

## “THE DRUNKENNESS OF THINGS BEING VARIOUS”: SYMBOLS IN LOUIS MACNEICE’S POETRY OF THE 1930s

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**Abstract:** *This article intends to examine the symbolic significance of the imagery and the form of the Anglo-Irish poet Louis MacNeice’s poetry of the 1930s in terms of certain characteristic aspects of his representation of his sense of personal and social crisis within the context of a turbulent historical period that covers the years leading up to the Second World War. The article argues that the terms of this representation are inseparable from Louis MacNeice’s concern with, and conception of, the nature of the art of poetry and his role as a poet. Hence, this study will investigate selected poems from the poet’s work during the 1930s in the light of his critical essays that explore and comment on his own as well as others’ work, at a time when the function of poetry in relation to historical and social dilemmas had become an issue of debate in literary circles.*

**Key words:** *Louis MacNeice, symbolism, imagery, poetry of the 1930s, historical and social crisis*

In *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, Edna Longley remarks that Louis MacNeice is a “central poet of the twentieth century”, whose poetry “fully enters our perennial life of the senses” (1988: ix). A characteristic and apparent feature of MacNeice’s (1907-1963) poetry during the historical period defined as the 1930s or simply as the ‘Thirties’, that bears out the validity of Longley’s claim is his dramatization of his contemplation, apprehension and celebration of intense moments that seem to provide the protagonists of his poems, frequently a first-person speaker addressing the reader directly in a lyric voice, with an opportunity, often sudden and unexpected, of experiencing a sense of life’s meaning, joy and value. The expression “the drunkenness of things being various”<sup>1</sup> in his poem “Snow” (1935 in Dodds 1966: 30), represents symbolically MacNeice’s experience of such moments. This moment turns out to be one revealed as even more precious and meaningful for being ephemeral and vulnerable, caught up in the inevitable flux of time, and within an awareness of threatening conditions and forces that are portrayed as never far away, but pressing on from all sides, thus implying a need to be sober. Such moments and the context in which they occur are rendered through vivid, evocative images and other elements of poetic form arranged in such a way within the entire design of individual poems so as to gain symbolic significance that expresses his themes. My aim in this article is to examine this particular feature of MacNeice’s poetry as an important aspect of his response to, and involvement in, the historical and literary context of the Thirties.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from MacNeice’s poetry are taken from *The Collected poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. E. R. Dodds (1966).

Louis MacNeice was, in the words of Alan Heuser in his "Introduction" to *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, "a challengingly prolific writer who produced eighteen volumes of poetry, two notable verse translations that appeared in book form, a great many plays and features, ten books of prose, many articles and contributions to books, and a vast amount of journalism as well as unpublished material" (1987: xv). He was not only a poet, but a man of letters who was, in fact, a very perceptive and astute critic of his own as well as of other writers. As Heuser states, "If for MacNeice the poet is a concentration of the ordinary man (Everyman) who rediscovers commonplaces [...] as a good maker or craftsman, the critic who is also a practitioner of the craft presents creative principles which arise from his own quest of life and form" (1987: xxiii). In this regard, MacNeice's essay "Experiences with Images" (1949 in Heuser 1987)) sheds light on his conception of the art of poetry.<sup>2</sup> He writes in this essay that all lyric poems are dramatic, ironic and "from the first and, above all, symbolic" (1987: 155). He goes on to say that "language itself is by its nature a traffic in symbols but these symbols are plastic – an endless annoyance to the scientist but God's own gift to the poet; for the poet, who is always trying to say something new, must take the rough and ready symbol of a general A and mould it to stand for his own particular *a*; that is at his least ambitious – sometimes he will mould it to stand for *b* or even *x*" (1987: 155). This procedure is, he maintains, "itself both ironic and dramatic; these three attributes of a poem are inseparable", and poetic images, "far from existing in their own right, can only be considered as parts, or rather as aspects, of the whole which is the poem" (1987: 155). It is the poet, as craftsman or maker of the poem who shapes this unity.

In the same essay, MacNeice explains that his images are determined partly by the mental climate, that is, a common world without which private worlds could not exist, and partly by his own particular background: "We only notice what we want to notice, we only react to what we want to react to, and we only get the images we deserve" (1987: 157), he observes. The mental climate of the particular time that MacNeice was referring to, and indeed was involved in, was characterized by pervasive anxiety and a sense of foreboding, a time of social and political unrest in the face of the economic depression of the late twenties and early thirties, the Spanish civil war, and the threatening signs of yet another world war. In the literary circles of the time, there was an ongoing debate as to the necessity, desirability and also the extent of contemporary poets' commitment to, and involvement in, social and political issues at a time of historical crisis. As Longley puts it, the 1930s was not "just another literary period, but also a cultural myth which the writers themselves constructed" (1988: 36). One important topic of contention at the time was the question of poetic individualism as opposed to social and political commitment. MacNeice actively participated in these debates through his critical writings. In "A Statement" (1938 in Heuser 1987) he

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from MacNeice's critical writings are taken from *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (1987).

writes that the poet is “only an extension – or, if you prefer it, a concentration – of the ordinary man. The content of poetry comes out of life” (1987: 98). Since the content of poetry comes out of life, “the poet at the moment will tend to be moralist rather than aesthete” (ibid.). Yet, at the same time he also emphasizes the integrity and individuality of the poet by insisting that “his morality must be honest; he must not merely retail other people’s dogma. The world no doubt needs propaganda, but propaganda (unless you use the term, as many do, very loosely indeed) is not the poet’s job” (ibid.). The poet is not, he asserts, “the loud-speaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice. At his highest he can be its conscience, its critical faculty, its grievous instinct” (ibid.). In a later essay, “The Poet in England To-day: A Reassessment” (1940 in Heuser 1987), he elaborates on the issue of the poet’s integrity, and declares that art “is a manifestation of human freedom. The artist’s freedom connotes honesty because a lie, however useful in politics, hampers artistic vision” (113). He is careful, however, to acknowledge that “if the artist declines to live in a merely political pigeonhole, it does not follow that he has to live in a vacuum” (1987: 113). At the end of the essay, commenting retrospectively on the poets of the 1930s, he remarks, “some of the poets who renounced the Ivory Tower were ready to enter a Brazen Tower of political dogma; where the Ivory Tower represents isolation from men in general, the Brazen Tower represents isolation from men as individuals (witness the typical entowered politician) and also from himself as an individual” (1987: 114). MacNeice’s preoccupation with moments of intense, life-affirming moments of personal experience in his poetry is inextricably related to his conception of his role and duty as a poet who strives, as a ‘concentration of the ordinary man’, to dramatize honestly and truthfully both private and public realities as ‘the critical faculty’ and the ‘grievous instinct’ of the world. Peter McDonald’s remark in *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* that MacNeice was a poet who aimed to “define and give voice to the individual without either the wilful blindness of individualism or the cypher-making generalizations of dogma” (1991: 20) sums up MacNeice’s position in the 1930s. Considered from this perspective, MacNeice’s poems that recreate the lived experience of the moment in all its complexity and fragility can, in themselves, be regarded as symbols of his struggle to achieve in his art, a balance, even if very delicate and precarious, between his personal and public commitments.

Louis MacNeice’s endeavours in his poetry of the 1930s to give expressions to moments captured from the flux of time and set within a context of threatening and destructive forces was, in fact, as McDonald states, “had always been native to his imagination” (1991: 35) and had been present in his work before the 1930s. In “Experiences with Images”, he describes the personal ‘peculiar background’ that he claims to have been a persistent influence on his imagery as an unhappy and lonely childhood spent in Belfast, Ireland, “a wet, rather sombre countryside” (1987: 158) on the northern shore of Belfast Lough. He remembers the sea as

"something alien, foreboding, dangerous", yet also a "symbol of escape" (ibid.). About the church and the church bells, later to come up as recurrent symbolic images in his poetry, he writes: "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 one reason, I think, though I would also maintain that the sound is melancholy anyhow, why church bells have for me a sinister association" (1987: 159). Furthermore, he says that the daily routine of his home was "monotonous" and there were few other children with whom he could play (1987: 160). In his opinion, all these circumstances must have supplied him with many images of "fear, anxiety, loneliness or monotony" (ibid.). It is important to note, however, that at the end of this sentence, he is careful to add that these images were "used very often quite out of a personal context" (ibid.), in other words, a public context, which in the 1930s signified widespread communal fears and anxieties.

The first poem I will consider is "Mayfly" (1929 in Dodds 1966). This early poem, "a love poem to MacNeice's first wife" (Longley 1988: 13), embodies several recurring characteristics of his symbolism. The poem is a dramatization of the poet's reflections on the movements of mayflies. The mayfly's dance awakens feelings of delight in the speaker, while at the same time he hints at the insect's brief life span:

Barometer of my moods today, mayfly,  
 Up and down one among a million, one  
 The same at best as the rest of the jiggling mayflies,  
 One only day of May alive beneath the sun.  
 The yokels tilt their pewters and the foam  
 Flowers in the sun beside the jewelled water.  
 Daughter of the South, call the sunbeams home  
 To nest between your breasts. The kingcups  
 Ephemeral are gay gulps of laughter. (1966: 13-14)

Commenting on MacNeice's early poems in his article "Louis MacNeice: The Pattern and the Poem, A. J. Minnis (1975) points out that his "images seem to fall neatly into two antithetical groups. On the one hand there is sleep, darkness, isolation, death and dogma; on the other noontday reality, light, movement, shared experience, life and the active imagination" (1975: 230). Minnis draws attention to another characteristic of MacNeice's poetry, namely, his seasonal symbolism, observing that "when it be realized that spring contains, or at least counterpoints, all the positives in this scheme, one can begin to appreciate the importance of the seasonal cycle for MacNeice" (ibid.). In "Mayfly", as the lines from the poem above illustrate, the spring sun provides not only light but energy and vitality. The awareness of the destructive quality of time is expressed in the fourth verse, in the speech of the mayflies:

When we are grown up we are sure to alter  
 Much for the better, to adopt solider creeds;

The kingcup will cease proffering his cup  
 And the foam will have blown from the beer and the heat no longer  
 dance  
 And the lift lose fascination and the May  
 Change her tune to June – but the trouble with us mayflies  
 Is that we never have the chance to be grown up. (1966: 14)

The poem's imagery of movement, dancing, flowers and water all together convey a sense of the life force that symbolizes the mayflies' resistance to 'solider creeds', which in their turn becomes a symbol for dogmatic beliefs of the world of grown-ups, that force them to conform, and thus restrict human freedom. The speaker then offers the mayfly as a model for human beings, as a symbol of defiance of 'solider creeds': "So we, whose strand of life is not much more, / Let us too make our time elastic and/ Inconsequently dance above the dazzling wave" (1966: 14). Images of life in the poem are, however, opposed by images of petrification that symbolize the power of time as a negative force: "[...] hours of stone / Long rows of granite sphinxes looking on" (ibid.). The speaker goes on in the last verse, to address the loved one and to acknowledge the inevitable passing of time: "The show will soon shut down, its gay-rags gone, / But when this summer is over let us die together, / I want always to be near your breasts" (ibid.). Moments of joy are bound to disappear, but the value of shared love is affirmed. In the last verse MacNeice also stresses the poet's role in making the moment alive through his creative powers: "[...] we the circus masters / Who make the mayflies dance, the lapwings lift their crests" (ibid.). The poem itself, as it moves toward its end, becomes a symbol of its own argument and of the poet's struggle to make the moment last.

The occasion for the moment of contemplation in a slightly later poem, "Sunday Morning" (1933 in Dodds 1966) is indicated in its title. The poem is a variation on the sonnet form, breaking with the traditional octet-sestet division. The first verse where the speaker describes the morning and its activities, as well as its promises, has ten lines. The imagery in the early lines show the morning as a time of ordinary holiday activity, yet the speaker delights in the sense of anticipation that it offers:

Down the road someone is practicing scales,  
 The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,  
 Man's heart expands to tinker with his car  
 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 clutch 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. (1966: 23)

The phrase 'Fate's great bazaar' refers to the freedom of choice promised by the only free morning of the week, and symbolizes the sense of endless possibilities such as attaining a true love of music and becoming an excellent piano player; or driving beyond the usual place of recreation at the speed of a race car, that would enable the driver to get hold of all happy moments of the past, and stop the passing of time that is sure to bring the Monday morning. The following four-line verse, however, puts an end to these reflections by the imperative that expresses the need to pay attention to a demanding voice not far away:

But listen, up the road, something gulps, 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. (1966: 23)

The church bells are a reminder and a symbol of the passing of time and the grim certainty of death, the end of all human activities. Time's flux, within the context of the poem, also implies the approach of the 'weekday time' with its never-ending obligations and dull routine of work that 'deaden'. In its entirety, the poem acquires symbolic significance by reproducing in its form the contrast between a moment of fleeting sense of happiness and freedom and the 'deadening' and 'enduring' realities that undermine these feelings. The sonnet form allows for the abrupt break and change of tone and perspective that ends the speaker's contemplation of the moment and forces him to face the unpleasant prospect of waking up to the Monday morning. The moment cannot be captured in reality, yet the poet's art can 'abstract' and make it to the week of time' as 'a small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme', which, after all, what the poem is. The creative powers of the poet as maker are affirmed, yet MacNeice's consciousness of the forces that oppose and restrict human freedom, and his refusal to disregard them prevent him from ending his poem on a positive note.

"Aubade" (1934 in Dodds 1966) is a short six-line lyric that is similar to "Sunday Morning" in its final recognition of the realities that are inimical to human beings' chances of experiencing long-lasting happiness. The first four lines show the speaker remembering a brief list of intense moments and end with a question:

Having bitten on life like a sharp apple  
 Or, playing it like a fish, been happy,  
 Having felt with fingers that the sky is blue  
 What have we after that to look forward to? (1966: 30)

In the lines above, vivid images derived from sensory experiences celebrate life and impart a sense of satisfaction with what it has to offer. The delight one takes in nature, in the taste of 'a sharp apple', in the playful movements of a carefree fish, and the sense of exhilaration in the ability to feel the colour of the

sky suggest our life of the senses, in a manner very much like the anticipation of 'clutching a fringe of the past' in "Sunday Morning". The question 'what have we after that to look forward to?' specifies the agents of these experiences as 'we', indicating that MacNeice is speaking on behalf of not only himself, but the public as well, just as he does in "Mayfly" when he widens his perspective to 'we, whose strand of life is not much more'. The question in "Aubade" that gains communal relevance is answered in the last two lines:

Not the twilight of the gods but a precise dawn  
Of sallow and grey bricks, and newsboys crying war. (1966: 30)

Like the abrupt and negating beginning of the last verse of "Sunday Morning", *Aubade's* answer effectively undercuts any expectation of making the happy moments last. What 'we' face instead is approaching war, as announced in the newspapers, its reality underlined by the poet's declaration "not the twilight of gods", in other words, not a mythological war between gods and evil. The "sallow and grey bricks" are a reference to the colourless urban settings of much of MacNeice's poetry in the 1930s, a symbol of the monotonous and bleak lives of their inhabitants with whom the poet seems to identify. The moments of joy in the poem form a striking contrast to the sense of doom symbolized by the answer and become invested with great poignancy.

"Snow" does not attribute such a poignant quality to its dramatic moment but reproduces and investigates it at greater length. It does not contain any direct references to the restrictions of ordinary life, or threat of an imminent war, focusing instead on the precious quality of the moment itself. This particular moment is distinguished by its unexpectedness:

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was  
Spawning snow and pink roses against it  
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:  
World is suddener than we fancy it. (1966: 30)

The speaker's sudden realization that snow and pink roses, that are in fact "incompatible", are actually brought together and are able to exist together 'soundlessly collateral' awakens in him a sense of delight and becomes a sign of world's promise of producing enriching moments of pleasant surprises. In the second stanza the speaker's senses continue to be attacked, as it were, with a bewildering "spawning" of images, causing a state of intoxication:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,  
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion  
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel  
The drunkenness of things being various. (1966: 30)

As A. J. Minnis observes, "the linguistic and formal structures perfectly duplicate the thematic process" (1975: 235). The enjambments that carry the

images from one line to the next serve to enact the sense of sudden assault and the "incorrigibly plural" quality of the "crazy" world, culminating in what the speaker experiences as "the drunkenness of things being various". The impact of the speaker's moment of discovery of the shocking plurality of world is reiterated in the last stanza:

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world  
 Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes-  
 On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands-  
 There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses. (1966: 30)

The non-punctuated, rolling third line enacts the variousness and plurality that the speaker has felt, becoming a striking symbol of their impact on his senses. The last line, on the other hand, states that it is not only glass that separates the snow from the roses. In the words of Steven Matthews, what the last line firmly asserts is the existence of "strict barriers and borders between kinds of perception, as between all the different kinds of human activity and its politics" (2010: 167). Viewed from this perspective, it can be concluded that the speaker has sobered up to face and admit the difficulty of reconciling differences, of bringing them together to co-exist in harmony. The form of the poem as a whole becomes a symbol of this recognition and the tension it generates.

A later and longer poem, "Postscript to Iceland: for W. H. Auden" (1936 in Dodds 1966), written after a trip MacNeice and Auden, a fellow poet and friend, made to Iceland, shows MacNeice more explicitly committed to the crises of his time:

Not for me romantic nor  
 Idyll on a mythic shore  
 But a fancy turn, you know,  
 Sandwiched in a graver show.  
 Down in Europe Seville fell,  
 Nations germinating hell,  
 The Olympic games were run-  
 Spots upon the Aryan sun. (1966: 73)

From its very beginning the poem records the speaker's sense of living in a world full of frightening, uncontrollable events. In the lines above, overt references to "a graver show", "the fall of Seville" during the civil war in Spain, "nations germinating hell" and the "Aryan Olympics" register an awareness of the present and approaching future conflicts. The trip to Iceland is "a fancy turn", a moment, or rather, a series of shared moments snatched from a time of world-wide disasters:

Holidays should be like this,  
 Free from over emphasis,  
 Time for soul to stretch and spit  
 Before the world comes back to it,

Before the chimneys row on row  
 Sneer in smoke, 'We told you so'  
 And the fog-bound sirens call  
 Ruin to the long sea-wall. (1966: 74)

That this trip was a time of respite, a brief interval before going back home to face "the world" is made clear and emphasized by the repetition of "before". The "chimneys row on row" is an image that symbolizes the unpleasant and dark atmosphere of the modern, industrialized urban world that MacNeice's poetry features often. Like the church bells of "Sunday Morning", the chimneys are personified to remind the inhabitants of the place of the impossibility of escape. "The fog-bound sirens" calling "ruin to the long sea-wall" are personal images from MacNeice's childhood; here they are used in a different context, as symbols of the contemporary menace, and merge the personal, inherited fears of the poet with the fears of his contemporaries. Another aspect of the modern world that MacNeice broods on in the poem is the feeling of being alone, for all ties that bind him to his friends seem have been destroyed:

With the fear of loneliness  
 And uncommunicableness;  
 All the wires are cut, my friends  
 Live beyond the severed ends. (1966: 74)

The possibility of shared, communal experiences that MacNeice values and portrays in his poems is felt to be lost in this picture of present and future catastrophic happenings. His room has become "a pit/ Humming with the fear of it" (1966: 74). Feelings of despair and uncertainty are conveyed through the image of "a pit humming with fear", recalling the "graver show" of public crises, yet the first two lines of the first stanza of the poem, "Now the winter nights begin / Lonely comfort walls me in" (1966: 73), with their seasonal symbolism of the cold darkness of winter nights have already put emphasis on the private nature of his despair. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the private from the public in "Postscript to Iceland", and the form of the poem mimics this difficulty in its form that juxtaposes images of the poet's personal life with those that render a wider one. The last two stanzas are a direct address to his friend Auden, and an acknowledgment of duties and responsibilities:

So I write these lines for you  
 Who have felt the death-wish too,  
 But your lust for life prevails-  
 Drinking coffee, telling tales.  
 Our prerogatives as men  
 Will be cancelled who knows when;  
 Still I drink your health before  
 The gun-butt raps upon the door. (1966: 75)

The poem ends on a note of stoic acceptance of their "prerogatives as men", an acceptance that John Lucas sees as MacNeice's "enviable ability to 'stand stable'" (1986: 181). As a matter of fact, Lucas believes that this ability "to find relish in the actual no matter how the storm clouds build" is what makes MacNeice such a fine poet (*ibid.*). At the end of the poem the complexity of the poet's acceptance is symbolized by the moment of celebrating the friendship before the war arrives at the door and forces them to get actively involved.

The last poem to be examined, "The Sunlight on the Garden" (1937 in Dodds 1966), like "Postscript to Iceland", reflects MacNeice's sense of being a part of the inevitable world crisis and contains recurring symbols of his characteristic preoccupations. As McDonald notes, MacNeice's poetry in the late 1930s "was more committed than ever to the exploration of, and engagement with, its public contexts (1991: 65), and shows him "coming to terms with a burden of responsibility which is broadly 'political' in its terms of reference, while sustaining also the concerns already central to his poetry" (1991: 73). The poem focuses on a particular moment of the present on which the crisis and obligations of the near future are felt to be pressing heavily. The first verse describes the moment, the occasion, in fact, for the poem:

The sunlight on the garden  
 Hardens and grows cold,  
 We cannot cage the minute  
 Within its nests of gold,  
 When all is told  
 We cannot beg for pardon. (1966: 84)

The moment, the poet states, cannot be extracted from the flux of time, and the structure of the verse mimes this conviction. "The sunlight on the garden", the entire first line, does not irradiate the scene, but "hardens and grows cold" immediately in the following line. The sunlight, an elemental symbol in MacNeice's poetry, often employed to suggest the life force with positive implications, is displaced in an unexpected manner before its life-giving quality is affirmed. The "hardened and cold" sun turns into an image symbolic with sinister associations. The moment is only a "minute" and cannot be saved. The last two lines of the verse begin to gain significance in relation to these sinister associations that the following verses elaborate:

Our freedom as free lances  
 Advances towards its end;  
 The earth compels, upon it  
 Sonnets and birds descend;  
 And soon, my friend,  
 We shall have no time for dances.  
 The sky was good for flying  
 Defying the church bells

And every evil iron  
 Siren and what it tells:  
 The earth compels,  
 We are dying, Egypt, dying (1966: 84)

The image of sonnets descending on the earth because it forces them to do so is obviously a symbol of the end of freedom for artists. A time of commitment to the affairs of the world is what the poet foresees. The change of the present tense into the past in “the sky was good for flying” points to a dramatic change that leaves no room for sonnets, or, for that matter, birds to fly freely in the sky. The world that MacNeice is portraying in the poem was one on the brink of a second world war, so the image of “every evil iron siren” recalling the “fog-bound sirens” of “Postscript to Iceland”, attains importance as a powerful symbol that refers to the destruction and horrors that a war would certainly cause. The quotation “We are dying, Egypt, dying”, from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* also contributes to the symbolic overtones by alluding to past wars that were the subject of previous works of literature. The poem ends typically with an affirmation and a sense of stoic determination. It should be noted here, however, that the ending of the poem enacts quite the opposite of what it has already declared and revealed to be impossible, by returning to “sunlight on the garden” in a way that “cages” the minute within the structure of the poem:

And not expecting pardon,  
 Hardened in heart anew,  
 But glad to have sat under  
 Thunder and rain with you,  
 And grateful too  
 For sunlight on the garden. (1966: 85)

The “hardened heart” is a reminder of the “hardened sunlight” of the first verse, a symbol that widens the range of associations to become a sign of the speaker’s commitment to duties and responsibilities to be fulfilled, duties that “the earth compels” him and his friends to do. The heart is glad, nevertheless, for having sat with a loved one under, if not the sunlight, thunder and rain. The poem comes full circle to attach greater value to the life force to be cherished as a symbol of not only one moment but of all times.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from MacNeice’s reply in his essay “The Tower that Once” (1941 in Heuser 1987) to Virginia Woolf’s criticism of the poets of the Thirties. At the end of the essay, assessing the work of these poets he writes, “We may not have done all we could in the Thirties, but we did do something. We were right [...] - in our more lyrical work - to give personal expression to our feelings of anxiety, horror and despair (for even despair can be fertile)” (1987: 124). The handful of individual poems examined above illustrate that what he himself did in his own poetry made it an enduring symbol of an

honest and painful confrontation and struggle with the demands of his troubled times.

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