', yet the scale of the narrative, the tautness of story and the demands of the medium meant MacNeice had little space for overt psychological description.

In some respects *He Had a Date* represented an attempt by MacNeice to get his experience of war into perspective: to determine, what of value had been achieved by himself, his friend, and many others through their sacrifice to the Allied cause. Like much of his poetry of the period (see for example, 'Convoy' [December, 1942], 'Bottleneck' [December, 1942], 'The conscript', 'The springboard' [June, 1942]) MacNeice was attempting to assess how events of history had impacted upon his and other people's private system of values; how the war had challenged preconceived notions of what was ethically acceptable and raised issues of individual responsibility in times of national crisis and ideological extremism. These themes are addressed again in MacNeice's next great radio drama of the war *The Dark Tower* (1946) yet are woven more tightly into the overall fabric of the play. Before turning to analysis of *The Dark Tower* however, it is worth remembering that just as Dylan Thomas's radio-classic *Under Milk Wood* grew out of earlier radio scripts by the poet such as 'Early One Morning', 'The Londoner', and 'Margate – Past and Present'<sup>ix</sup>, so *The Dark Tower* can be said to have its roots in previous radio scripts by MacNeice. The following section will attempt to trace the artistic roots of MacNeice's radio masterpiece in certain earlier scripts by the poet thereby placing it within his overall development as a radio artist. For the *The Dark Tower* represented the artistic culmination of MacNeice's work in radio during the war, drawing on all he had learned as well as advancing the radio-form into new territory.

## V

According to MacNeice, *The Dark Tower* can be defined as a 'parable play' and in his introduction to the published version of the text the poet indicates his belief that parabolic writing provides a more effective mode for representing contemporary life than single-plane or 'realistic' writing:

My own impression is that pure 'realism' is in our time almost played out, though most works of fiction of course will remain realistic *on the surface*. The single-track mind and the single plane novel or play are almost bound to falsify the world in which we live. The fact that there is method in madness and the fact that there is fact in fantasy (and equally fantasy in 'fact') have been brought home to us not only by Freud and other psychologists but by events themselves. This being so, reportage can no longer masquerade as art. So the novelist, abandoning the 'straight' method of photography, is likely to resort ... to all kinds of twists which may help him to do justice to the world's complexity. Some element of parable therefore, far from making a work thinner and more abstract, ought to make it more concrete. Man does after all live by symbols. (SPLM 112)

While it may be pointed out that all writing (to whatever small degree) operates on two or more planes at once, it is clear that parable, with its in-built double vision and structural symbolism, offered a form of writing which MacNeice felt could more adequately represent and engage with the complexity of modern life. Yet it is the interior as well as the exterior world of modernity which MacNeice felt parable could respond to; for it encourages an author (and reader), through its insistently referential mechanism, to create a world in which thoughts and actions are always more pregnant than they at first appear; images and symbols are an assumed part of an interpretable pattern; surface reality, while a concrete world in itself, is also a veil for an elusive architectonic of meaning (an unconscious of the text). MacNeice had attempted dramatic parable in his early stage plays such as *Out of the Picture* and *Station Bell* (McCracken 255). However, compared with the radio-parables, these plays (which are overly derivative of Auden's plays from the same period) seem much more concerned with outer rather than inner human experiences as well as lacking the structural unity and accomplished dialogue of MacNeice's best radio work. As we shall see, working in radio encouraged MacNeice to construct a different type of parable, as well as strengthening his interest in the form. Indeed, in his posthumously published study on the subject, *Varieties of Parable* (1965), MacNeice outlines how writing for a pure-sound medium was one of the factors which attracted him to forms of double-level writing (9).

Radio's appeal to the auditory (as opposed to visual) imagination meant that MacNeice had greater freedom to construct what he referred to as the 'special world' of parable; repeated spatial, temporal or contextual shifts are easily achievable on radio (as compared to stage) and plays could veer from fantastical worlds to naturalistic settings with a greater degree of credibility. Indeed, the medium of sound is uniquely suited to the mechanics of allegory and Valentine Cunningham's comments on the allegorical form reinforce this view. Cunningham argues that: 'The rhetorical function allegory traditionally draws on most is prosopopoeia, the activity of making present in

discourse things, concepts, people normally characterised by invisibility, abstraction, absence, the lack of personality or presence.’(221) Because radio requires no actual presence on stage or visible mise-en-scene, it can use prosopopoeia more freely and credibly than traditional theatre. Radio, too, is also much better suited to forms of psychological drama, for it lends itself to the use of soliloquy or monologue and can more easily portray the inner life of a character without losing momentum or dramatic effect. Indeed, MacNeice’s radio-parables regularly veer in and out of the intangible, complex and fluid world of a character’s imagination or (sub) -consciousness and seek to explore the interstitial spaces between the objective waking world of ‘fact’ and the subjective reality of the dreaming mind. Because the world of a radio play is, by its very nature, both ephemeral and immaterial it naturally induces an uncertainty as to the nature and extent of the reality which the characters inhabit (or project). MacNeice plays on this ambiguity in his work to invoke questions and uncertainties about the foundation, meaning, production and perception of reality.

While *The Dark Tower* represents MacNeicean radio-parable *par excellence*, an earlier unpublished radio programme titled ‘Ring In The New’, can be seen as an important *ur-text*. The play was written at a time when MacNeice was beginning to move away from the more realistic or rhetorical tone of early war propaganda/ reportage programmes. It experiments with a form of dream parable which MacNeice was to use in later plays and poems (not least among which was *The Dark Tower*). Broadcast on the Home Service on New Year’s Eve, 1943, ‘Ring in the New’ follows the plight of two injured soldiers, Joe and Thomas, who both dream (in their hospital beds) that they travel together into a strange and unsettling future. It was the first radio-play which MacNeice described as a ‘parable play’ and the announcer’s introduction offers an insight into the formal principles at work in the drama:

ANNOUNCER: Ring in the New. The programme that follows is a parable play for New Year’s Eve. We wish to warn listeners in advance that some of you may find it mad, others may find it too serious. There is however, a method in the madness. And, if it is serious, that is the nature of the subject; for our subject tonight is the future.  
The space is the space of a dream and the time is New Year’s Eve. Listeners have been warned. (1)



Unlike stage, radio can readily and convincingly present the irrational and shifting world of dream to its audience. And it is through the textual construction of an environment governed by the logic of dream (or indeed nightmare) that MacNeice hoped to do justice to the chaotic and destabilising world of war and the uncertain future which it heralded. Thus, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the apparent 'madness' of the play, MacNeice hopes that his audience will be able to recognise their own reality in the drama and respond to the underlying questions and arguments concerning the future which the text poses. As if to reinforce the idea that the audience must grasp for what is latent in the text, the story begins with a Fortune-Teller 'reading' the cards of the two central characters; this process of decoding the cryptic meaning of the cards self-referentially prefigures the parable about to be enacted, where it is the listener who must decode the story. Thomas and Joe turn up two cards, the eight of diamonds and the ace of spades, which indicate respectively that they are to go on a 'long and dangerous journey' and, more ominously, that they will both 'be in at the death' (3). Their predicted journey begins immediately thereafter and they enter a train tunnel which, according to a blind cripple they meet, leads to the future. Emerging from the tunnel Thomas and Joe come to experience several different possible versions of society after the War as personified and expounded by the characters they meet. Lord Magnum, who they first encounter, is an aristocratic capitalist who places the prerogatives of the individual above all else and who believes that the state is 'the root of all evil' (7). Then the duo meets a Marxist demagogue who believes that: 'It will all be all right if you leave it to the workers ... The answer is dialectical materialism.'(10) The Demagogue's speech however is followed and subverted by the distorted sound of parrot squawking 'Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly!'(10) Through his use of the Parrot here MacNeice foregrounds the vacuity of this type of Marxist rhetoric and, in a more general sense, satirises any type of language or ideology which totalises the world into dogma. The final vision of the future, which the two characters encounter, is personified by a man described simply as the 'Manager'. MacNeice adapts a stanza of Tennyson's poem 'Ring Out Wild Bells' to convey his vision of future:

Ring in the world of ordered lives  
Where the paternalistic State  
Shall save you thinking and dictate  
Your choice of jobs and drinks and wives. (15)

In this Orwellian dystopia (described by the Manager as a 'better', more ordered type of Nazism), the individual is crushed beneath the coercive machinery of a totalitarian state. Because Joe has the nerve to question the Manager he is deemed 'unworthy of the state' and therefore must be re-

educated. Both he and Tom are placed under arrest by the Manager's lieutenant, named 'Inspector 909', and bundled into a van to be sent to the 'Clearing House'. On their journey, Inspector 909 also arrests Dr Endor, a benevolent psychoanalyst, and also a dissident preacher who is initially heard preaching a stirring sermon at a 'watch-night' service in a bombed out church. The Preacher is discussing what sort of future the War will bring and asks what might be meant by the term 'Victory'; he argues that it 'is no good basing your hopes on an end that is merely negative – on cessation of sacrifice, rest from labour, escape from war.'<sup>(20)</sup> Through the voice of the preacher here, MacNeice was perhaps attempting to move beyond the war aims as outlined by the Churchill government which, according to Helen Goethals, had 'insisted that the first objective was simply to win the War, by whatever means, and continued to define war aims negatively, in the simple and unobjectionable terms of resisting fascism. What would happen after the War had been won – indeed, the entire question of whether the end would justify the means - was conveniently left open.'<sup>(369)</sup> Churchill's government, of course, can hardly be criticized for this stance for it allowed almost all factions across the British political spectrum to rally to the cause at time when Britain stood perilously alone in 1940, on the brink of collapse. However, by 1943 the Allies were beginning to inflict heavy casualties on the Axis powers and the horrendous bombing of Hamburg in July 1943 (in which more than 45,000 civilians were killed by a firestorm) was questioned on moral grounds both in the press and in lengthy public pamphlets.<sup>x</sup> MacNeice then was perhaps responding to the problematic ethical decisions precipitated by the necessity of winning the War and the possible implications that those decisions might have for future society (in Britain and beyond). The closing pronouncements by the Preacher, therefore, can be read on one level as a judgement on Nazi Germany, but on another as a warning that the battle against evil is a perpetual struggle and will not simply cease once this war is won; it will merely be fought on different terms:

PREACHER:                    This is a Watchnight service. What kind of watch are we keeping? You remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand:

EFFECTS (spot):                    (police whistles nearer)

PREACHER:                    they all look their own way, everyone for his gain, from his quarter.' (21)

The preacher is forcibly prevented from delivering further exegesis of the biblical quotation, but this particular passage from Isaiah can be read as a parable (within a parable) warning of the danger to a society of false prophets and prophecy, of spiritual and moral blindness and ignorance, and of the peril of selfishness and egotism. These vices must be avoided in the future so that society can forge a new alternative between the extreme laissez-faire capitalism represented by Lord Magnum, and totalitarian state control, as represented by the Manager. As Dr Endor argues, there are other alternatives possible apart from those offered by the 'selfish man who calls himself an individualist' and the 'selfish man who calls himself a planner' (28). The play ends by suggesting positive patterns of behaviour which are, admittedly, difficult to fulfil:

PREACHER:           The answer seems to be not to be selfish. But  
                                  that is difficult.

THOMAS:             Difficult? Almost Impossible!

CRIPPLE:             Mind if I butt in? Wheel me closer, someone.  
                                  I'm a bloke who for twenty years has lived in  
                                  a dark tunnel. I can't walk so I couldn't move  
                                  and I couldn't move so I couldn't see. And that's  
                                  the worst thing of all – not to be able to see –  
                                  everything dark, dark, like being locked in a  
                                  nightmare. The only way out is to wake. Wake;  
                                  open your eyes; wake to your own strength.  
                                  Wake to the task ahead of you. (28)

While the Preacher argues for the societal benefits of altruism, the cripple invokes the quotation from Isaiah which urges against types of moral and spiritual blindness and the need to stay focused on the path for the greater good. The cripple displays his belief, here, that there is light (both literal and figurative) at the end of the tunnel, and the trope of travelling through tunnels in search of a better future or ideal is one which recurs in MacNeice's later poems such as 'Coda' (1962) and radio-plays such as *Prisoner's Progress* (1954) and *Persons from Pollock* (1963). The idea of being locked into the darkness of nightmare as outlined above, is a common trope in MacNeice's work and often implies a sort of helplessness to the whims of fate or the oppressive historical, political and social forces that act upon the individual. However, the cripple (who himself is the physical embodiment of debilitated humanity) has gained greater insight through his condition. He posits a positive model of action – a form of existential humanism - whereby the individual must overcome his/her paralysing fear and confusion in the face of the complexity (or absurdity) of the real world

and awake to the present moment, taking responsibility for improving what is under his/her influence, while also having faith in the self. However, there is no certainty of success in this decision, although it is worth doing as Thomas's father makes clear when he states 'I'd take a risk on waking.'

Despite some lyrical passages and stirring imagery, 'Ring in the New' is not a wholly successful play, and unlike *The Dark Tower*, it seems hurriedly written at times; too often, awkward or abrupt scenic links disrupt the flow of the narrative and Tennyson's poem, 'Ring Out Wild Bells', which is quoted (and intentionally misquoted) throughout the narrative is not sufficiently integrated into the story encumbering rather than enhancing the dramatic effect of the drama. Yet its importance as an experiment in radio-parable should not be underestimated. While other earlier plays had also worked allegorically, 'Ring in the New' was MacNeice's first radio-play to rely so heavily on the logic of dream to structure its narrative and control its movements. It abjures a cause-and-effect plotline and rational linearity, and is more concerned with exploring states of mind and possible modes of being. There is a greater tendency to destabilize the world of the drama often creating an uncertainty as to whether the events of the narrative are the subjective (unconscious) manifestations of a character's mind or the 'objective', authorial, constructed reality within the play itself. Within this shifting framework however, the play does attempt to submerge a set of beliefs (which also inform the meaning and shape of the text) yet not in a diagrammatic, or 'algebraic', allegorical sense. As we shall see these tendencies are developed and brought to full fruition in the *The Dark Tower* which will be the focus of the final section of this chapter.

## VI

It is perhaps significant that MacNeice began writing *The Dark Tower* while on holiday in Ireland in May 1945; far away from the frenetic activities of the Features department in London, MacNeice was more readily able to gain perspective on his work for the BBC during the war and also the monumental changes (both public and private) of the past five years. While on Achill Island, MacNeice was perhaps more able to accurately reflect on these events and this process was vital to the writing of *The Dark Tower*, which was, in large part, inspired by the events of the War. Indeed, that summer alone had seen the full disclosure of the 'final solution' and the Nazi Concentration camps, as well as the unprecedented and unimaginably horrific destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which announced the, seemingly apocalyptic, Atomic age.

MacNeice wrote to Gilliam in May that he was finding the surroundings conducive to writing and that he was eager to work on a new play: 'my old idea of the programme on "The Dark Tower" has suddenly blossomed out and I should like to get on with writing it within the next few

weeks.’(qtd. in Coulton 77) While his wife Hedli rested from a recent illness, and his son, Dan, and daughter, Corinna, enjoyed the local landscape, MacNeice spent May and early June working on the play. He found the work slow and arduous and writes to Gilliam: ‘I am writing the Tower but it comes slowly –partly because the virtue has gone out of me and partly because the subject is so austere that I can’t do it in long sessions.’(qtd. in Coulton 77) Feeling an allergy to England and weary with war work, MacNeice asked for more time off and was granted leave until July. He eventually returned to London in September with the script mostly written, and it was broadcast in January of the following year.

*The Dark Tower*, as with ‘Ring in the New’, begins with an opening announcement concerning the themes and formal intention of the programme. The announcer informs the audience that the play ‘is on the surface a fantasy’, yet it is ‘concerned with very real questions of faith and doubt, of doom and free will, of temptation and self-sacrifice.’ (117) A ‘Reader’ then follows on from the announcer stating:

READER:                   The Programme which follows is a parable play  
 .....  
                                   The theme is the ancient but ever-green theme of the Quest – the  
                                   dedicated adventure; the manner of presentation is that of a dream –  
                                   but a dream that is full of meaning. (117)

Just as in ‘Ring in the New’, the audience is primed to become aware of what is latent or indirectly voiced in the text and again the events of the drama are constructed as part of a dream. However, while ‘Ring in the New’ takes the form of a quest, *The Dark Tower* uses the trope of the Quest as a thematic concern *as well as* formal principle, interrogating the meaning and function of the quest as a dedicated journey in search or pursuit of an ideal. For MacNeice, this search implied an inward journey through memory and the subconscious as much as an outward movement through time and space; as Edna Longley astutely observes, in MacNeice’s writing: ‘No absolute line can be drawn between the quest as search and the quest as self-pursuit.’(Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 238) The need for self-understanding and greater insight as well as the reconciliation of opposing selves and the demands of conscience become as integral to the quest as reaching a desired geographical or temporal end point. This fusion of interior and exterior in MacNeice’s quest finds natural expression in radio where the projected audio-spatial landscape which the character inhabits can quickly merge into or become the internal landscape of the character’s psyche without loss of momentum or fluidity of narrative. And while, at times, MacNeice capitalises on radio’s capacity for such unsettling transitions and transformations of perspective in *The Dark Tower*, his overall

tendency is to stress the subtle interconnections and interactions between Roland's thinking self and his surrounding environment. Thus, the formal method brilliantly mirrors and invokes one of the central concerns of the play itself; namely, the subtle, sometimes barely tangible, effect of public events on the private individual and vice-versa.

The type of quest explored in *The Dark Tower*, it must be noted, also has its roots in Robert Browning's poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came', from which the play takes its name. The 'Reader', who speaks after the opening announcer, alerts the audience to this fact before noting how Browning's poem ends with a challenge call blown on a trumpet. Just before the play itself begins, the mysterious final lines of Browning's poem are quoted:

'And yet

Dauntless the slughorn to my lips I set

And blew: *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*'

Note well the words 'And Yet'. Roland did not have to – he did not

Wish to – and yet in the end he came to: - The Dark Tower. (117)

Just as MacNeice's play evolves outwards from an ambiguous, pregnant phrase from Browning's poem, so Browning's work derives its title from a line spoken by Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Edgar, under the guise of mad Tom, attempts to convince of his insanity by talking (apparent) nonsense and in the process speaks the following lines:

Childe Rowland to the dark tower came

His word was still 'Fie, Foh and fum

I smell the blood of a British man. (Act 3, sc 4)

As Browning begins and ends his poem on single line from Edgar's strange, incantatory song, so MacNeice opens and closes his play with the sound of a trumpet call. Yet, unlike Browning's poem, *The Dark Tower* begins in a naturalistic manner with Roland's brother Gavin learning to play the challenge call on a trumpet, to be played when he reaches the Dark Tower. Indeed, while 'Childe Roland' offers only fleeting and cryptic inferences as to why and how the Knight began his Quest, *The Dark Tower* constructs a chronological and causal dynamic behind Roland's pursuit of the Dark Tower. Roland is the seventh and last son of a family which has sent all its men (six sons and father) to their deaths on a quest to fight the mysterious, immortal force of evil, called the Dragon (for want of a better word) which lurks at the Dark Tower. It is primarily Roland's mother who encourages him on this ambiguous quest, and he is also spurred on by his Tutor and the Sergeant Trumpeter both of whom instructed his older brother Gavin. Before his quest begins

Roland meets the character of Blind Peter, who was alive when the Dragon last roamed the world. Peter tells Roland of how he came under the sway of the Dragon and became rich sending men to their deaths in the dystopian society which the Dragon precipitated across the land. Unfortunately, Peter's wife commits suicide because of his actions (he sends her father to his death) and he subsequently loses his child after it suffers from a mysterious malaise. After hearing Peter's harrowing tale, Roland is more determined to reach his goal. And despite temptation from drink, love, gambling, and his own self-doubt and delusion, he does eventually reach the Dark Tower thus fulfilling his familial duty and maintaining its tradition of challenging the Dragon at the Dark Tower.

The play, however, is much more than this skeletal narrative implies and underneath the linear 'concrete' storyline flows a shifting pattern of meaning, of parables within parable, as each character or aspect of the environment begins to signify on two or more semantic levels. Indeed, in his use of personification as integral to the overall meaning of the play, MacNeice reveals the influence of Spenser's and Bunyan's quest narratives (The Red Cross Knight and Christian respectively) on his aesthetic. As Heuser argues MacNeice also taps into the legend of St George, Knight versus dragon, in order to 'universalize' his 'part in the war as a journey into the unknown, to fight Evil.' (140) MacNeice makes clear in his introduction to the play however, that this allegorical or 'dual-plane' method is not to be understood as 'allegory in the algebraic sense; i.e. it will not be desirable or even possible to equate each of the outward and visible signs with a precise or rational inner meaning.' (SPLM 113) MacNeice is concerned to 'let the story persist as a story and not dwindle into diagram'. And because MacNeice does not want to 'impair the impact of the play' he declines to offer an 'explicit summary of those implicit "meanings" in *The Dark Tower*' of which he himself was conscious (SPLM 113). MacNeice continues: 'I have my beliefs and they permeate *The Dark Tower*. But do not ask me what Ism it illustrates or what Solution it offers. You do not normally ask for such things in the single-plane work; why should they be forced upon something more complex?' (SPLM 114) MacNeice's resistance to any completely coherent system of belief or (faith) implicit in the play reflects his scepticism towards any dogma or doctrine which, for him, falsely totalises or petrifies the plural world into static abstracts. Yet, while there is no final absolute message to be taken from *The Dark Tower*, it is possible to examine the play as a record of MacNeice's personal struggle with belief and conscience during the war and, more universally, as an attempt to draw meaning and value from the tragedy of war for all those who took part in resisting Nazism. It is to this personal account submerged in the drama to which this section now turns.

As with *He Had a Date*, *The Dark Tower* draws on much of MacNeice's own private history (and previous poetry) in its construction of the central character and for the images and sound

effects used throughout the text. Roland, like MacNeice, is sceptical and unsure of his quest and is, like Tom Varney, a misfit in the role his family have cast for him. His mother comments that: 'Roland lacks concentration; he's not like my other sons, / He's almost flippant, he's always asking questions' (122). Roland is deeply uncertain about the traditions which have been passed down to him, he is self-questioning, constantly attempting to clarify what it is he actually feels about the quest he has been called to. It is his mother who drives Roland to his quest and the power which she exerts over her son would seem to express MacNeice's own obsession with his mother's death and the feeling of guilt which surrounds her memory. Roland's mother is of course very different to MacNeice's mother, whom he lost so tragically; however, for both Roland and MacNeice the maternal is inextricably bound up with death and loss. Towards the end of Roland's quest his mother gives birth to a 'child of stone', which she wants to send on the quest in Roland's place. MacNeice noted in the published version of the play that the symbol of the stone child puzzled many listeners and goes on to explain its significance: 'The mother in bearing so many children only to send them to their death, can be thought of as thereby bearing a series of deaths. So her logical last child is stone – her own death.' (*SPLM* 411) Despite his mother calling him to come home and let the stone child complete the quest, Roland perseveres with his journey and through disobeying the force of his mother's memory he is finally able to exercise his own 'free will' and complete his quest. The conflicted nature of Roland's relationship to his mother finds resolution in the final scenes where her voice finally returns urging her son to 'strike a blow for all dead mothers.'(147)

It is not only memory of MacNeice's mother's which is submerged within the text; other personal relationships and losses are touched on throughout the play as the poet filters and extends his own private experience into the larger parabolic narrative. It is surely no coincidence that Roland's brother and immediate predecessor in the quest is called Gavin, for MacNeice's friend Graham Shepard is referred to by the same name in his later poem *Autumn Sequel* (1954). And the character of Sylvie, Roland's lover before he leaves home, recalls MacNeice's first wife Mary Ezra. The imagery and rhythms of the lines which Roland speaks to Sylvie echo poems such as 'Mayfly' (1929) written during the first bloom of MacNeice and Mary's relationship:

ROLAND:                    Today is a thing in itself - apart from the future.  
                                   Whatever follows, I will remember this tree  
                                   With this dazzle of sun and shadow – and I will remember  
                                   The mayflies jigging above us in the delight  
                                   Of the dying instant – and I'll remember *you*  
                                   With bronze lights in your hair. (123)



Roland, however, must turn away from Sylvie and his quest represents a search for something more lasting and more meaningful than the momentary bliss of young love and the sensuous, aesthetic joy of the 'dazzle of sun' in 'the dying instant'.

Another personage from MacNeice's past who seems to haunt the play is one of MacNeice's former tutors G.M Sargeaunt. He can be read most pertinently in the figure of the (similarly named) Sergeant-Trumpeter; for both are characterised by MacNeice as stoical and with a steady resolve; and just as the Sergeant-Trumpeter is a rousing force in Roland's quest, so Sargeaunt was an inspirational figure in MacNeice's early manhood - he is described by MacNeice as 'the one master we really found inspiring' (MacNeice, *SAF* 91). Indeed, MacNeice may well have adapted Sargeaunt's interpretation of ancient Greek ideas of destiny for his own purposes in the play: 'He [G.M.Sargeaunt] liked the Greek attitude to Fate, their refusal to bank on Utopias, their courage in going on living without the stimulus of heaven or heady idealism' (MacNeice, *SAF* 92). For this is the position Roland seems to embody, never really motivated by a particular 'Ism' and finding no solace in the idea of everlasting life after death, yet still having the courage to persevere in his quest. Sargeaunt's influence is perhaps also felt in the character of the tutor whose philosophy acts as a succinct parable, within a parable, of the existential mode of quest which Roland must undertake:

TUTOR:                   A man lives on a sliding staircase -  
                                  sliding downwards, remember; to be a man  
                                  he has to climb against it, keeping level  
                                  or even ascending slightly; he will not reach  
                                  the top – if there is a top – and when he dies  
                                  he will slump and go down regardless. All the same  
                                  while he lives he must climb. Remember that. (127)

The speech exemplifies the mixture of sombre stoicism and profound admiration for the human capacity for fortitude and effort which pervade the play as a whole. And Robert Welch detects in this attitude a similarity not only to Ancient Greek writers and older Protestant writers but also to MacNeice's younger contemporary, Samuel Beckett:

It [*The Dark Tower*] is a stirring play ... because it is so simple and so true. This is how it is for us on this 'bitch of an earth' as Beckett (another Protestant parablist whom MacNeice admired, along with Bunyan and Spenser) had it; who also, Seneca to MacNeice's Horace, wrote: 'I

can't go on, I'll go on'. Life is arduous and calls forth our ardour, our virtue. Whether it is the hurler venturing into the variousness and danger of the game, or the gardener keeping the borders clear so that nature can thrive, effort, valour, and unceasing vigilance are required. (14)

MacNeice saw and admired such virtue and fierceness in Londoners during the war, and *The Dark Tower*, is, in one sense, a recognition and celebration of such spirit.

By far the most important figure from MacNeice's personal life to find representation in the play is his father, Bishop John MacNeice, a man imbued with a profound Christian faith and a keen awareness of the wider community and his responsibility to it. One important subtext running through the play is MacNeice's attempt to reconcile his loss of faith with the memory of his father's unflinching belief in a Christian God and his strongly held adherence to the ethics of Christianity. From a young age MacNeice had begun to doubt the faith he had been born into and he recalls that while in boarding school he had come to the conclusion, under the influence of his class-mate Anthony Blunt, that: 'The only real values were aesthetic. Moral values were delusion, and politics and religion a waste of time. I had now given up saying my prayers' (*SAF* 100) However, an early dream MacNeice had while in Marlborough reveals that the Christian sensibility was more deeply ingrained in his character than his somewhat posed aestheticism suggests:

One night, lying in the great green dormitory, I found myself walking with my father over the downs. We were ascending a slope that was cut off blind by the sky and I was walking some way ahead. As I came near the skyline there was a noise of a funfair and a tall scarlet soldier standing stiff in a bearskin, woodenly abstracted. I reached his level, topping the curve of the world, the brass music blared up full and down below me was Calvary. Not on a hill – that was the first correction – but far down below me in an amphitheatre cut in chalk. Tiers and tiers of people in gala dress – bunting, rattles and paper streamers – and in the arena were three bodies on the crosses. A sight to make you retch and I knew if my father saw it all would be over. He was drawing up behind me when I woke. (*SAF* 65)

That MacNeice records this dream so vividly in his autobiography, so many years after the event, reveals how significant it was to him and how profoundly he was affected by his loss of faith. The fact that MacNeice chose Browning's poem as his inter-text for the play may also represent another point of connection with his father's memory given that Browning was one of John MacNeice's favourite writers. Indeed, one could even argue that the dream, described above, which MacNeice had at Marlborough, may well have some roots in the shapes and images from 'Childe Roland': for example, the final scene of MacNeice's dream in which the dreamer suddenly comes to an

amphitheatre surrounded by ‘tiers and tiers’ of people resembles the final scenes of Roland’s quest in which the hills rise up around him ‘all at once’ and become ‘like giants’ lying ‘Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay’ (45). In *The Dark Tower* it would seem as if dream and poem have been spliced together; for as Roland reaches the place of the Dragon he comments that ‘This looks like the great circus of Ancient Rome’ (146). Roland’s experience, in Browning’s poem, of a sudden disconcerting deluge of sound – ‘noise was everywhere! It toll’d/ Increasing like a bell’ (45) – as he comes upon the final scene of battle is paralleled in MacNeice’s dream where the dreamer hears the ‘noise of a funfair’ ‘blare up full’ as he reaches the amphitheatre. However, while Roland, in his final moments, is surrounded and supported by ‘all the lost adventurers my peers’ who have themselves died on similar quests, MacNeice, in his dream, is surrounded by crowds of people in ‘gala dress’, grossly inappropriate to the scenes of Calvary emerging below. It is this terrible incongruity which the dreamer seeks to conceal from his father. The poet never returned to formal Christianity, nor did he find any settled belief, although he did believe in belief itself. This loss of a Christian faith can only have fractured further his relationship with his father, which was already distant. In the poem *Autumn Sequel* MacNeice again describes this dream and comments on it in the poem:

This was the worst  
Of my dreams and I had the worst of it, in the lack  
  
Of my own faith and the knowledge of his [John MacNeice], the accursed  
Two ways vision of youth. (473)

This ‘accursed’ divided inner vision is one of the central dilemmas or oppositions which the character of Roland must resolve in *The Dark Tower*. Throughout his training he conceals his doubts about the quest he has been born into and even after he has heard Blind Peter’s harrowing tale of the Dragon he remains unconvinced. Blind Peter’s last comment to Roland reveals the difference between Roland’s outward actions and his inward turmoil:

BLIND PETER:      You’re like your father – one of the dedicated  
                             whose life is a quest, whose death is a victory.  
                             Yes! God bless you! *You’ve* made up your mind!

ROLAND:             But have I, Peter? Have I? (127)

The ghost of Roland's father is felt later on in the play when Roland is considering marrying Sylvie and abandoning his quest. Just as he is about to take his wedding vows his father's voice is heard from the grave (like the ghost of King Hamlet) rebuking Roland for not staying true to the quest: 'I am still waiting to be your father. While you malingers, you are no son of mine.'(140) Roland does eventually complete the quest and as he faces the Tower, his father's voice can again be heard encouraging him onwards to face the Dragon: 'Your heritage, my son. You were born to fight.'(147) Like his father before him, Roland makes the ultimate sacrifice for his community, standing strong in the face of overwhelming evil. And one is tempted to see in this narrative, MacNeice's own attitude to the not insignificant risks he took and the sacrifices he made while living in London and working for the BBC during the war. Like his father, MacNeice believed in doing his part for his community and although he may not have had his father's faith to guide him, he shared an innate sense of duty and a profound sensitivity to the call of his conscience. Roland's ability to fulfil his quest, with his father's approving words echoing in his ears, represents a sort of artistic or imaginative rapprochement between MacNeice and his father's memory; in the play's final moments the poet attempts to fuse in Roland the various points of contact between himself and his father – their shared values - as opposed to focusing on the accursed 'double vision' which MacNeice felt when he was younger. Indeed, Roland's overall trajectory in the play – from absent father to paternal support and approval- is repeated in a late poem by MacNeice, 'The truisms' which finds a form of solace and ethical resolve in his father's memory.

While on one level, *The Dark Tower* grows from and engages with the tensions and concerns which were central to MacNeice's own private history and specific psychology, the play is also rooted in the shared events of recent history and is, according to the Announcer, 'largely inspired by World War II.'(117) In this sense, Roland can be understood as a representative of all those who have sacrificed and suffered during the war and the various challenges and temptations which were overcome in challenging and defeating fascism. It is an attempt by MacNeice to universalise his part in the war as a journey into the unknown against Evil. While war is never actually discussed in the play, MacNeice does implicitly invoke, through the character of Blind Peter, the terrors of a fascistic society. Just before Roland sets out on his journey, he visits Peter who recounts to him the last time the Dragon (in this context a symbol of fascism) was 'loose' upon the world. He explains that the reason it ventured out of his Tower was because no one had challenged it in some time. The result was that 'everything went sour' (- the government became highly coercive sentencing to death anyone who disobeyed its laws. Peter became an informer in this police state admitting: 'I grew rich sending men to their death.'(125) He goes on to explain that he even informed on his father-in-law causing his wife to take poison, leaving him with their only child. The child subsequently dies; yet not from any discernable physical defect but, as Peter explains, from a sort

of spiritual malady: 'it was more as if its soul / was set on quitting.' (125) Terribly, after seeing his daughter's slow death, Peter himself caused his own blindness. Yet this loss of sight seems to have put Peter in touch with his conscience, endowing him with greater insight into the destruction which was perpetrated while the Dragon reigned. There is perhaps an echo of *King Lear* here, where MacNeice's play and Browning's poem have their ultimate source, in which Edgar allows evil to triumph because of his blindness to the truth, only becoming aware of the true nature things when he himself loses his physical sight. As in 'Alexander Nevsky' and 'Ring in the New', MacNeice foregrounds the theme of sight here, examining different forms of blindness and ways of seeing. According to MacNeice's synopsis of the play, this passage was intended as a 'parable of fascism'<sup>xi</sup> and can therefore be seen to imply not only Peter's individual and wilful denial of his own conscience, but the collective blindness of the whole community who have allowed the evil of the Dragon to spread unchecked. MacNeice may also have been pointing to the failure of Chamberlain's government, and the western community more generally, who were prepared to sacrifice the Sudetenland in 1938 and turn a blind eye to Hitler's increasingly coercive and militant regime in pursuit of a phoney peace.

## VII

The deeper meanings and nuances of the play however can only be partially understood by analysing the play as a textual artefact and the following section will shift focus onto how the aural dimensions of the play operate in tandem with the lexical. Many passages may present as rather bare on the page, without an accordant awareness of how sound-effects, word-sounds, and accompanying music function to expand and enrich the script in performance. Indeed, music and sound effect are discernable in the written script simply as bracketed in-text directions, while the tone, accent, and cadence of voice can only be guessed at. Thus, the *reader* of the play can only ever achieve a superficial sense of how all the aural elements of the drama combine in performance. And while an awareness of the aural texture of MacNeice's radio-writing is important in analysing all of his radio-dramas, it is particularly so of *The Dark Tower*, in which MacNeice extended his artistic range in radio, pushing the pure sound elements of the drama to structure and signify as never before.

The play makes sophisticated and extensive use of a wide range of sounds, sound patterns, and musical themes, which are often as integral to the development and meaning of the play as the dialogue. The sensitively written incidental music, in particular, adds as another dimension to the play and MacNeice was shrewd in his choice of Benjamin Britten as composer. As is clear from MacNeice's synopsis of the play, the script is conceived and written so that music has an integral

part to play in the events of the narrative<sup>xii</sup>. In a letter to Britten, dated 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1945, MacNeice asks that the music effects for the play be achieved 'as economically as possible', while noting that 'the music ... is required to pull a good deal more than its weight in proportion to the time allotted to it'; MacNeice was particularly eager that the trumpet call, which Roland would eventually play at the Dark Tower, 'must be very striking and original' and Britten composed a simple but stirring challenge call which rises with a flourish to a final held note at its end. It is this sound which opens the play with the Sergeant Trumpeter demonstrating the challenge call to Roland's brother Gavin, who is next in line to face the Dragon. This musical phrase, played on the trumpet, becomes one of the central sonic motifs of the drama and can also be understood as an aural microcosm of the pattern of the overall narrative. Gavin's ensuing practice of the challenge, his repeated breaking off and resuming, musically prefigures the stop-start movement of the journey, which Roland will eventually embark on, and the rhythm and rising pitch of the trumpet call itself evoke the shape and overall momentum of the quest, conveying the heroic upward arc and the numerous beginnings and re-beginnings which are required of the hero.

As Gavin sets out on his quest, Roland quizzes him as to his final destination and, after some hesitation, Gavin tells him of his goal is to 'find the Dark Tower'. As he speaks his final words Britten's musical theme - the 'Dark Tower' - fades up disconcertingly in the background, creating a creeping sense of doom and dread. When Roland does eventually come to the Dark Tower, the same musical phrase is also used to prompt the materialisation of the tower itself in the auditory imagination of the listener. Indeed, throughout the play, various objects and landscapes are performed into being by Britten's orchestral music; the forest of temptation, the lonely desert and even Roland's splash into the water as he leaves the dreamlike ship of forgetting (itself having orchestral engines) are all actualised for the listener in music. Yet just as music can imply a sense of presence, so it can also be used to invoke an absence and not long after Gavin has left on his quest, a tolling bell 'grows up out of the distance' (121) dramatically interrupting Roland and his tutor during lessons. As MacNeice notes, the tolling bell, 'instead of being done by percussion alone, was reinforced and made ultra-suggestive by strings.' (*SPLM* 410) The effect of this arrangement is indeed striking - the barely heard strings, suggestive, perhaps, of a high pitched, distant screaming, put one's teeth on edge while the resounding boom of a gong overcuts them with a chill inexorability. This is entirely in keeping with MacNeice's early childhood response to the sounds of church bells (discussed in the first chapter here) which he found both 'melancholy' and 'sinister' because of their association with his father's church - the 'haunted annex' - which frightened him as a boy. (*SCLM* 159) While there is no account in the ensuing dialogue as to how Gavin died, the sound of the music alone, here, is perhaps more pregnant with the terror and subtle horror of his death than any verbal description could achieve. Certainly, there is a greater sense of

foreboding as to what lies in the distance as Roland sets off on his quest. This enervating bell-sound continues to toll behind as Roland's mother and the Sergeant Trumpeter lament Gavin's passing. The Sergeant notes: 'Five years it is – / or would it be more like six – since we tolled for Michael?'(121) To him the past several years can be expressed figuratively as two interchanging musical instruments: 'Bells and trumpets, trumpets and bells', the bell implying death, the trumpet new life and the challenge.

In the original broadcast, the Sergeant trumpeter was played by Harry Hutchison, a favourite of MacNeice's, who delivered his lines in a soft, rich Irish brogue. In a telling section, given the dual frequencies of MacNeice's own Anglo-Irish background, the Sergeant comments to Roland, who speaks in rather foppish upper class English voice, that he is beginning to sound like him:

SERGEANT TRUMPETER: ... D'ye know  
Ye've caught my accent during these last lessons –

ROLAND: Have I?

SERGEANT TRUMPETER: Ye have. And if ye're after catching me accent  
Maybe ye've caught a touch of me spirit.

ROLAND: (slightly forced laugh; pause)

Roland's awkward laugh and pregnant pause imply not only his sense of inadequacy when compared with the Sergeant, but also his feeling of not quite belonging within the tradition which the Sergeant represents. The idea of voice, as a window into someone's character, is important in the play and is pointed up when Roland later meets Blind Peter who tells him: 'I can tell/ By your voice alone that you're your father's son.'(124) Blind Peter, who was played by Ivor Bernard, has a very distinctive voice in the play. In a short note to Bernard before the broadcast, MacNeice writes that he should make Peter 'old, broken and embittered' while also adding that he is 'definitely of humble origin'. Picking up on this cue, Bernard speaks Peter's lines with a haggard, wan, uncouth drawl, as if defeated by life, yet with a certain pith and spit reflecting, perhaps, a resentfulness at lessons learned in the harshest manner. There is too a stark plainness to Peter's words and an abruptness of diction which underlines the horror of his harrowing tale.

On radio, of course, accent and tone of voice are especially significant as listeners inevitably make judgements about a character's personality and background based entirely on the sound of their voice. MacNeice himself was extremely sensitive to this fact and in his introduction to *Christopher Columbus* he comments that the radio actor must 'rely solely on his voice both to establish himself as a genuine character and to distinguish himself from the rest of

the cast.’(SPLM 400) To aid the actor in this task, MacNeice argues that the radio-dramatist ‘must “envisage” what kinds of voices will be heard together on the air and he must apportion the lines in such a way as to help any necessary contrast.’(SPLM 400) From a young age MacNeice was particularly alert to the contrasting accents to which he was exposed. In his autobiography he recounts the difference between the ‘rasping Northern accent’ of the ‘die-hard Puritanical’ Miss Craig, the home help, and the ‘gay warm voice’ of Annie, the Catholic cook from rural Tyrone, as well as the ‘singsong voice’ of Archie, the elderly gardener (SAF 41, 48). Outside of the home, the nearby mill-girl’s voices were ‘harsh and embittered and jeering’ and, as Longley notes, these ‘local voices of Carrickfergus pungently differed from his parents’ intonation.’ (LMAS 7) To MacNeice, voices seem to have had inspired particularly potent synaesthetic associations: a local farmer’s wife in Carrickfergus had a voice ‘harsh as sandpaper’; his father could speak certain biblical names ‘with all the ore of the East’; and Mr Powys a school teacher had a voice ‘beautiful and bronze.’(SAF 51, 74). As with non-human sounds, voices often projected or evoked something quite other, or much larger, than their original source; and, as will be shown, MacNeice’s rich, audio-imaginative response to voice is brought to bear on *The Dark Tower* in which he orchestrates a whole range of different voices and accents, not only to distinguish character, but also to evoke states of being and even to suggest a surrounding environment.

The most important voice in the entire play, that of Roland, was played by Cyril Cusack in the original broadcast, who played him both as a faunal youth and as a young man. Cusack gained a special mention from MacNeice who stated, in his published introduction to the play, that he gave a ‘sensitive rendering’ (113) of the character and Cusack does indeed effectively portray the whole range of emotions required of him. He is perhaps most moving when Roland is bidding goodbye to Sylvie before setting out on his quest. In this scene there is a strong sense, deftly conveyed in Cusack’s particular tone of voice, that he is struggling to give up what is perhaps the most compelling reason for staying: the chance to live in a pastoral idyll with his lover Sylvie. Just before Roland sets out on his quest, she urges him to ignore his ‘mad’ mother with her ‘out-of-date beliefs and mock heroics’. Instead she pleads with Roland to choose ‘a sane and gentle life’ with her ‘in a forest nook or a hill pocket’ living like those ‘who keep themselves to themselves or rather to each other ... keeping/ Their hands clean’ and ‘at one with ... each other and nature’ (126). However, Roland counters Sylvie’s seemingly reasonable vision of a shared future with the word ‘Necessity’. Remembering his Tutor’s warning that if the Dragon isn’t challenged, though ‘some of us would live longer; all of us/ Would lead a degraded life’ (120), Roland insists that, despite his doubts, he must try to imagine ‘That things can be bettered ... That there are ends/ Which, even if not reached, are worth approaching’(127). As Roland is leaving Sylvie a drum roll swells behind and reaches a



peak before suddenly stopping just after Roland says his last Goodbye. The solitary drum's accelerating, percussive rhythm and abrupt cessation, is perhaps designed to suggest the scenario of a death sentence about to be carried out and may also invoke the practice, within the military tradition, of a beating a drum before a battle commences. This musical theme is reinforced and developed in the next scene, when martial music is played as Roland leaves the Castle to set off on his quest:

ROLAND: Mother! Before I go –

MOTHER: No more words. Go!

Turn your face to the sea. Open the gates there!

The March of Departure, Sergeant.

Let my son go out – my last. And make the music gay!

(A drum roll, followed by the March at full volume, then gradually dwindles) (128)

Roland's mother, played brilliantly by Olga Lindo, speaks with a cold, distant and withered voice almost shrieking her last words, suggesting a psychologically unbalanced individual. The March, played slightly out of key and off-tempo, seems to echo her unhinged state of mind; its brash and jaunty tone, as orchestrated by Roland's mother, has a jarring, ironic effect at odds with the sombre occasion of Roland's departure. In effect, the March is Roland's mother's music, expressive of her flawed sensibility, and the playing of it can be seen to represent the imposition of her will upon Roland. This is further underlined by her refusal to allow Roland to speak his final few words; his voice is silenced in the blaring, ritualistic music played more to satisfy the mother's warped mind than to honour Roland as he sets off on his quest.

The first character Roland meets on his quest is the Soak, a leering drunk, played compellingly by Robert Farquarson. As instructed by MacNeice in a note to the actor, Farquarson plays his 'essentially sinister' character, at times, with an 'old-fashioned bravado', while also managing to convey an almost sub-human, monstrous quality in his darker lines. Farquarson speaks with a truly unusual timbre of voice (the strangest of the play), bristling with malevolence, slippery and shifty, and seemingly intoxicated, while simultaneously intoxicating. If Sylvie signified a form of romantic escape away from public reality into a private sanctum of personal relationships, the Soak, acts as a personification of solipsism; his subjective internal vision is all that exists for him resulting in an amoral selfishness – 'I exist

for myself and all the rest is projection'(130). Indeed, he is aggravated when Roland doesn't conform to his own perception of reality:

SOAK:               Barmaid  
BARMAID:         Yes, sir?  
SOAK:               Give us whatever you have and make it a triple.  
ROLAND:           Just a small one for me, please.  
SOAK:               Oh don't be so objective. One would think,  
                       looking at your long face, that there's a war on.  
ROLAND:           But –  
SOAK:               There is no war on – and you have no face.  
                       Drink up. Don't be objective. (130)

The Soak represents a form of philosophical sophistry which negates the public world and one's responsibility to it. MacNeice comments in the notes to the published text that the Soak's 'alcoholism is an effect rather than a cause'(SPLM 441), suggesting that in the absence of any purposeful or meaningful engagement with reality he has abandoned himself to the hollow inwardness of alcoholic excess; as MacNeice states in an earlier poem 'Alcohol' (1942), drink is the 'only road for the self-betrayed to follow - / the last way out that leads not out but in.'(230) This state is strikingly evoked in a wonderful exchange between the Soak and the Barmaid named Mabel, who, it must be remembered, is only a projection of the Soak's internal world:

(The Orchestra strikes up a lullaby, continued behind his speech)

SOAK:               Unity, Mabel, unity is my motto.  
                       The end of drink is a whole without any parts –  
                       a great black sponge of night that fills the world  
                       and when you squeeze it, Mabel, it drips inwards.  
                       D'you want me to squeeze it? Right. Piano there.  
                       Piano – I must sleep. Didn't you hear me?  
                       Piano, puppets. All right, Pianissimo.  
                       Nissimo ... nissimo ... issimo...

(The music ends and only his snoring is heard) (130)

The Soak's speech here is spasmodic in tempo with a rolling, undulating pitch; at times dwelling overlong, almost sleepily, on low vowel-sounds, then suddenly erupting with a plosive zest on fricative consonants. Appropriately, he seems to deeply relish the sound of his own voice, which, like the music playing behind, eventually lulls him into sleep. The lullaby, like the previous March of Departure, is disturbingly off key, suggesting perhaps the Soak's warped childishness and reminding of how he has 'never abdicated the life of the womb'(130). Overall, voice, image and music combine wonderfully in this scene as the Soak's solipsism leads him to absorb the whole world of the play into his subjective ego; the only end to his perspective, it seems, is a nihilistic detachment from the world.

Yet the Soak may also have a different function in the play beyond that of advancing the narrative or forming a component of the overall pattern of parable. Indeed, part of his monologue offers a self-referential commentary on the act of artistic representation itself. More specifically, certain sections can be read meta-textually (or perhaps 'meta-radiophonically') in that they seem to disclose some of the processes by which the radio-play itself becomes an aural reality. In a deftly self-reflexive moment in the drama, the Soak decides that he is determined to build a Tavern in the air:

SOAK:                   If you won't come to the Tavern, the Tavern must come to you.  
                              Ho there, music!  
                              (The Orchestra strikes up raggedly – continuing while he speaks)

SOAK:                   That's the idea. Music does wonders, young man.  
                              Music can build a palace, let alone a pub.  
                              Come on, you masons of the Muses, swing it.  
                              Fling me up four walls. Now, now, don't stop you tempo;  
                              easy with those hods. All right; four walls  
                              now benches – tables – No! No Doors or windows;  
                              what drunk wants daylight? But you've left out the bar.  
                              Come on – 'Cellos! Percussion! All of you! A bar!  
                              That's right. Dismiss!  
                              (The music overruns and ends) (129)

Just as the universe of a radio-play takes shape and texture in the silent, formless space of the inner ear, so the Soak, like a malevolent Prospero, constructs a tavern out of thin air compelling it to exist in the auditory imagination of Roland and the listening audience. The

lazy, swaying, cacophonous music written by Britten for this sequence succinctly evokes the drunken, nightmarish state of mind through which the Soak perceives the world. Yet for a moment, the Soak is able to turn his inner vision into the outward world of the play and infiltrate the mind of its central character. Thus, the listener is provided with a disconcerting microcosm of the radiophonic situation; the Soak becomes producer of his own radio-drama – his aural ‘farce’, his ‘puppet play’- directing the orchestra to compliment his narration of the scene as well as constructing characters to inhabit his newly minted soundscape. He even directs and controls Roland on his aurally projected stage, stating: ‘Come on, projection, drink! Dance on your strings and drink!’ (130) The Soak’s direction takes an even more sinister turn, however, for he not only invades Roland’s mind but deprives him of his voice, a catastrophic loss in radio terms in that it signifies a complete loss of presence:

SOAK:                    Watch, Mabel: my new puppet drinks again -  
                                 a pretty boy but I’ve given him no more lines.  
                                 Have I, young man? (*Pause*)  
                                 You see, he cannot speak.  
                                 All he can do henceforward is to drink –  
                                 look! A pull on the wire – the elbow lifts.  
                                 Give him the same again. (130)

The Soak eventually falls asleep and Roland, having regained his voice (both figuratively and literally), refutes the Soak’s all powerful and encompassing subjectivity as merely fabrication, finding proof of the deceit in the fact that he is able to leave even though the Soak is asleep. For Roland, however, there is one last sting in the tale. As Roland is about to leave, the Soak stirs from his slumber and mumbles that Roland is, in fact, part of his dream. The Soak’s final words make for a harrowing farewell:

SOAK:                    Yes, and the curious thing about my dreams  
                                 Is that they always have an unhappy ending  
                                 For all except the dreamer. Thus at the moment  
                                 You’d never guess, young man, what role I’ve cast you for ... (131)

The audience, like Roland, is left with a disquieting feeling that all that follows may only be a continuation of the Soak’s dream. The structures of the dramatic world have been devastatingly compromised and the Soak’s meta-theatrical persona as scriptwriter only serves

to strengthen the impression that he is more than simply a character in the drama but perhaps its creator and producer too. Thus, through the character of the Soak, MacNeice destabilizes any sense of realism in the play, challenging the audience to overcome their suspicion that the radio-dramatic production they hear is merely a shallow artifice, a self-justifying aural illusion created by a self-serving author. By using the Soak to cast doubts on the credibility of the play's reality in this way, MacNeice draws the audience closer to the uncertain, Kafkaesque world which Roland inhabits; like him they must now also attempt to decipher whether the quest he follows is real and of value or simply a warped oneiric projection of a sinister drunk. Thus, through implicitly questioning the artistic world which Roland inhabits, MacNeice, in a seeming paradox, induces an increased empathy for Roland's condition and the circumstances of the narrative.

The Soak may also serve as a more general warning about the potential danger which is latent in any act of artistic representation. For the artistic world created by the artist requires an almost tyrannical subjectivity: parts of reality are inevitably omitted, falsified, or edited out in the finished piece. The artist's prerogative to see and represent the world as he/she wishes is perilously close to the decidedly uninspired ego of the tyrant. MacNeice knew that an artist's actions – distorting perspectives, re-imagining reality, engaging in fantasy – were precisely the same activities that could potentially cause havoc in societies. In this sense the Soak can therefore be read as a reprobate creative impulse in the play, an element in MacNeice's own character which he himself was aware of and sought to hold in check. This view of the Soak perhaps demonstrates how rigorously MacNeice questioned everything, including art, and how he was sceptical of everyone, including himself.

After Roland has finally extricated himself from the Soak, we hear a Stentor's voice break in suddenly shouting 'All Aboard! All Aboard!' (131) and Roland is ushered onto a strange ship containing 'Lost souls and broken bodies' (131). As MacNeice notes: 'The Stentorian Voice butting in here changes the scene with the speed of a dream. Radio, like dreams, having no set stage, can disregard spatial conventions.' (*SPLM* 411) This exploitation of the fluidity of the medium also has the effect of leaving the reader as disorientated as Roland, who, having been profoundly rattled by the Soak's metaphysical acrobatics, is beginning to wonder whether his 'whole Quest' is simply a 'dream' (131).

While on this surreal sea-voyage Roland is seduced by the beautiful Neaera who is working together with a steward on board and whose name has a possible source in Milton's 'Lycidas': 'Were it not better done, as others use/ To sport with Amaryllis in the shade, or with the tangles of Neaera's hair'. MacNeice, perhaps, is attempting to suggest the idea of an alluring distraction invoked by the name as well as its connotations of amorousness and

licentiousness. For Neaera, as MacNeice would have been aware, was a famous hetera (or courtesan) of antiquity and he may well have been suggesting that Roland and Neaera's relationship is more than simply a romantic fling, but something much more cynical. Neaera speaks with a rich, slightly exotic, French accent, contrasting with the Soak's laggard, unnerving tones. However like the Soak's tavern, the ship on which she travels, seems hardly to be here at all for Roland. Indeed, when he gets 'on board' he mentions to the Steward that he cannot hear the engines. The Steward, who is in league with Neaera (possibly even her pimp), replies:

STEWARD: Can't you sir? I was right then.

ROLAND: Right? What do you mean?

STEWARD: I thought so the moment I saw you.

You don't, sir; of course you don't.

ROLAND: Don't what, damn you? Don't what?

STEWARD: *You* don't know where you're going, sir.

(Pause. The ships engines are heard on the orchestra; from them emerges the chatter of the lounge with the banal laughter of tombola players.)

OFFICER: Clickety-click: sixty-six...

Kelly's Eye: Number One

And we –

CROWD: (raggedly) Shake the Bag!

(The orchestral engines give place to a solo violin)

NEAERA: ... Andantino ... rallentando ... adagio –

(Her violin playing breaks off)

My God! You startled me! (133)

Neaera's apparent shock, it transpires, is merely feigned and is part of her and the steward's plan to dupe Roland and ultimately to extract money from him. The game of Tombola being played by the passengers interrupts the dialogue again in the ensuing scene and could be read as representative of the meaningless, banal pattern of life for those aboard the ship. Neaera's slow, mellifluous sounding-out of Italian musical terms marks the first stage of her seduction of Roland, speaking the words more for their sensuous aural effect than their semantic significance. Her pronounced French accent combined with the Italian musical phrases, may have invoked a sense of exoticism for the contemporary listening audience and even perhaps

prompted images of glamorous, continental destinations and holiday experiences. Indeed, onboard the ship, Roland becomes a kind of holiday-maker enjoying an 'inter-regnum' (as MacNeice said of some of his holidays) from his quest. His 'idle days at sea' seem curiously out of time under the sway of Neaera's voice and the alluring music of her violin. In one particularly poetic passage Roland loses himself in figurative evocations of the aesthetic beauty of the ocean – both he and Neaera exchange descriptions, with each new formulation signifying a new day: 'The sea today is adagios and doves...'; 'The sea today is broken bottles...'; 'The sea today is drunken marble...'; 'The sea today is silver stallions...'etc. (134) The use of anaphora in this scene as well as the swift accumulation of contrasting images wonderfully invoke the wavy dazzle of the rocking sea-surface, while the sibilance, continuing from line to line, suggests the aural fizz of waves collapsing in sea-spray. Yet there is also a feeling of representation without purpose in all this description, as if Roland, spurred on by Neaera, has given himself over to a kind of Keatsian negative capability, a purely sensuous enjoyment of beauty which frees him from the complexities of self-consciousness and the subtle demands of external reality.

Roland remains in this self-indulgent state for several days and the developing 'false idyll' between Neaera and him comes to an end only when Roland spots Sylvie on the shore. When the ship comes into port, he dramatically decides to jump from the ship and swim to her. Unlike Neaera, Sylvie represents a much more tangible and long-lasting future for Roland, offering him 'happiness' and love. He is eventually swayed by Sylvie's arguments for reconciliation, and proposes marriage only to reject her at the altar and continue on his journey. This next phase of Roland's quest brings him to a haunted forest in which chilling hallucinations – a Raven, played by Dylan Thomas, and a Parrot – cast doubt on his ability to complete the quest telling him he is doomed and to save his skin before it is too late. The forest itself is aurally announced by a searing 'Long bird screech' accompanied by Britten's frenetic Forest music and this scene is one of the most memorable and jarring of the entire play. In the first section of the scene the two birds can be heard spying Roland entering the forest and mocking his 'pale' pallor. The varied pitch of the two birds – the parrot with a high, slightly electronically altered voice and the Raven with low, booming tones – accentuates the strangely mechanical rhythm of their alternating lines, as if some terrifying mechanised force is encroaching upon Roland. These avian voices are made ever more startling by the long, grating bird screeches which are played on a recorded disc throughout the scene. When the birds finally address Roland directly there is a subtle shift in momentum; both birds adopt a sing-song voice (as if chanting a deranged nursery rhyme) and speak in an accelerating rhythmic gallop:

PARROT: Still on the road? Still on the Quest?  
 RAVEN: None achieve it but the best.  
 PARROT/ RAVEN (Together): You're not the sort. You're not the sort  
 PARROT: Why not stop, my dear young man?  
 RAVEN: Let heroes die as heroes can. (141)

This sniping continues until a final cacophonous orchestral crescendo ends the passage and Britten's Forest theme gives way to the more frugal, astringent Desert theme which acts as an eerie contrast to the riotous blare of the previous scene. Britten perfectly translates into music the 'flat ... colourless ... silent' desert environment through which Roland now travels and out of this barren soundscape, a 'Clock voice' begins to make an monotonous ticking sound. MacNeice uses this rhythm to generate a nightmarish, poetic description of deathly timelessness which seems to pervade the desert:

CLOCK VOICE: Sand and grit, bones and waste:  
 A million hours - all the same,  
 A million minutes – each an hour  
 And nothing stops for nothing starts  
 .....  
 The desert is the only clock –  
 Tick Tock, Tick Tock. (142)

More than anything, it is the rhythm which conveys meaning here, underlining Roland's feeling that the desert is something horrifyingly 'familiar'; for what is more utterly recognizable than the unchanging, automatic cadence of a clock sound. Gradually, the voices of the Soak, Neaera, and Sylvie, all of whom have distracted Roland on his quest, repeat phrases which become subsumed into the 'Tick Tock' rhythm. Finally all the voices eventually synchronise, forcibly expressing all the inner selves and doubts driving Roland backwards. However, just as Roland reaches his lowest ebb, he gains a reprieve. His mother having changed her mind about the quest calls him back - her voice emerging spectrally out of the ether - and the blood suddenly drains from the ring which she had given Roland as a reminder of his duty. Yet, as Roland discards the ring it strikes off something hard with an 'orchestral clink', the 'first/ Sound' Roland has heard in the desert (144). To Roland's surprise, the ring has ricocheted off a carved stone, which he initially thinks is 'milestone', but



which is in fact a memorial which he reads: 'To Those Who Did Not Go Back - / Whose Bones being Nowhere, their signature is for All Men - / Who went to their Death of their own Free Will/ Bequeathing Free Will to Others.'(144) Roland, however, is uninspired and unmoved by this, and can only bewail the subjugation of his will by his mother and others:

ROLAND:                                    ... Own free will!  
  As if I Roland had ever ... Tutors, trumpeters, women,  
  old soaks and crooked stewards, everyone I have met  
  has played his music on me. Own free will!  
  Three words not one of which I understand! (145)

Significantly, Roland describes himself as a sounding-board or musical instrument, merely projecting or amplifying other people's music, rather than discovering his own. This has indeed been the case in literal as well as figurative terms in the play; for when Roland has come under the influence of other characters, such as the Soak, his mother, or Neaera, he has been largely silenced in the face of their opinions and perspectives and literally muted by the accordant music which they prompt and direct. Indeed, since Roland has begun his journey he has never played his own music, which is, of course, the ultimate goal of the quest in the first place. Yet just as he is on the verge of giving up, he hears a child's voice pleading from the future:

CHILD'S VOICE:                            You will never find us if you go forward -  
  for you will be dead before we are born.  
  You will never find us if you go back -  
  for you will have killed us in the womb. (145)

Faced with the starkest of choices Roland attempts to leave the decision up to chance by stripping the leaves of a cactus - one leaf for forward, the other for backward. The 'oracle of the cactus' eventually sends him back, but Roland's humanity and his individuality, finally come to the fore and he decides that he must go on: "Back!" says the cactus but *I'm ... going forward!* / Mother don't pull on that string; you must die alone.' (146)

For Roland, this is *the* pivotal moment of his quest, when he finally becomes an agent of his own destiny, rather than a pawn or puppet of someone or something else. The significance of this is underlined when, for the first time in the entire play, the audience hears what might be termed Roland's own music - the pulsing melody of his beating heart. And this use of

music as a metaphor to express individual freedom may have its roots in the final section of MacNeice's earlier poem *Autumn Journal* in which the speaker prays for: 'a possible land/ Not of sleep-walkers, not of angry puppets', but 'where both heart and brain can understand/ the movement of our fellows' and no-one is 'debarred his natural music' (256): the following scene reveals Roland's tentative steps to reaching such understanding, and such music.

(He pauses; the orchestra creeps in with a heartbeat rhythm, held behind)

ROLAND:                                 Silent? ...Then what's this?  
   Something new! A *sound!* But a sound of what?  
   Don't say that it's my heart! Why, Roland your poor fool,  
   who would think you had one? You must be afraid;  
   it is fear reveals the heart.

(Heartbeat louder) (146)

This brilliantly and seamlessly leads into the next section of the play where Roland at last comes to the Dark Tower. It is this scene, MacNeice states, which is 'nearest' to Browning's poem, as it is here where he follows the narrative of the final stanzas of the poem most closely. And while the play's ending represents the most explicit connection between *The Dark Tower* and 'Childe Roland' there is perhaps another, more subtle link, between the two works which relates to how Roland's inner consciousness and emotional condition is conveyed. Browning relies for the most part on landscape and image to express the hero's internal state of mind (as opposed to having Roland subjectively relate his thoughts directly to the reader). The strange, desolate terrain through which Roland travels seems highly charged with undeniable significance, yet a significance which is more felt than understood (at least initially). Objects are described in terms of emotions aroused in the beholder rather than in terms of physical characteristics; the river is 'spiteful'(xx), the willows a 'suicidal throng'(xx), the horse 'wicked'(xiv). The series of images, or objective correlative, in the poem are connected by a meaning which would best be understood as emotional, rather than as explicitly allegorical or didactic. As in a dream, images seem to cluster and repeat, curiously emerging out of, while also expressing, certain emotional states. This process, used by Browning to evoke certain moods and emotions through underlying patterns of images, is extended, in *The Dark Tower*, into the aural sphere through the use of patterns of word sounds, sound effect and music. And nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than when Roland finally arrives at the Dark Tower:

(Heartbeat louder)

ROLAND: Aha, you piece of clockwork –  
trying to have your little say while you can!  
Before your wheels run down here in the empty desert.

(Sudden chord; heartbeat continues behind)

Empty? ... Where have those mountains come from?  
Closing round in a ring. Hump-backed horrors  
that want to be in at the death. And where's the horizon?  
A moment ago this was level. What's the game?  
A confidence trick? A trap! I am cooped in.  
A circle of ugly cliffs – a lobster-pot of rock! (146)

If analysed on the bare page, the most striking aspect of this scene, one might say, are its vivid, poetic images: the 'clockwork' heart or the mountainous 'Hump-backed horrors', for example. Yet when *heard* as broadcast, Roland's frantic monologue, interwoven with the quickening bio-rhythm of his pulse and the intermittent, shrill chords from the orchestra, becomes a much more visceral and immediate expression of his reaction to the unsettling transformations unfolding before him. The audience's aural sense is stretched to the limit in this dynamically coherent and mesmeric passage as the intimate beat of Roland's heart varies in pitch behind the paratactic verse description of the dreadful rocky landscape, which seems to be ensnaring him. The contours of this landscape are as much aurally as visually created, having been conjured into the listener's auditory imagination through the startling jolt of a sudden, dissonant chord and the evocative word-sounds, contained within Roland's poetic description of it; particularly suggestive of the terrifying, encircling panorama are the assonant, kinaesthetically enclosing 'o' sounds and the jarring, alliterative 'c' sounds contained in the lines: 'A confidence trick? A trap! I am cooped in./ A circle of ugly cliffs – a lobster-pot of rock!' (146). This chilling soundscape is simultaneously compelling and claustrophobic, amplifying Roland's disturbing realisation that he is trapped (entombed even) in a strange and deathly amphitheatre, while also luring the audience further into the strange and fantastical world of the play.

As the Tower rears up in front of him, he hears the voices of his father and mother, his tutor, the Sergeant Trumpeter and Gavin. It is then that he makes his final declaration:

ROLAND: I Roland, the black sheep, the unbeliever -  
who never did anything of his own free will -

will do this now to bequeath free will to others.  
Ahoy there, tower, Dark Tower, you're getting big,  
Your shadow is cold upon me. What of that?  
And you, you Dragon or whatever you are  
who make men beasts, come out – here is a man;  
come out and do your worst.

(Orchestra ends)

ROLAND:

Wrist be steady

As I raise the trumpet so – now fill my lungs –

(Challenge Call rings out – with Orchestra: Sergeant  
Trumpeter speaks as the last long note is reached)

SERGEANT TRUMPETER: Good lad, Roland. Hold that note at the end.

(The trumpet hold it to close) (148)

Backed by Britten's music this makes for a rousing climax with Roland's voice becoming steadily louder and more forceful up until his final lines, which are spoken in more restrained and calm tones. As Roland takes up his trumpet the orchestral heartbeat, which has been building steadily, abruptly ceases seeming to isolate Roland in a devastating, deathly silence. This split-second stillness literally clears the air for Roland's challenge call to ring out the play, the call being 'enriched and endorsed by the orchestra'. (qtd. in Coulton 82) Britten's spare and dignified musical phrase for the trumpet rises deftly to the final, held note and there is perhaps an illusion to or echo of the famous bugle call 'The Last Post' here. Britten's phrase, though not identical, and considerably shorter, than the famous bugle call bears a similar musical shape and tone of austerity. Indeed, this aural invocation seems appropriate to the overall strain of elegy and remembrance which runs through the play. For *The Dark Tower* not only obliquely elegizes people dear to MacNeice (his father, Graham Shepard) and his past lives (his intoxicating first love, the broken idyll of his childhood) but also stands as an elegy to all those who sacrificed themselves to the cause of humanity during the most bloody and destructive war in human history. It is this greater resonance, stirringly invoked by Roland's trumpet call (with its echoes of 'The Last Post'), which, perhaps, partly explains why so many listeners found the play such a deeply moving experience. Indeed, MacNeice's decision to close the play with the solitary note of the trumpet underlines his alertness to the poignancy and emotive significance of that particular sound within the aural culture of his listening audience

This ending also creates a symmetrical shape in the aural patterning of the drama, as Roland's final challenge call parallels the Challenge Call played by the Sergeant Trumpeter which had opened the play. However, by the play's end, we have an utterly transformed understanding of its symbolic importance; for so many of the play's themes – sacrifice, endurance, loss, courage and remembrance – seem now to gain expression in Britten's spare and dignified musical phrase, which rises deftly to the, long, held note played by Roland with his dying breath. In the play's deployment of cadence, rhythmic intensity, sound patterns and repetitions there is discernable an overall musical (or musico-poetic) design to the drama, which builds with a centripetal momentum as Roland is forced, in an ever-shrinking spiral, to the final point of his quest. This solitary note is the final strand of this preconceived whole creating a symmetrical shape in the aural patterning of the drama, as Roland's final challenge call parallels the Challenge Call played by the Sergeant Trumpeter which had opened the play. However, by the play's end, we have an utterly transformed understanding of its symbolic importance; for so many of the play's themes – sacrifice, endurance, loss, courage, and remembrance – seem now to gain expression in the reverberant trumpet note played by Roland with his dying breath. Yet despite this death, the play contains a positive mode, or mode of praxis for individuals in society. In the face of an unknown and seemingly indestructible force, MacNeice posits a form of existential humanism. For Roland exerts the profound value of making choices for the greater good of society, without hope of survival or sanction from a greater power, and without even the certainty that what you choose or do will make any significant difference.

## VII

*The Dark Tower* has proved MacNeice's most critically acclaimed and remembered radio-work and Donald McWhinnie, who was better qualified than most to assess such matters, described it as a 'textbook' of radio-drama technique (68). At the time of its first broadcast it was recognised as a great play by many of MacNeice's colleagues and contemporaries. W. R. Rodgers thought it the 'most memorable broadcast I have yet heard.' (qtd. in Coulton 83). Henry Reed, in a letter to MacNeice after a repeat broadcast in November 1946, was full of praise:

I found I was listening with an intentness I had never before been forced to give anything except music on the wireless ... I have never known anything come over the air with such a visual quality as the forest and desert scenes; and I have heard nothing at all as moving as the second of these. I think this compulsion to imagine is very rare on the wireless. I have

certainly never felt it before; It was a new experience ... I am sure yours is the way radio must go if it is to be worth listening to; I have always thought your claims for its potentialities to be excessive; I now begin, reluctantly, to think you may be right, and am very glad.

Henry Reed himself went on to work in radio and to become an acclaimed radio dramatist in his own right and, judging by this letter, it would seem that *The Dark Tower* was instrumental in this choice. What is interesting about Reed's commentary on the play is that he stresses the quality of the forest and desert scenes; both have relatively sparse verbal descriptions of landscape, yet the combination of music, sound effect and verse rhythms seem to have compelled a powerful imaginative visualisation of Roland's environment on Reed's part while also exerting a profound emotional reaction.

The public response to the play, according to the Listener Report, was sharply divided. While some listeners echoed Reed's comments, finding themselves deeply moved 'both by the language and significance of thought', others failed to grasp the play's deeper significances – the 'abstruseness of the symbolism' being the major 'obstacle' for enjoyment of the drama. The many listeners who did admire the play thought it had given 'much food for reflection' and though that the verse 'in its pliability, always matched the moment.' The acting was roundly praised with listeners 'delighted' by Cyril Cusack's performance, while Robert Farquharson, as the soak, and Olga Lindo, as the mother, were both considered 'outstanding'. The production and music were given unusually high praise with the vast majority of listeners believing the music was 'perfectly suited' to the play. Britten's score was deemed to have unusual 'power and allusiveness' for a radio drama and, equally unusually, to have 'heightened the interest and intensified the emotional stress' of the play. The all important trumpet call was described simply as 'magnificent'. Given the strong demand for a repeat performance in the report, it is unsurprising that the play was eventually produced by MacNeice again in 1949, and then again in 1956 and 1959. As Heuser notes, every production was followed by 'rebroadcasts; congratulatory letters; translations; posthumous productions.' (140)

*The Dark Tower* was in many ways a watershed for MacNeice as it was to be one of his last radio dramas to be aired on the Home Service (subsequent dramas were aired mostly on the Third Programme which was created shortly after the war). Yet it represents an extremely important strand in his artistic development as a whole. Particularly important was his experiment with the form of parable which he adapted for a contemporary audience. Traditional parable writing, such as *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Everyman*, crucially depended upon a shared 'base of cultural authority' for its effect, meaning that it naturally had a greater coherence and resonance in the hermetically sealed, almost exclusively Christian dominated world(-view) in which it was written. The gradual

erosion of this shared base was intensified in the modern period, forcing allegorical writing into more elusive and radical formulations as it attempted to come to terms with an increased scepticism towards religious, historical or scientific narratives as expressions of a convincing truth about the world we inhabit. One of the major difficulties for MacNeice, in choosing to write radio-parable, lay in how to effectively engage with the growing relativism and cultural plurality which the modern age instigated while, at the same time, ensuring that his writing did not dissolve into a un-synthesised multiplicity of perspectives. His challenge was to create an artistic world, which was sufficiently cohesive and self-consistent to support a compelling narrative and generate a comprehensible meaning within its own terms, while simultaneously creating patterns and symbols of relevance to contemporary society and culture. *The Dark Tower*, perhaps more than any other of MacNeice's radio-parables, is most successful in negotiating these problems. For on one level the play implies that the contemporary individual must exist in an increasingly absurd and alienating reality in which any action seems tragically inconsequential in the face of the overwhelming force and chaotic whirl of history. Yet set against this awareness, is the coherent structure of the artistic form itself; through his deft use of music, sound-effect, vocal tones and accents, dream logic, linking dialogue and image MacNeice manages to sustain a structural unity to the drama despite its rapid, sometimes fantastical, transformations between and through the outer and inner landscapes which make up Roland's quest. And at deeper level, the play invokes a meaningful pattern of action in the sense that Roland's quest to the Dragon is completed and his internal doubts and frustrations overcome. *The Dark Tower* (and also, to a lesser degree, *He Had a Date*) experimented to a larger extent than earlier MacNeicean radio-dramas with the meanings that certain combinations of sound, sound-effects, dialogue and music, could generate. As will be shown in the final chapter, the sense in which this is important to MacNeice's later poetry lies in how it encouraged an expanded awareness as to the range, the varied signifying potential, of the aural dimension of the poem. The particular strain of parable achieved by MacNeice in *The Dark Tower* was also to prove useful to him. Not only did it represent a successful experiment in extended use of dream logic, which was to become a standard idiom of MacNeice's later work, it also helped to develop an artistic model through which his 'private obsessions could develop into artistic form without becoming autobiographical intrusions or indulgences.'(McDonald, *LMPC* 168)

Despite the artistic success of *The Dark Tower*, the transition from war to peace at the BBC was to prove a difficult process for MacNeice. The war had demanded much of MacNeice, and the quiet heroism he had displayed while working and living in London during the Blitz, should not be underestimated. He had shown considerable creative stamina in the many features and plays written and produced during war conditions, and despite the many sacrifices MacNeice and others

made during the war, it was also a unifying force lending purpose to the poet's actions and a depth of field to his writing. The post-war world was to prove a rather disconcerting and disillusioning place for MacNeice. Yet he decided, somewhat ambivalently, to remain a radio-man:

'If you so desire,'

My employers said, 'this office will now return  
To a peacetime footing where we might require

Your further service.' I could not discern  
Much choice; it might in fact be better to give  
Such service, better to bury than to burn.

I stayed. On my peacetime feet. There was little alternative. (392)



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<sup>i</sup> As already stated, all quotations from unpublished scripts have been referred to by the original page number on the script. All unpublished scripts referred to in the study are held in the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading, United Kingdom.

<sup>ii</sup> The abbreviation 'f/u' is an abbreviation for 'fade up', indicating to the producer to gradually bring in a voice, sound effect, or recording using the central control panel.

<sup>iii</sup> During 1943 Allied offensives were winning victories launched from Sicily against the Fascists. It is from Sicily that De Bosis makes his last flight to Rome.

<sup>iv</sup> As John Stallworthy astutely observes: '*Adonais* ends with a prophetic foreshadowing of its speaker's death at sea:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
The massy earth and sphere skies are riven!  
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;  
Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

Keats's star 'beacons' and Shelley's death at sea is remembered in the opening movement of MacNeice's elegy, "The Casualty" (321)

<sup>v</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all memos, letters, Listener Research Reports and notes quoted in relation to *He Had a Date*, can be located in BBC Written Archives File: 'R 19/491: "He Had a Date", 1944-1949', held in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>vi</sup> Louis MacNeice, BBC memo to Francis Dillon, 6th May, 1944.

<sup>vii</sup> Louis MacNeice, BBC memo, 25<sup>th</sup> May, 1944.

<sup>viii</sup> Listener Research Report, 'He Had a Date: LR 4562', 28th June, 1944.

<sup>ix</sup> For an in depth discussion of the artistic genesis of Thomas's radio-masterpiece, see Peter Lewis (73-110)

<sup>x</sup> See, Helen Goethals (373)

<sup>xi</sup> The synopsis was written in June 1945. Unless otherwise stated, all memos, letters, Listener Research Reports and notes quoted in relation to *The Dark Tower*, can be located in BBC Written Archives File: R 19/249, held in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>xii</sup> In the synopsis, MacNeice displays a definite sense of the length, tone and function of the music in the play.

CHAPTER 4: 'TO A PEACETIME FOOTING': POST WAR DEVELOPMENTS AND  
BROADENING PERSPECTIVES

I

*The Dark Tower* undoubtedly marked one of the high points in MacNeice's career as a radio artist and as a writer more generally, yet the period directly after the war was indeed to prove a disillusioning period for the poet. His poetry of the immediate post-war years often registers his disappointment at a perceived disintegration of the more socially coherent community which had emerged in Britain during the war years, particularly in London and at the BBC. In the poem 'Aftermath' (February, 1946) MacNeice can only foresee a return to the inequalities of pre-war society without the paradoxically curative effects of wartime conditions:

the bandaging dark which bound  
This town together is loosed and in the array  
Of bourgeois lights man's love can save its breath:  
Their ransomed future severs once more the child  
Of luck from the child of lack ... (255)

The poem 'Hiatus' (July 1945) invokes a similar state of disillusionment, and loss of innocence, not simply for the poet but also for his own generation; yet it implies a certain broadening and deepening of perspectives, suggesting knowledge and maturity gained through trial and bitter experience.

Yes, we wake stiff and older; especially when  
The schoolboys of the Thirties reappear,  
Fledged in the void, indubitably men,  
Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount,  
And having found some dark and tentative things made clear,  
Some clear made dark ... (254)

There is a sense in many of MacNeice's poems of this period of a world disconcertingly changed, of 'all green Nature out of gear', and of the difficult transition now being made to peace. At a time when Britain was renegotiating its position as a global power and gradually acknowledging the tenuous, fragile and inherently contradictory nature of its Empire, (as well as beginning profound

socio-economic transformations at home), MacNeice was beginning to recalibrate his poetic approach in line with what seemed to him an increasingly complex and alienating reality; Rupert Croft-Cooke, who worked at the BBC during this period, felt that between the years 1946 to 1950 there 'was a faster and faster and more futile rate of change than ever before.' (Cooke 25)

Critics<sup>1</sup> have tended to see this phase, from his early post-war poetry to his later long poem *Autumn Sequel* (1954), as a time of artistic stagnation for MacNeice, in which the 'thirties verbal mill goes on loosely grinding without its grist' while the poet 'flounders between travelogue and metaphysics and efforts to unite the two.' (Longley, *LMAS* 114). Yet this view perhaps fails to acknowledge the value of this period to the overall evolution of his poetic; as McDonald states: 'To claim that the poetry of these years is consistently at the level of his best would be perverse, but although some poems may be, as W. H. Auden suggested, 'a bit dull', much of what MacNeice achieved in this period was to prove of great importance to the lyric poetry of his last three volumes.' (130) Crucial to this development were the two books, *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952) and, to a lesser extent, *Autumn Sequel* (1954). Both books were written, at least in part, with radio in mind and this fact has generally been overlooked by critics. This chapter intends to bring a keener awareness of how the poetry of this period is constructed as much for ear and voice, as for the silent reader and the printed page. Thus, it will be necessary to use the context and demands of a listening radio audience as a more central means for analysis of the writing. What will also become apparent in this period is the greater thematic and structural overlap between MacNeice's radio writing and his poetry, with his BBC work in India and Greece having a marked influence on many poems.

## II

The end of the war saw a major restructuring of the BBC, which now began to respond to the very different challenges and conditions of peace. The most significant changes, from MacNeice's point of view, were the establishment of the new 'Third' Programme and the separation of Features and Drama into separate departments. Until the end of the war Drama and Features had been produced in the same department under the ultimate control of Val Gielgud with Features under the Assistant Head, Laurence Gilliam. Gilliam now became head of the newly independent Features with Gielgud as Head of Drama. Unlike the Drama department, Features had become associated with innovation and experiment attracting the most talented writers and producers, including: E.A. Harding, Francis Dillon, Stephen Potter, D.G. Bridson, and, in 1946, MacNeice's friend, the Ulster poet Bertie Rodgers, with whom he was to share an office for a time. Buoyed by the wartime achievements of Features, Gilliam's intent was to continue to foster writing which blurred the

distinction between the 'literary' and the 'documentary'; his ultimate goal was to further develop a hybrid art-form specific to radio, which his department had pioneered. It was this form, developed so successfully by writers such as MacNeice during the war, which Gilliam believed most successfully capitalized on radio's innate properties and unique qualities. Indeed, in a collection of the greatest features, published in 1951, Gilliam comments on the centrality of the work of feature's writers in the history of the medium:

Once broadcasting had got over its initial intoxication with its own existence, it started to wonder what it was for. It spent its first ten years happily cutting and adapting works created for other forms of art, entertainment or instruction. But slowly, obstinately, and with growing success, a group of writers and producers insisted on exploring the possibilities of the radio medium itself ... they were grouped under the generic title of 'features programmes'... it is the form of statement that broadcasting has evolved for itself .... It is pure radio, a new instrument for the creative writer and producer. (Gilliam, *BBC Features* 9-10)

While Gilliam perhaps underestimates the work of certain early pioneers of radio such as Hughes and Sieveking, the creativity displayed and the possibilities explored in many wartime features<sup>ii</sup> opened up the medium for a later generation of writers, such as Harold Pinter, Samuel Becket and Giles Cooper, while also paving the way for the new Third Programme. Clas Zilliacus in his book *Beckett and Broadcasting* suggests that the Features Unit was *the* major impetus to and foundation for the creation of the Third Programme: 'to a considerable extent, the founding of the Third Programme can be attributed to deeds done by features people in the heroic age' (Zilliacus 13) And Gielgud, who, it must be remembered, was head of a rival department, also emphasizes the importance of Features to the growth of the Third Programme:

It can reasonably be claimed that without the prestige achieved by certain Feature Programmes, their producers, and their authors, it is most unlikely that the Third Programme, the most unique and perhaps the most important of the British contributions to Broadcasting in general, would ever have been thought of.' (Gielgud, qtd. in *British Radio Drama* 115)

Much of MacNeice's subsequent output would air on the Third but its creation was a double-edged sword for the poet; for while he would gain greater artistic freedom compared to his wartime work for the Home Service, his writing would be heard by a vastly reduced and more elitist group of listeners. Yet he could perhaps take comfort in the idea of his work having a more oblique

dissemination and cultural influence as the Third was conceived as an outlet for avant-garde radio, which could inspire other radio-artists and thereby feed into more mainstream broadcasting.

The greater scope offered by the Third was immediately embraced by MacNeice and at the first Features Department meeting to discuss specifically Third Programme writing MacNeice suggestions for forthcoming programming included 'satirical fantasy' and 'psycho-morality', two forms which he would employ with varied success in the coming decades (qtd. in Coulton 91). The greater possibilities of the new service also led him to suggest, in December 1946, the dramatization of two Icelandic Sagas and in 1947 he wrote and produced two programmes based on the Njal saga: *The Death of Gunnar* (11<sup>th</sup> March 1947) and *The Burning of Njal* (12<sup>th</sup> March 1947) A further programme in the Icelandic series, *Grettir the Strong* (27<sup>th</sup> July 1947), was also broadcast. Programmes such as these, with running-times of up to seventy-five minutes, and based on subjects which are more minority-orientated or special-interest than mass-appeal and populist, underline the greater freedoms which the Third was opening up. Indeed MacNeice felt enthused enough by the prospects offered by the Third to contribute an essay to the *BBC Year Book* for 1947 asking for contributors. In it he displays his support not only for the Third but his continuing belief in the potential for broadcasting more generally

Unless it can get scripts from outside its own staff, its [the BBC's] Third Programme will run dry in features and probably drama. This will be a great pity. Yet even now, with the Third Programme wide open to them, writers are reluctant to tackle 'radio', i.e. that direct dramatic writing for the medium, which I am now going to discuss. This reluctance or prejudice – apart from the fact that the literary world is conservative and cautious, not to say timid – is due to two things: ignorance and snobbery. (25)

MacNeice was fast becoming one of the more senior members of the Features department and his growing status was reflected by the fact that, in 1947, he was assigned to a BBC Features team who were entrusted with the difficult job of reporting on the British transfer of power to the peoples of India and Pakistan. This journey to India was undoubtedly the dominating event of the late forties for MacNeice. While MacNeice's poems of the mid forties bear the strong imprint of war, India forced the poet to engage with an entirely different crisis, challenging his beliefs and assumption at a different level. MacNeice eventually wrote three features based on his experience in India. The first feature, 'India at First Sight' was broadcast on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1948, and, as Stallworthy notes, there is surely an associative link with 'love at first sight' in the title (367). This link is underscored towards the end of the programme when Edward, the central character, feels that his experience of India has been 'like love at first sight. For just as the love may go on but the sight must change, so

India ...' (43) The title, therefore, is designed to foreground the themes of spontaneous connection and evolving perspective which are central to the programme. It is undoubtedly his most successful feature on the country and was to provide images and descriptions which MacNeice would recycle in later poems. The programme opens by waiving all claim to objectivity - making it clear that the script is based on the 'author's own impressions' - and asserting the limitation of foreign perspectives which can only 'gropingly' comprehend 'India at First Sight.' Edward, the audience's touchstone, through whom India is experienced, is clear about his prejudice and ignorance from the beginning and can be said to represent, broadly speaking, a middle-class English perspective (and probably much of MacNeice's own outlook). He tells of how he 'didn't much like the Indians I met - or the photos of Indian temples - or all this yogi-cum-swami stuff ... I was allergic to India' (3). Yet when asked to travel to India, Edward hears a contrary voice

EDWARD:

So when last year I'm suddenly asked to go  
there - well, my first reaction was No! But  
Somehow, inside me, there was a sort of little  
Voice -

STILL VOICE:

You don't want to go - and that is why you must go.  
You think your world is already too big and complex.  
It is - but you must complicate it further.

.....

The earth is not the moon, one can cross to the dark side,  
can see how the other half lives. And even a  
glimpse of their lives may throw some light on your  
own half. Look East, Eddie -

'Look East where whole new thousands are!

In Vishnu-land what Avatar?'

Come on, come on, start packing. Inklings and guesses at the  
bottom - and squeeze in an open mind. (3)

Edward is accompanied on his trip by the voices of his Nanny, a Missionary, his (very pukka) Uncle Howard and a more intuitive, progressive and expansive Still Voice, quoted above. Each voice projects a different kind of perspective or prejudice which is reinforced in performance by the tonal and accentual variation of the speakers. Edward talks with a slightly jaded middle-class

English formality, while the internal still Voice, played by Cyril Cusack, is slightly softer, and imbued with greater energy and lyricism. Uncle Howard, who is intended to convey the myopic arrogance of the colonizing Establishment, speaks with a conceited and jovial, upper-class accent while the cosseted and insular Nanny adopts a rather righteous, pedagogical tone. Despite Edward's desire to 'start from scratch' and to 'forget all my own preconceptions – everything I've learned and read' his inner voice reminds him that he is 'enmeshed' in his 'own background' and his reactions to India will be 'not so different from those of your Nanny or your Uncle' (6). Throughout the programme, the voices of his Nanny and Uncle Edward often cut in abruptly, irritating Edward with condescending or ignorant attitudes, perhaps particularly riling because they represent a part of him he would rather suppress or forget.

One of the central aims of the programme is to destabilize western ideas and ideals about India, to show how Edward's particular experience of the country cuts through the tangled web of his previous assumptions. India, MacNeice stated later, 'is not only a land of paradoxes but the cause of paradoxical behaviour in her visitors; "it does something to you, you know."' (SLCM 201). There is an attempt to dig below the surface and also, as the *Radio Times* billing for the programme suggests, to give a sense of the 'physical impact and of the manifold culture of the sub-continent'<sup>iii</sup>. In order to convey the initial, alienating reality of India which the foreigner experiences, MacNeice figures Edward's first contact with the country in terms of a plane crash.

MECHANIC:	Contact
EDWARD:	Contact? ... With India? ... Impossible.
GRAMS:	<u>(f/u steady plane and hold behind)</u>
EDWARD:	Grit! Sheer grit. Sheer sand. Tunisia, Egypt, The Holy Land –nothing but desert. Funny how one has to see things for oneself. One may know statistics by heart but
–	
STILL VOICE:	Statistics? Heart? ... Heart?
EDWARD:	Sand. Rocks. Place of skull. No people. And now at last – now after hours and hours flying over This desert and that desert ... It'll be like a crash landing
GRAMS:	<u>(effect of plane crash - mixing with Indian instrument) (3)</u>

The sound of the plane crash powerfully and concisely evokes the violent change of perspective and the drastically different terrain Edward is now confronted with. It is as if the audience had

nose-dived along with Edward from a detached and (within its own terms) comprehensive western viewpoint into the vast complexity and particularity of the subject sought to be defined. The familiar drone of the aeroplane dramatically blends into the lively and evocative music of a sitar, which provides an immediate sense of the daunting strangeness and vivifying rapidity of Indian life. In the scene which follows, where ‘everything’ is felt ‘at ground level or over your head’ (4), an unidentified Indian urban landscape is seen through Edward’s gaze as a collage of confusing sense impressions and startling images; unsurprisingly, the aural dimensions of the cityscape are emphasized as Edward becomes overwhelmed by ‘All this life on the streets –cooking and stitching and hammering and tinkling and touting ...’(4). Looking down at one point Edward notices ‘sprouting from under my feet the naked stump of an arm and twining itself up my leg the whine of a one track voice ...’(5) The onomatopoeic diphthongs repeated in the words ‘twining’ ‘whine’ viscerally suggests the creeping, nightmarish physicality of the insistent voice beneath. While the symbol of the bodiless stump, here, evokes the idea of a fragmented or blunted perception and suggests how the quotidian environment of one society can often assume a surreal or unnerving aspect when seen through foreign eyes.

From the cityscape which seems ‘so dirty, so rich, so manifold, so engrained’ (4) Edward’s gaze drifts to the vastness of the Indian plain, as described by the voice of ‘India’, beyond which is ‘only beyond’(7):

INDIA:

Here in the middle of my great plain, my  
aggressively featureless plain, my immutable  
imponderable interminable plain – where there’s  
no rise in the ground to be seen – no shadows  
even for the sun is straight above you – here  
in this desert that blazes with people, here where  
the eye has nowhere to rest and the restless hawk  
circles forever. (6)

The miasmal, barren topography of the plain bears a strong resemblance to the desert through which Roland travels in the *The Dark Tower* and also, as McDonald notes, the desert landscapes of MacNeice’s poetry from early in the war which were ‘settings for decisive trials of strength between self and other, the individual and time.’(LMPC 138) Usually, as in the *The Dark Tower*, the appearance of such terrain in MacNeice’s work also acts as a prelude to a moment of greater self-awareness and this is true of ‘India at First Sight’ which charts the challenge which India presents to Edward’s sense of self. However, rather than valorising and stabilising identities, India



blurs and distorts; as the voice of 'India' tells Edward: 'You have brought your voices with you; visitors always do. But if they stay long, sometimes those voices change – acquire a new accent or break.' (10) As the narrative progresses, Nanny starts telling Edward Indian fables as if she were and Indian Ayah, the Christian Missionary adopts a Buddhist philosophy, and the racist Uncle Howard admits that western powers are in no position to judge Indians for the atrocities which occurred after independence; violence he argues, is as much part of European life as it is Asian. While Edward realises that it is unlikely that any of these figures would actually consciously say such things, his inner voice reminds him of the latent possibility of connecting with the surrounding environment and reconciling the various oppositional sides of oneself:

STILL VOICE:

Voices, you were told, changed. Many things change out here. Your own memories of what you thought you knew. Nanny doesn't really know the story of Buddha in Deer Park. And as for your missionary friend, maybe he couldn't really quote Buddhist scriptures.

.....

The point is not what people know in words, the point is not what opinions they think they have, the point out here is what they potentially know; their potential sympathy with things that, as words go, are alien; their potential identity with their opposite numbers. (28)

The idea of an opposite self would return in later radio plays and poems but in much darker terms. Here MacNeice stresses the latent parallels between East and West, seeking to move beneath surface and cultural division to discover possible shared values beneath.

'India at First Sight' sought to examine not only the East-West divide but also to touch on the political and religious divisions and tensions rapidly emerging within India and Pakistan and the terrible consequences of such discord. MacNeice had witnessed some of the horrifying scenes of the Punjab massacres at first hand and although such horrors are only touched on in the text the brief glimpses offered are chilling. When Edward travels to the Punjab he wonders: 'Whom shall I meet here?' (29). The voice of India offers a sobering reply:

INDIA:

You will meet me – many times over.

.....  
You will meet me huddled in refugee camps, clasping a child  
like a broken doll – a doll that someone has  
cut with a penknife.

.....  
You will meet me lying on my back in the gutter with my  
legs apart and my white skirt rusty brown and the  
flies like black nebula spiralling over the  
spear wound. (29)

The juxtaposition of nursery images with scenes of massacre in the first nightmare snapshot is particularly chilling and these harrowing descriptions are potently framed by the sound of a curfew siren, which Edward wrongly assumes to mean 'All clear'. The haunting resonances of this particular sound within the listening audience would have surely helped to amplify the underlying terror and mayhem behind the scenes the voice describes. Yet MacNeice was eager that he should remain non-partisan in reporting such tragedy and was also determined not to see this particular barbarity as evidence of the general character of a race. Thus, the sound of the siren and Edward's confusion as to its significance, functions to invoke parallels with the slaughter in India and the recent mass-murder in Europe. Writing on the subject in his adapted script of the programme for publication, MacNeice, with typical circumspection, states:

We saw both sides of this communal tragedy, and tried to view it without partisanship. What is more difficult is to view it without superiority; seeing such outrages one tends to conclude that their authors must be inhuman...[But] who were we to feel superior? Did we not come from twentieth-century Europe? And were we quite sure that the British themselves were not responsible for some of this? So in that inferno of the Punjab we looked and reported what we had to and tried to cast no stones. (*BBC Features* 60-4)

MacNeice not only casts no stones but (in line with his BBC brief) attempts to suggest the various points of contact between the emerging religious and social factions within the newly independent state using quotations from the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal to highlight the similarities of sentiment in the art of both cultures. The personified voice of 'India' says of them: 'I am proud of them both – and I needed them both, and they both have common ground – my ground' (38) It is perhaps through this voice that MacNeice filters the sentiments of Sarojini Naidu (state governor of Uttar Pradesh 1947-8), whom he was greatly

impressed by when he met her in Lucknow on his trip. Speaking of her later MacNeice comments that she had 'real imagination and real heart' and that 'the people revered and loved her and called her "our mother"'. She had no use for the "communal nonsense", and forcibly mixed Hindu and Muslim at her parties.' (*BBC Features* 62). Given that MacNeice had toyed with the idea of calling the Indian voice 'Mother India' and that the voice was female in the broadcast, it seems possible that Naidu may have represented, as close as was possible, an human embodiment of an idealised India as a country accommodating a rich multiplicity of religions, cultures and political attitudes. MacNeice, however, refrained from identifying his Indian voice too closely with any one person, removing any subjective background so as to allow the voice to function as a detached allegorical symbol of the nation. Yet, this voice too often speaks in formulaic opposing binaries – she is at once a feminist and a secluded Muslim woman for example – which do little to elucidate the dense pattern of Indian society and culture. Given the time and space in his script, however, this failing was perhaps inevitable.

Ultimately, the script's finest moments occur when Edward directly recounts certain vivid sense impressions he has had while in India and the final sequence of the programme leaves the audience with a remarkable image of the iconic Nanga Parbat. It is when Edward first sees the mountain that he feels his 'eyes...change' and 'for a moment' he seems to attain a subtle, fragile vision of India, untarnished by western voices or prejudice:

EDWARD:                         When I saw her  
  Across one hundred miles of ranges. A long dark  
  ridge of mountains below and a long dark ridge of  
  clouds above and between the two a canal of clear  
  sky, liquid. And in that canal, floating, something  
  like a tiny lion – a lion with snow on its mane.  
  And that was Nanga Parbat. (44)

STILL VOICE:                     And something more perhaps. It was dawn at the time, remember?

EDWARD:                         Yes but why?

STILL VOICE:                     One can see things at dawn.

(f/u song and hold behind)

The music, which fades up through the dialogue, is a song in the classical Indian style of *Thumri* sung by Rasoolan Bai, a renowned Indian classical singer from Varanasi. Bai's haunting voice, accompanied by sitar, veers from a hypnotic, melodious yearning lament to a more discordant

slightly syncopated rising cry. In keeping with the theme of sunrise sparking connection, the lyrics, in spoken Hindi, express the love of a woman who feels that the dawn can only come to her eyes when her beloved returns (suggesting a sort of inverted alba); MacNeice received a translation of the song in which the female speaker ends with the line: 'There is no sleep in my eye because it is/ the dwelling place of my darling.'<sup>iv</sup> The exact lexical meaning of the song would obviously remain incomprehensible to the vast majority of the audience, although Nanny, in the guise of an Ayah, does tell Edward that this song is 'all about love' (44). Yet this is entirely commensurate with the theme of India's directly unknowable essence: 'translation', as the *Radio Times* billing makes clear, is the only possible means of 'discovering India'. However, the exuberant rise and fall of Bai's unique voice, twinned with the panoramic image of a distant Nanga Parbat, may have conveyed a fleeting sense of the remarkable epic grandeur of the distant Himalayan range as well as hinting at emotions and perspectives connecting all human beings - such as the awe inspired by distant mountain peaks drifting skyward, or the longing for the unpredictable vistas which emerge with dawn. As the music fades up to close the programme, the voice of the Christian Missionary repeats one of the Buddha's wisest and most pertinent observations on the plight of humanity: 'Never in this world is hatred ended by hatred. Hatred is ended by love.' (44)

'India at First Sight' is a fine radio programme and was recognised as such in the audience listener report at the time in which the vast majority of the audience felt that MacNeice's 'conception of India, embodied as it was in a kaleidoscopic pattern of dialogue, characterisation and poetry, symbolised to a great extent, the immensity, complexity and bewildering diversity of life in the sub-continent.' The 'evocative quality of the writing' was praised as was the programme's difference 'from the usual "actuality" type of feature with its facts and figures'. The production was considered flawless and, in particular, the 'effect of the crash-landing merging into Indian music' at the beginning of the programme was deemed a 'very ingenious' means of conveying one's initial experience of India. The quality of his Indian scripts were given further recognition when a pendant written by MacNeice to the series of programmes on India was included in the book *BBC Features*, edited by Laurence Gilliam, which included a selection of outstanding programmes from the BBC Features department from the forties and early fifties.

### III

MacNeice's experience as a BBC feature writer in India not only led to successful radio programmes but also inspired several poems on the subject, which develop and broaden themes touched on in his radio writing and show how his radio work, as we shall see, increasingly would have a creative impact on his poetry. MacNeice's visit to the abandoned site of Mahabalipuram, a

former royal capital near Madras, forms the basis of his first poem to emerge from his Indian trip. In 'Mahabalipuram'(1948) MacNeice experiments with a more unrestrained, fluid form, in an attempt to evoke the prolific images which the abandoned site offered him. Among the ruins could be found: 'the massive relief of the Ganges' descent to earth; adjacent boulders with carvings from Hindu mythology; four free-standing temples carved from one long border; the Shore Temple built up of granite blocks with one cell opening directly on to the sea, spray from the Indian Ocean eroding the carving.' (Marsack 91) The poem's first stanza captures the desolation and the strange, latent energy of the ruins:

All alone from his dark sanctum the lingam fronts, affronts the  
    sea,  
The world's dead weight of breakers against sapling, bull and  
    candle  
    Where worship comes no more,  
Yet how should these cowherds and gods continue to dance in the  
    rock  
All the long night along ocean in this lost border between  
That thronging gonging mirage of paddy and toddy and dung  
    And this uninhabited shore? (305)

The opening stanza immediately suggests the numerous, pregnant contrasts and parallels perceived by MacNeice at the ruins: the solitary shore against teeming countryside; rock, animated by sculpting, against endlessly corroding water; natural and aesthetic symbols of the infinite; timelessness against temporality; abstraction against corporeality. The lines also conjure the live environment of the site itself: the alliterative repeated word-sounds – 'fronts, affronts' and 'All the long night along' - suggesting ocean waves ricocheting off rock, curling back upon themselves and flowing inward as undercurrent; while the clotted, echoic word-sequence, 'thronging gonging mirage', seems to vibrate with the swarming life it describes. The typographical arrangement of the poem also mirrors the geography of the site, the indentation and varied length of the line mimicking the jagged outcrops of rock against the ocean and perhaps also the jutting tops of the crumbling temples.

In the poem's fourth stanza, the gaze shifts from the ruins to those perceiving them; the tourists to whom 'mantra and mundra mean little, / And who find in this Hindu world a zone that is ultraviolet / Balanced by infra-red.' (306) According to Marsack, 'the "ultraviolet" and "infrared" come from his [MacNeice's] reading of Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar*, where they stand

for Change from Within and Without' (90). MacNeice may also be suggesting an elusive reality existing above and below the daily spectrum of visible light, the wavelengths invisible to the human eye but felt or sensed nonetheless. As in 'India At First Sight' the narrator seeks to respond more intuitively to the environment, to 'look without trying to learn and only look in the act of leaping/ After the sculptor into the rock face ...' (306). The reliefs are described as transporting the onlooker into a phantom, amorphous (or non-dimensional) zone of being in which one feels a paradoxically heightened sensuousness despite conventional physical sensory experience seeming narrowed; an experience, it is worth noting, that is close to that of the listener of certain types of fantasy radio plays. The scene on the largest relief, which in 'India at First Sight' Edward describes as 'somehow so powerful and so graceful at once' (41), seems to:

excite

And at once annul the lust and the envy of tourists  
Taking them out of themselves and to find themselves in a world  
That has neither rift nor rim:  
A monochrome world that has all the indulgence of colour,  
A still world whose every harmonic is audible ... (306-7)

The preternaturally dense and nuanced soundscape and the paradoxically vibrant one-tone world invoked seem to represent the outer limit of the poet's comprehension of (as well as capacity to communicate) the meaning and metaphysical essence of the stone sculptures. The final stanza adopts a more conventional perspective and stance, and acknowledges that 'the visitor must move on and the waves assault the temple ... and time with its weathering action / make phrase and feature blurred' (307). The poem's conclusion seems to retreat back from the carvings into more familiar intellectual territory and physical experience as if the narrator is exhausted from his imaginative leap into the transcendental cosmos embodied in the rock:

Still from to-day, we know what an avatar is, we have seen  
God take shape and dwell among shapes, we have felt  
Our ageing limbs respond to those ageless limbs in rock  
Reliefs. Relief is the word. (307)

There is, perhaps, an inter-textual response here to the lines from Browning quoted in 'India at First Sight' - 'Look East where whole new thousands are / In Vishnu-land what Avatar?' - suggesting that at least some of the mystery of the East and its avatars has been unveiled. And the

final sentence, as Marsack argues, 'hints at eroticism as well as the intellectual/emotional achievements of comprehension.' (93) However, the pun on the word relief also underlines the slipperiness of meaning in language and by proxy destabilizes the poet's effort to express his particular experience of the site at Mahabalipuram. The rhyming of 'word' with 'blurred' across the two punctuating trimeters of the stanza, deftly reiterates the pun already made, and also suggests how the poem itself, and the poet's original meaning, are also vulnerable to the 'weathering action' of prospective reinterpretation.

Another poem to emerge from MacNeice's Indian experience, 'Letter from India' (1947), dwells on the more disturbing aspects of MacNeice's trip focusing more sharply on the alienating diversity and plurality of the country which seems to increase the distance between himself and his wife and to set 'Western assurance at nothing' :

For here where men as fungi burgeon  
And each crushed puffball dies in the dust  
This plethoric yet phantom setting  
Makes yours remote so that even lust  
Can take no tint nor curve on trust  
Beyond these plains' beyondless margin. (295)

The disconcertingly fecund environment seems to yield only that which is ephemeral and brittle; nothing can be taken for granted or as permanent, not even the horizon. No longer can MacNeice state with confidence, as he did over a decade earlier in the poem 'Ode' (1934): 'We always have the horizon / Not to swim to but to see' (33) For MacNeice the only view is 'of the near, the too near only', such as the all too familiar scenes of human destitution, which he witnessed in the Punjab: 'I have seen Sheikhpura High School/ Fester with glaze-eyed refugees'(296) For MacNeice India could also disturb because its sheer abundance of humanity seemed to negate the idea of individual agency, downgrading the value of each human being: all sense of self seems to be swallowed up in the 'maelstrom/ Of persons where no person counts' (297) MacNeice can offer no solution to such disquieting realisations and instead attempts to draw meaning and comfort from his personal relationships, focusing on the bond between husband and wife. However, even this connection is impaired:

And the small noises that invest me,  
The sweepers' early morning slow  
Swishing, the electric fans, the crickets,

Plait a dense hedge between us so  
That your voice rings of long ago,  
Beauty asleep in a Grimm story. (298)

The distant ringing voice of MacNeice's wife Hedli recalls a similar use of such an image in Canto XI of *Autumn Journal* in which the poet remembers his first wife, Mary, as a 'voice faintly heard/ Through walls and walls of indifference and abstraction'(125). In the earlier poem even the 'distant clatter of hoofs' or the sound of taxis passing in the surrounding London streets seems to ignite hopes of his wife's return, making him 'gamble on another rendezvous' with her (125-6). However, the more rebarbative, unfamiliar Indian environment insinuates itself through a flurry of encroaching, sibilant sound effects, which isolate and harass the poet rather than evoking memories of his distant love. She can only be imagined in the context of a European fairytale tradition, as a sleeping beauty waiting for her prince. The poem does, however, end on a note of hope (if slightly forced) as MacNeice sees Hedli as his 'future' with the promise of sexual union dissolving the boundaries and limits of identity and culture:

So you for me are proud and finite  
As Europe is, yet on your breast  
I could find too that undistressed  
East which is east and west and neither? (298)

Aside from the two poems discussed above, it is clear from a letter to T.S.Eliot, on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1948, that MacNeice had in mind a more ambitious poetic response to his Indian experience: 'I am also planning a long poem (about the length of "Autumn Journal" but much more tightly knit) which would not be so much "about" India as suggested by India...' (qtd. In Marsack 93) The poem never materialised, yet the ideas and themes which he had in mind when he proposed it may well have found expression in a later poem, 'Didymus' (1950-1), which was to be MacNeice's longest poem focusing on India. Borrowing images from MacNeice's script 'India at First Sight' and centred on the same thematic contrasts as Mahabalipuram, the poem further complicates East/West differences through the introduction of Doubting Thomas, the missionary apostle who travelled as far as India to preach Christ. The dialectical structure of the poem sets the intricacies of Indian Art and transcendent mysticism against the empirical Thomas and his unpretentious religious stance. The poem opens with a striking acoustic image, portraying a shrine to Shiva as an overflowing cauldron of existence, a source of almost boundless power and remarkable destructive and (re)generative potential:



A million simmering kettles: in the Destroyer's shrine  
The world is on the boil, bats in malodorous dark  
Under a pyramid of writhing sculpture  
That rams the destroying sky.

.....

The bats like microbes stitch and unstitch their hectic zigzag  
Of black on black, of blind on blind, and dot  
And carry and dot and carry and sizzle like seaweed  
That reeks on the shore of the Infinite. While outside  
The whole of India jinks and twitters too ... (332)

The series of plosives and clipped vowel sounds in the final four lines quoted above produce a sense of frenetic movement, mimicking the darting flight of the bats and the hyperactive flutter of their flitting wings. The repeated word 'dot' may also derive from the sound of the shorter signal used while transmitting Morse code, the staccato rhythms of which the poet perhaps hears echoed in the noise of the bats scurrying about the sculpture. The rapid accumulation of different word-sounds and sound-effects— 'simmering', 'writhing', 'hectic zig-zag', 'sizzle', reeks' etc. —aurally express the seemingly chaotic, multifaceted, prolific energy of the Indian god. The overall sense of reality in flux, on the verge of transformation or disintegration - the 'stitch and unstitch' of invisible pattern - corresponds to the symbol of the god Shiva, whose divine dance, according to Hindu doctrine, is designed to destroy the world in order that it might be reborn. The phrase 'stitch and unstitch' may also obliquely suggest a parallel between the creation of earthly and poetic worlds, recalling as it does Yeats's use of the phrase in 'Adam's Curse' (1902) when describing the drawn out process of poetic composition. It is worth noting too that these opening lines bear a strong resemblance to a much earlier poem, 'Genesis' (1925) (also titled 'The Universe: an excerpt'), which is similarly focused on the birth-pangs of an emerging cosmos. In this poem (which was, not insignificantly I think, one of the earliest poems included in his *Collected Poems, 1925-1948*) MacNeice figures the moment of creation as an erupting, cacophonous squall of sound:

A million hammers jangling on the anvils of the sky  
The crisp chip of chisels and the murmuring of saws  
And the flowing ripple of water from a million taps

.....

A green sea singing like a dream, and on the shore,

Fair round pebbles with eggy speckles half transparent  
And brown sodden tangles of odorous wrack. (620)

Like the beginning of 'Didymus', there is here a similar sense of destruction and remaking, of things being broken, divided, segmented and unsettled but also potentially re-crafted, re-sculpted (chisels, saws and anvils are craftsman's tools), and imbued with a dynamic new essence and order. And while Longley is surely right in detecting a 'hint of the aural genesis of MacNeice's own inspiration' in this poem (*LMAS* 6), 'Genesis' perhaps also suggests how central sound is to the *construction* and *composition* of much of his poetry: how his sensibility is primed to absorb and digest mechanical, environmental and human sounds and rhythms as the basic raw materials of poems in order to forge them into aurally live lines of verse and to reconfigure them to produce the dynamic overall sound system of a poem.

In both part I of 'Didymus' and in 'Genesis' a vast uncontrollable energy seems to be at play, a pulsating reality in flux, recorded in a cataract of words with an almost Dionysian sensuousness. Yet in the former poem in Canto II MacNeice introduces, in opposition to the Indian 'riot of dialectic', a more controlled diction and sparse expression, which epitomises the unassuming, deliberate simplicity of Thomas and his brand of Christianity. Even within the context of the other Christian apostolic missionaries Thomas's approach is more rudimentary:

Peter would have talked big and John  
Have called forth a serpent out of the sherbet;  
Paul would have matched them abstract with abstract  
But this man, how could he start? (334)

As is revealed in section two of 'Didymus', Thomas has an instinctively more somatic approach to life relying on his 'two hands for all things, including the cross' even though his 'fisherman's hands were hardly right / For a preacher's gestures'(334). In spite of the fact that he feels ill-suited to his mission, and is dogged by doubt, Thomas manages to exude a quiet dignity:

And beside that sea like a sea on the moon  
He clasped his hands to make sure they were only  
Two and, finding them two but strong,  
Raised them gently and prayed. (335)

The more prosaic, unadorned language in this last stanza is starkly different to the plethoric description of the opening scene; yet both parts provide an effective foil for the other, imbuing the poem with a more lively overall rhythm and creating a sense of drama through contrast and opposition in a similar manner to the use of contrasting elements of sound and voice in a radio play. The third section of the poem leads on dynamically from the second, as the reader is suddenly given intimate access to Thomas's thoughts as he soliloquises, perhaps in prayer. He is shown to have a direct and strikingly personal relationship to Christ, which is all the more moving because of its simplicity (he outlines the prosaic manner of their meeting) and the utterly human insecurity and doubt he displays within it.

Was he that once, the sole delight of my soul?  
My memory wilts in the heat. I was mending a net  
When I sensed with a start that I was under his eye  
And he called my name; the rest of his words I forget.

Is he my friend still? No, perhaps. (335)

As Marsack has astutely observed, the homophones occurring in the first and third line of each stanza 'emphasize his [Thomas's] dubiety: words that are apparently the same with quite different meanings, identity and disparity.' (99) Sound functions as an ironic binding force here creating a facade of unity over a deeply divided, questioning self. The fourth and final section of the poem strongly parallels one of the final scenes of 'India At first Sight' in which Edward describes how, as evening falls in the Indian countryside, 'all the roads fill like rivers with people returning from work.'(40); and the 'Still Voice' notes how, across India, 'the feminine domes' of mosques 'are turning lavender', while distant granite boulders turn 'purple' and 'the tarnished mirrors of the paddy-fields are stained with red' (41- 42). These images recur in 'Didymus' as the poem expands once more at the end to portray the Indian environment:

The last light purples the mirrors of paddy, the tracks  
Become dark rivers of peasants with brushwood on their heads,  
Rivers which all day long flowed out of sight  
Leaving the world to children. (336)

In this mysterious landscape in which people seem to gather as passing torrents, Thomas's task seems almost futile. Against the centripetal lingam - a 'hollow kernel where all noise / Lies folded

away like grave clothes' - all that can be heard of Thomas is a solitary 'whisper / More tenuous than the shriek of one lost bat' which 'Spins out like the one weak thread of one lost spider, / The ghost of groping doubt of one lost man.' (337) This subtle description delicately figures and re-figures the lone sussurant voice first as an ultrasonic screech, then synaesthetically as a barely tangible spider's thread, before finally presenting it as a numinous, spectral echo. The cluster of images underline both the fragility of Thomas's faith and mission (the blind, searching bat and the barely finished web signifying each respectively) but also the elusiveness of the myth, which has been constructed around him. As the poem reaches its conclusion, a nagging, questioning voice, in a quasi-nursery rhyme rhythm, twice intercuts through the flowing narrative to taunt Thomas; each jarring, interruptive voice speaks in the form of four rhyming couplets, beginning with Thomas's name repeated twice and continuing in the trochaic rhythm which the repetition establishes. The voice functions almost as a dramatic chorus, reminding of MacNeice's use of such a technique in his radio play *Christopher Columbus* in which Columbus is plagued by a chorus of Doubt singing of the impossibility of his quest. In the poem, however, Thomas is less certain of his quest and the doubting voice emphasizes the paradox of living as a missionary with an uncertain, temperamental faith ('Thomas, Thomas were you right/ In your blindness to preach light? [336]) as well as reminding the apostle of his previously uncomplicated life as a fisherman and his inherent disinclination towards religiosity and religious work. Despite such questions and doubts remaining unsatisfactorily answered, 'Didymus' does end on a powerful image in which the poem's opposing themes – practical empiricism against religious absolutism, myth against actuality, plain faith against mystical transcendentalism, metaphysical Oneness against lived duality – gain partial resolution:

Believing Thomas,  
 Apostle to the Indies! If never there,  
 The Indies yet can show in a bare church  
 On a bare plaque the bare but adequate tribute  
 To one who had thrust his fingers into the wounds of God. (337)

MacNeice's final poems concerning India, 'Return to Lahore' (1955) and 'Indian Village' were both partly inspired by another trip there for the BBC eight years after his first visit which had yielded the radio features and poems discussed above. In 1955, MacNeice and Ritchie Calder were both assigned to prepare an ambitious, round-the-world programme for Christmas day of that year. Because of MacNeice's successful features on India and Pakistan he was chosen to gather material – sounds, voices, songs - in those countries as well as Ceylon. Although it was a much

shorter trip than his previous visit it gave MacNeice an opportunity to re-visit some of the areas he had travelled to on his first expedition. One such place was Lahore in which he toured the city with a tape-recorder in search of material for the programme. According to Stallworthy, whilst carrying out this work MacNeice was 'particularly delighted by the song (in couplets) with which a street sweet-seller hawked his wares.' (418) It was while there that he began the poem 'Return to Lahore', and the rhyming couplets towards the end of each stanza in the poem perhaps echo or were inspired by this song. The poem is strikingly different to his earlier poems on India adopting a much more restrained diction and a sparseness of description:

'So long! Come back!' So back I come  
To find Lahore a matter of course,  
At peace and dull. The sober lawn  
Regrets the Punjab Boundary Force  
(Which, like the drinks, has been withdrawn).  
Town of Moghuls, town of fear ... (506)

The emphasis is on retrospection, on returning to a different but recognisable landscape, rather than invigorating discovery. As McKinnon argues this theme is inherent in the 'to-fro rhythms' which 'fit his [MacNeice's] Heraclitean theme of then-and-now, the pattern repeated, as well as suggesting the variation in pattern.' (207) Another poem, 'Indian Village' published later in *Solstices* (1961), interprets India less in terms of Heraclitus and instead draws on the Euripidean maxim that life is 'whatever glints' in order to approach a more general notion of the inherent value of existence as suggested by Indian environment:

Whatever it is that jigs and gleams –  
Flickering lizard, courting bird –  
For which I could not, had I even  
One hour to implement my dreams,  
Concoct one new and apposite word,  
Might yet prove heaven this side heaven,  
  
Viz. Life. Euripides was right  
To say 'whatever glints' (or dances) ... (555)

The lines reveal that although India had seemed beyond explication and rational understanding for MacNeice, proving a political, metaphysical and religious conundrum for the poet, it is ultimately a place of insistent, unyielding, utterly perceptible animation and creation: a place which suggests, as Brown argues, that the 'vigorous tangible reality of objects in flux before us needs no heaven to endow it with value. It is its own kind of heaven.' (*LMSV*, 94) It is perhaps in this last poem of India, which ends by invoking the 'leap and shine' of life in the dawn, that MacNeice returned to the fragile vision which Edward (and no doubt he) achieved on first seeing Nanga Parbat in 'India at First Sight' – the moment when his 'eyes ... change' and the analytical, reasoning and subjective self is momentarily pricked or stilled in the soaring, exuberant gleam of one of Nature's most solidly objective forms.

#### IV

As detailed above, MacNeice's experience of writing radio features on India for the BBC had a significant thematic impact on certain poems and also provided images and sounds which could be re-used more generally throughout his oeuvre. The poet's next experience of working abroad in Greece was to begin an even closer relationship between radio and poetry, which would see the poet write longer poems specifically for radio as well as the page. Between these two foreign sojourns MacNeice was employed by the BBC to make a translation of Goethe's *Faust*, in order to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. He was aided on this large scale project by the distinguished Oxford Germanist, Ernest Stahl, who became MacNeice's 'textual consultant', going through the original German text with MacNeice, translating it line by line. Aside from the problem of rendering the poem in English, MacNeice was faced with the difficulty of adapting for radio a text which Goethe conceived as essentially a theatrical production. In order to facilitate this process, MacNeice cut several passages of Goethe's original for the radio version of *Faust*; and these excisions were usually made in the interests of the listening audience, for whom continuity and clarity were vital. Archie Harding, who described the project as 'possibly the greatest single literary and cultural achievement' of the BBC's history, produced the script when it was first broadcast in segments between 30<sup>th</sup> October and 21<sup>st</sup> November 1949. MacNeice's translation was considered a great success and Victor Lange, writing forty-five years after the first broadcast, argues that although the conversion of the text for radio was 'in many ways an experiment', it gives 'to a venerable text a freshness of perspective and a poetic flavour that no other translation has achieved.' (Lange ix) Lange continues:

Even in a version as free and keyed to the special purpose of presenting a difficult text to radio listeners, the characteristic gestures of Goethe's prosody are maintained, and convey much of the musical and rhythmic quality of the original ... the effect of this English text as a whole is persuasive, faithful to Goethe's superb craftsmanship, and deeply moving (Lange x)

That MacNeice was able to suggest the aural textures of Goethe's original *Faust* is a testament to his brilliant ear for the distinctive auditory characteristics of other literary texts and also to his skill as a poet; it should be noted too that Goethe's *Faust* contains a great many formal variations. Stahl remarks that: 'I sometimes wonder whether the arduous exercise Louis had to undergo in adopting and adapting Goethe's multifarious verse forms ("Knittelvers", blank verse, free verse, idiosyncratic two-beat lines, hexameters, trimeters, trochaic tetrameters, choric odes on the Greek model, alexandrine) had some effect upon his later practice.'<sup>(68)</sup> MacNeice's next volume of poems, *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952), would seem to substantiate Stahl's point; for the volume adopts many of the verse forms which he would have used in the *Faust* translation, while also displaying a new degree of formal ingenuity and variation in MacNeice's aesthetic which would seem to derive, in part, from his work adapting and translating Goethe for radio.

MacNeice was attached to the British Council in Athens, from March 1950 to March 1951 and while there he developed the ideas for three scripts on Greece, which would be broadcast in late 1951 and early 1952: 'Portrait of Athens', 'In Search of Anoyia' and 'The Centre of the World'. During his time there he also wrote the majority of *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952), which was his first collection of poetry written, at least in part, with broadcasting specifically in mind: the volume was broadcast between September and November 1951 and was produced by Terence Tiller. Writing to T.S. Eliot in September 1950, MacNeice described how he had been working on a 'set of longish poems' which he thought represented 'what one calls "a new development"': He felt that they would be more cohesive than previous volumes, not simply because of a similarity of structure and length, but 'because they come from a common matrix and so overlap or lead on to each other'. (qtd in Coulton 118) One of the ways in which MacNeice is able to weave his poems into one another is through the use of recurrent imagery relating to key themes of the volume; and it will be shown here how the interconnected structure of the volume and also the particular forms of poems were affected by MacNeice thinking in terms of radio and sound more generally.

Water is perhaps the most frequently recurring image throughout the volume, most evident in the poem 'Our Sister Water', yet there are several other images linking the volume, including: stone, fire, seeds, flowers, and sunshine as well as images of the divine, whether Christ, other gods (Shiva and Krishna) or the unknown 'god/ Who cannot answer his name' in 'Day of Renewal'.

Each poem is constructed in four movements, perhaps registering the influence of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and MacNeice would subsequently refer to them as 'experiments in dialectical structure' ('Visitations' 1) This is perhaps clearest in the first poem of the volume 'Suite for Recorders', in which pastoral alternates with violence and in the second poem 'Aeropagus', which alternates between Christian and classical myth examining themes of faith, doubt and revenge. The latter poem opens with the Hebrew-Christian Paul (Saul) preaching at the rock Aeropagus, challenging the older classical gods and cults of Greece with the new Christian faith:

he whetted the blade  
Of the wit of his faith to slice their pagan  
Prides to the quick; they nudged and doubted.  
Diamond cut diamond. Something new. (321)

In the second canto MacNeice enlarges and complicates his theme and suggests how in both the classical world and the Christian world man is exposed to a cursed inheritance - a debt for sins and transgressions committed before him, which must be paid. This idea is introduced at the beginning of the canto and evoked aurally in the lines: 'Primaeval / Echoes of evil. A nuance, a noise, / As of Titans gurgling into the sink of the world.' (321) The homophones of the first phrase parallel its semantic meaning in sound, producing the echo across the line, while the guttural, insidious, Titanic 'gurgling' also aurally replicates the lexical sense of the lines. In the context of the poem's totality, the sentence also underlines how past evils reverberate through generations and civilizations as a recurring theme played out in new forms. This, of course, is suggested in the very meaning of the term echo, which can be described as a sound emitted outwards and reflected back in a split-second, yet inflected with slightly new acoustic properties to the original sound; containing the older version of itself but slightly re-phrased in time. The importance of the concept of echo - which may well derive from MacNeice's work in radio in which programmes often work best when characters' voices are contained in an echoing hollow such as a cave or tunnel - is underlined later in the canto, where the onomatopoeic qualities of the word are sounded out and amplified in the line, 'Ech! Ech! Ooh! Ech! Ech! Oo-o-oh!' (322) The various use of the figure of chiasmus in the canto can also be understood as formally echoic, syntactically reflecting words and clauses across sentences in the same way that sound is reflected as an echo. Indeed, the term echo, taken as noun and verb, can be viewed as a central metaphor with which to understand the poem and indeed the volume as whole; for its varied conceptual (and also more tangible) meanings imply the concerns and processes at work in the text: the ironic or satiric imitation of previous writers' styles or forms of expression; the meaningful internal pattern of repeated sounds, phrases and



expressions; the vestiges and traces of earlier ideas, stories, events and myths resonating into the present; and the evocation of previous memories or past histories.

In 'Aeropagus' the echo's acoustic circularity and repetition suggest the cycle of revenge and hatred running through the Orestes trilogy, which forms one of the mythic frameworks underpinning the poem. It suggests too the tradition within Christian theology of man as inheritor of past sin which must be paid from generation to generation. It is this troubled sense of a negative past filtering insidiously through to the present which causes the poet to wonder whether Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus can be a new beginning or another episode in a destructive pattern: a 'trap ... snapped in a flash on a lonely dust-white road' (323) This uncertain, conflicted faith forms a key dialectic in the poem as an 'Unknown God' – whether 'cursing or kind' - is approached from both Greek and Christian traditions (MacNeice, here, alluding to Paul's reference to the Athenian altar dedicated to 'an Unknown God' [Acts of the Apostles 17:23]). In Canto III MacNeice considers what type of saviour exists in the present:

Christ, if we could, having Christian fathers;  
But Furies, if we must. For no  
Life is for nothing, all must pay,  
Yet what unknown is dread, we know  
Can yet prove kind; our selves can pay  
Our son's atonement for their fathers (324)

The poem draws on *Eumenidês* here in which Apollo, embodying a new order in Heaven, unseats the Furies of blind, primitive vengeance changing them into Eumenides (kind ones) and allowing Orestes to be acquitted, thereby bringing forward a new rationality which seeks to transcend the bitter cycle of evil punishing evil. The poem offers hope that modern man may also be capable of such transformation asking: 'Could we too lead our Furies to their shrine?' (325) The final line ends on a new note of reconciliation, in a partial resolution of the dialectic at play between Christianity and Greek mythology, Furies and Eumenides: 'Nurses of fear and hope, come taste our honey, taste our wine!' (325)

As is clearly evidenced by both 'Areopagus' and 'Didymus', *Ten Burnt Offerings* was to be one of MacNeice's most explicitly religious volumes of poetry. However, other myths, popular histories, and personal mythologies are woven throughout the volume. 'Cock o' the North', the third poem of *Ten Burnt Offerings*, examines the myth-making which surrounded Byron's involvement in the Greek struggle for independence, comparing Byron to Meleager the mythic Argonaut, who slew the Calysonian boar. The ceremony of Greek orthodox Easter is also invoked

(reminding of Byron's death on Easter Sunday 1824) and the resurrection of Christ is paralleled by the mythic resurrection of Adonis, who also hunted boar like Meleager. The poem is particularly memorable for its vibrant, complex aural pattern, creating a rich mosaic of varied rhyme schemes and shifting rhythms punctuated by a range of vivid sound-words and sound-effects (including, 'twang', 'rattle', 'hullaballoo!', 'boom', 'Crackle and hiss', 'clatterin' down', 'ganglin' eel', 'Blaw the bellows') In the first Canto of the poem alone MacNeice deploys a striking range of metrical forms: he begins in imitation of the nursery rhyme 'Little Jack Horner', interlacing fairytale or nonsense words such as 'hubble-bubble' and 'Entusymusy'; he then adopts the metrical form of Byron's 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' before moving to a longer, rolling line which pivots rhythmically on an internal rhyme; the canto finishes powerfully on a short, four line Easter hymn which repeats the Greek religious phrase, '*Christos anéste*' (327). The middle Cantos are constructed in a more improvised free verse, with occasional rhymes while the final Canto, written in the style of Robert Burns introduces yet another metrical form into the poem, possibly in homage to Burns's 'Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled' (Smith 147). Byron recounts, in a Scottish accent, his last moments on earth culminating in a dramatic thunder storm at Missolonghi:

What is it growlin', what is it groanin'?  
 Thunder at sunset! What can it bode?  
 Is it mysel'? My sunset?  
 You may throw my brand in yonder fire –  
 Oh Meleager! *Crede Biron!*  
 I will hae the courage o' my fear  
 And blaze a path to silence. (331)

MacNeice unites the two central figures in the poem here, having Byron invoke the circumstances of Meleager's death (who, as prophesied, died when his mother threw a certain brand in the fire) while he too passes away to 'blaze a path to silence.' (331) 'Cock o' the North' is one of MacNeice's most experimental poems in terms of form and structure and like 'Aeropagus' and 'Didymus', its 'whirling farrago of styles and speeds' is best appreciated when heard (Smith 148). At times it achieves an exhilarating, accelerating momentum similar to that of 'Bagpipe music' invoking the apocryphal passion, madness and glamour of Byron, yet it also shifts downwards into a more meditative, plain verse when describing the sapping swamps around Missolonghi where Byron suffered a tragic and painful death.

'Cock o' the North' is typical of the new range of expression and subject matter which characterised *Ten Burnt Offerings* and MacNeice himself felt that this volume had broken new

ground, particularly in terms of structure, arguing that the poems were ‘more architectural - or perhaps I should say symphonic – than what I was doing before.’ (qtd. in Marsack 96) While one should be wary of making too much of such analogies, the poetic parallel with the symphonic form in music (classically in four movements) is perhaps reflected most explicitly in the four part division of the poems, and may also be echoed in the way that the thematic and mythic concerns are stated, developed and recapitulated in each poem as the musical themes are in the symphonic form. MacNeice may also have had in mind the manner in which a particular musical theme, after being introduced, is repeated and rephrased in subsequent movements with the later incarnations connected to, but subtly different, from the original. He may even have had in mind Coleridge’s conception of the symphonic form with its stress on aesthetic involvement and a sense of unity:

If we listen ... to a symphony of Cimarosa, the present strain still seems not only to recall, but almost to *renew*, some past movement, and present the same! Each present movement bringing back, as it were, and embodying the spirit of some melody that had gone before, anticipates and seems sometimes trying to overtake something that is to come: and the musician has reached the summit of his art, when having thus modified the present with the past, he at the same time weds the past *in* the present to some prepared and corresponsive future. The auditor’s thoughts and feelings move under the same influence: retrospection blends with anticipation, and hope and memory (a Female Janus) becomes one power with a double aspect. (Coleridge 305-306)

Coleridge’s understanding of the resonance between past and present musical themes in a symphonic work, and the listener’s experience of this aurally double perspective, seems to be an effect MacNeice is aiming for in several poems in *Ten Burnt Offerings* through the repetition and subtle rewriting of phrases, axioms, sound-images and symbols drawn from various religious, mythic, personal and historical narratives. The symphonic outline is particularly discernable in the sixth poem of the volume, ‘The Island’, in which animal and natural sounds are vividly described and subtly combined to create an intricate aural pattern in the poem, connecting its four cantos. The lines of the first stanza of the poem swiftly establish a rich soundscape and, like the opening sound-effects of an effective radio programme, this aural backdrop generates an intriguing environment and atmosphere in the imagination of the reader:

First the distant cocks. A hairfine  
Etching on silence, antiphonal silver,  
Far-flung nooses of glittering sound,

A capstan chanty to launch the day,

The crowing cock is a deeply ambivalent symbol in MacNeice's aural topos: for though it signifies the reassuring potential of a new day beginning, it also evokes the moment of Petrine betrayal, implying the guilty denial of one's true self and values as well as a wilful ignorance of the suffering of others. The sound gains a remarkable palpability in the reader's auditory imagination as MacNeice compares it first to a delicate stone engraving and then to a series of dazzling loops thrown out across the atmosphere. The different figurations are significant, initially implying that the crowing of the cocks is a sort of code or language which can be 'read' or interpreted, while then suggesting that the sound has the power to entrap, perhaps hinting at the suffocating force of guilt associated with the sound's biblical resonance. The poem's symphonic structure is intimated, in miniature, by the synaesthetic 'antiphonal silver' and the 'capstan chanty' each of which suggest the statement and recapitulation of musical themes. The cock-crows are followed by a medley of donkeys with their 'grumps and catarrh' and then a sudden 'gush of water/ And gabble of Greek.' (343) These sounds, which here are associated with the dawning of a new day, repeat to different effect in the latter sections of the poem.

The island, which the poem describes, is that of Ikaria, the home of MacNeice's Greek maid, Ariadne, at the time. In the summer of 1950 he travelled there, accompanied by his wife Hedli and son Dan. The second canto, written in a more relaxed verse, shifts focus from the sounds and sights of the breaking dawn to describe a Greek mountain village on the island. The village, like the island, appears to isolate (even imprison) its inhabitants seeming 'a closed/ Circle, cave of Calypso.' (344) Yet just as 'Hermes came from Olympus' to deliver the divine edict to Calypso which ordered that Odysseus should be released, so letters post-marked from Cleveland and Detroit arrive from across the Atlantic reminding that there are greater powers beyond the horizon – 'The towers of life, the steel and concrete / Which scorn yet prop these cabins.' (345). The canto comes to an end with a remarkable mosaic of images and sounds drawn from scenes of village life:

As cockcrow and cicada

Argue that light will last. The timeworn baker,  
Burnt out of Smyrna, smokes his hubble-bubble,  
The grey stones breathe the sky, a slim silent girl  
Gathers salt from sea-crags, green among green leaves  
Figs, kid-soft purses, bulge, on low stone roofs ... (345)

Terence Brown has insightfully commented on such description in MacNeice's verse that: 'It is as if a film-camera were panning across a landscape observing detail after detail in swift succession, to build a composite, impressionistic picture.' (LMSV 157) And referring to the lines quoted above, Brown argues:

This has the immediacy of drama and the feeling of actual experience. The separate, sharp sense details, fuse to create a convincing picture; the camera flitting over the landscape has composed, apparently randomly, an impressionistic landscape of disorganised, disparate, exciting fragments. (LMSV 157)

As Brown argues, MacNeice's descriptive mode in this poem may well seem to mimic a cinematic technique, but the style and mode of presentation would also seem close to that of MacNeice's radio features on foreign locales. His radio feature, 'A Portrait of Athens' (broadcast 18<sup>th</sup> November 1951), for example, which MacNeice was preparing during the same period in which he composed the poems of *Ten Burnt Offerings*, offers a similar collage of dramatic, vibrant sense impressions. Vivid snapshots of modern Athens are presented through the eyes of an inquisitive Visitor, while the noise and chatter of the city streets fade into the popular music of the *cafeneion*. The series of impressions – the 'token patchwork' as the announcer states (1) - are carefully combined in the feature in a way which seems to capture convincingly the mood, atmosphere and feel of the city caught in a moment in time. It is worth noting too that the feature, like 'The Island', takes us from early morning to night verging on daybreak.

The third canto moves from the rich external landscape of the village, with its steady, relaxed rhythms to the vertiginous internal dreaming world of the visitor who is now drowsing in the mid-morning sun. His dreams 'are troubled/ By the sawmill noise of cicadas, on and on – Will they never cease?' (346) The shrill, grating drone of the insects, unnervingly amplified here, become the terrible soundtrack to the man's dream:

And the cicadas

Force, force the pace; a jaunty cavalcade of despair.

.....

The sanguine visitor dreams

And finds himself on the run with barking

Dogs at his heels who turn into wolves, into men, and each of

Them seems

To be running in creaky shoes ... (346)

In contrast to the relaxed, relatively tranquil, descriptive verse of the second canto, the lines here have an unsettling momentum, seeming to draw the dreamer ever close to an uncertain end. The soundscape of the poem rapidly changes, too, as a new and discordant aural (or perhaps musical) theme is introduced. This theme seems to build to a crescendo as the dreamer is finally driven before a judge with a 'wig like a sheep' who, 'Forcing the pace, forcing the pace', speaks 'In the voice of a circular saw' while 'a brown leaf clanks from the / green tree' (346). The high-pitched whine of the circular saw and the metallic clank are particularly dissonant with the natural sounds which had been described before and are suggestive of violence and man-made destruction. As the canto comes to a close the visitor must face 'the truth of his panic' (346): that underneath the idyllic scenes of pastoral beauty on the island lurk darker realities:

And there are prisoners really, here in the hills, who would not  
agree  
To sign for their freedom, whether in doubt of  
Such freedom or having forgotten or never having known what it  
meant to be free. (346-7)

MacNeice, here, is alluding to Ikaria's use as an island prison under the Greek government of the time and also its dark history as a place of political imprisonment and exile. The writer Kevin Andrews, who had befriended MacNeice in Athens at this time, was to write later of how MacNeice spent one summer:

at the wild rough end of one of the least known islands of the Aegean (from Byzantine time a place of exile, under the Metaxas dictatorship and again during the Civil War a place of enforced rustication for political prisoners) ... not enough to spark him off, though some of the prisoners on Ikaria were his contemporaries and most were to go to places worse, and all had been fired by the same urge that had once sent so many volunteers, reporters and observers – including himself – to Spain.(103)

Near the rented house where MacNeice stayed at Ikaria was a concentration camp housing 'political prisoners', including women and children. At night, many of them, who were suffering from Tuberculosis, could be heard coughing. The third canto of 'The Island' (and indeed the whole poem) would seem haunted by such sounds, although they have become associated, through the

logic of day-dream, with the insistent whine of insects, the barking of dogs and the strange nightmare creaking of shoes.

The final canto of the poem moves through night on the island to the edge of dawn as earlier sounds are heard again, but at a lower pitch: the energetic medley of donkeys, which had opened the poem, is echoed in the sound of 'One donkey' who 'erupts, a foghorn, then runs down / Like a worn disc'; while the earlier 'gush' of water becomes a prattling, watery 'voice' which 'Breaks where the steep from which he dived / Turns level' (347) The final stanza brings the reader, almost, full circle to the cusp of dawn:

The round of dark has a lip of light  
The damns of sleep are large with daybreak,  
Sleeping cocks are primed to crow  
While blood may hear, in ear's despite  
The sun's wheels turning in the night  
Which drowns and feeds, reproves and heartens. (348)

In the silence of the early dawn, the revolving, mythical chariot wheels of the sun reverberate through the blood-stream as a new day is anticipated. The image of the cocks about to crow remind of the first sound – the 'anitphonal silver' - of the opening canto, creating an aural symmetry or circularity in the poem, in which 'retrospection blends with anticipation, and hope and memory (a Female Janus) becomes one power with a double aspect.' (Coleridge 305-306)

The mutually coherent 'architecture' which underpins *Ten Burnt Offerings* - the way in which each canto of a poem is designed to resonate (backwards and forwards) across the whole, and each poem to resonate with the other poems within the volume (and, more broadly still, with the cultural discourses or meta-narratives invoked) - is given colour, texture and dramatic movement by the remarkable variation of tonal registers, metrical forms, voices, accents, sound effects and rhythms occurring throughout the volume. This formal and thematic unity which MacNeice eventually achieved in *Ten Burnt Offerings* can perhaps best be understood by reference to a statement by Gerald Manley Hopkins which MacNeice himself quoted in his essay 'The Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry' written in December 1946:

A remark of Gerald Manley Hopkins, which applies to many things, applies here: "in everything the more remote the ratio of the parts to one another or the whole the greater the unity felt if felt at all". Rhythmical variations are *not* the death of rhythm. Eliot is a master of

variations and in his poems, some of which look almost like 'free verse', the evidence is that the necessary unity is felt. (*SCLM* 135)

MacNeice was trying to broaden and deepen the resonance of his poetry in this volume through a more far-reaching, interlaced, dialectical framework of myth, religious symbol, literary reference, popular culture and history. Similarly, in terms of formal structure, he was attempting to bring a greater diversity to his poems and his technical virtuosity and versatility are revealed in the wide range of styles and forms used throughout the volume: By writing in such a wide and densely varied range of forms, MacNeice reveals a particular focus on the aural aspects of the poems which was, at least in part, as a result of thinking of the needs of a listening audience; for the aural plurality of the verse imbued the poetry with greater immediacy, and a more lively sense of drama and movement. Yet this range of expression does not, for the most part, lead to disintegration or splintering of the poem and (as with Eliot) the best poems produce a more 'felt' or innate sense of unity, the greater because of their structural variety.

## V

MacNeice's next experiment in the longer poem was to be *Autumn Sequel*. The poem, composed in twenty six sections or cantos, was written very much with radio in mind and was broadcast in six parts from June 1954. The sub-title of *Autumn Sequel* - 'A rhetorical poem' - indicates its suitability for the sound medium in that, as McDonald argues, its 'rhetoric is ... that of radio, the speaking voice contriving a coherent and natural development of ideas.' (148) This coherency of voice is supported by MacNeice's use of *terza rima*, which helps to unify the poem, connecting one section with the next by means of first and last lines, yet providing a sufficiently fluid structure for ideas and narratives to find full expression. It was considered a 'major and mature achievement' by controllers and producers at the BBC and was published in 1954 (Coulton 135). The poem had been in gestation for some time however and in April, 1944 MacNeice had written to Eliot that he had in mind a long poem that might take years to shape. He does however give a brief outline of its formal method and underlying structure:

I can't tell you much about this project at the moment except (1) that the main characters will be imagined contemporary individuals, but will exist on two planes, i.e. the symbolic as well as the naturalistic. (2) That there will be some inter-shuttling of past and present (though in a much more modified way than Ezra Pound's Cantos). (3) That the total pattern



will be very complex, and in fact rather comparable to the 'Faerie Queene' in its interlocking of episodes, sub-plots, and digressions which aren't really digressions. (qtd. in Marsack 101)

When MacNeice came to write the poem in 1953, the practice of double level writing, of each character serving both a symbolic and naturalistic function, was an aesthetic MacNeice had experimented with frequently in his radio writing, most recently in his play *One Eye Wild* (1952); and the structural 'inter-shuttling of past and present' was a well practiced device in many radio programmes. The poem's intricate patterning (as the letter makes clear) would also draw on Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* - a favourite text of the poet since boyhood - which he had adapted for radio in 1952: it was broadcast as twelve programmes between 29<sup>th</sup> September and 15<sup>th</sup> December 1952. While MacNeice registers the poem's affinity with Spenser (and less so Pound's *Cantos*), it also bears resemblance to Dante's *Divine Comedy*: for it is also divided into cantos, written in *terza rima* and depicts a journey in the middle years, which branches off into other journeys and dream visions. By drawing on such poems for inspiration MacNeice revealed his belief that the long poem was coming back into favour. In a review of E.M.W. Tillyard's book on the epic in 1954, MacNeice states that when 'he begins by lamenting that "the long poem itself is out of favour" he seems not have noticed the renewed interest in long poems indicated by the successful recent broadcasts of such works as *Paradise Lost*, the *Aeneid*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Faerie Queen*'. (qtd. in McDonald, *LMPC* 152)

*Autumn Sequel* may also have been an attempt by the poet to overturn critical misconceptions about his poetry, that it was too journalistic or superficial: a review of his *Collected Poems 1925-1948* in *Poetry Review* is typical of such opinions in arguing that 'he [MacNeice] has yet to prove himself a true poet by going beneath the surface ... he has spent all his talents on the flesh without attempting to touch the bone' (Cooke 169). MacNeice's use of the double level form in *Autumn Sequel* is one means of countering such claims and the poet was keen to emphasize that an important dynamic in the poem's construction is the structural interweaving of topical and naturalistic narratives within larger metaphysical frameworks: writing of the volume, he stated: 'What I think myself should be most interesting about the work is the balance I have tried to achieve between realistic and contemporary on the one hand and the mythical and historical on the other.' (qtd. in Coulton 136) Among the sources of mythic elements that permeate the poem are memories of his own dreams and one of the most vivid sequences in the poem occurs in canto XXII when MacNeice recounts the appalling dream-vision he had, while at Marlborough, in which, fearing his approaching father's disapproval, he stumbles upon the scene of the Crucifixion as part of a tawdry funfair. As discussed in the previous chapter this dream was to find its first poetic expression in *The Dark Tower* and many themes and images used throughout *Autumn Sequel*

derive from radio programmes. Another important image, which recurs throughout the poem, and deriving, at least in part, from his radio writing is that of the Parrot. In both 'Ring In The New' and *The Dark Tower* MacNeice had used the sound of the parrot (or a parrot voice) to suggest the concept of mocking, meaningless repetition and in *Autumn Sequel* the idea of the parrot is developed and enlarged to become, according to MacNeice, a 'symbol of a mechanical civilization' (qtd. in MacDonald 149) Mechanical civilisation seemed to imply the anonymity, conformity and despair permeating contemporary society, and the endless, seeming futility of mass production as well as the encroaching, formless chaotic reality which modernity seemed to usher in. In order to resist such forces, to rise above the 'murk and mangle of modernity' (399), one must assert one's individual uniqueness and also the uniqueness of each human being. One such person who seems to embody such resistance, who is able 'to throw the Parrot's lie/ Back in its beak', is Dylan Thomas a 'maker' like him, whom MacNeice laments in canto XVIII of *Autumn Sequel*.

Dylan Thomas was to be one of a number of people close to MacNeice whom he would celebrate (and in some cases lament) in *Autumn Sequel* and friendship was to be a key theme of the poem. Indeed, Cyril Connolly described the poem as 'loosely constructed round the portrait of a group of friends like Elgar's Enigma Variations.' (qtd. in Marsack 101) While the most outstanding elegy was for Thomas, other friends remembered were Graham Shepard, Archie Harding and Gordon Herrickx. As well as the elegiac form MacNeice also employed a celebratory mode for those friends whom he still saw regularly, such as Jack Dillon, Bertie Rodgers and Laurence Gilliam, and those who belong more to his past, such as his schoolmaster Powys or past loves with whom he remained on good terms. The many friends referred to in *Autumn Sequel*, according to MacNeice's introductory note to the poem, are 'for mythopoeic reasons' represented 'under pseudonyms' (1) However, the poet's mythopoeia can sometimes mean that the poem becomes too obscure, too private, to have any meaningful impact upon the reader/listener. Yet certain elegies transcend such problems, providing lines, which resonate beyond their subject. One such outstanding elegy is for Dylan Thomas.

While MacNeice pays tribute to Thomas's singularly poetic ear - 'He made his own sea-shells / In which to hear the voices of the sea.'(453) - it is the memory of Thomas' extraordinary voice which induces the strongest response from MacNeice, who vividly recalls the intricate patterning and inspirational quality of Thomas's way of speaking:

And did we once see Gwilym plain? We did.

And heard him even plainer. A whole masque  
Of tones and cadences – the organ boom,

The mimicry, then the chuckles; we could bask

As though in a lush meadow in any room  
Where that voice started, trellising the air  
With honeysuckle or dogrose, bloom on bloom

And loosing bees between them and a bear  
To grumble after the bees. Such rooms are still  
Open to us but now are merely spare

Rooms and in several senses: damp and chill  
With dust sheets over the furniture and the voice  
Silent, the meadow vanished, the magic nil. (455)

MacNeice would have been intimately aware of the exact quality and texture of Thomas's voice, having been good friends with the poet for many years and also having cast him in several of his radio plays: Thomas had played a friendly raven in 'A Heartless Giant' (1946), a play which gently satirises *The Dark Tower* in which Thomas had also played a raven, but a mocking spiteful one. Thomas also played a more central role in MacNeice's 'Enemy of Cant' (1946), a feature on Aristophanes, in which Thomas brilliantly played the lead part of Aristophanes. MacNeice not only greatly admired Thomas' poetry but also his radio-acting ability and the versatility of his voice. In an article for *Encounter*, not long after Thomas' death in 1953, MacNeice praised Thomas's 'roaring sense of comedy', his 'natural sense of theatre' and noted also that he 'took production' and was capable of vocally projecting a variety of tones and moods, from darkly menacing to light-heartedly comic (qtd. in Coulton 87). MacNeice attempts to capture this range of expressiveness in the lines quoted above, imbuing the poetic language with the qualities of voice they describe: particularly effective is the use of gliding 'l' sounds and lush, sibilant word sequences juxtaposed with more meditative 'm' and 'n' sounds combined with resonant, thundering diphthongs. The combination of these contrasting phonetic elements produces an undulating, free-flowing rhythm and surging pitch vividly invoking the unique timbre and modulation of Thomas's speaking voice. MacNeice, though, is not only concerned with simulating the aural qualities of Thomas's voice, but also with describing its potency as a particularly stimulating force in the auditory imagination of the listener; simply through the act of speaking, Thomas seems capable of transforming the everyday into something magical, of conjuring vibrant environments, complete with flora and wildlife, out of thin air. Something of this transformative aural effect is carried into MacNeice's

language in this canto as he too constructs a densely textured and evocative pattern of meaning, which exists in the aural dimensions of the verse.

*Autumn Sequel* however is not always of the standard of the Thomas elegy and one of the less successfully concluded sequences of the poem is a quest, which runs from the beginning of canto XIV to the end of canto XVI. It is a form of psychological parable in which a young man embarks on a surreal - 'to and fro' - journey back and forth to a suffocating womblike space described variously as a 'clinging dark', 'a rubbery blubbery duct', and an enclosing 'intestinal darkness'. While entrapped in this claustrophobic, pre-natal space the young man is haunted by a 'thin colourless voice', which speaks in a 'hairfine monotone', asking him "If life means rising skywards but to fall, / Who would choose life?" (443) The young man is aided in his answering of this question - this challenge - by an antiphonal, opposing 'outside' voice:

did not a voice outside  
Come suddenly back to him. Through the dumb gut it blares:

'Just let your sense of Whatnot be your guide ...  
Just hold tight ... If you want to ...' That great voice  
Cuts through the Gordian knot the worm has tied. (443)

Spurred by the exterior, sonorous speech, the young man chooses to live, 'to grow and decay ... To be what I was and shall be', to delve into 'the give and take of humanity' (443) Like Roland in *The Dark Tower*, the young man, harassed by conflicting voices, eventually breaks free from an oppressive, overpowering maternal power through a quest which also allows him to exert his individuality. Yet, unlike the radio-play, the quest in *Autumn Sequel* eventually falls rather flat: While, the 'Quest, goes on and we must still ask why/ We are alive' (443), only an unsatisfactory and makeshift solution is provided:

All we can do  
Is answer it by living and pay the debt  
  
That none can prove we owe. And yet those debts accrue  
Which must pay and pay but, what is odd,  
The more you pay the more comes back to you. (443)

The concluding sentiment itself is of course not reprehensible, if a little commonplace, but by attempting to make manifest the underlying meanings of the parable, MacNeice hampers what energy the quest began with. By imposing a somewhat hackneyed moral gloss on what was a mysteriously elusive, yet vividly concrete narrative, the poet limits and dilutes a parable, which had seemed to contain a stimulating and highly charged core of meaning. As McDonald notes of this quest: 'what MacNeice is doing is allegorizing his own poem; as he was to acknowledge later, parable cannot afford to undergo this kind of process' (*LMPC* 170). The problem of how to communicate the underlying meanings of a parabolic narrative without dampening its total effect or negating the apparently real world under which the symbolic or abstract exists, is one which MacNeice tackles more successfully in his next major work for radio, *Prisoner's Progress* (1954), which was to point the way to a new phase of his poetic development.

*Autumn Sequel* is perhaps MacNeice's least successful volume of poetry and when first published, reviews were generally negative: the *TLS* reviewer at the time summed up critical reactions to the poem when he remarked that what we miss in the *Autumn Sequel* is 'the sense of an area of unused force outside the poem.' (qtd in. Marsack) Among MacNeice critics, the volume has remained his least appreciated (and perhaps least understood) volume of poetry (Longley, *LMAS* xii). Of pertinence to this study, is the fact that certain critics (Longley, Stallworthy, Marsack, Press) have tended to see the dull, overlong wordy patches and structural weakness in *Autumn Sequel* as a result of his radio work which, according to one critic, encouraged 'tendencies towards superficiality and concentration on detail' (Marsack 83). However, while it is true that some of MacNeice's early propaganda scripts were rather two-dimensional affairs, to attribute the flaws of *Autumn Sequel* to radio would seem to ignore the fact that MacNeice had produced some of his best poetry while working for the BBC during the war. In addition, as Richard Danson Brown has observed in his recent study of MacNeice, to blame radio for the longer, looser form of *Autumn Sequel* would seem to ignore the poetry MacNeice was thinking of writing before the war:

The difficulty of establishing a causal connection between working for the BBC and poetic deterioration, however, rests on the fact that MacNeice's interest in longer poems predates his job. 'Poetry To-Day' (1935) predicts that 'poets in the near future [will] write longer works [...] which will, for the intelligent reader, supersede the stale and plethoric novel' (*Poetry of the 1930s* 22).

It is worth noting too that MacNeice's finest radio work, such as *Christopher Columbus*, *The Dark Tower* and (as we shall see) *Prisoner's Progress*, bear no relation to the weaker sections of *Autumn*

*Sequel*: quick-moving, dynamic and structurally taut these plays point the way to MacNeice's final three volumes of poems, which were among his very best.

## VI

*Prisoner's Progress*, broadcast 27<sup>th</sup> April 1954, was to prove MacNeice's most successful broadcast of the period. The play, which was set in a Prisoner of War camp, was partly inspired by Goronwy Rees' escape narrative *Where No Wounds Were*, which MacNeice had adapted for broadcast earlier in 1954. The novel concerns the imprisonment of a German pilot, Adam Lipansky, by the British during the Second World War who is interrogated about his personal history by a British Officer who wishes to assume his identity and infiltrate the enemy. Lipansky however is seeking refuge from his past and it transpires that he has deliberately grounded his plane. He eventually makes an unsuccessful attempt to escape to Wales and on his return to camp it becomes clear that he has become emotionally dependent on the interrogating officer. The novel's themes of identity, self-discovery, memory, imprisonment and escape are also explored in *Prisoner's Progress*. However, the play's characters and geography are more universalised, reflected, for example, in the fact that the two competing armies are labelled as non-identifiable 'Greys' and 'Browns'. The play centres on a recently captured prisoner named 'Waters' who eventually takes part in an escape attempt through a tunnel, leading through a passage tomb and running underneath the camp's outer fence. While the escape is initially successful, Waters's fellow escapees Mac and Regan are killed leaving only him, and another prisoner from the women's camp, Alison, to make a break for freedom. As the pair scramble up the dark mountain overlooking the camp they draw unexpected comfort from each other and eventually fall in love. The play's tragic ending is shockingly sudden and powerfully emotive as the two lovers are shot by a 'Brown' soldier just as they reach the top of the mountain.

As the narrator makes clear at the beginning of the play, the story is a 'fable of imprisonment and escape' based loosely upon 'data from World War Two', but makes 'no claim to be a documentary'. (155) In his introductory note to the programme in the *Radio Times* (7<sup>th</sup> January 1955) MacNeice states that while the prisoner-of-war camp in the play 'is closely based upon real camps in World War Two as described to me by René Cuthforth', there is no mention of 'Germans or British' so as not to 'confuse the issue' (*SPLM* 155). Despite writing in a much more naturalistic style than earlier parable plays such as *The Dark Tower*, MacNeice was seeking to downplay political partisanship and contemporary cultural reference in order to suggest the deeper patterns of human thought and behaviour, which echo through history and culture. Though the play would retain a surface realism, the 'symbolical or fantastic or "poetic" elements' would be incorporated through 'sleight of hand' (*SPLM* 151). As MacNeice explains, one of the ways in which he was

able to achieve this effect in the play was through the use of quotation and music: ‘Since I was treating my characters naturalistically, I could not endow them with an unnatural eloquence, so instead I gave them naturalistic opportunities to draw upon: the Bible, *The Ancient Mariner*, the ballad of True Thomas, etc. Similarly with the music, which is limited to voice and accordion.’(SPLM 151) Thus, the popular song, ‘Comin’ Round the Mountain’, which is played by ‘Catsmeat’, the prison cook, in the opening scene of the play, functions as more than mere naturalistic background music. The relatively simple song gains in complexity and depth during the course of the drama as snatches of the tune are repeated and improvised at various points in the narrative, achieving a slightly different resonance with each new context. It becomes one of a series of repeated aural tropes, which at times gel the narrative together yet also, at times, seem to function as an ironic or tragic gloss on the action. The song’s assured and irrepressibly buoyant lyrics combined with its carefree, whirling rhythms come to symbolise, initially at least, the hope of a possible escape round ‘the mountain’ overshadowing the camp, and also the prisoners’ ardent expectation of a future rescue, which will happen when ‘victory comes, when our great Grey armies come pouring down over that mountain’(155). Yet on another level the song also foreshadows the eventual ill-fated escape attempt made towards the play’s end, in which all those involved are tragically killed. Heard in retrospect it seems to imply the naivety of such an escapade, which only serves to confirm the prison Commandant’s warning: ‘To overstep the wire man shall be shot. And to overclimb that mountain, man, I should think, must be crazy’ (159)

As in *The Dark Tower* the hero in *Prisoner’s Progress* embarks on an impossible and ultimately fatal quest. In the former play, the aim is to slay an immortal dragon which has killed all who have come before it, while in the latter, the quest is a form of escape which is inevitably doomed: at one point Waters asks Elmsey, the oldest living prisoner at camp Malcanto 22, whether anyone has ever escaped, to which he replies: ‘No, but they’re always trying.’ (159) In pursuit of freedom, both heroes are willing to die. However while Roland’s quest is one of self-sacrifice - of annihilation of the self to ensure the freedoms of the wider community - Waters is more focused on a quest to liberate one’s consciousness from its own constructed delusions about reality and to free it from its subjective and constrictively relative understanding and experience of existence, which seems to isolate it from the rest of humanity. When he first arrives at the camp he speaks to the Prison Chaplain in attempt to solve some these existential questions:

PADRE: Now what exactly is the trouble?

WATERS: The whole point is that it’s *not* exact. I don’t quite know how to put it. You see, this camp, this whole inane insane muddle of bits and pieces, this make-believe work and make-believe play and

make-believe quarrels and intrigues and friendships, this averagely odd and oddly average community, misers and morons and scapegoats and scavengers, snow-blind, sand-happy, punch-drunk, thought-shy with enemy's wire and our own red tape around us, with the snoopers and the search lights and the rollcalls ... (160)

What is particularly galling for Waters is not that the conditions at the camp are exceptional, but rather that they are uncannily familiar; he states: 'I've been here long, long, before – almost before I can remember. And what's more, I've never really left here. That mountain up there, it's always been between me and the sun.' (161) The camp is merely the context not the cause of Waters's sense of imprisonment; for him, it seems a microcosm of society reflecting its superficialities and falsely reassuring structures and rules – outside the wire he sees little hope of anything different. Even though the chaplain is ultimately of no help to Waters, the fact that he seeks out a religious figure for guidance suggests that his difficulties are rooted in sense of metaphysical crisis or spiritual lack: reality seems somehow fractured, disparate, and unreal to him, and one's activities within society seem disconcertingly frivolous and inconsequential, yet bound and limited by enemies and bureaucracies without and undermined from within by one's own deluded and flawed perception of a fixed, objective reality.

Waters's disillusioned attitude is perhaps partially explained by the fact that he has had a difficult past; having been born illegitimate - his biological mother died before he could meet her - he did not get to know his father until adulthood and only decided to join the army after his father 'made a pass' at his wife, who he also cut ties with (divorced), leaving him feeling that he 'had nothing' to hold him. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Waters has difficulty in trusting others or indeed that he is unable to see any innate pattern or meaning to life: he comments later to a fellow prisoner, Regan, that the world seems a 'mad machine we all live in', 'something too absurd to make fun of, something so frightening we can't feel frightened anymore.'(169)

The chaplain's solution to Waters' 'little problem' is to suggest he get involved in 'Theatricals' and take a role in the upcoming play being performed by the prisoners, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's drama, which makes light of some of the cultural and social superficialities which Waters despises, has little appeal to him and he quotes instead a section of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which is much more in key with his sense of longing and entrapment:

WATERS:

'I never met a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue



Which prisoners call the sky  
And at every drifting cloud that went  
With sails of silver by.' (161)

The poem's resonance with the themes of escape and imprisonment in the play is obvious, yet the lines also have a more subtle significance, foregrounding the idea that each man's world is bound by his own pre-conditioned frame of reference: one man's 'little tent of blue' is another man's 'sky'; amorphous, woolly clouds can become vivid, particular objects depending on the eye of the beholder (this is also true for the listener, whose conception of the world of the play is constructed out of their own unique sensibility.) In a later scene, Waters interrogates this concept of each person's ultimately relative perception of the world and seems to fall into a state of nihilistic despair. In a discussion with Regan concerning the definition of self he states:

WATERS: Do I really know who 'I' am? Do *you*  
really know -

REGAN: I do. I know I'm not anyone else.

WATERS: That's just the snag. One isn't anyone else and one never will  
be. So one never can know what it's like to be anyone else. And  
that's why nothing one does can ever matter a damn. (173)

This epistemological uncertainty troubles Waters not only because it suggests that meaning is limited and circumscribed by the individual perceiving self, but also because of its ethical implications; he remarks to Regan: 'Whoever you are, you're conditioned to be what you are and you can't be anyone else. So you never need feel ashamed.' To which Regan responds: 'Would this be what you mean? Because you're conditioned to do whatever you do, therefore you can do no wrong. So if you feel ashamed, you're being untrue to yourself ...' (173) According to this logic, meaning, and therefore morality, is constructed within the walls of each person's own perception and coloured by the unique conditions of one's past. Thus, it is illogical to bear any moral responsibility for one's thoughts or actions; to do so would be to transgress the one valid source of truth – your own mind.

Despite his apparent despondency and apathy towards life, Waters does eventually find a way beyond this psychological and metaphysical *impasse* as he makes his escape from the camp. It is not so much the promise of freedom beyond which re-energizes him, but the act of escaping itself: 'I like this here and now, I like this act of escaping.' (190) Although initially frosty to his co-escapee Alison, Waters begins to warm to her after they discover a shared love of poetry; she

recites to him in soft, elegant and alluring tones. As they grow closer, and Waters begins to tentatively reveal his debilitating sense of isolation from others, she offers him some hope that he need never be totally cut off:

WATERS:                   One can't really know other people.

                                  Everyone's really so lonely

ALISON:                   That's just it. The lonelinesses can meet, you see. (191)

Ironically, perhaps, it is Waters' sense of isolation from others, which facilitates his greater closeness to Alison who seems to understand his particular, solitary sensibility. Eventually the pair kiss and as a sign of their growing intimacy Waters reveals his real name, Thomas. His aversion to the name is based on its associations with Doubting Thomas the Indian apostle, yet Alison reminds him that there was also a True Thomas, before reciting a section of the famous Scottish ballad *Thomas the Rhymer*. In *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice described this ballad as 'the best example' in the 'corpus of ballad literature', which 'if not intentionally allegorical, could easily have allegory read into them.' (66) This is particularly true of the poem when understood in the context of the play: its narrative seems to become implicated with that of the drama, and its symbolism is deepened and enriched through its resonance with the underlying themes of the narrative. The poem tells of how the hero Thomas meets and kisses the 'Queen o' fair Elfland' while wondering through the forest near his home, before following the Queen on a strange journey to an otherworldly region existing beyond the land of the living. From here she shows Thomas 'ferlies three' (three marvels) which Alison recites to Waters as the voice of the Queen.

ALISON:                   O see ye not yon narrow road,  
                                  So thick beset wi' thorns and briers?  
                                  That is the Path of Righteousness,  
                                  Though after it but few enquires.  
And see ye not yon bonny road  
                                  That lies across the lily leven?  
                                  That is the Path of Wickedness,  
                                  Though some call it the road to Heaven.'

WATERS:                   Alison!

ALISON:                   'And see ye not yon bonny road  
                                  That winds about the fernie brae?  
                                  That is the Road to fair Elfland,

Where thou and I this night maun gae.' (194)

The third road, which seems to signify a moral and spiritual intermediary zone, brings Thomas to a fantastical land where time has little meaning. However, Thomas, a mortal, can only reside there for a brief period, and eventually leaves heartbroken, but with the gift of truth telling – the Queen gives him a 'tongue that can never lee'. The ballad acts as an inter-textual parable within a parable, predicting in miniature the fate of Waters and Alison, whose romance and profound connection can only ever be short-lived given their inevitable capture. Yet the gift of Truth which Thomas receives from the Queen in the ballad, suggests another parallel with the main narrative: that Alison, like the queen, becomes the crucial figure in Waters' symbolic quest for a Truth outside of himself. The ballad also resonates with the nursery rhyme 'Lavender's blue' which Walters hears while in fever half-way up the mountain. As the distant strains of the accordion fade up in the background, Waters sings the words in a slow, subdued manner:

WATERS:

*(in time to the music)*

Lavender's blue, diddle, diddle,  
Lavender's green;  
When I am king, diddle, diddle  
You shall be queen.

*(Accordion out)*

If we ever get home ... (193)

The song becomes an aural motif for the lovers' hope of escape and each of the several improvisations of it throughout the narrative achieve a new tone commensurate with the mood of the scene. When Waters hears the distant accordion while in fever, the music seems to have a heavier (even drunken) quality and is played at a markedly slower speed than previous versions. The new improvisation on accordion combined with Waters's low singing voice lends an uncanny, unsettling quality to the words perfectly in key with his delirious state of mind. The lyrics, too, have their own significance ironically inferring a fairytale future for Waters and Alison, while also invoking their genuine, if naive, hope of escape: the simple rhyme scheme, the slow waltzing rhythms and the repeated, alliterative words combine to produce an enchanted, haunting atmosphere as if the two lovers have momentarily entered a surreal, magical reality, like 'fair Elfland', the timeless region where Thomas travels with the fairy Queen.

As the play reaches its climax, the fates seem to be moving against Waters and Alison and their shared future looks increasingly tenuous with the Brown search parties (evoked by the sound

of chasing dogs) gaining ground on them. Realising this, Waters quotes Marvell's 'The Definition of Love', the last verse of which Alison then proceeds to recite:

ALISON:                        'Therefore the love which us doth bind,  
But Fate so enviously debars,  
Is the Conjunction of the Mind,  
And Opposition of the Stars.' (195)

'Conjunction of the Mind' is exactly that which Waters felt was impossible but which he briefly achieves with Alison: they connect based on an intuitive understanding of each other's loneliness which blossoms into a ill-fated romance – or in Marvell's words, theirs is a love 'begotten by despair/ Upon Impossibility.' Thus, the sound of the approaching dogs, while also serving a realistic function, comes to signify the more abstract idea of star-crossed love – on hearing the sounds of the approaching dogs, Waters comments, 'Yes. I can hear them – now. Yes; the opposition of the stars.' (196) Shortly after this remark, a montage of dogs and ticking clocks is faded up in the background, echoing Waters' imaginative yoking of figurative (the ticking signifies the imminent death of Waters and Alison) and concrete sounds in the previous line.

The sound of the barking, erupting spasmodically in the background and growing gradually louder, continues as the unrelenting team of pursuers slowly encircle the pair. As the baying and snarling of the hounds reaches a peak (the listed sound effects for the play included an array of different dog sounds), Alison and Waters realise their chances of escape are next to impossible. Rather than surrender however, they decide to make an heroic last run for it and poignantly repeat the lines from Marvell before scrambling across open ground:

WATERS:                        Give me your hand. We've no time to lose. One!  
BOTH:                          Two! Three and – GO!

(Pause. Automatic rifle fire; silence)

(Fade up accordion 'Lavender's Blue – once through, then  
Catsmeat's voice joins in)

CATSMEAT:                     (singing)  
Lavender's blue, diddle diddle,  
Lavender's green;

When I am king, diddle, diddle,  
You shall be queen

(Accordion pianissimo to close) (197)

If, on the page, this may look rather threadbare, the total effect when broadcast is aurally rich and resonant. The rifle fire is startlingly abrupt, loudly echoing and re-echoing as if ricocheting off several surfaces, while the contrasting silence is deathly, both literally and figuratively, with a potency only achievable on radio. The ensuing song, 'Lavender's Blue', sung by Catsmeat is played delicately in hushed, solemn tones emotively at odds with the sanguine lyrics. The distinctive sound of Catsmeat's voice and accordion deftly detach the listener from the apparently realistic, concrete world of Alison and Waters and briefly draw him/her into a more uncertain realm in which voice is an unreliable signifier of tangible presence: is Catsmeat now a listless spectre lamenting from the banks of the Lethe? The original, carefree version of the melody has become, in this rendering, a tragic, chill and haunting echo of itself. It seems to produce a double effect in the auditory imagination moving the listener backwards and forwards in time simultaneously: the melody and words contain a latent (and, of course sentimental) resonance of the lovers' earlier dreams, now unfulfilled, and also of Catsmeat's own unrealized hopes, while the subdued accordion strains and the voice of Catsmeat (himself brutally murdered) act as a stark reminder of the two lives mercilessly cut short and of their uncertain journey after death. The music here, as well as the earlier ballad, also seems to imbue the narrative with a more expansive significance, placing the doomed love-affair between Alison and Waters within an oral folk or mythic tradition (of countless star-crossed lovers) and bestowing their tale with a greater universality gained from its connection to that tradition.

Ultimately Waters's sense of spiritual deficiency and moral uncertainty remain unresolved. Yet through his love of Alison and the act of tunnelling and climbing to escape, he is able to move beyond the solipsistic, despairing outlook he adopts at the beginning of the play. In comparison to *The Dark Tower* the moral and indeed underlying belief system of this play is perhaps more ambiguous, but the mode of quest remains a viable method of meaningful engagement with the world. What is particularly significant about *Prisoner's Progress*, in terms of its impact on the evolution of MacNeice's overall poetic, is the way in which MacNeice conveys his underlying meanings or conjures a particular atmosphere, change of mood, or shift in momentum through the method of 'sleight of hand' writing. He had developed a method which allowed him to construct a compelling surface narrative, in which Folk tales, ballads, nursery rhymes, and popular songs are used to create subtle cross-currents of meaning, as well as powerful but understated ironies and haunting double-meanings.

The themes of tunnelling as a means of quest would return in MacNeice's last play for radio, *Persons from Porlock* (1963), and many of the symbols, images and sound-effects from *Prisoner's Progress* would also recur in later poems, most noticeably, perhaps, in MacNeice's late poem 'Coda', written almost a decade later. The poem, a variation on the *roundel* form, is divided into three tercets covering the speaker's past, present and future, and dwelling on a possible, though tenuous connection, with a distant other. The final stanza strongly echoes *Prisoner's Progress* in terms of its use of the trope of tunnelling as an endeavour to a yearned for connection, and of the mountain as obstacle to knowledge of both self and other:

But what is that clinking in the darkness?  
Maybe we shall know each other better  
When the tunnels meet beneath the mountain. (610)

The sudden, onomatopoeic 'clinking in the darkness' hinting at deeper knowledge of the 'other', may even have been suggested by the sound-effects used to intimate tunnelling in *Prisoner's Progress*: the men's camp finally make contact with the women's after an unusually hollow sounding 'chink' on rock while tunnelling alerts Mac to the hollow passage tomb adjacent to the tunnel. Crucially, it is this sound, vibrating in the darkness, which instigates the successful attempt by the men to break into the passage tomb which the women have been excavating. It is a prelude to the discovery of a communal space for both groups to share their experiences of imprisonment and hopes of escape. The mysterious, tentatively hopeful, but unfulfilled nature of the poem's final lines seems to mirror that of *Prisoner's Progress* which concludes in a similarly open-ended manner. While on the surface the narrative ends conclusively with Waters's and Alison's deaths, the underlying symbolic pattern of the Quest remains only partially fulfilled: while Waters does gain a momentary sense of freedom from his psychologically isolated state through his profound connection with Alison, it is unclear if this unity between them would have sustained into the future - the larger metaphysical issues posed earlier in the play remain unresolved and, just as in 'Coda', the ultimate answers remain, tantalizingly, just out of reach.

The mode of incomplete or open-ended quest, which *Prisoner's Progress* adopts, would be a pattern MacNeice would return to in his later poetry. The poet's experimentation in the play with folk songs, ballads, popular tunes and nursery rhymes, interwoven ironically or ambiguously with a more naturalistic or plain diction, would also point the way to later types of poetry - particularly the darker lyrics of MacNeice's last two volumes which draw on the familiar rhythms and phrasings of such demotic forms to improvise a startlingly original and often unsettling voice which potently integrates recognizable and familiar modes of utterance into increasingly strange or surreal

contexts. Much of the power of these late poems depends on the way in which MacNeice invokes a certain atmosphere, tone or emotional state through the poem's aural elements (i.e by using a nursery rhyme cadence or a carefree refrain) which are often strangely out of sync, even at odds, with the poem's narrative progression and lexical sense. This complex recalibration of MacNeice's poetic – the new dynamic between the phonoaesthetic texture of the verse and its semantic meaning – would have been impossible without first having pushed the boundaries of poetic form in *Ten Burnt Offerings*, and also having found subtle new ways to combine sound and sense in radio-plays such as *Prisoner's Progress*.

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<sup>i</sup> See, Marsack, 104 and Stallworthy, 410-11

<sup>ii</sup> These include D.G.Bridson, Stephen Potter, Douglas Cleverdon and W.R. Rodgers

<sup>iii</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all memos, *Radio Times* billings, letters, Listener Research Reports and notes quoted in relation to 'India at First Sight' can be located in BBC Written Archives File: 'R 19/549: "India at First Sight", 1944-1949', held in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>iv</sup> This translation, contained in BBC Written Archives File: 'R 19/549: "India at First Sight", 1944-1949', is undated and unsigned.



## I

It is now firmly established that MacNeice's final two books of poetry, *Solstices* (1961) and *The Burning Perch* (1963) were among his most successful; as McDonald notes, they 'mark the climax of his career, containing much of his best and most enduringly influential work ... these books along with *Visitations* (1957), have seemed to critics to represent a surprising late flowering, a 'lyric return' for which to be grateful.' (*LMPC* 177) This artistic renaissance has been variously attributed to the poet's changing personal circumstances, to the vagaries of the poetic muse, or, more coherently to 'the application to the lyric medium of principles tested in the longer poems' (*LMPC* 177). And while such explanations all have their own merit, critics have failed to properly acknowledge in any detail, the positive influence of MacNeice's radio career on his poetic; indeed, if critics have examined radio in relation to MacNeice's poetry, it is usually to lament his work at the BBC as a distracting force, siphoning away or perverting his creative energies, at great loss to his poetry. It will become clear in the following chapter, however that much of MacNeice's late poetry has been positively influenced by the creative experiments and developments occasioned by writing and producing for the BBC. Indeed, in MacNeice's last three books of poems there are several poems which are actually short-hand or re-worked versions of radio plays as well as numerous poems which have explicit connections to certain themes already explored on radio. Importantly, these poems often expand and (re) interpret many of MacNeice's radio plays. Radio writing was also to have a profound influence on the form and style of MacNeice's late poems which often adopt many aspects of his radio-dramatic aesthetic, including: a compact terseness of language and plainness of diction, a powerful use of dream logic, a double-level mode of writing hinged to a linear Quest or Everyman narrative, an eerie use of nursery rhyme or cliché and a structured blending of voices and sound effects. Such poems may be termed 'radiogenic' in the sense that they adopt certain techniques and practices common to the medium of radio-writing and in particular radio-drama; these include: aural flashback; particular emphasis on tone and quality of speech as indicative of personality or context; sound-effect as primary indicator of surrounding environment; and quick and fluid transitions through time, place and memory indicated by subtle aural cues. It will become clear that the startlingly original aesthetic MacNeice achieved in many of his later poems can be traced, at least in part, to the poet's formal experiments and achievements in radio.

Despite MacNeice remarking to a friend, Sam Wells, in early 1955, that he felt finished as poet and that he 'just can't get started' (qtd. in Stallworthy 414), it was around

this time that the poet began to compose the poems that would eventually make up the volume *Visitations*. The book was chosen as the Summer Choice of the Poetry Book Society and in its *Bulletin* MacNeice comments:

This is the first book of short poems I have published since 1948. In between I have published *Ten Burnt Offerings* (ten long poems which were experiments in dialectical structure) and one very long poem, *Autumn Sequel ...* While writing these longer pieces I was incapable of writing short ones. When the lyrical impulse did return, this interval of abstention, it seems to me, had caused certain changes in my lyric writing - I naturally hope for better. It is hard to put labels on one's work but I like to think that my latest short poems are on the whole more concentrated and better organized than my earlier ones, relying more on syntax and bony feature than on bloom or frill or the floating image. ('Visitations' 1)

As MacNeice recognises, *Visitations* represented a new direction in his poetry and if seen in the light of his late poetry, it can be read as an important transitional volume in which the structural experiments of *Ten Burnt Offerings* evolve into the more compressed and concentrated forms of shorter poems. It will become clear, however, that his changing poetic also owed much to the incorporation of certain techniques and modes which he had developed in radio dramas, particularly in terms of tone and quality of voice, the importance of sound effect in language. It also owed much to the narrative style and structure of certain plays.

T.S. Eliot, in his article 'The Music of Poetry' (1942), declared that there is one rule which poetry must obey: 'the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear. Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse.' (*Partisan Review*, 9: 455 November - December 1942) Through his work in radio MacNeice was continually tasked with writing in a style which did not stray too far from the 'language of common intercourse' and the new strain of voice MacNeice achieved in *Visitations* derives in part from his radio work in which he was compelled to stay close to the diction of the majority of his listenership; the poetry of the volume tends to steer clear of the philosophical or metaphysical gamesmanship of some of his early poems and tends towards a more unembellished, unpretentious and plain style which relies more on irony, wit, and syntactical subtlety for its effects. As he states in the *Bulletin*, his verse began to rely less on 'bloom' or 'frill' or 'floating image', and achieved a more taut expression and concentrated structure. This style was undoubtedly influenced by the challenges of writing for radio in which MacNeice often had to condense complex ideas and narratives into

coherent one hour segments, or engage with serious or sensitive political and historical issues without alienating or patronising his listeners. As MacNeice makes clear in his introduction to *Christopher Columbus* the pressures of writing for a mass audience caused him to develop a style of radio writing which is 'popular' while 'not ever...vulgar', which requires a 'sensitive more than an educated audience.' (SPLM 394-95) (One suspects that MacNeice uses the adjective 'educated' here in a much more refined sense than many of his peers.) Although, after the introduction of the Third Programme, the pressure of a mass audience gradually reduced for MacNeice, in radio-plays such as *One Eye Wild* (1952) and *Prisoners Progress* (1954) the poet continued to display a popular mode of writing which presupposes a sensitive, thoughtful and acute listenership, one prepared to delve beneath the surface narrative for the more subtle ideas and themes streaming underneath. In general, MacNeice's best radio-programmes were rich in meaning, often with a tendency towards lyrical language, yet the narratives were always lucid and fluent, without the esotericism and pretentiousness of some of his fellow practitioners. In his essay, 'MacNeice and the Puritan Tradition', Terence Brown offers a cogent description of the particular qualities of MacNeice's radio voice:

... MacNeice as broadcaster employed a version of plain style, supple, judicious, not without its own colour and energy, its metaphorical suasions. In doing so he helped to make available a tone and mode of address that might be termed the house-style of the B.B.C. in its hey-day, a style remote from the imperial rumble of establishment authoritarianism or the crass *Sunese* of the contemporary sound-bite. (32)

This style, as Brown notes, is discernable in many of MacNeice's late poems, although often applied to create a rather sombre effect; such poems, like several of his radio plays, also draw on Bunyan and Herbert whose method of revelation could often be a forbidding plainness: 'the knife that killed the writer will cut the reader to the bone' (*Varieties of Parable* 23). Indeed, MacNeice's last three books of poems show a simplification of diction. While earlier in his career, the poet had preferred the aesthetic panache of disyllabic and polysyllabic words, flavoured with erudition, in his last volumes MacNeice more readily opts for the devastating directness, the pith and punch, of monosyllabic words, which were more appropriate to his pared down, sinuous style.

A good example of this mode, as applied to MacNeice's lyric, is 'Figure of Eight', a poem covering two stages of a man's life: the first, from his past, is figured as a bus journey in which he is 'eager to meet his fate' pressing 'with foot and mind to gather speed'. Curiously, no-one comes to meet him at 'the meeting place agreed' even though he is 'dead on time' (517). The second stage of the man's life, covered in the second stanza, is set in the

present, and he is now aboard a train. His enthusiasm and youthful élan have now been replaced by anxiety, fear and dread of death:

Whereas today in the rear and gloom of a train,  
Loath, loath to meet his fate, he cowers and prays  
For some last-minute hitch, some unheard-of abdication,  
But, winding up the black thread of his days,  
The wheels roll on and make it all too plain  
Who will be there at the station. (517)

The chilling perspective of each person's life as an inexorable and inescapable journey towards Death gains a particular force when it is remembered that the man had previously wished to be 'dead on time': the everyday phrase gains a disturbingly literal significance. The mortal terror of the man and the bleakness of his terminal realisation, are all the more affecting because conveyed with such plainness of diction. The poem's narrative also gains in dramatic power because it shifts so swiftly from an apparently ordinary, commonplace event into an expression of profound and terrifying existential insight. The mode of address is open and explanatory, and the conceit of Man's voyage through life as condensed into a bus or train journey constructs a figurative parallel with a particularly broad resonance: virtually everyone can identify with the experience of travelling on motorised transport. The popular, yet subtle tone and appeal of the poem twinned with the compact, cohesive, and dramatic structure of the narrative show MacNeice's successful application of techniques and modes developed in radio to his lyric style.

## II

This new strain of voice is also recognisable in MacNeice's poems about foreign locales. In the *Bulletin to Visitations* MacNeice said that he hoped his 'poems of place', like his best radio features and plays, existed on more than one level; though they were 'superficially ... merely descriptive pieces'(1). 'Visit to Rouen' and 'Return to Lahore' are two poems of place in the volume which bear the influence of MacNeice's travel features although they are perhaps more limited than 'The Rest House' which is the most notable travel poem of the volume. The poem was written while MacNeice was in Africa obtaining material for a documentary programme 'The Fullness of the Nile', broadcast 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1955. The titular 'rest house' was situated near Nimule, where the Nile flows north from Uganda to Southern Sudan. The tone and descriptive technique used in the poem remind of MacNeice's BBC travel features, particularly those on India in which the poet attempts to portray something of

the country's effect on the foreign traveller without making any definitively conclusive statements about the places he sees and hears: often the programmes convey the poet's sense of the unfathomable complexity of certain landscapes and relate a feeling of humility and even vulnerability in the face of overwhelming natural or human spectacles. The opening of 'The Rest House' registers a similar feeling of alienation and confusion in the face of unfamiliar surroundings, as seemingly quotidian actions and processes become imbued with an otherworldly quality: 'The thick night fell, the folding table unfolded, / The black men cooked a meal on the thatched veranda'(505). As in radio there is particular sensitivity to the sounds of the environment as MacNeice aurally sketches the contours of the surrounding soundscape:

The hissing lamp had hypnotised the lizards  
That splayed their baby hands on the wired window  
While crickets fiddled and sizzled to drown the river  
Who, bowling his agelong bias out of Uganda,  
Was curdling and burbling his nightlong way to rapids  
Tipsy with goggled hippo and drifting lilies. (505)

Instead of using a highly structured verse form MacNeice relies chiefly on rhythm, alliteration and onomatopoeia to bind the images together in a simple diction. The sibilant lamp, the fidgety crackle of the crickets and the continuous murmur of the river vividly conjure the live atmosphere of the scene. The interchanging clusters of gliding, then plosive, consonants in the final two lines aurally suggest the smooth drift and constricted curl of the water. As in radio the poet hones in on and selects certain noises from the aural environment and combines them to produce a rich and varied soundscape as a backdrop to the narrative. However, these lines are more than simply realistic audio-visual scene-setting and MacNeice performs a syntactical sleight-of-hand in his use of metaphor, reversing the usual (ad)verb and noun combinations to disconcerting effect: the lamp hisses at the lizards, the crickets 'drown' the river while the hippo appear, to the human eye, to be 'goggled'. This atmosphere of unease, insinuated through sound and syntax in the first stanza, is ratcheted up in the second to produce an unnerving, haunted environment which seems to enclose the speaker:

And on the dark the voices of unknown children,  
So shrill they might be white, sifted and splintered  
And shivered away till, noisy lamps extinguished,  
The bed beneath the ghostly netting beckoned

To chrysalid or sepulchral sleep. But such  
Was now the river's dominance that he filtered  
Through even the deepest sleep, weaving his journey  
Out of too little history into too much. (505)

The trope of distant voices emerging onto a plane of darkness is extremely radiogenic, and, just as in radio-drama, the sound of these voices becomes almost preternaturally palpable, resonating through and beyond the aural sense to create tangible shapes and forms in the imagination of the speaker. Overall, the poet is primarily concerned with the auditory textures and contours of the environment, relying less on the 'floating image', as he constructs a dense and vivid soundscape which encroaches upon the speaker, continuing even into sleep. Though this form of aural description is perhaps less immediately lucid than a more filmic technique, it is more expressive of the poet's sense of the highly charged and alienating environment surrounding the rest house.

Like many of MacNeice's radio features on foreign locales, 'The Rest House' is not simply a mimetic description of an exotic location, but is coloured by an awareness of the complex historical and political forces at play in the region: in particular, the final line of the poem, which figures the water as flowing out of 'too little history into too much', seems to suggest the British view of Africa's history. And though the river Nile - 'bowling his agelong bias' - is initially domesticated for an English imagination, the final image of it filtering into the depths of a sleeping mind, echoes older metaphors in which Africa was a symbol of the unconscious. The image of the river may also suggest a more universal symbolism - the flow of life - but this remains undefined<sup>1</sup> like the image of the Rest House itself which may be tomb or a journey's transformative stopping off point. The poem seems to strain towards, though only partially create, a defined allegorical meaning and this aspect is reflected in the various animal and environmental sounds in the text which are highly suggestive, even pregnant with meaning, but lacking a precise discursive significance. Ultimately, the reader is unable to sift a final message from the strange world of the poem, which, nevertheless, manages to lodge firmly in the memory. In this sense, it is similar to the radio programme 'A Portrait of Athens' (broadcast, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1951) which, though symbolically and often psycho-acoustically dense and allusive, does not consistently suggest a precise or rational message or moral. MacNeice allows his readers/ listeners greater agency to draw their own conclusions, assuming of them a degree of sensitivity and creative intelligence.

Another of the volume's finest poems, 'Death of an Old Lady' (1956), reveals the more subtle manner in which MacNeice's radio practice informed his poetry. The subject of the poem is MacNeice's stepmother, whom he admired and loved, who died in April 1956. The poem's title recalls several of MacNeice's radio programmes on dead authors (for

example, 'The Death of Marlowe' [21<sup>st</sup> June 1943], 'The Death of Byron' [10<sup>th</sup> May 1943], 'The Story of my Death' [8<sup>th</sup> October 1943,) and many of MacNeice's radio plays and features, like the poem, are written to commemorate the life of a person whom MacNeice admired, loved, or had been inspired by. The challenge in writing in this elegiac mode is to compress the essence of someone's personality, and perhaps also something of their life and times, into a short programme which consistently appeals to the listening audience. In attempting this task in his radio programmes, MacNeice usually chose to cut between various scenes from the subject's life, building a picture of their personality, character and personal history. Usually (as in *He Had a Date* and 'The Death of Marlowe') the programme begins in the present then tracks back and forth in time before returning to the Here and Now. In an introduction to his published radio feature *Sunbeams in his Hat* (14<sup>th</sup> July 1944), MacNeice's portrait of Chekov, the poet explains the difficulties of writing such programmes:

The basic problem of such a portrait is condensation – how to select a few significant 'shots' and put them coherently together in a little space. For this programme I used the method of the *flash-back*. Beginning with Tchekov on the morning of the day of his death I ended with him that evening; phases of his earlier life were presented through flash-backs. This method can be confusing and irritating, though when it comes off it provides tension and unity. (*Persons from Porlock, and Other Plays for Radio* 69)

Although applied in an even more condensed form than in *Sunbeams in his Hat*, this technique is used to compelling effect in 'The Death of an Old Lady'. The poem begins, like the radio feature, on the morning of her death:

At five in the morning there were grey voices  
Calling three times through the dank fields  
The ground fell away beyond the voices  
Forty long years to the wrinkled lough  
That had given a child one shining glimpse  
Of a boat so big it was named Titanic. (517)

The poem had been inspired by MacNeice's experience, with his sister, of hearing strange voices calling across nearby fields the night before his stepmother died. This, of course, is the opening event of the poem and the 'grey voices' which echo across the 'dank fields' create a chill and sombre atmosphere, as though the reader has entered a strange, sinister fairy tale or dreamscape. The scene quickly shifts from present to past and the striking image

of the ground falling away beyond the voices may have been inspired by his work in radio in which a landscape evoked by voices can be quickly faded out as a new group of voices are faded in to conjure a new environment and a different time period. Thus in the second stanza, the haunting voices which opened the poem are replaced by the more frenetic 'Shipyard voices at five in the morning': the busy talk of men working forty years ago on the construction of the Titanic. This imagined sound, in consort with the image of the newly forged Titanic, suggests industry, activity and progress; they cast in moving relief the 'old tired lady' sailing 'towards her iceberg calm and slow.' These shipyard voices (like the grey voices), and all that they evoke, are also eventually faded out and in the final two lines of the stanza all we can hear are the faint metallic noises of the ship's maiden voyage: 'We hardly hear the screws, we hardly / Can think her back her four score years.'(517) Like the woman's past, these sounds seem to retreat into the distance, straining the memory, and ultimately dying away. The poem's final stanza, in contrast to the previous two, begins in silence: all voices have 'called and ceased'. This stillness resonates powerfully into the final scenes of the poem in which the old woman edges slowly towards the ultimate silence of death:

The daffodils in her garden waited  
To make a wreath, the iceberg waited;  
At eight in the evening the ship went down. (517)

The caesura created by the semi-colon here suggests an intake of breath, subliminally suggesting the instant in which MacNeice's step-mother drew her last breath and perhaps also the catastrophic moment, as time seemed to stop, when the Titanic was fatally struck by the waiting iceberg. Past and present coalesce powerfully in the stark, climactic line of the poem as the bare and factual description gains powerful resonance from the preceding context. The image (or 'shots') of an empty garden, the floral wreath and the sinking Titanic, are potent tropes in the popular imagination and MacNeice employs them in a delicate, understated manner. The focus on the precise hour of his step-mother's death suggests the poet's preoccupation with the inexorable passing of Time, a theme which haunts many of his last poems. Yet it also completes the narrative arc of the poem from dawn to dusk: the twice repeated - 'At five in the morning' becomes 'At eight in the evening', compressing remembered scenes from a lifetime into the frame of a single day (a technique successfully employed in *Sunbeams in His Hat*). The unadorned and precise quality of the verse in the poem, the potent use of sound-effects and silence, the adroit intercutting of contrasting voices and the technique of aural flashback all derive, in part, from MacNeice's radio work in which they were standard practices and modes.



*Visitations* not only proved to be MacNeice's most innovative volume for decades but also his most self-reflexive, with several poems interrogating the poetic process itself, and in some cases suggesting or even embodying his evolving aesthetic. The sequence 'Donegal Triptych', for example, points backwards to earlier poems, in that its formal arrangement, in three interconnected movements, echoes the symphonic, interwoven structure of the poems in *Ten Burnt Offerings*. However, part one of the poem points forward to later forms of poetry. In this section, MacNeice examines the prosaic repetitions and routine of existence, as well as the seemingly recurrent cycle of historical process:

But arrival? Go your furthest,  
The Muse unpacks herself in prose;  
Once arrived, the clocks disclose  
That each arrival means returning.

Returning where? To speak of cycles  
Rings as false as moving straight  
Since the gimlet of our fate  
Makes all life, all love, a spiral. (498)

The idea of life, love and history as a 'spiral' anticipates MacNeice's statement, on his last book of poems *The Burning Perch* (1963), that 'most of these poems are two-way affairs or at least spiral ones: even in the most evil picture the good things...are still there round the corner.' ('The Burning Perch' 1). According to this rationale, life is an activity of perpetual beginning and becoming as one strives for what is always just out of grasp or 'round the corner'. Life as a moving spiral however can also be understood as a structural, as well as conceptual, phenomenon of his later poetry in which many of the speakers or various personae seem to spin outwards in space and time towards a distant other or rotate inwards towards a still centre as if drawn by an irresistible centripetal force. The narrative arc of these poems may well have roots in MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* in which Roland travels, though intermittently, in an ever decreasing spiral towards his ultimate goal. And, just as in *The Dark Tower*, the narrative spiral which underpins many of MacNeice's late poems not only moves (or is moving) between Good and Evil, but also between inside and outside worlds, between depth and surface, memory and future, solitariness and communication, and open and closed vistas.

The most obvious and perhaps most important influence that MacNeice's radio work was to have on his late poetry was in how it allowed the poet to develop, and test the limits of, the parable form as variously applied in many of his plays and features. Beginning with *Visitations*, parable increasingly came to the fore in MacNeice's poetry, and in many of these late poems the poet adapts the form in a manner first pioneered or worked out on radio. While it is true that MacNeice first began to experiment with dual-plane dramatic writing in earlier stage plays such as *Station Bell* (1934) and *Out of the Picture* (1937), radio offered a much more suitable medium in which to adapt parable and the vast majority of his parable plays were written for radio. Indeed, the opportunity to write for radio was one of the most important factors in perpetuating and deepening his interest in parable writing. In *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice states:

... it was the medium itself propelling me ... sound radio, thanks to the lack of any visual element, is very well able, when attempting fantasy, to achieve the necessary suspension of disbelief ... it tempts one, more than stage does, and far more than television, to experiment in modern morality plays or parable plays. (9)

Radio's appeal to the auditory (as opposed to visual) imagination meant that MacNeice had greater freedom to construct what he referred to as the 'special world' of parable; repeated spatial, temporal or contextual shifts are easily achievable on radio (as compared to stage) and radio plays can veer from fantastical worlds to naturalistic settings, from internal dreamscapes to external panoramas, from the stone age to modernity, with credibility and fluidity. As Kathleen McCracken astutely observes, radio is a particularly effective medium for the portrayal of the special world of MacNeicean parable in which an apparently objective reality frequently gives way to a fantastical dreamscape or chilling nightmare world: 'Whereas the theatre must realise the fantasy element so literally that it risks making the special world comic, even ludicrous, the mental and subjective visualisation elicited by radio bolsters the analogy between actual and imaginary phenomena.' (254) As already revealed, the most enduring and successful of all MacNeice's radio-parables was *The Dark Tower* and, speaking of the play's parabolic structure, Donald McWhinnie comments:

I think it is true to say that Sound Radio as much, if not more than, any other medium demands this double – or multi plane approach, if only because it seems to exist so primitively on one plane only. The single plane radio work may be worthy; it will probably also be dull and untrue, and usually is. (68)

Parable writing and radio, therefore, made an excellent marriage: the special world of the parable could be convincingly constructed in a medium which encouraged the necessary 'suspension of disbelief' in the audience, while the demands of the mass audience, who were seeking entertainment and 'story', compelled the writer towards a dual plane approach in which complex themes and ideas could be integrated into the text without disrupting the dramatic arc of the narrative.

One of the earliest and most explicit examples of how MacNeice's radio-parable aesthetic began to influence and become integrated into his later poetry can be observed in the poem 'The Burnt Bridge' (1955). This poem adapts the parabolic modes used in *The Dark Tower* and *Prisoner's Progress* into the lyric form while also repeating several of the former radio-play's symbols and images. The poem also draws on the traditional ballad mode, which like radio drama, was designed to be vocalised (sung or spoken) and to appeal to the auditory imagination of its listeners. Written in quatrains patterned in the scheme a-b-a-c, 'The Burnt Bridge' has a ballad's economy of vocabulary, rhyme and frequent alliteration which lull the reader into acceptance, allowing the world of the poem to unfold smoothly even though its reality is constantly changing. While MacNeice had used the ballad form before in earlier lyrics such as 'The Streets of Laredo' and 'Bagpipe Music', his deployment of it in this poem is more compact, elusive and dense in meaning. This change in execution may well have been influenced by MacNeice's experimentation with ballad elements in radio folktale programmes such as *The Nosebag*, (1944) and the 'Heartless Giant' (1946) in which the ballad form is used in a more meaningful, less transparently extravagant manner.

The first line of the poem begins the action of the narrative *in medias res* as though the first section of the story has already been recounted by the poem's narrator, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps:

So, passing through the rustic gate,  
He slammed it to (it broke in two)  
As he took quick strides to tempt his fate  
And the world ahead was daylight. (513)

The opening conjunction 'so' lacks a preceding connective and syntactically, at least, the sentence which makes up the first stanza appears incongruous. Yet the verse seems to flow easily and fluidly so that the reader has no time to ponder such a syntactical paradox. The second line in which the sound of 'to' invokes the elliptical phrase 'it broke in two' implies that the narrative, like the progress of dream, is bound together by strange, arbitrary psycho-acoustic connections: in this case, the mirroring of a word sound across the line. The next

stanza seems to deepen the mystery surrounding the man's strange journey while maintaining the direct, seemingly open voice of the first stanza.

But when he reached the haunted coombe,  
Glancing left, glancing right,  
On either ridge he glimpsed his doom  
And the world ahead was darkness. (513)

Like *The Dark Tower*, the strange landscape of the poem seems to have a looming yet mysterious significance, suggesting a plane of meaning running just below the surface. The image of the haunted coombe is richly symbolic: evoking ghosts, possibly of the man's past, and, if read in the context of recent history, possibly ghosts of the millions who died in the Second World War. The subsequent image in a later stanza of the man clambering through a 'barbed wire fence' could also be read as evoking the terrifying spectacle of a Concentration camp. The glance left and right may have political overtones suggesting the totalising ideologies of communism and fascism which had perpetuated so much bloodshed during the war and continued to do so. This is supported by the fact that on each ridge could be glimpsed doom suggesting the catastrophe which was about to unfold. All that is left for the man to do is to try to hold the road between the two extremes

In pursuit of the object of his quest – the 'long-lost dragon' which 'lurked ahead' - the man proceeds 'against his will' into a dark wood. There are strong echoes of *The Dark Tower* here in which Roland, under the oppressive influence of his Mother and duty-bound by the dictates of family tradition, embarks on a quest to challenge an immortal Dragon. In the course of his journey he proceeds through a haunted forest in which he is plagued by chilling bird sounds; this scene too is echoed in 'The Burnt Bridge':

And the air in the wood was dark and tense,  
The world was tense and tortured.

So on he went and the wood went on,  
With boughs a-creak, with birds a-croak ... (514)

This bristling, tormented environment recalls not only *The Dark Tower* but also the nightmare landscapes of Browning's *Childe Roland*, the radio-play's source. However, unlike the poem's literary predecessors, the quest leads not to a Dragon but to a 'bridge and a shining lady':

She stood where the water bubbled bright  
On the near bank, the known bank;  
He took her hand and they struck a light  
And crossed that bridge and burnt it. (514)

The man's encounter with the lady in the poem is just as climactic as Roland's with the dragon; by crossing the river from the 'known bank' to the unknown, an image invoking the fabled crossing of the Rubicon, it seems as though an irrevocable step into new symbolic territory has been taken. The lady's dismissal of the original quest - 'Dragons? She said, Let dragons be' - reminds of Sylvie's unsuccessful attempts to dissuade Roland from his mission. However, unlike Sylvie, the shining Lady convinces the man to abandon his quest and they eventually come to 'a golden strand' finding that now, 'all the world was daylight' (514). The poem's movement in the final stanzas from darkness to light, from loneliness to love, begins now to recall the final sequence of *Prisoners Progress* in which it becomes apparent that the escape-quest up the mountain is more important as a psychological journey away from isolation towards communion and love. The poem seems to become a parable of unexpected intimacy rather than confrontation and doom, yet its fractured parallels with *The Dark Tower* give the poem a greater depth, reminding that there are other endings and choices which have been avoided.

The poem's final message is difficult to decode and its ambiguity is reflected in critical accounts of the poem. Marsack argues that the formal and phrasal similarities between the first and last stanza suggest that 'some dragon still has to be vanquished, that the finding of love is only a beginning, that paradise soon ends.'(118) McDonald, however, offers a different reading and proposes the 'lady as the true object of the quest, the "daylight" in contrast to the dragon's darkness which effects a profound change' (172). Certainly the underlying moral of the poem is less comprehensible than *The Dark Tower* in which the quest had a more tangible ethical impetus and historical context. Indeed, another reading, could propose the man's journey as into the afterlife; for, just before the man crosses the river, the narrator tells us: 'And he knew in his bones he was all but dead / Yet that death was half the story.' The crossing of the river could therefore be seen as his leaving the mortal realm and moving into a strange afterlife in which the normal rules of reality no longer apply: the poem ends as the man and the lady approach a paradoxically 'shoreless' sea to 'board a ship sunk years before'(515). What is remarkable about the poem is that it smoothly integrates a rich, multivalent symbolism into a comprehensible and compelling narrative. As in *The Dark Tower*, the poet is concerned to make the story concrete, allowing the deeper, more complex nuances of the text to filter through to the listener's imagination in a less consciously processed manner. However, unlike the radio play the poem is perhaps less

bound by an underlying political or ethical framework, and in the true ballad tradition, furnishes no moral. In this it is closer to MacNeice's later radio parable *The Prisoner's Progress*, which if not an explicit parable furnishes a number of possible parabolic readings.

### III

In MacNeice's next book of poems, *Solstices* (1961), his use of parable becomes increasingly prominent: he notes in the *Bulletin* that the volume contains a 'large number of overt or covert parables' (2) and several of these parables are deeply informed by MacNeice's radio writing. His radio play 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' (25<sup>th</sup> July 1959), based on a Norwegian folk tale which personifies the Four Winds must surely have been the inspiration behind the poem 'Sleeping Winds' which is divided into four sections, each revolving around the 'North', 'East', 'West' and 'South' winds respectively. 'Dark Age Glosses', a sequence divided into four inter-connected poems, is greatly informed by MacNeice's three radio plays on the Njal Saga broadcast in 1947 – 'The Death of Gunnar' (11<sup>th</sup> March 1947), 'The Burning of Njal' (12<sup>th</sup> March 1947), and 'Grettir the Strong' (27<sup>th</sup> July 1947) – while also incorporating elements of another more recent play *They Met on Good Friday* (8<sup>th</sup> December 1959) a 'sceptical historical romance' concerning the death-in-victory of Brian Boru at the Battle of Clontarf.

The four poems of 'Dark Age Glosses' are connected in their uses of historical and legendary narratives to cast a light on the present. The first poem of the sequence, titled 'on the Venerable Bede', uses the Bede's image of the swallow in the barn to suggest how parable might evolve and be received in the Anglo-Saxon era:

The great wooden hall with long fires down the centre,  
Their feet in the rushes, their hands tearing meat.  
Suddenly high above them they notice a swallow enter  
From the black storm and zigzag over their heads,  
Then out once more into the unknown night;  
And that, someone remarks, is the life of man. (539)

The conclusively delivered and apparently definitive parable, however, seems to leave the feasters in a state of puzzlement as they begin to unpick its meanings and to interrogate what it implies: 'How can the world/ or the non-world beyond harbour a bird?'; 'They close their eyes that smart from the woodsmoke: 'how / can anyone even guess his whence and whither?' The poem is commenting on its own processes, implicitly questioning whether parable can be condensed into unambiguous exegesis, that 'Glosses' of this nature are

possible. This scepticism about the capacity of parable to mean with precision in relation to life extends in the fourth poem of the sequence to History's capacity to give a definitive, objective account of the lives of those in the past. The poem, titled 'On The Four Masters' covers the same historical battle as *They Met on Good Friday* and, like the play, it attempts to revise the nostalgic view of this period as a 'golden age' of Irish history, seeking to offer a more humanistic account of the idealised High King Brian, who becomes, in the poem's rendering, an overly ambitious, ageing ruler whose eighty years 'Caught in a web of largely his own intrigue, soured him with power and rusted him with blood'. (541) Yet the point of the poem is not to moralise on the short-comings of Brian, but rather to invoke comparison between our own times and those accounts of world's past: in this it is similar to *They Met on Good Friday*, of which MacNeice states: 'The play has no clear moral, unless *plus ça change*, but I hope it will open a window on to a strange world which yet in a way may seem familiar.' (*SPLM* 264) This sense of familiarity, of intuited parallels, between the world of the present and the legendary past pervades the second and third poems of the sequence. In 'On the Njal Saga' a 'tall blonde dabbing scent behind her ears' cursing her 'defenceless' lover evokes the scene of Gunnar's betrayal by his 'exulting' wife who leaves her husband unarmed to face his enemies. In 'On the Grettir Saga', an alcoholic 'burly major' who died in an explosion reminds the speaker of Grettir, 'the strong man of Iceland who also died / Under the frown of the safe men'. (539) MacNeice's conception of Grettir in this poem - 'An outrageous outlaw' with a 'Temper uncertain' - is much closer to the portrayal of the flawed, arrogant hero of the radio play 'Grettir the Strong' than the previous 'Grettir' of the much earlier poem, 'Eclogue from Iceland'(1936), who is conceived as a paragon of positive action. Grettir in the later poem has a more understated heroism emanating from his keen awareness and stoic acceptance of his doomed fate:

But, unlike the major, Grettir was cursed,  
 Haunted by eyes in the dark, on his desolate  
 Rock on the fringe of the Arctic knew  
 The fear no man had ever induced in him,  
 And thus waited his doom. Where  
 The major, who also was doomed, slept sound  
 And was merely cursed by the curse of his time. (540)

The pertinent comparison drawn here between Grettir and his twentieth century counterpart suggests, as Longley notes, a 'lost heroic and spiritual consciousness.' (*LMAS* 123) And the third poem in the sequence, 'On the Njal Saga', similarly posits the idea of past histories filtering into present to inflect our understanding of the world: even the tragic death of

Gunnar, the poem argues, began ‘one great saga casting from those dark/ Ages a lighthouse ray.’ (540) The interconnected four-part structure of the poems in ‘Dark Age Glosses’ – their subtle thematic and conceptual overlap - reminds of MacNeice’s formal method in *Ten Burnt Offerings*. While the framing ideas of the sequence – that of similarity and difference through history as well as the unpredictable manner in which certain events and actions ripple through time – would have been suggested to the poet by his radio work on the Njal Sagas and *The Battle of Clontarf*.

As ‘Dark Age Glosses’ suggests, the lyric poems in *Solstices* were generally not as self-contained as the shorter poems of MacNeice’s previous books of poetry. Each poem within the volume generally gains a deeper and more complex resonance when read as part of a greater whole, bearing out MacNeice’s observation that he found the poems in *Solstices* ‘mostly to be scored for the same set of instruments’. (‘Solstices’ 2) While there is a similar tonality throughout the volume, lyric units tend to be arranged in concentrated clusters, each with a slightly varied approach. There are several sequences, for example, in which four linking lyrical poems (with their own sub-titles) are drawn together under one main title, such as ‘Indoor Sports’, ‘Nature Notes’, ‘Sleeping Winds’ and ‘Country Weekend’. Other poems, while not as explicitly framed together are linked by a recurring theme or approach. Such poems include: the sequence of four parable poems unified by the landscape of Regent’s Park (‘The Park’, ‘The Lake in the Park’, ‘Dogs in the Park’ and ‘Sunday in the Park’); two poems of personal reminiscence, ‘The Atlantic Tunnel’ and ‘Homage to Wren’; four travel poems, ‘Indian Village’, ‘Jungle Clearance Ceylon’, ‘Half Truth from Cape Town’(August, 1959) and ‘Solitary Travel’(August, 1959); and two poems related to the varied experience of dream, ‘Good Dream’ and ‘Bad Dream’. Perhaps the most distinct of the above poetic sequences is the last in which the landscape of dream is more fully exploited than in the rest of the volume. The integration of dream logic into the parable mode was to become increasingly common and developed in MacNeice’s last book of poems which includes several remarkable dream-parables.

## V

Dream and parable had been closely connected in MacNeice’s imagination for a considerable time and when explaining why he was attracted to parable writing personally, in *Varieties of Parable*, the poet gave as his first reason that he had ‘from childhood been a steady dreamer (I mean in the literal sense)’(7). Before reading Freud or other psychologists, MacNeice had taken it for granted that dreams were opaquely attached to and interwoven with his own real world, and he remembered ‘in all periods of my life having dreams with a fair degree of shape ... often akin to fairy stories’(7). While MacNeice had experimented with nightmare



images and sensations in his earlier poetry, dream logic and dreamscape only became consistently and coherently integrated into his poetry in his last two books of poems. However, MacNeice had been making sustained use of the device of dream and nightmare in numerous radio programmes prior to his poetic adoption of the technique. One of the main reasons that the poet had so consistently chosen to include a dream sequence or construct narratives around the logic of dream in his radio-writing was, as we have seen already, that these techniques were particularly suited to the innate qualities of the radio medium. In several of MacNeice's radio programmes – including *Sunbeams in His Hat*, 'One Eye Wild', *Prisoner's Progress* and *The Administrator* – dreams are woven into the action of the drama naturalistically; usually the audience becomes privy to the dream-narrative of a character who falls asleep or who has been knocked unconscious. And while the dream-sequences in these programmes often last for extended periods, meaning that that the dream world gradually seems to overtake the previous 'reality', the dreamer always wakes up or regains consciousness bringing the listener back to the original world of the text. In other radio programmes, such as 'Ring in the New', *The Dark Tower*, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, and, as we shall see, *The Mad Islands* the narrative is more fully constructed out of the strange and flexible logic of dream; different planes of reality rapidly bleed into one another in the unstable landscape of the drama and, unlike the more naturalistic plays, there is no definite boundary between what is a conscious, objective environment and an unconscious, subjective projection. Yet the texts have their own tangible and coherent texture, approaching what MacNeice referred to in his introduction to *The Dark Tower* as 'the solidity of a dream' (SPLM 114) Radio, then, due to its unique capacity to coherently and convincingly represent the fluid and fluctuating world of dream, offered MacNeice an ideal medium through which to experiment with and hone his dream aesthetic.

The dreams that tended to persist in MacNeice's imagination, although incorporating certain fairy tale elements, were often characterised by a chilling, foreboding quality characteristic of nightmare. A classic example of this is the dream MacNeice had as a teenager (discussed in chapter 3 in relation to its integration into the final scenes of *The Dark Tower*) in which he comes across a lurid scene of the crucifixion and frantically seeks to avoid the disapproving gaze of his father. In this dream there is a sense of fear and paralysis in the face of encroaching doom, a feeling that events are moving inexorably forward while the passive, debilitated dreamer can only gaze on in horror. This nightmare scenario, in which a person feels locked into an unfolding narrative, over which they have no control, is repeated in many of MacNeice's dream-parable poems and is particularly evident in the first poem of the two dream poems in *Solstices*.

'Bad Dream' is a disturbing mini-drama in which a man comes to a bizarre house designed from surreal materials: 'The window was made of ice'; 'The ceiling was one great

web' (567). Stalking through the building are dreadful animals of inverted proportions: 'Bears the size of flies' and 'Flies the size of men' (567). The poem brilliantly employs nightmare images but also builds a disquieting soundtrack perfectly in key with the visual scene setting: tiny men are heard 'phutscuttering' down holes ; flies are described as 'cantankering' in webs, while a distant burglar alarm can be heard 'filibustering' in a desolate church steeple. Such sound-effects provide an aural dimension to the nightmare which is perhaps more subtle, and more pregnant with horror than the visual description. Indeed, the poem has an extremely radiogenic quality as disembodied voices pester the man from out of the ether and fantastical animals make sounds impossible to their species:

Electronic voices nagged at him out of the filtered air  
The eyes on the hoarding winked  
He knocked at the door of the house, the bears buzzed and the  
flies  
Howled to him to come in. (568)

The nagging 'electronic voices' remind of the electronic bird-voice which mocks Roland as he moves through the murky forest in *The Dark Tower* and, as in the play and the symbol of the parrot in *Autumn Sequel*, they suggest a mechanised mindlessness, perhaps invoking the de-humanising force of industrial mass production in the contemporary world. The 'buzzing' bears and 'howling' flies are effective aural sleight-of-hand as one animal sound is passed off as originating from another in the weird, inverted reality of the poem. This form of fantastical psycho-acoustic inversion was second-nature to MacNeice from his work in radio programmes such as 'The Golden Ass' (3<sup>rd</sup> November 1944), 'Cupid and Psyche' (7<sup>th</sup> November 1944) and 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon', in which the poet often had to aurally suggest animals and creatures which inverted the natural order of things. His ability to do so, of course, was greatly increased by the medium in which he was working: as he points out in his 1963 introduction to *Christopher Columbus*: 'The complete lack of the visual element allows the radio playwright to jump about not only in time and place but on different planes of reality. Thus it is admirably suited to fantasy: even Cocteau's grotesqueries in the cinema tend to creak or appear 'contrived' but in radio a witch or a talking animal can comparatively easily escape the suggestion of pantomime.' (SPLM 4) The metamorphoses, apparitions and sudden transitions of fantasy and folktale stories, which the poet experimented with in his radio programmes, are devices increasingly used in MacNeice's later poetry although generally to produce a more unnerving effect. Thus, in 'Bad Dream', as the man enters the house a ghostly wisp of white materialises from the floor in front of him and he watches as it 'clawed the air two inches from the floor' before turning

into 'The arm of a girl'(568). As the man stares on agog, he 'just can hear her Voice Say: Wait! Wait till I grow.' This faint voice then instigates another eerie transformation:

The arm grew and the fingers groped for help, the voice  
That had grown with the arm, the voice  
That was now a woman's about to be saved or lost was calling  
For help. He could not move. (568-9)

In the strange logic of nightmare, the voice ages as the limb grows; as in radio, MacNeice complements the imagery of the narrative with the appropriate aural detail, which serves to make the surreal sprouting arm more disturbingly tangible. Despite the rapid transmogrification of the objects surrounding the man, and the insistent, hair-raising call of the voice he remains firmly rooted to the spot in a state of terrible paralysis. The poem then builds to a shuddering acoustic pitch as a cacophonous medley of noise erupts from every direction:

Then everything buzzed and boomed. The chaps outside on the  
lamp posts  
Hooted, broke wind, and wept,  
Men the size of flies dropped down the neck while the mansized  
Flies gave just three cheers  
And he could not move. The darkness under the floor gave just  
One shriek. The arm was gone. (569)

It is as though the sound-world of the nightmare has suddenly been amplified to preternatural levels as the macabre environment springs into action; the 'chaps' outside had previously been 'corpses dangling' in an 'endless file'. The poem finishes with a chilling aural diminution as the landscape of howling despair gives way to a solitary, shrill cry, before ending on the empty silence of the stark final sentence. The finely orchestrated acoustic ebb and flow of the poetic narrative and the particular attention paid to sound-effects and quality and pitch of voice reveal the poem to have been deeply informed by a radiogenic approach.

The second poem in the sequence 'Good Dream', a sort of palinode to 'Bad Dream', employs a similar dream-parable technique, while also using voice and speech as integral to the poem's working out and powerful use of sound effects. Like 'Bad Dream', the poem is set in the apparently ordinary surroundings of a house, except that the male protagonist does not approach it from outside, but wakes up in his 'usual room' on the inside. However, on waking, everything begins to become suddenly strange and the man is unable to find the

switch to his reading lamp. Groping for his book in the dark, he feels it 'suddenly gently taken away' from him and out of the darkness emerges a warm voice telling him that he is not, in fact, awake and not in his own room: this darkness surrounding him takes on a biblical dimension as the Voice paraphrases the book of Genesis: '*in the beginning/ Is darkness upon the face of the earth*'. The man, however, counters the Voice's claims:

I tell you this is my usual room;  
I can put out my hand from the bed and feel the ...  
*Yes?*

The wall – but I can't. Where  
Has the wall gone? My bed was against it.  
*What was against it?*

Why is your voice  
Moving away? Why do I hear  
Water over it?

*There is water*  
*Between us, I am here on the bank.*  
But I need light to row.

*No*  
*No light until you reach this bank.*  
*Feel for your oars.*

Here are my oars.  
*Then lose that rope. Are you ready? Row (570)*

MacNeice's lines bear all the qualities of effective radio dialogue. The poet concisely conveys information about the character's surroundings and also his position relative to the other speaker while maintaining the natural to-and-fro rhythm of the conversation. The reader is involved more closely in the man's ordeal as he/she must also perceive the man's reality almost as he does, purely through sound; although he is literally and figuratively 'in the dark', by listening to the prompts of the mysterious, Socratic voice and staying alert to the sounds surrounding him, the man (like the reader) begins to gain some understanding of his environment. The surrounding darkness also intensifies the dreamlike quality of the man's ordeal as the apparently quotidian and familiar moment of waking in his bedroom segues into a bizarre boat journey towards a disembodied voice. The imagined darkness surrounding the man means that the acoustic elements of the narrative naturally gain more significance and this technique was one of the most established and effective in radio writing, and one MacNeice would have learned and used in his very early days at the BBC writing

propaganda scripts. The poet's capacity to swiftly and seamlessly change setting in the poem - from bedroom to otherworldly voyage - without recourse to an omniscient narrator draws on his experience of writing radio drama in which he often preferred to deftly weave changes of setting into dialogue or through the use of evocative acoustic cues.

As the man gradually makes his journey across the water, his room expands to become indivisible from the natural world and this transformation is potently evoked through an accumulation of sound effects: he 'hears the ripples round the chair legs, hears/ Larksong high in the chimney, hears rustling / Leaves in the wardrobe ...' and as he rows to the other bank there is a 'Splutter of water, crackle and grinding / of reeds and twigs; then bump.' (571) The simple, onomatopoeic 'bump' is enough to evoke the abrupt end of the journey in the mind of the reader, who has been primed by the poet to pay particular attention to the sound-effects of the poem. Having reached the other side the man seizes the hand coming out of the dark - 'the hand that is hers, / Hers, none other's' - and scrambles up the bank. Unlike 'Bad Dream' the male protagonist is able to overcome his inertia and grasp the hand of the woman calling to him. This fairytale journey, constructed, in part, out of MacNeice's private mythology, achieves an expanded resonance at the end as the poet again invokes Genesis:

    'And God  
Said Let there be light.'  
        His usual room  
Has lost its usual walls and found  
Four walls of sky, incredible blue  
Enclosing incredible green enclosing  
Her, none other.  
            Completely awake. (571)

This final vision seems almost preternaturally vivid, etching on one's consciousness, akin to the visual hyperaesthesia which briefly occurs when one awakens in a well-lit room. MacNeice has carefully constructed the poem so as to heighten the effect of the final image, by withholding all visual detailing until the final moment: almost everything up until this point has been directed to the reader's auditory imagination. Thus, when the narrative shifts from a world of darkness surrounded by voice and sound effect to one of dazzling light, the colour and pattern of the landscape seem to gain an intense clarity and razor-sharp focus. The movement within the poem from darkness to light, from closed to open vistas, can be understood on several levels (religious, psychoanalytical, philosophical, emotional), and the journey through dark waters draws on images of natural and cosmic birth, the light being 'first' in several senses. This reverses the trend in 'Bad Dream' which moves through lost

love, spiritual and emotional dislocation, before ending in an atmosphere of horrifying inertia. Both poems draw on MacNeice's radio experiments with dream sequences, voice tones, dialogue, and sound effect, and this application of radio techniques into the lyric poem would continue, with even greater success, in his last book of poems, *The Burning Perch* (1963).

## VI

A crucial radio play in the continuing evolution of MacNeice's dream-parable aesthetic was *The Mad Islands* (4<sup>th</sup> April 1962) which was written in the second half of 1961, around the same time that MacNeice was composing several of the poems that would eventually be included in *The Burning Perch*. MacNeice decided to write the play after another project based on the Arthurian romances had been rejected by the Third Programme, and as a response to those who 'for the last decade or more' had called on him 'to write "another *Dark Tower*"' (qtd. in Coulton 182). Though MacNeice wrote the play in a short period of time, it had a long gestation and he had mentioned the idea to the actor Denys Hawthorne at the beginning of his radio career (Coulton 183). The play is a reworking of the ninth-century voyage tale, the Gaelic *Immram Mael Duin* and the poet's chief source for the play was P.W. Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances* although he had also read the Tennyson poem 'The Voyage of Maeldune' (1880) on the same tale. In the original version, when Maelduin is born he is fostered out by his mother to her friend, the queen, because his father has been killed by raiders. When he grows to be a man he discovers he is not the queen's child, and returns to his mother's homeland to find out the truth about his father's death. Against his mother's advice Maelduin embarks on a quest of vengeance against the raiders and sails west in a curragh, accompanied by his three foster brothers. On their peripatetic sea-journey they encounter thirty-one strange islands before Maelduin relinquishes the idea of revenge and is reconciled to the raiders who had killed his father.

In *The Mad Islands* MacNeice preserves some of the original islands and also certain earlier characters such as the Jester and the Funster, and a seal-woman Skerrie (a Celtic motif) who protects Muldoon on his voyage. Unlike the original tale, Muldoon's mother in *The Mad Islands*, like Roland's in *The Dark Tower*, stokes his desire to avenge his father's death and towards the end of the quest he hears her voice from across the sea encouraging him to complete his quest. However, unlike Roland, Muldoon eventually abandons the quest after discovering that it is false: it transpires that the man Muldoon believes had killed his father actually *is* his father and his mother's desire for vengeance was based on the fact that he had been unfaithful to her. The play ends with his parents' death and Muldoon's loss of hatred: 'I thought that vengeance was mine but the fates took it away from me and what was I avenging anyway?' (349) The most important aspect of the quest therefore, has not been its

completion, but rather the journey towards that completion and the greater self-knowledge that Muldoon has achieved upon the voyage.

Formally speaking, the play was important to the poems of *The Burning Perch* because it allowed MacNeice to experiment with a modern version of the *immram* or Irish voyage tale: the characteristic feature of such a voyage, as Longley notes, is that 'it penetrates the beyond, visting "otherworld islands" which might be dream islands, or as MacNeice notes "parable islands"' (*LMAS*, 155). One aspect of *The Mad Islands* which MacNeice stresses are its anachronisms – he states, in fact, that 'half its point is its anachronisms' (*SPLM*, 307) – and they are designed to suggest the innate relevance that the dream-parable has for the contemporary world. This is most clearly illustrated in his portrayal of the alchemist who eventually becomes a nuclear scientist, destroying his 'Island of Progress' in a catastrophic explosion. Like Muldoon, several of the characters in MacNeice's last poems seem to travel into otherworldly, timeless zones of being, much like the islands in the play, which yet have objects and features characteristic of modern life. The structure of such poems as 'The Taxis', 'The Introduction', 'After the Crash' and 'Charon' (discussed below), in which characters rapidly and seamlessly move from a relatively 'normal' reality into various dream and nightmare worlds, would seem to have incorporated the flexible fast-moving narrative style and plasticity of environment of *The Mad Islands* which, according to MacNeice was 'essentially "radio"' (*SPLM* 305).

The first poem of MacNeice's *The Burning Perch*, 'Soap Suds', is one of his finest and brilliantly employs a dream-parable technique. It begins with a description of an apparently ordinary experience which rapidly and dramatically dissolves into bleak, nightmare territory, in which the speaker or protagonist of the poem suffers an unnerving dislocation from the familiar and knowable present. The poem's first stanza conveys a relatively quotidian act of remembering as a man is brought back to his childhood through the evocative scent of soap:

This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big  
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom  
open  
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a  
hoop  
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child. (577)

The poem quickly and magically moves backwards in time, in a Proustian manner, from the moment in the bathroom where the man smells the soap to a suddenly remembered scene from the past; the remarkable image of the surrounding walls dissolving into the world of childhood echoes the image of the ground falling away 'beyond the voices' in the opening

stanza of 'Death of an Old Lady'. MacNeice reinforces the temporal shift syntactically with the colon dividing past and present, while the image of the croquet ball rolling back to the mallet (standing on its head the usual progress of the game), faintly suggests the clichéd phrase: 'rolling back the years'. The atmosphere is one of enclosed calm, yet there is also an air of possibility and expectancy as the child grasps the mallet in readiness to strike. The house in the poem becomes a potent microcosm of the world in which the man was born as the various 'joys' of the house are listed and juxtaposed for symbolic effect: two 'great faded globes' are compared, 'one of the earth, one of the stars'; a static 'stuffed black dog in the hall' is contrasted with the more vital 'rabbit warren' and the bees outside in the garden; while an enclosed 'vine under glass' is balanced against the expanse of 'the sea'(577). All of these images contribute to the sense of a universe about to be explored and the sure-footed cataloguing of the various objects in and around the house also suggest a feeling of control, a mastery of one's environment through naming and classifying it. However, this feeling of composed awareness is quickly shattered as the poised mallet is finally set in motion in the third stanza:

And a grown-up voice cries Play! The mallet slowly swings,  
Then crack, a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall and the  
ball  
Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and  
then

Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn  
And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play!  
But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the  
hands  
Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child. (577)

The poem seems to explode into motion after the sudden call of the voice and the onomatopoeic 'crack' of the mallet. In keeping with the associative logic of dream, MacNeice performs an aural sleight-of-hand as the crisp sound of the mallet almost instantly becomes the low, echoic boom from the deathly 'dog-dark' hall. The sound of a 'gong', which had punctuated the opening scenes of *The Dark Tower* symbolising Roland's dead brother(s) and his doomed mission, is used in a similar way in this stanza acting as a prelude to the child's loss of individual will to inexorable forces outside his control. As the gong resounds disconcertingly and the ball begins to spin away from the mallet, the lines of the stanza create a rich sound-system supplying a meaning, which powerfully enhances the



denotative sense: the hard, alliterative plosives – ‘dog-dark’, ‘great gong’ etc. – combined with the series of closely crowded diphthongs suggest both the quick explosive force of the swung mallet and the over-powering low reverberations of the sounding gong. The lines unwind with a centrifugal momentum and the persistently repeated conjunctions suggest the inexorable, propulsive momentum of the ball (this is continued in the second stanza with the quick repetition of the word ‘hoops’ and the homophones ‘where’ and ‘were’). The aural texture of the opening two lines of the final stanza powerfully evoke the rapidly changing, vertiginous landscape which seems to parallel the spiralling, shifting nature of memory itself: the verse is dense in fricatives (particularly the voiceless ‘h’ and ‘s’) which, when spoken, produce a quick outrush of breath imbuing the language with speed and movement and leaving the speaker literally breathless before the end of each line. The final, overbearing, exclamatory shout from the angry voice dramatically signals the climax of the nightmare, as the poem circles back through time and out of memory to the present. As in the third stanza, the poem pivots on the sudden sound of a disembodied voice, both in terms of structure and narrative progression. The abruptness of the poem’s climax is perhaps an attempt to reproduce the experience of suddenly waking from a night terror, with the imagined sounds and blurred shapes of the nightmare still vividly reverberating through one’s mind. The poem’s deft inter-shuttling between a nightmare past and a more familiar present, while simultaneously maintaining a comprehensible narrative arc, parallels several dream sequences from MacNeice’s radio programmes; and particularly those of the play, *The Administrator* in which the central character, Jerry, experiences a series of strange dreams concerning his past (the scenes in which Jerry is dreaming bear the influence of Lewis Carroll’s narrative technique in *Alice and Wonderland* which, it is worth noting, would also seem to have strong parallels with the narrative style of ‘Soap Suds’). The use of sound and voice in the poem as integral to the expression of the dream narrative is particularly radiogenic; and so too is the way in which the aural fabric of the verse seems to respond to the sound effects of the poetic world, suggesting how they vibrate across the auditory imagination.

The poet’s keen awareness of the audio-imaginative potency of sound-effect in this poem must surely have been heightened by his work in radio in which the integrity and coherence of a radio-dramatic world could often be dismantled by an unsuitable or misplaced sound effect. The poet’s precise scrupulousness with regards to sound-effect in his radio programmes is underlined by a description, by Ved Mehta, of MacNeice at work recording his abridged version of *Faust* at the end of January, 1962:

‘Mephisto, can you drop your voice an octave or so?’ MacNeice said over the intercom.  
‘It should be deep.’

‘Like the blue sea, Louis?’ came the voice of Mephistopheles, in bass tones. He got a ripple of unsure laughter from the cast.

‘All right,’ MacNeice said. ‘Let’s take the scene through again.’... A signal light went on, and a second later the studio was transformed into a cosmic stage by contrapuntal voices of Mephistopheles, low and resonant, and Faust, high-pitched and distraught ... Except during occasional interruption from MacNeice (‘Mephisto, point up “decent” ... Faust, point down “ach”’), the poetry continued to vibrate and resound in the studio, but when Faust’s assistant made his entrance into the study, the drama came to a stop. ‘The door should be medieval – heavy and stiff on its hinges,’ the producer said to the engineer, ‘but it sounds modern’. None of the recordings from the sound-effects library of the B.B.C were right; it required the mixing of two records – the scraping of a bunch of keys on a table and the shuffling of a chair – to reproduce, many minutes later, the lumbering door. It was, however, the arrangements of the effects for Easter Sunday that caused the longest delay. Recordings of bells – from Indian cowbells to the bells of the Cologne Cathedral – were assembled and reassembled, until there was an epiphany of sound, a flood of joyous clanging. (46)

What is also apparent from Mehta’s description is MacNeice’s clear conception of how various voices should sound in the drama. MacNeice’s sensitivity to the various subtle moods and tones which could be generated by altering the quality and texture of voice would have been intensified by his work as a radio writer in which he had to “envisage” what kinds of voices’ which would be appropriate for his script (*SPLM*, 400). Obviously, MacNeice was unable to control how the reader hears the speakers in his poems but his concern in many poems to outline the character’s manner of vocalisation indicate his desire to achieve an effect, innate to radio, in which the voice adds subtle qualities and twists to the lexical sense of words – heightening or undercutting the meaning. Throughout the poems of his last three volumes, as has already been shown, there are an array of different, sometimes disembodied, voices all envisaged and carefully described by the poet: in ‘Donegal Triptych’, the poet is menaced by the ‘acid’, ‘cold’ voice which ‘chops and sniggers’(498); in ‘Half-Truth from Cape Town’ the speaker hears a ‘voice like a crazy clock that every ten / Minutes runs down’ (556); in ‘Death of an Old Lady’, haunting ‘grey voices’ merge with ‘shipyard voices’(517); in ‘Soap Suds’ a ‘grown-up voice’ becomes an unsettling ‘angry voice’(577); in ‘Good Dream’ a ‘warm voice’ becomes muffled and distant as though with ‘water over it’(570); in ‘The Rest House’ , the ‘shrill’ and ‘dark voices’ of ‘unknown children’ sift and splinter across the soundscape of the poem (505); in ‘The Messiah’, the poem’s speaker splits into two dialogic voices, whose lines are preceded with elliptical cues to maintain a conversational rhythm(533); in ‘The Wall’ the voices of well-wishers at a patient’s bedside

fade away to 'Different voices' behind a wall which are, disturbingly, 'Singing'(564); in 'Bad Dream' the protagonist is harassed by strange 'electronic voices', 'howling' flies and the solitary, whimpering voice of a disembodied arm (567-9).

MacNeice's experience of writing dialogue would also have focused his mind on the sound and rhythm of everyday speech and his attempt to write convincingly for his characters would have been aided by his radio colleagues with whom he often discussed whether dialogue 'rang true' (*SPLM* 407). The poet would also have gained feedback from the various Listener Reports on his plays which would have given him a snapshot of audience reaction to dialogue. MacNeice saw radio's foregrounding of speech sounds as a positive for poetry in general and argues in his essay 'A Plea for Sound'(1947), that, 'the goodness of words-as-spoken-and-heard is something that radio has restored to us in an age when even some of our poets write as if they were deaf-mutes.' (26) MacNeice's attentiveness to 'words-as-spoken-and-heard' in radio undoubtedly contributed to his ability to heighten and twist the cadences of the speaking voice in many of his late poems, often to startling original effect.

This is particularly evident in the poem 'Charon'(1962) which, like 'The Taxis' and 'Figure of Eight', compresses Man's journey through life into the frame of a single (and extremely singular) voyage on motorised transport. The poem's opening is extremely radiogenic, as the narrator offers a concise and compelling description which powerfully evokes a surrounding context, before a speaking voice weaves in to the narrative:

The conductor's hands were black with money:  
Hold on to your ticket, he said, the inspector's  
Mind is black with suspicion, and hold on to  
That dissolving map. (592)

Like the cabby in 'The Taxis', as we shall see, the bus conductor's uses a 'kind of sleight-of-hand colloquial' discourse in a similar manner to MacNeice's radio parables (*SPLM* 3). The somewhat paradoxical request to 'hold on' to a 'dissolving map' underlines the strange nightmare logic of the narrative and the density and duality of the poetic language: a 'dissolving map' could equally mean an abstract notion or a physical object, and to hold on to it could signify both a physical action or a more oblique act of the imagination or memory. The quick repetition of the word 'black', used initially in a purely descriptive way and then latterly in a darker, more figurative sense, foregrounds the close blend of the literal with nightmare in the poem and alerts the reader to the double-level method which MacNeice employs.

As in 'The Taxis' the world of the poem grows gradually weirder while retaining certain vestiges of reality. The landscape is simultaneously London and some otherworldly plane of reality deriving from myth and dream. As if to emphasize the idea that things are not always as they appear, that meaning is layered in the narrative, MacNeice draws a distinction between the visual and aural sense of the cityscape; this contrast highlights the way in which reality can sometimes be constructed and experienced in starkly different terms by different senses:

We moved through London,  
We could see the pigeons through the glass but failed  
To hear their rumours of wars, we could see  
The lost dog barking but never knew  
That his bark was as shrill as a cock crowing ... (592)

The verse manages to convey an uncanny silence inside the bus, as though the passengers are travelling in a sort of soundless bubble, an hermetically sealed space, partially cut off from exterior social or political forces. Outside the bus, the conflation of the sound of the dog barking and the cock crowing (both well-worn radio sound-effects in MacNeice's radio plays) deftly suggests the underlying mythical and religious contexts to the narrative: as noted earlier, the sound of the cock-crow in MacNeice's auditory imagination often implied St Peter's betrayal (see 'Schizophrene' for example) and the sound of a dog barking is often a 'bleak/ Oracle' (as in 'The Ear'). The lost dog in this poem may also be understood as Cerberus, the fearsome guardian of the river Styx.

'Charon' is structured so as to build momentum carefully, often employing repetition to potent effect: repeated phrases include 'we just jogged on' and 'black with money/suspicion/ obols'(592-3). The sense of calm inevitability evoked by the constant repetition makes the passengers' destination seems inescapable as an atmosphere of imminence pervades the journey. Having got to the foggy banks of the Thames, the bus finally stops and the conductor instructs those on it to 'Take the ferry'(593). The passengers are then dramatically confronted by the eponymous 'Charon', who in Greek mythology traditionally demanded an obol for passage across the Styx. MacNeice's conception of him may have been inflected by his familiarity with the stern, grim anti-heroes and ghosts of the Norse sagas, who spoke in a plain, terse and compact prose:

He looked at us coldly  
And his eyes were dead and his hands on the oar  
Were black with obols and varicose veins

Marbled his calves and he said to use coldly:

If you want to die you will have to pay for it. (593)

The blackness of the ferryman's hands disconcertingly reveals that he was also the bus conductor of the poem's opening. This creates a strange sense of circularity and entrapment, similar to 'Figure if Eight' and 'The Taxis', in which something routine and domestic turns into a sort of ambush. The adverb 'coldly' strikes with an accumulative force when repeated in the final line and one can almost hear the chill tone of the ferryman's voice in his dismissively blunt delivery. MacNeice's awareness of how an apparently flat statement could gain enormous subtlety and power from the speaking voice would have been brought home to him as a radio producer and in his introduction to *Christopher Columbus* he states that one can: 'write deliberately flat ... in radio, without sacrificing simplicity or lucidity, you can often leave the twisting to the voice.' (SPLM 397) The dead-pan quality of Charon's delivery imbues the final line with a greater charge and resonance than perhaps a furious or spiteful tone. As Marsack argues: 'The flatness of the closing statement is an example of that sleight-of-hand writing MacNeice spoke of admiringly in *Varieties of Parable*: it promises an end yet it goes on reverberating.' (148)

## VI

One of the qualities that MacNeice noted of his poems in *The Burning Perch* is that they are 'often trying to get out of the iambic groove' ('The Burning Perch' 1); this striving towards other verse rhythms is one of the major reasons for the volume's originality and had already been occurring in *Visitations* and *Solstices* as well. Poems are often structured not by strict meter but rather seem to evolve rhythmically out of strange quasi-musical refrains, powerful segments of speech and improvised conversational phrases, clichés and aphorisms. The poem 'The Taxis', one of the finest in *The Burning Perch*, exemplifies MacNeice's particularly innovative use of speech and the verse technique of refrain in his late poetry. Edna Longley has rightly pointed to MacNeice's admiration for Yeats's use of the refrain<sup>ii</sup> and it is clear from MacNeice's study of Yeats that he understood the varied effects which it could generate:

his [Yeats's] use of refrain is peculiar ... A refrain ... when it means anything, tends to be simpler in meaning than the rest of the poem; it gives the reader or hearer relief. Yeats's use of it, therefore, is often in two respects unusual. First the music of the refrain is often less obvious or smooth than that of the verses themselves, being sometimes flat, sometimes halting, sometimes strongly counterpointed. Secondly, his refrains tend to have either an intellectual meaning which is subtle and concentrated,

or a symbolist or nonsense meaning which hits the reader below the belt' (*Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 147)

'The Taxis', with its recurring 'tra-la' would seem an example of a MacNeicean refrain with a 'symbolist or nonsense meaning' however the repeated phrase, as Neil Corcoran has observed, is more precisely defined as a 'repetend'; that is: 'A recurring word, phrase or line. As distinguished from refrain, repetend usually refers to a repetition occurring irregularly rather than regularly in a poem, or to a partial rather than a complete repetition.' (Corcoran 219). MacNeice's particular use of it in this poem is significantly influenced by his radio programmes, in which snatches of ballad, nursery rhyme or popular tune often punctuate the narrative to produce effects ironically at odds with their original meaning: one of the most powerful examples of this technique occurs in *Prisoner's Progress* in which snippets of the nursery rhyme 'Lavenders' Blue' are played and then improvised throughout the play; while the words and music of the nursery rhyme have little import at the beginning of the play, acting as a familiar, incidental and comforting aural backdrop, they take on a much more profound and intensely sombre significance at the play's end (hitting one 'below the belt') when the song is played in sombre doleful tones. The chilling psycho-acoustic effect of the song's final deployment is intensified by its echoing of the blithe, joyous earlier version, (while also simultaneously subverting it): the first, more conventional, performance of the song provides the necessary foil for the later version, heightening the sense of irony and generating a more subtle feeling of horror. This disconcerting deconstruction of the gaiety and simplicity of the original nursery-rhyme is applied in an even more condensed and potent manner in 'The Taxis'. The four stanza poem begins in a fairly ordinary, straight-forward manner:

In the first taxi he was alone tra-la,  
No extras on the clock. He tipped ninepence  
But the cabby, while he thanked him, looked askance  
As though to suggest someone had bummed a ride. (583)

The rhythm and cadence of the verse and the insouciant use of 'tra-la', while not completely mirroring nursery rhyme or ballad forms, do create implicit audio-imaginative associations with these forms, which soothe and reassure through their subliminal familiarity: the lines also seem to demand a speaking or singing voice evoking the tradition of oral performance linked to these modes. The compact stanzas, and the clear description in simple words, also lull the reader into a relaxed state. Implicit in the designative, 'In the first taxi', is the

suggestion that there will be others, that the story will continue in digestible increments recapitulated each time by the recurring phrase and continuing (presumably) in the same familiar mode of transport. However, despite the assured seemingly benign progression of the narrative, there is also a charge of menace stirring beneath the surface, implied by the taxi driver's sceptical glance which suggests a mysterious free-loader has stalked away without paying his share. The second stanza, while initially mirroring the buoyant formal opening of the first, gradually moves into more disquieting territory:

In the second taxi he was alone tra-la  
But the clock showed sixpence extra; he tipped according  
And the cabby from out his muffler said: 'Make sure  
You have left nothing behind tra-la between you.' (584)

The integrity and dependability of the narrative voice have now been totally undermined as it becomes increasingly clear that the man is *not* in fact alone. The cabby's appropriation of the phrase 'tra-la' is particularly disconcerting as it becomes, in his version, a sardonic, parodying echo of the original; it has a deadening and disruptive effect on the rhythm and sound of the verse losing any propulsive energy it may have retained from the first stanza. The way in which it dissects the cabby's apparently thoughtful parting words is particularly unsettling. In the third stanza, in which yet more spectral passengers get into the taxi, the phrase seems almost automatic; it is as though it is stated in the first line simply to get it out of the way. By the fourth and final stanza, the 'tra-la' slips over into the second line, as the music of the verse begins to slow down, rather like a record playing at the wrong speed:

As for the fourth taxi, he was alone  
Tra-la when he hailed it but the cabby looked  
Through him and said: 'I can't tra-la well take  
So many people, not to speak of the dog-' (584)

The final use of 'tra-la' may well be a cloak for the exasperated taxi drivers use of expletive or a means of punctuating the sarcastic irritability of his final remark; it may also imply, at a more artistically self-reflexive level, the final deconstruction and reinvention of the nursery/ballad form in which the poem is written. Like 'Charon' the tone of voice, and the directness of phrasing, are perfectly pitched so that the final line shudders through the poem to startling effect.

Another poem which brilliantly uses refrain and speech in *The Burning Perch* is 'The Introduction' (1962), which echoes and vibrates with sound and voice in an extremely

radiogenic manner. The world of the poem, with its irrational transmutations and mocking dream manifestations, bears a strong resemblance to sections of radio plays such as *The Dark Tower* and *The Mad Islands*. It charts the experience of two people who have met at the wrong time in their lives; he is too old and she too young. Throughout, there is a sense that the surrounding environment is gaily mocking the very idea of a prospective romance between them, and that (as in the poem 'Bluebells') 'all green Nature has gone out of gear' (257); the 'grave glade' where the man and woman are introduced becomes by the poem's conclusion a haunting, verbally echoic, 'green grave', completing the poem's movement from tentative surface to darker nightmare depths. One of the most striking elements of the poem is the thrice repeated repetend 'Crawly crawly' interspersed throughout the narrative; part nursery-rhyme nonsense word/part sound-effect it seems to erupt into the poem moving against the grain of the verse and then forcing the rhythm:

They were introduced in a grave glade  
And she frightened him because she was young  
And thus too late. Crawly crawly  
Went the twigs above their heads and beneath  
The grass beneath their feet the larvae  
Split themselves laughing. (593)

The repetend seems to squirm disconcertingly into the auditory imagination, making one's hair stand on end while also invoking an uncomfortable, claustrophobic sense of being gradually enclosed by some unpleasant, slithering insect or animal: it literally makes the skin crawl. The trochaic impetus of the phrase spills through to the following line where the verse then gives way to the repetitive rhythm of the repeated 'beneath' (a sort of aural double-take), which carries the line downwards to the mocking larvae. The final image is particularly disturbing because it seems to resonate with the more inchoate word sounds of the earlier repetend which evoke the wriggling movements of such underground animals. Again the logic of dream is paramount as the reader is asked to imagine the paradoxical sound of a mocking larval chorus. Nature as a symbol of re-birth is savagely undercut here as the larvae split themselves in spiteful laughter rather than in metamorphosis from their immature state into their new adult form. When MacNeice again deploys the repetend it is to suggest that, not only Nature, but the movement of Time, symbolised by the Sun's arc, is against the man and woman ever becoming closer: 'Crawly crawly / Went the cloud above the treetops reaching / For a sun that lack the nerve to set'(593). The uncanny atmosphere created by the sun-suspended sky, twinned with the gaily grim soundtrack, powerfully evokes the aberrant nature of any possible love-affair.



The third and final section of the poem shifts from the fidgety nightmare landscape of the outside world into even more surreal territory:

Crawly crawly

Went the string quartet that was tuning up  
In the back of the mind. You two should have met  
Long since, he said, or else not now.  
The string quartet in the back of the mind  
Was all tuned up with nowhere to go.  
They were introduced in a green grave. (593)

Like the crack of the mallet in 'Soap Suds', the onomatopoeic 'Crawly crawly' quickly weaves into other imagined sounds - the cacophonous stream of notes and clashing arpeggios of a quartet tuning up. This imagined aural discordance and dissonance, of course, is deftly expressive of the poetic theme and the mysterious male voice interrupting the narrative suggests that the two people have perhaps departed the mortal realm. The penultimate sentence, with its paradoxical yoking of clichés, adds a further layer of black comedy to the poem; it also suggests a surreal image of a quartet of motionless musicians - a potent pictorial representation of silence, stasis and impotent energy. The final line further chills the narrative, with its ironic slant on the opening sentence, and the 'green grave', one is tempted to imagine, could well be the context for another 'Crawly crawly': the sound of insects burrowing into a rotting corpse.

'The Introduction' is perhaps the most aurally rich and allusive poems of the volume; for so much of its meaning is embedded in the sound of the verse and how it operates upon the auditory imagination. The repetend seems to deconstruct the capacity of the poem to communicate its meaning through language; for, in terms of its denotative sense, it is essentially meaningless. However, when interwoven into the fabric of the poem as a whole it communicates something very tangible and powerful, yet something almost immune to paraphrase - like an eerie snatch of music or a carefully chosen sound-effect in a radio-play. Indeed, the complex of emotions which the poem seeks to represent are perhaps at the very limit of what it is possible to understand and communicate purely through the lexical sense of words. Through a greater focus on the aural dimensions of the poem MacNeice had developed ways to convey the territories of emotion and feeling which were at the very edge of his consciousness; his work in radio was integral to this process.

One phenomenon which radio expresses more potently than any other medium is that of silence, for unlike the theatre or cinema, nothing fills the void it creates. As Crissel argues,

it compels the listener to imagine something beyond what can be conveyed in sound and voice:

The positive function of silence is to signify that something is happening which for one reason or another cannot be expressed in noise. Because radio silence is total (unlike film and theatrical silences, which are visually filled) it can be a potent stimulus to the listener, providing a gap in the noise for his imagination to work. (53)

In the poem 'After the Crash' (1961) contained in *The Burning Perch*, MacNeice seems to use silence in a radiogenic manner to evoke impossible sounds, existing purely in the realms of the auditory imagination. The poem conveys a man's experience of waking up after a motor-cycle accident in a disorientating, post-apocalyptic world in which 'The asphalt was high with hemlock' and his 'wrinkled hand' was 'no more ... what it was' (585). Though life continues it has grown utterly strange as the man begins to sense some form of paranormal disturbance:

He could hear the signals bounce  
Back from the moon and the hens  
Fire themselves black in the batteries  
And the silence of small blind cats  
Debating whether to pounce. (586)

It is as though the familiar sounds and soundscapes of reality before 'the crash' have been muted, allowing other frequencies to reverberate through the man's consciousness: the signals bouncing back from the moon suggest the invisible atmospheric ricochet of radio waves which, though normally eluding the naked ear, have now begun to echo ominously across the silence. It may be that the man in the poem is sensing what the attitudinizing budgerigar – an emblem of Everyman – in the poem 'Budgie' (1962) had failed to hear while lost in his solipsistic mirror: that 'The radio telescope/ Picks up a quite different signal ... the giant/ Reptiles cackle in their graves' (602). Particularly unnerving is the oppressive quietness of the predatory cats: their poised soundless presence, generating an atmosphere of palpable tension and imminent threat.

In the final stanza of the poem, this tense intimate stillness is superseded by an infinitely more chilling, all encompassing silence:

Then he looked up and marked  
The gigantic scales in the sky,

The pan on the left was dead empty,  
And the pan on the right dead empty,  
And he knew in the dead, dead calm  
It was too late to die. (586)

The weightless scales suggest a final judgment already passed, or perhaps the lack of any higher order or metaphysical entity to pass judgement at all: perhaps the man is lost in nightmare afterlife in a meaningless universe? As in the final scenes of many of MacNeice's radio plays the 'dead calm' silence which ends the poem terrifyingly and powerfully reveals the protagonist's death; for this is the final, absolute silence, the still void in which the sounds of the mortal world are lost.

By the end of his career, MacNeice had grown frustrated with the bureaucracy at the BBC and his decision to work part-time in 1961 was reflective of this. However, critics have been too quick to interpret MacNeice's sense of disillusionment with the administration at the BBC as representative of his attitude towards radio more generally. Up until the end of his life MacNeice believed in the unique qualities of the radio medium and also in its capacity to offer its own special opportunities to the artist. The quality of MacNeice's radio writing in his last years reflect his continuing belief in the medium and his last two plays were among his very best. MacNeice's incorporation of narratives and themes from his radio writing into his poetry, particularly in the final three books, reveal how highly he viewed some of his radio work and how useful it was to him as a poet. The most important effect that radio was to have on his poems however, was not in terms of content, but technique. The startling originality of many of MacNeice's late poems - their unique cadence, original rhythms and supple narrative transitions through time and space - certainly suggest the influence of his radio work. His experimentation with dream narrative, sound effect, tone of voice and parable in radio plays such as *The Dark Tower*, *Prisoner's Progress* and *The Mad Islands* had allowed the poet to test and hone his aesthetic to the point that he was able to bring a compellingly innovative approach to the lyric mode when he returned to it in the mid-nineteen-fifties.

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<sup>i</sup> See Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*, 141

<sup>ii</sup> See Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 3

## CONCLUSION

MacNeice's final radio-play for the BBC, *Persons from Porlock*, was uncannily predictive of the poet's death. Broadcast on the Third Programme (30<sup>th</sup> August 1963), it was also one of his finest. The play's title derives from the 'person from Porlock' who Coleridge claims fatally interrupted his composition of his famous 'dream poem' *Kubla Khan* (hence, the lead character's name, Hank, is an anagram of Khan). MacNeice states in his introduction to the published text: 'Taking the phrase "person from Porlock" to represent any unforeseen interruption of the creative process – or, going deeper, those forces which are always odds on against an artist – I have dramatized the story of a fictitious painter of our time.' (*SPLM* 353) The play's central character, Hank, may be seen as the last in a long line of MacNeicean heroes; like Tom Varney in *He Had a Date*, Roland in *The Dark Tower*, and Thomas Walters in *Prisoners Progress*, Hank is 'to some extent a lost soul and, on the surface at least, an unheroic figure. But in each case the hero finds himself at the end.' (*SPLM* 151). *Persons from Porlock* tells the story of a fictitious painter whose artistic vision is repeatedly disrupted by various distractions: women, war, commercialization, alcoholism, financial difficulties and, eventually, the last Person from Porlock, death. The fact that Hank is an artist brings him closer than previous heroes to MacNeice's own life. Indeed, the poet comments of the play: 'Fictitious though the whole story is, I have drawn upon my own experiences and upon my observations of artists I have known.' (*SPLM* 353) The play begins with Hank and his lover Sarah as young idealistic art students. As with MacNeice's other 'psycho-moralities' there are frequent jumps through time and space as the audience follows Hank from his youth to his early forties. It deals with his struggles as an artist, his attempts to overcome his claustrophobia by taking up cave exploration (or speleology), his World War II experience in Burma, his loss of Sarah along with his artistic vision, his diversion by his friend Alec into the stifling world of commercial advertising, a doomed love affair with a materialistic woman named Maggie, his struggles with alcoholism and finally his return to his first love Sarah. Set against the many debilitating distractions to Hank's artistic vision are two characters that seem to inspire Hank in his art. The first is his first love, Sarah, who Hank acts as a sort of missing critical faculty for Hank; it is her above all others whom he trusts to judge his pictures with truth and insight. The second character is his fellow speleologist Mervyn who seems to embrace the dark, timeless world of the caves with an almost religious fervour; one particular chamber seems to Mervyn, 'a symphony in dripstone'. He is exuberant in his medium and is fascinated with the names of the caves, some of which – such as Skrimshank's – he has named himself. His passion and total immersion in the activity of pot-holing seems to chime

with Hank's relationship to art and Hank later comments that 'Mervyn speaks my language.' (373) While in the original synopsis of the play, sent for approval to the Assistant Head of the Features Department in January 1963, MacNeice had described Hank's hobby as mountain climbing, in the final script of the play the hero develops a passionate interest in speleology; this permits a deeper symbolism to be introduced into the drama naturalistically. When taken pot-holing for the first time by his friend and former art instructor Peter, Hank murmurs to himself: 'Talk about back to the womb! Difference is the womb was soft.' (358) And in the course of the drama the underground caves become associated not only with corporeal birth and primitive origins, but also with the dark embryo of unconscious energy and inspiration in which the artist must trust for his art. Towards the end of the play, Hank finally decides to devote himself wholly to his art and several of his best paintings from this period derive from the experiences he has had while in the underground caves.

As in *Persons from Porlock* and *He Had a Date*, MacNeice makes skilful use of music in the play and during the first caving episode, Mervyn introduces a nursery rhyme song as part of his ritual: 'Have you seen the life-line man, the life-line man, the life-line man...' The life-line is, of course, a central tool for insuring a caver's survival and the image and the song begin to take on a more meaningful resonance as the play progresses. In the final scene of the play, when Hank and Mervyn make one last outing to Skrimshank's Cave, the life-line is swept away by an underground river and the two become separated. After Hank's brave attempt to save Mervyn from the fast flowing water he becomes trapped at a Stygian Trap with water rising. As the sounds of water fade into the background the listener is gradually taken inside Hanks mind as he hears voices rapidly emerging from all directions. People close to Hank as well as a host of strange ghostly presences appear and disappear as he begins to hallucinate. It makes for one of MacNeice's most compelling and powerful sequences in radio; as Heuser observes of this episode: 'Cross-cutting episodes are brought to high art in sound: realistic scenes acquire symbolic import, until they reach an echo chamber of mocking ironies in a cavern, a trap' (154) As in *He Had a Date*, the hero Hank is brought to a greater self-knowledge by the surrounding voices before finally drowning into silence when met by death. In a brilliant stroke of dark humour, MacNeice decided that the final Person from Porlock – Death- should speak with a warm, congenial Somerset accent. Hank's final conversation with him is given a memorably surreal air by the slow, avuncular tones of his executioner.

Once MacNeice had finished writing the play he set about producing it and, as always, was concerned to gain accurate sound effects. He sent a recording engineer and a pot-holer guide to the Settle caves in Yorkshire moors and decided to accompany them himself. Writing to his daughter Bimba about the trip, he tells her 'We got a nice underground stream, also a waterfall, also general

drippings.’ (qtd in. Stallworthy 1963) Unfortunately, MacNeice was to suffer viral pneumonia as a result of the trip and was to die just four days after *Persons from Porlock* was first broadcast. Like his hero Hank, MacNeice questioned his death up to the very last minute, disconcerting the doctors with the quizzical question: ‘Am I supposed to be dying?’

*Persons from Porlock* is a fitting testament to MacNeice’s mastery of the radio form. W. H. Auden described it as ‘a magnificent example of...psychological drama’ (qtd. Holme 68) and R.D. Smith correctly places with his very best work in radio:

It [*Persons from Porlock*] achieved what he had consistently worked for, and had till now, only intermittently managed; a tautness of structure, an economy of scene-setting, a totally controlled story-line, and a *dramatic* realisation of character that had eluded him in those earlier scripts which had tried to synthesise contemporary man with the hero, or anti-hero of fable, folk and fairy tale. (Smith 94)

## II

Tim Crook, in his ground-breaking *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, argues that: ‘Radio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century... Academics, media theorists and writers in most cultures have not fully appreciated that the medium of sound has provided an environment in which a new story telling genre has been born’ (3). This study has aimed to turn the tide of neglect concerning radio drama by giving serious critical study to the radio work of an author who has been absolutely central to the history of the evolution of this ‘new story telling genre’. Through ‘reading’ MacNeice’s radio scripts ‘by ear’ with an ‘auditory imagination’, as well as listening, with a degree of sensitivity, to what recordings are available, the originality, versatility, complexity and vitality of MacNeice’s radio *oeuvre* has become more discernable. It has been shown that during his early years at the BBC his best radio dramas and features represented an innovative and imaginative development of what was at the time an *avant-garde* art form. MacNeice helped to open up the medium in ways that were to benefit other artists such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Dylan Thomas. The BBC offered MacNeice an opportunity to experiment, to evolve the distinctive craft of sound drama in a field which was essentially *suis generis*. His best work of these years, radio-plays such as *Christopher Columbus*, *He Had a Date* and *The Dark Tower* are seminal texts in the history of twentieth century radio drama, realizing, as never before, the innate potential of the medium of sound. MacNeice was also a central member of and contributor to a Features department which, under the stewardship of Gilliam, not only established the formal techniques and modes from which later radio artists could learn and build, but which was integral to the formation of the Third Programme on which so much

experimental radio drama was eventually to be aired.

By the end of MacNeice's career in the BBC however, radio was no longer *the* exciting mass-medium it used to be having been eclipsed by a new power, 'the Genghis Khan of Shepard's Bush – television' (Wade 225); summing up radio's position relative to television by the early sixties, David Wade states: 'All the money, the action, the notice, and the riches were with television. How could radio hope to compete?' (227). Between April and October 1958, MacNeice himself worked in television, having been sent on a six-month training course by Laurence Gilliam. Although in August of that year, MacNeice was happy to be entrusted with the TV production of two Strindberg plays, *Pariah* and *The Stronger*, the poet never wavered in his allegiance to radio and was more comfortable working in the medium of pure sound.

Coupled with a awareness of radio's general decline, MacNeice must also have been alert to the fact that the BBC Features department was itself losing ground to the Drama department as the primary outlet for fresh, original radio-drama: in the late fifties and early sixties the department sponsored young outside playwrights, such as Pinter, Stoppard and Bolt, and it was Donald McWhinnie in the Drama department who encouraged Beckett to write for the medium, leading to the radio-dramatic masterpiece *All That Fall* in 1957. MacNeice may not only have been disheartened by the general decline of the medium and, indeed, the department in which he worked, but also by the increasingly restrictive BBC administration: his script 'The Pin is Out' (1960), a satire on the apartheid system of South Africa, was rejected on political grounds, and his Arthurian proposal 'The Remorse of Sir Gawayne' – a subject close to him – was turned down in 1961. In the same year a team of management consultants were drafted in by Gilliam's supervisors to assess the efficiency of the Features Department and to recommend ways of improving it. As part of the assessment MacNeice was asked by one of the investigators: 'We see, Mr MacNeice, that during the past six months you have produced only one programme. Can you tell us what you were doing the rest of the time?' MacNeice replied laconically: 'Thinking'. (Stallworthy 451) MacNeice had in fact done a good deal more in that time, producing a programme of his own poetry and assisting with the production of many others, but the anecdote underlines MacNeice's growing irritation with the encroaching bureaucracy of the BBC at this time. An insight into MacNeice's relationship to radio and the BBC at this time is provided by Ved Mehta who recorded the poet's comments on his radio work shortly after the 1961 production of *Faust*:

He [MacNeice] said that on the Third a producer could stage more masterpieces in a year than he would be able to put on in the commercial theatre in a lifetime. The B.B.C. left one alone. It provided the stability of a salary and the independence of an organization made up for the most part of artists. "But many of us work not for the salary – it compares more to a don's than to an



entertainer's – but for love," he went on. "There is a kind of excitement in having a few hundred pounds in your pocket, so to speak, to produce a programme in any way you wish. In earlier times, we producers used to listen quite a lot to each other's programmes. The old hands would drop in on the studios of the younger producers to criticize their broadcasts. Indeed, we were trained by the light of their advice, and, of course, by the listeners – our box office – who are polled by the audience-research people. Since the cuts in time and the loss of audiences to television, a general depression has set in, and radio, while still the yeasts of culture here, is not what it used to be." (53) Critics have been too quick to interpret MacNeice's irritation, in his later years, with the administration at the BBC as representative of his attitude towards radio and the BBC more generally. What is clearly apparent from Mehta's account is MacNeice's continuing excitement towards (even 'love' of) the medium and his overall gratitude to the BBC, which he had once described as 'probably one of the least interfering patrons there have ever been.' (MacNeice 'Scripts Wanted!' 27). The BBC was undoubtedly the most important institution in MacNeice's life and his work there provided him with opportunities to experience, first-hand, major historic events or exotic locations that the life of an academic or a solitary writer may not have. It also involved him in artistically fruitful collaborations with many diverse and talented professionals and artists such as Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton, William Walton, Benjamin Britten and Dylan Thomas. The reality of radio's changed position relative to television seems to have been the most important factor in MacNeice's sense of disillusionment in his later years. Yet up until the end of his life MacNeice believed in the unique qualities of the radio medium and also in its capacity to offer its own special opportunities to the artist. He states in his introduction to *The Mad Islands and The Administrator*: 'Sound radio can do things no other medium can and, if 'sound' dies, those things will not be done.' (7) The quality of MacNeice's radio writing in his last years reflects his continuing belief in the medium and his last two plays, *The Mad Islands* and *Persons from Perlock*, were among his very best.

The relationship between MacNeice's work for radio and poetry continues to stimulate debate. For Jon Stallworthy, 'the scriptwriter's work for the BBC upset the natural balance of the poet's perceptions'. The suggestion being that features writing drew MacNeice away from his earlier, taut lyrics to larger, looser poetic structures such as the longer poems of *Springboard*, *Holes in the Sky*, *Ten Burn Offerings* and *Autumn Sequel*. Yet, as has already been argued, this ignores MacNeice's previous inclination towards the long poem and also the fact that his later, shorter lyrics were written while MacNeice was still employed at the BBC. In addition, it has been shown in this study that much of MacNeice's work in the BBC, in fact, had a generally positive impact on the development of his poetic style. Radio, rather than being, as Christopher Holme has

argued, MacNeice's 'biggest "person from Porlock" of them all'(71), was, if anything, a stimulus to the creative process, encouraging experiment in parabolic writing, dream technique and expanding his awareness of the effect and meanings which could be achieved through the aural dimensions of a poem.

MacNeice's profound sensitivity to sound and new forms of auditory experience emerging in the modern period, as revealed in his early poetry, meant that he was ideally placed to capitalise on the potential offered by radio, which was still at the time an avant-garde medium. Through radio MacNeice was able to hone his auditory faculty, and gradually realise the full range and potential of the human voice as well as the potency of certain textures of sound and patterns of rhythm. The poet's experiments and achievements in radio were not only pivotal in the evolution of radio-drama of the twentieth century, but also instrumental in developing the startling originality of voice and form which can be discerned in many of his later poems; the qualities of accessibility and speakability, the evocative, often chilling, sound effects and words-sounds, the potent dreamscapes and nightmare zones, the rapid metamorphoses and supple transitions through time and space, and the variety of contrasting voices and speakers which characterise these later poems are all deeply linked to his work as a writer and producer for the BBC.

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### **Scripts written by MacNeice for the BBC.**

Aside from very early scripts, MacNeice produced almost all his own material. Three notable exceptions are 'Alexander Nevsky' (1941) and 'Columbus' (1942), which were both produced by Dallas Bower, and a series of programmes on 'Faust' (1949) which were produced by E.A.Harding.

### **Dates are of First Broadcast**

'Word from America', 15<sup>th</sup> February 1941

'Cooks Tour of the London Subways', 25<sup>th</sup> March 1941

'The March of the 10,000', 16<sup>th</sup> April 1941

'The Stones Cry Out': 1. Dr Johnson Takes It, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1941

4. Westminster Abbey, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1941

5. Madame Tussaud's, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1941

8. St Paul's, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1941

10. House of Commons, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1941

'Freedom's Ferry – Life on an ex-American Destroyer', 16<sup>th</sup> July 1941

'The Stones Cry Out': 18. The Temple, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1941

'Dr Chekhov', 6<sup>th</sup> September 1941

'The Stones Cry Out': 22. Royal College of Surgeons, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1941

26. Belfast, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1941

'The Glory that is Greece', 28<sup>th</sup> October 1941

'The Stones Cry Out': 30. Plymouth Barbican, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1941

'Alexander Nevsky' 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941

'Rogues' Gallery', 12<sup>th</sup> December 1941

'Salute to the New Year', 30<sup>th</sup> December 1941

'Vienna', 12<sup>th</sup> March 1942

'Salutation to Greece', 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1942

'Calling All Fools', 1<sup>st</sup> April 1942

'Salute to the USSR', 12<sup>th</sup> April 1942

'The Debate Continues', 10<sup>th</sup> May 1942

'Black Gallery':1. Dr Goebbels, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1942

'Salute to the United Nations', 14<sup>th</sup> June 1942

'The Undefeated', 30<sup>th</sup> June 1942

'Black Gallery':10. Adolf Hitler

'Britain to America': no.1, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1942

'The United Nations: A Tribute', 6<sup>th</sup> September 1942

'Halfway House', 25<sup>th</sup> September 1942

'Salute to the US Army', 4<sup>th</sup> October 1942

'Christopher Columbus', 12<sup>th</sup> October 1942

'Salute to Greece', 25<sup>th</sup> October 1942

'Two Men and America', 29<sup>th</sup> January 1943

'Salute to the Unseen Allies', 31<sup>st</sup> January 1943

'The Four Freedoms': 1. Pericles, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1943

2. Early Christians, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1943

3. The Renaissance, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1943

4. John Milton, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1943

5. French Revolution, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1943

'Long Live Greece', 25<sup>th</sup> March 1943

'The Four Freedoms': 6. What now?, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1943

'Zero Hour', 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1943  
'The Death of Byron', 10<sup>th</sup> May 1943  
'Sicily and Freedom', 18<sup>th</sup> June 1943  
'The Death of Marlowe', 21<sup>st</sup> June 1943  
'Independence Day', 4<sup>th</sup> July 1943  
'Four Years at War', 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1943  
'The Story of my Death', 8<sup>th</sup> October 1943  
'The Spirit of Russia', 8<sup>th</sup> November 1943  
'The Fifth Freedom', 17<sup>th</sup> November 1943  
'Ring in the New', 31<sup>st</sup> December 1943  
'The Sacred Band', 7<sup>th</sup> January 1944  
'The Nosebag', 13<sup>th</sup> March 1944  
'This Breed of Men', 23 April 1944  
'D-Day', never broadcast. Recorded, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1944  
'He Had a Date', 28<sup>th</sup> June 1944  
'Sunbeams in his Hat', 16<sup>th</sup> July 1944  
'Why Be a Poet?', 13<sup>th</sup> August 1944  
'The Golden Ass', 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1944  
'Cupid and Psyche', 7<sup>th</sup> November 1944  
'The Year in Review', 31<sup>st</sup> December 1944  
'A Roman Holiday', 10<sup>th</sup> January 1945  
'The March Hare Resigns', 29<sup>th</sup> March 1945  
'London Victorious', 18<sup>th</sup> May 1945  
'A Voice from Norway', 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1945  
'Threshold of the New', 31<sup>st</sup> December 1945  
'The Dark Tower', 21<sup>st</sup> January 1946  
'Salute to All Fools', 1<sup>st</sup> April 1946



- ‘Enter Caesar’, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1946
- ‘The Careerist’, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1946
- ‘Agamemnon’ (broadcast by the Drama Department), 29<sup>th</sup> October 1946
- ‘Enemy of Cant’, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1946
- ‘The Heartless Giant’, 13<sup>rd</sup> December 1946
- ‘The Death of Gunnar’, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1947
- ‘The Burning of Njal’, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1947
- ‘Portrait of Rome’, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1947
- ‘Grettir the Strong’, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1947
- ‘India at First Sight’, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1948
- ‘Portrait of Delhi’, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1948
- ‘The Road to Independence’, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1948
- ‘The Two Wicked Sisters’, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1948
- ‘No Other Road’, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1948
- ‘Trimalchio’s Feast’, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1948
- ‘He Had a Date’ (revised version), 14<sup>th</sup> February 1949
- ‘The Queen of Air and Darkness’, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1949
- ‘Faust’ (translated from Goethe, with E. L. Stahl, produced by E. A. Harding), 30<sup>th</sup> October – 21<sup>st</sup> November 1949
- ‘Ten Burnt Offerings’, September-November, 1951
- ‘Portrait of Athens’, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1951
- ‘In Search of Anoyia’, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1951
- ‘The Centre of the World’, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1952
- ‘Mourning and Consolation’, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1952
- ‘One Eye Wild’, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1952
- ‘Twelve Days of Christmas’, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1953
- ‘Time Hath Brought me Hither’, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1953

'Return to Atlantis', 5<sup>th</sup> July 1953  
 'Where No Wounds Were', 16<sup>th</sup> March 1954  
 'Prisoner's Progress', 27<sup>th</sup> April 1954  
 'Autumn Sequel' (in six parts), 28<sup>th</sup> June 1954  
 'Return to a School', 5<sup>th</sup> July 1954  
 'The Waves' (adapted from the novel by Virginia Woolf), two parts 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> March 1955  
 'The Fullness of the Nile', 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1955  
 'The Star We Follow', (with Ritchie Calder), 25<sup>th</sup> December 1955  
 'Also among the Prophets', 5<sup>th</sup> February 1956  
 'Bow Bells', 17<sup>th</sup> June 1956  
 'Spires and Gentries', 29<sup>th</sup> July 1956  
 'Carpe Diem', 8<sup>th</sup> October 1956  
 'From Bard to Busker', 30<sup>th</sup> December 1956  
 'The Birth of Ghana', 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1957  
 'Nuts in May', 27<sup>th</sup> May 1957  
 'An Oxford Anthology', 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1957  
 'The Stones of Oxford', 24<sup>th</sup> September 1957  
 'All Fools at Home'. 1<sup>st</sup> April 1958  
 'Health in Their Hands', 7<sup>th</sup> April 1958  
 'Scrums and Dreams', 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1959  
 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon', 25<sup>th</sup> July 1959  
 'They Met on Good Friday', 8<sup>th</sup> December 1959  
 'Mosaic of Youth', 30<sup>th</sup> December 1959  
 'Another Part of the Sea' produced for TV, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1960  
 'The Odyssey', series arranged by MacNeice, partly translated by him also, 6<sup>th</sup> October – 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1960  
 'The Administrator', 10<sup>th</sup> March 1961

'Let's Go Yellow', 19<sup>th</sup> December 1961

'The Mad Islands', 4<sup>th</sup> April 1962

Translations of Latin poems for programmes, 3<sup>rd</sup> March and 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1963

'Person from Porlock', 30<sup>th</sup> August 1963.

All unpublished scripts can be accessed on microfiche (as well as some hard copy) at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Peppard Road, Caversham Park, Reading, RG4 8TZ, UK. Recordings of MacNeice's programmes can be accessed at the Sound Archive in The British Library, St Pancras, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB. Up to thirty programmes are held in the archive including: 'Christopher Columbus', 'The Dark Tower', 'India at First Sight', 'A Portrait of Athens', 'Prisoner's Progress', 'The Death of Gunnar', 'The Burning of Njal', 'Faust', 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon', and 'Persons from Porlock'.

**BBC Written Archive Files containing material on MacNeice's Radio Programmes and career at the BBC.**

BBC File: 'Louis MacNeice: Script Writer File, 1940-1963'.

BBC File: 'R 19/325: "Alexander Nevsky", 1941-943'.

BBC File: 'R 19/397: "Christopher Columbus", 1942-1943'.

BBC File: 'R 19/ 240: "D-Day", 1944-1954'.

BBC File: 'R 19/ 1245: "Sunbeams in his Hat", 1944-1945'.

BBC File: 'R19/ 491: "He Had a Date", 1944 -1949'.

BBC File: 'R 19/ 249: "The Dark Tower", 1945 -1951'.

BBC File: 'R19/ 348: "Faust -Goethe, 1946-1950'.

BBC File: 'R 19/ 256: "The Death of Gunnar" Part I of the Njal Saga, 1946-1947'.

BBC File: 'R 19/ 136: "The Burning of Njal" Part II of the Njal Saga, 1946-1948'.

BBC File: 'R19/ 463: "Grettir the Strong", 1947'.

BBC File: 'R19/ 549: "India at First Sight", 1948.'

BBC File: 'R 19/ 947: "Portrait of Athens", 1951'.

BBC File: 'R 19/711: "They Met on Good Friday, 1959-1960'.