



Title	Louis MacNeice and the Rhetoric of Ireland
Author(s)	Kitamoto, Yuko
Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 1995, 34, p. 49-70
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25425">https://doi.org/10.18910/25425</a>
rights	
Note	

*The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

## Louis MacNeice and the Rhetoric of Ireland

Yuko Kitamoto

It is widely considered that Louis MacNeice was a political poet, linked with W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C. Day Lewis as a member of the so-called 'Auden Group' or 'Oxford Poets', writers who were reacting against T. S. Eliot's symbolic, scholarly poetry, and aiming for a more popular poetry, a poetry that would reach a wide audience by being clear, direct, and concerned with contemporary social and political problems. Although MacNeice has continued to be associated by critics with the Auden Group, it is clear that his thinking was unique and independent of the others from very early on. While the other poets affiliated themselves with the growing Left movement and the Communist ideas, he chose not to be involved, busying himself instead with personal issues and work. For that reason, he has failed to become the major poet of the movement, as Samuel Hynes points out 'MacNeice is a good minor poet and Auden is a daunting major poet'.<sup>1)</sup> But in his more recent essay Hynes has slightly altered his opinion about MacNeice:

For a time after his death his reputation sagged, perhaps because the myth of the Auden Gang was growing in the academies, and he had never really been a full-time gang member . . . . He seemed to have won no secure status in the poetic history of his own time, he didn't quite fit — as he never had.

That this situation has altered in recent years is due in large measure to the way in which MacNeice has been adopted as an ancestor by the present generation

of Northern Irish poets.<sup>2)</sup>

Another aspect of MacNeice is brought to the surface: he was Irish by nature.

Discussing the Belfast born poet in the context of Irish literary history, however, has been controversial, too; and his status as an Irish poet has not been fully established. He has been given a cold and grudging welcome in anthologies of Irish poetry: in John Montague's *Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974) the fellow Ulster poet spares just four poems for MacNeice as against six for himself; and in Thomas Kinsella's *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986), his most critically acclaimed poems such as *Autumn Journal*, 'Meeting Point' or 'Bagpipe Music' are indifferently omitted. One of the reasons for excluding MacNeice from Ireland's literary circle, seems to lie in his biographical background. Frederick Louis MacNeice was born in Belfast, the capital of the north of Ireland in 1907 and grew up in Carrickfergus, on the coast of County Antrim, until he was ten years old. (It should be remembered that Ireland was at this time a part of the British Empire and Northern Ireland did not exist. It was in 1922 that the southern twenty-six counties, leaving six counties in the north behind, became independent as the Irish Free State.) Both of his parents were originally from Connemara, in the West of Ireland, which is one of the places with the strongest distinctive character in the island. As an example, it can be adduced that native Irish speakers are living in that area even now. The MacNeices, especially his mother always cherished the landscape of the West of Ireland and never forgot it. His father Frederick's ancestors were Protestant small landowners, and Frederick was a minister of the Church of Ireland who was later to become a bishop.<sup>3)</sup> The poet's mother Lily's grandparents were Roman Catholics, but her father Martin converted to

Protestantism. It is said that MacNeice was delighted to know that there were Roman Catholics as well as Anglo-Irish Protestants among his ancestors,<sup>4)</sup> because it is a matter of importance whether you are a Roman Catholic or a Protestant in Ireland. Since the nineteenth century a Protestant ascendancy (non-native Irish ascendancy) on the side of the British Empire has so influentially dominated Ireland politically with its wealth that among nationalists there has been a strong tendency that non-Catholics should not be considered to be Irish; they are 'West Britons' and 'Unionists' from the point of view of Roman Catholics. In fact, most Protestants in the North of Ireland today identify themselves as British or 'Unionists'.

But Rev. MacNeice was exceptional. In spite of the fact that he was living in Belfast where Protestants were dominant and formed a majority, he was one of the few Protestants who had nationalist sympathies and supported Home Rule in 1912. He preached a sermon, against the feelings of the local people, that the defenders of the Union of Ireland with Great Britain should throw away their arms; it should be noted that this is an extraordinary thing for a significant Protestant bishop because almost all Protestants in Belfast were loyalists. His poet son had the same feeling towards Ireland, and he himself could have become a Nationalist. But the death of Lily and the arrival of his stepmother Georgina, who was from the non-Catholic ascendancy, changed the situation: at the time MacNeice was ten years old, he was sent to a prep school in Dorset at the suggestion of the new mother who hoped for her son to get rid of the Northern Ireland accent.<sup>5)</sup> He later went on to Marlborough College, to Merton College, Oxford, and worked in universities in England, the BBC and the British Council, and never came back to live in Ireland

(although on a couple of occasions, ending each time in failure, he attempted to choose Dublin as a place to live). In the eye of the native Irish people he is an exile, who has gone 'across the water'.<sup>6)</sup> This assumption was confirmed in 1934 when the poet published the poem 'Valediction' which caused a big resentment among Irish people. The poem begins with the bloody image of people '[d]ied by gunshot under borrowed pennons' and 'slung like a dead seal',<sup>7)</sup> the image which the poet considers to be an archetypal motif in Irish history. After listing violent and disgusting subject matters as well as superficial fake images of Ireland, he declares:

I will exorcise my blood  
 And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud  
 I will acquire an attitude not yours  
 And become one of your holiday visitors,  
 And however often I may come  
 Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum. (53)

In Irish literary history, however, we can count numerous exiles and it is possible to assume that there is a tradition of exiles — Sean O'Casey, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett; and these people have occupied pivotal roles in Irish literary history. Then why has MacNeice not been allowed to play his part? To this question Denis Donoghue answers harshly as follows:

He had no interest in the Irish Literary Revival or the provocations which issued in it, he thought the attempt to revive the Irish language was daft . . . and he deplored, as I do not, Ireland's neutrality in the war. Indeed, what disables MacNeice from consideration as a precursor is that his work touches history and sentiment only occasionally and opportunistically.<sup>8)</sup>

It seems that Donoghue is influenced by the prejudice that

MacNeice is just a typical 'thirties poet', or he has not read MacNeice's poems very deeply. If he had, he would have noticed that many of MacNeice's poems are about what and how he felt towards Ireland, and it is even possible to point out that he was obsessed with his past in the native country. It is true that MacNeice physically left Ireland for good, but he was always thought to be Irish by English people and he could not completely free himself of his own country; ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards Ireland kept haunting him until his death in 1963, as he remarks in the same poem:

But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,  
The woven figure cannot undo its thread. (53)

Not only he knew 'his past is wed to his self' and that he cannot leave his native country behind, but he admitted that he really loved Ireland,<sup>9)</sup> and wrote poems about Ireland's beautiful landscape.<sup>10)</sup> Mentally and imaginatively he never left Ireland. It must be denounced that Donoghue's view — the view that a poet, who was born in Ireland and whose poetry is affected by his nationality, should not be considered to be an Irish poet just because he lacks in nationalist motivation, or that an Irish poet must write only about Ireland and should not think in the context of Europe — is very narrow-minded and even ridiculous.

Recently, however, several critics have tried to include and discuss him in the context of Irish literature. Terence Brown keenly discerned the poet's Irishness and made studies focused on it in his informative books as early as the mid-seventies,<sup>11)</sup> more recently Peter McDonald and Edna Longley have tried to discuss MacNeice in the cultural context of Northern Ireland,<sup>12)</sup> and in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986), an anthology of Irish poems after Yeats, the poet editor Paul Muldoon gives him a substantial part

lined up with nine other poets such as Patrick Kavanagh or Seamus Heaney. Moreover, some critics have pointed out that there is a strong continuity between MacNeice and subsequent Ulster poets like Derek Mahon or Paul Muldoon.<sup>13)</sup> As Hynes proclaimed in 1989 it is more meaningful to understand the work of the poet obsessed with his nationality in the context of his relationship with the native country, because MacNeice often described the nature of poetry as 'his emotional reactions to the universe' or 'with his own individual observation';<sup>14)</sup> his poems are overflowing with his personal feelings and experiences, which undoubtedly include those of Ireland. In this study, by mainly focusing on his poems about Ireland, I will examine how the poems of MacNeice were affected by his Irishness, and why he had to say good-bye to Ireland while at the same time knowing it was impossible; and I believe this will reveal the poet's distinctive character which cannot be categorised as just 'nihilistic and political poet of the thirties', and bring a more stimulating viewpoint to an understanding of the common situation shared by Ulster poets as well.

## I

It was in 1931 that MacNeice revealed his obsession with his childhood memory and evidently and visibly referred to Ireland in the poem 'Belfast' for the first time.

The hard cold fire of the northerner  
Frozen into his blood from the fire in his basalt  
Glares from behind the mica of his eyes  
And the salt carrion water brings him wealth. (17)

MacNeice's personal memory of early childhood in Belfast is 'grey, wet, repellent and its inhabitants dour, rude, and

callous', and he 'always had what may well be proper dislike and disapproval of the North of Ireland'.<sup>15)</sup> He expresses not personal feelings but physical perceptions such as 'cold', 'blood' or visual and auditory perceptions of the place:

Over which country of cowed and haunted faces  
The sun goes down with a banging of Orange drums  
While the male kind murders each its woman  
To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna. (17)

From the non-emotional descriptions, however, we can note that his memory in Belfast is not a good one and something he wants to forget: the sound of the Orangemen's drum (a symbol of Ulster Protestants) which must have frightened the young poet, darkness ('[t]he sun goes down') and his mother's early death. The poet's sister Elizabeth Nicholson makes an interesting speculation on her brother's childhood in the North of Ireland:

Neither our mother nor Louis nor I myself felt that we belonged properly to the Ulster community in which we were living. My father occasionally told us stories of Connemara, but my mother spoke of it so constantly and with such love and such longing that I think it was she who really made it come alive for Louis and myself. It became for us both a 'many-coloured land', a kind of lost Atlantis where we thought that by rights we should be living, and it came to be a point of honour that we did not belong to the North of Ireland. We were in our minds a West of Ireland family exiled from our homeland.<sup>16)</sup>

Certainly MacNeice was feeling isolated in the severe, 'cold' and 'hard' Protestant-dominant North of Ireland, even though his father was a Protestant bishop. The MacNeices had never lived in the North of Ireland until Rev. MacNeice was appointed to Trinity Church, Belfast in 1899; their life



style was that of the Catholics of the Republic, especially of the West of Ireland. The young MacNeice could not socialise with the neighbours, and after his mother's death he felt much lonelier than before. He did not like 'sour and die-hard Puritanical'<sup>17)</sup> Miss MacCready, the Mother's Help, who came to his house when his mother's illness became serious and kept on looking after the children after Mrs MacNeice's death until Rev. MacNeice remarried. The feelings that he did not belong to the community and never felt at home are visible in 'Carrickfergus' (1937), another poem about his childhood memory from his birth until when he was ten and sent away to England:

I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries  
To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams:  
Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim  
Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which  
jams

The little boats beneath the Norman castle,  
The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;  
The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses  
But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt.

The brook ran yellow from the factory stinking of chlorine,  
The yarn-mill called its funeral cry at noon;  
Our lights looked over the lough to the lights of Bangor  
Under peacock aura of a drowning moon.

The Norman walled this town against the country  
To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave  
And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting  
The list of Christ on the cross in the angle of the nave.

I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order  
Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;  
The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of transept

With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

The war came and a huge camp of soldiers  
 Grew from the ground in sight of our house with long  
 Dummies hanging from gibbets for bayonet practice  
 And the sentry's challenge all day long[.] (69)

In the first stanza, as Gareth Reeves alertly points out, the word 'between' suggests his sense of belonging to nowhere or displacement,<sup>18)</sup> and in each stanza and in the connection of the sequence of the stanzas we can see discords of various levels: haunting and ear-piercing noises—'the *hooting* of lost sirens and the *clang* of trams' (italics mine) as well as the consonance of the words 'Smoky', 'Carrick', and 'County' —, a contrast between 'mud' and 'crystal salt' in the sea, the 'Scotch Quarter' and the 'Irish Quarter' to neither of which the poet belonged, unpleasantly polluted and depressing ground and mysteriously beautiful sky, the impressive Norman style castle and slave workers, an established church and soldiers involved with the First World War. These objective observations reflect MacNeice's uneasy and lost feelings of childhood memory as well as the uneasy trend of the time before the war. The only phrase which straightly describes his personal emotion, 'Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor', suggests both the poet's ignominious feelings and unrealisable wish to be aligned not with 'the anglican order' but with ordinary Irish people. The poem ends with another disharmony between himself and the circumstances:

I went to school in Dorset, the world of parents  
 Contracted into a puppet world of sons  
 Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt-mines  
 And the soldiers with their guns. (70)

He had to feel lost in England as well: another opposition

between Ireland and England was added to the opposition between the West and the North, which resulted in further self-division, or sense of exile, as described in 'Carrick Revisited':

Torn before birth from where my fathers dwelt,  
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,  
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England  
Cancels this interlude; what chance misspelt  
May never now be righted by my choice. (225)

In England where MacNeice attempted to socialise with other students, he was to find out *facts* he did not know in Belfast where he just kept away from the local people. Among English people who thought of him as Irish he could not help realising that he was undoubtedly Irish, not an Ulster Protestant, and in order to become popular among the students he made use of his being Irish. In his native country, however, people thought of him as British. It is ironic that living in England made MacNeice firmly conscious of his nationality, and at the same time, made his fellow country people consider that he had abandoned Ireland.

It is noteworthy that it is MacNeice who wrote one of the first critical scholarly books on a great Irish poet before his time, W. B. Yeats, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941), and pointed out the dialectic feature in Yeats's poetry. We can see how self-revealing a poet is when exploring and examining the condition of another, and also how a dilemma was growing in his mind:

As I said, it is unsafe to generalize about Ireland or the Irish. Their character could best be expressed in a set of antinomies, which would require an analysis that I cannot give here . . . . The Irish dialectic is best, perhaps, resolved by a paradox: Ireland, like other

countries, has obvious limitations; these limitations, if rightly treated, becomes (sic) assets. I would suggest therefore as a final antinomy this: *It is easy to be Irish; it is difficult to be Irish.*<sup>19)</sup>

Then he goes on explaining why he suggested the antinomy.

It is easy to be Irish because, Ireland being a small country, the Irishman can trade upon the glamour of minorities. If he is in Ireland, all he need do is talk about the country as if it were his family estate; if he is in England, all he need do is talk about being Irish. (One need only, for proof of this, inspect the behaviour of Irish children at English schools. Yeats was no exception when he went to school in London.) An Englishman cannot make capital in the same way out of being English . . . .

On the other hand it is difficult to be Irish because the traditional Irish aim is to be spiritually self-supporting and in the modern world this is as impracticable — for an individual or for a small country — as to be materially self-supporting.<sup>20)</sup>

MacNeice was a victim of the Irish paradox he identified: it was difficult for him to be (recognised as) Irish because he went across the Irish Sea, and it was easy to be Irish because he lived in England where he felt alienated and could never identify himself as English. He had to stop and reconsider his antithetical relationship with Ireland and wrote 'Train to Dublin' (1935).

Our half-thought thoughts divide in sifted wisps  
 Against the basic facts repatterned without pause,  
 I can no more gather my mind up in my fist  
 Than the shadow of the smoke of this train upon the  
 grass —  
 This is the way that animals' lives pass.

The train's rhythm never relents, the telephone posts

Go striding backwards like the legs of time to where  
In a Georgian house you turn at the carpet's edge  
Turning a sentence while, outside my window here,  
The smoke makes broken queries in the air.

. . . .

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

MacNeice's philosophical stance towards life is clearly represented in this poem. Every phenomenon in life rides in a flow of time which you can never suspend nor intermit, and 'basic facts' are what humans reconstruct purely through perceiving phenomena 'with [their] own individual observation', without any prejudice. A train is a manifold symbol in this poem. Its movement symbolises a fluid nature of time, and 'the telephone posts' and 'a Georgian house' which the poet sees through a train window are compared to flashbacks in a kaleidoscopic vision of life. He is reliving his own summarised life on a time-like train to 'gather up [his] mind'. A train also symbolises a human destiny: once we get on it we have no choice about the movement, the speed and the destination. The destiny which a train symbolises, however, is a man-made fake destiny, because, in reality, it is possible to choose a train to take and get off it whenever we want. What MacNeice tries to refer to as a false destiny is a destiny misled by what humans construct not through pure perception but with prejudice. If you want to get off and free yourself from the destiny, you have to struggle against circumstances: 'walking freely through the slanting rain / Its ankles wet, its grimace relaxed

again'. In the latter part of the poems there is a refrain of the phrase 'I give you . . .'. MacNeice does not specify who is 'you', but what he gives is obvious:

All over the world people are toasting the King,  
Red lozenges of light as each one lifts his glass,  
But 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. (28)

What he gives is the truth that is never misled by prejudice and 'any idol or idea': that is, what can be achieved by 'individual observation'. MacNeice, who maintained the importance of knowledge through experience, abhorred Plato's theory of Idea or idealism and denounced it on many occasions:

Those philosophers who, like Schopenhauer, have drawn too sweeping a distinction between the actual and the ideal have thought of the ideal world either as a substitute for the actual or, at best, as something to be abstracted from the actual world by, it may be, the artist, the aesthete, the philosopher, or the mystic. Art in particular has often been regarded recently as an escape from the actual to some transcendent reality on the pattern of Plato's Forms, whereas Marxist materialism ignores transcendent realities and is therefore a good creed for the artist who must move in a concrete world.<sup>21)</sup>

Idealist philosophers in talking about their Absolutes and Universals have made them vulnerable by hypostatizing them, whereas the only invulnerable Universal is one that is incarnate . . . . That a rose withers is no disproof of the rose, which remains an absolute, its value inseparable from its existence.<sup>22)</sup>

If he gives what he considers to be most important in life,

he does not possess it any longer and has to yield to a superficial and false flux of life: the 'you' in this poem, therefore, a train which symbolises a misled destiny. The situation that he is already on a train indicates that he has decided to give up 'walking freely through the slanting rain, / Its ankles wet, its grimace relaxed again' and pretend to put on a mask which prejudice urges. Then he wrote the controversial 'Valediction'.

Contrary to the honest descriptions of actual things in 'Belfast' and 'Train to Dublin', 'Valediction' is abundant with dishonest and fake objects:

Park your car in the city of Dublin, see Sackville Street  
Without the sandbags in the old photos, . . .

. . . .

Park your car in Killarney, buy a souvenir  
Of green marble or black bog-oak, run up to Clare,  
Climb the cliff in the postcard, visit Galway city,  
Romanticise on our Spanish blood, leave ten percent of pity  
Under your plate for the emigrant, . . . (52-3)

'Sackville Street' is the former name of a main street in Dublin, a British name which was used until Ireland's independence;<sup>23</sup> 'green marble' and 'black bog-oak' in Killarney are typical Irish tourist things and so are the Cliffs of Moher in Co. Clare. In Galway there is an arch called 'Spanish Arch' that was built to protect galleons unloading wine and rum and is nothing to do with romanticised 'Spanish blood'. These are mistaken images of real Ireland which can be obtained not by genuine inspection but through ready-made ideas. Undoubtedly MacNeice understood these are fake images; in other words, he was able to present them because he knew real Ireland, and he deliberately presented them in the poem to declare that he had 'acquired

an attitude' and would be one of the 'holiday visitors' to Ireland. This resignation or decision is, just like the erroneous imagery of Ireland, not his honest feeling. As the train he took goes towards Dublin, his consciousness goes towards Ireland and he still wonders '[w]hat we mean to Ireland or Ireland to us' (54). He just pretended to be wearing the mask of a tourist, and in order to be a sham tourist, he had to 'exorcise [his] blood' and bid farewell to his mother country.

It was this determination to pretend to be a tourist that confirmed MacNeice's attitude towards Ireland and fixed the position of the country in his own mind. Consequently he could come to speculate on Ireland through his own perception again. The poem 'Dublin' is a good example which displays the poet's sincere feelings towards the city:

Grey brick upon brick,  
Declamatory bronze  
On sombre pedestals —  
O'Connell, Grattan, Moore —  
And the brewery tugs and the swans  
On the balustraded stream  
And the bare bones of fanlight  
Over a hungry door  
And porter running from the taps  
With a head of yellow cream  
And Nelson on his pillar  
Watching his world collapse.

This was never my town,  
I was not born nor bred  
Nor schooled here and she will not  
Have me alive or dead  
But yet she holds my mind  
With her seedy elegance,  
With her gentle veils of rain  
And all her ghosts that walk



And all that hide behind  
 Her Georgian façades—  
 The catcalls and the pain,  
 The glamour of her squalor. (163-64)

Dublin was one of MacNeice's favourite cities in Ireland, as he remarks in his autobiographical essay:

Today I am so at home in Dublin, more than in any other city, that I feel it has always been familiar to me. But, as with Belfast it took me years to penetrate its outer ugliness and dourness, so with Dublin it took me years to see through its soft charm to its bitter prickly kernel — which I quite like too.<sup>24)</sup>

This is because he discerned something similar to himself in the city's character:

She is not an Irish town  
 And she is not English[.] (164)

Abjuring nihilism and pretention (except for the pretention of being a tourist) he could express his liking for the country.

In later years MacNeice's imagination about Ireland became more sentimental: he came to compare himself not to a tourist but to the Irish saint Brendan, who set off in a leather-made boat on a western voyage of faith, and whose legend 'exercised the imagination of medieval Christendom and helped to arouse the spirit of adventure which prompted the great voyages of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', and wrote the play *The Mad Islands* based on the legend as well as poems with the subject matter.<sup>25)</sup>

O Brendan, spindrift hermit, who  
 Hankering roaming un-homing up-anchoring  
 From this rock wall looked seawards to  
 Knot the horizon round your waist,  
 Distil that distance and undo  
 Time in quintessential West[.] ('Western Landscape', 256)

It is possible to say that St Brendan is a tourist or a wanderer in a sense, but he set forth to the West to look for his creed, and more importantly, his position in Ireland is firmly established and he unquestionably belongs to Ireland. This identification with St Brendan is not a pretention unlike that with a tourist, and exhibits that he wanted to have his own place in Ireland while knowing that he has no place there. It is symbolic that MacNeice and the poet W. R. Rodgers were planning to publish a collection of essays entitled *The Character of Ireland* which was never to be published because of the editors' deaths before its completion: as he says in the prologue poem to the book, however hard he strove to change the situation through writing poems, he could not find his place in Ireland in reality:

That we met  
Her, not her, is a chance; that we were born  
Here, not here, is a chance but a chance we took  
And would not have it otherwise. The water  
Flows, the words bubble, the eyes flash,  
The prism retains identity, that squalor,  
Those bickerings, lies, disappointments, self-deceptions.<sup>26)</sup>

### III

Apart from poems directly concerning Irish subject matters, MacNeice left a number of poems concerning beautiful landscapes in Ireland, such as 'House on a Cliff' and 'The Sunlight on the Garden' without mentioning any Irish place names. MacNeice avoided obvious references to Ireland in those poems though it is one of the common strategies among Irish writers to provoke Irishness, because he knew readers would discern the subject matters if they read carefully using their own pure perceptions. He always talked

about Ireland or 'about being Irish' in poems to be recognised as Irish. It is ironic that he was not recognised as Irish by people in the Republic because he was born in the North of Ireland where he felt isolated and cherished the West of Ireland in his mind; it is also ironic enough that the fact that he was born in the north of the same island prevented him from being aligned with his fellow country people. In Ireland the gulf between Catholics and Protestants is very wide. There is a strong tendency among Catholics to identify any Protestants with British and deny their Irishness. For example, radical Catholics did not welcome even Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, the most important figures of establishing the Irish Literary Renaissance at the beginning of this century who tried to promote the national feelings, just because they were Protestants. It is this self-supporting narrow-mindedness that MacNeice called 'obvious limitations' of Ireland. He criticised Ireland's false neutrality at the time of the Second World War. Ireland did not take part in the war, but many people were in favour of Nazism (anti-Jewish, in other words) on the assumption that 'an enemy's (Britain) enemy (Germany) is a friend'. MacNeice's first wife, Mary, was Jewish, and he had difficulties when he had to think about the safety of his half-Jewish son, Daniel, during the war in Ireland. Nobody would have known better than MacNeice that Ireland is, in fact, far from being neutral, accompanied by a history full of violence, divisions, discriminations and paradoxes among people of the same race. While he was a victim of these contradictions, he himself felt contradictory feelings towards the country: a resignation and a consistent desire about belonging to Ireland.

Quite a few Irish writers have had the similar contradictory feelings towards Ireland or Irish people. Oscar

Wilde was ashamed, and at the same time, proud of being Irish; Yeats who was the prominent figure of the Irish Literary Renaissance which was a movement to revive forlorn traditional Celtic Irish culture, identified himself with the Protestant ascendancy and abhorred traditionally Catholic middle-class people; Joyce and Beckett, while understanding that their nationality was crucial to their works, left Ireland by their own choice. Searching for a national identity is another characteristic feature among Irish writers because of the country's loss of the literary tradition as well as the native language since the occupation by Britain in the twelfth century, and the fact that they have to use their enemy's language (English). Yeats turned to a Romantic view of the Celtic civilisation, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney looked at the ordinary peasant's life, and Austin Clarke tried to awaken the tradition of Gaelic poetry of bards and medieval Ireland. But all of these writers' incompatible attitudes towards Ireland are built on one obvious assumption that there is no arguing about their being Irish. But unlike the circumstances of these writers, MacNeice's contradictory feelings are based on his uncertain nationality, and I believe this peculiar situation of the poet was given birth to by the administrative separation of the North and the South after 1922. There is another common element shared by Irish writers, that they are always conscious of Irish people and they have their own peculiar audience they address to. But, as the poet from the Republic Brendan Kennelly suggests, MacNeice could not have his own audience and never specify whom he was addressing to:<sup>27)</sup> what he considered to be his audience is just 'ordinary people'.<sup>28)</sup>

MacNeice belongs to the first generation who started writing poetry after Ireland was officially divided, and for

that reason he could not belong to any traditional categories his precedents created, nor share his feelings nor specify his audience among the Irish. But contemporary Ulster poets such as Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Frank Ormsby, John Hewitt, Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney are willing to admit MacNeice's influence on them. And a few Republic poets like Brendan Kennelly have started considering him in the context of Irish literature. What Denis Donoghue defined as necessary elements to be regarded as an Irish writer are valid for the literary scene only until early this century. Ireland was certainly MacNeice's source of imagination as well as of his character as a poet. There seems to be no reason to exclude MacNeice from the history of Irish literature: besides, it is possible to say that he created a new category for Irish writers: a writer tormented by the contradictions and divisions of Ireland.

### Notes

- 1) Samuel Hynes, 'Auden and MacNeice', *Contemporary Literature*, 14/3, p. 383.
- 2) Hynes, 'Like the Trees on Primrose Hill', *London Review of Books*, 2 Mar. 1989, pp. 6-7.
- 3) In Ireland Christian denominations except Roman Catholic—Anglicans (including the Church of England, the Church of Ireland), Presbyterian and Methodist—are usually called 'Protestant' from the Roman Catholic's point of view, though they differ from the original Protestantism established by Martin Luther. The Church of Ireland shares most of its creeds with Catholic, but most members of the Church of Ireland do not have native Irish ascendancy and share a culture with people of the Church of England, (English people). In this essay I use the word 'Protestant' instead of 'the Church of Ireland' for convenience.
- 4) Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 2.
- 5) Because MacNeice and his stepmother Georgina got on well, and

she had sent Louis's sister Elizabeth to boarding school in England, hoping that Elizabeth would 'lose her Northern accent' before he was sent to England, it is reasonable to think the reason she sent him to England was the same one. See MacNeice, *The Strings Are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 63.

- 6) Tom Paulin, 'The Man from No Part: Louis MacNeice', *Ireland & the English Crisis* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), p. 75.
- 7) Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (E. R. Dodds, ed., 1966; rpt. London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 53. Subsequent quotations of poems are from this edition and page numbers will be incorporated in the text in brackets.
- 8) Denis Donoghue, a book review of *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (ed. Alan Heuser, Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1987) in *London Review of Books*, 23 Apr. 1987, p. 19.
- 9) Cf. 'Why do we like being Irish?' in *Autumn Journal* XVI (132).
- 10) See *Treasury of Irish Verse* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1992).
- 11) Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975).
- 12) Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1991), Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994).
- 13) Robert F. Garratt, 'Tradition of Discontinuity: A Glance at Recent Ulster Poetry', in *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (1986, rpt., Berkeley: University of California P., 1989), pp. 259-75, and McDonald, p.7.
- 14) MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1938, rpt., London: Oxford U. P., 1968), pp. 25-26.
- 15) MacNeice, 'A Personal Digression', *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* (ed., Alan Heuser, Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990), p. 60.
- 16) Elizabeth Nicholson, 'Trees Were Green', *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice* (Terence Brown and Alec Reid eds., Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1974), pp. 13-14.
- 17) MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 41.
- 18) Gareth Reeves, 'MacNeice (1) Turning the Music On', in *Auden*,

- MacNeice, Spender* (Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 79.
- 19) MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941, rpt., London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 51.
  - 20) MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 51-52.
  - 21) MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, pp. 24-25.
  - 22) MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p. 15.
  - 23) Sackville Street is now called O'Connell Street. It was officially called Sackville Street until 1922, but the local people named it O'Connell Street after Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) after his death.
  - 24) MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 222.
  - 25) Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1961), p. 314.
  - 26) *Time Was Away*, p. 3.
  - 27) See Brendan Kennelly, 'Louis MacNeice: An Irish Outsider', *Journey into Joy: Selected Prose* (Åke Persson ed., Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), pp. 136-44.