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| **MacNeice, Louis (1907-1963)** |
| MacNeice, Frederick Louis (1907-1963) |
| Poet, critic, and broadcaster Louis MacNeice was an influential member of the generation of British poets who came to artistic maturity in the 1930s. Born the son of a Protestant minister (later a bishop) in Belfast, and raised in nearby Carrickfergus, MacNeice would live most of his adult life in England, where he balanced the literary fame he enjoyed from the 1930s on with a career at the British Broadcasting Corporation that lasted from 1941 until his death in 1963. Though professionally and personally connected to other major poets of the 1930s, MacNeice wrote verse that tended to eschew the fervent commitments of that decade in favour of an attention to sense perception and a wry, sophisticated scepticism directed equally at political, national, and religious affiliations. |
| Like others of his literary generation—whose most prominent members included W.H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Stephen Spender—MacNeice demonstrates a renewed interest in traditional verse forms (including odes, epistles, and eclogues) and in regular metrical and stanzaic patterns. MacNeice himself saw this generational attention to form as a response to, but not a rejection of, the free-verse innovations of recent Anglo-American poetry. ‘There is a chance,’ he writes in his critical volume *Modern Poetry* (1938), ‘for poets of today to retain the *élan vital* of Whitman or of Lawrence… but to girder it with a structure supplied partly by reason, partly by emotion intelligently canalized to an end, partly by the mere love of form’ (MacNeice, *Modern Poetry* 17). MacNeice’s interest in the expressive potential of poetic form manifests itself equally in the slow resignation to romantic loss captured in the tightly structured lyric ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’ (from *The Earth Compels* [1938]) and in the reeling, apocalyptic refrains of ‘Bagpipe Music’ (from *I Crossed the Minch* [1938]).  Critics tend to agree with MacNeice’s own assessment that he began to find his voice with his second volume, *Poems* (1935), in which moments of acute social observation (‘Birmingham’) rub shoulders with considerations of political commitment (‘To a Communist,’ ‘The Individualist Speaks’) and personal meditations (as in ‘Ode,’ written on the occasion of his son’s birth). Taken collectively, these poems indicate that MacNeice was speaking of himself as much as anyone else when, in *Modern Poetry*, he outlined his poetic preferences:  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. The relationship between life and literature is almost impossible to analyse, but it should not be degraded into something like the translation of one language into another. For life is not literary, while literature is not, in spite of Plato, essentially second hand. (MacNeice, *Modern Poetry* 198)  The worldliness of MacNeice’s poetry emerges from its attention to sensory details; for all their capacity for intellection and abstraction, MacNeice’s poems often hinge on delicate observations of the physical world, what he calls (in ‘Snow’) ‘the drunkenness of things being various’ (MacNeice, *Collected Poems* 24). Combined with his capacity for humour and irony, this attention to perceptual experience has contributed to MacNeice’s reputation as a poet of the everyday whose works are relatively accessible, especially as compared to those of his friend and contemporary, W.H. Auden.  His most celebrated work, the long poem *Autumn Journal* (1939), remains a remarkable culminating document of the tumultuous 1930s. Over twenty-four cantos totalling some 2000 lines, MacNeice fuses personal and historical crises—most notably the breakup of a romantic relationship and the Munich Crisis of 1938—to produce a poem that is at once socially engaged and wary of absolute political solutions; intensely personal while also externally oriented; and alternately lyrical and plain-spoken in style. Formally aware without being dogmatic, MacNeice adopts in *Autumn Journal* a loosely iambic metre in which shifting patterns of end-rhyme and varying line-lengths mitigate readerly exhaustion:  And I am in the train too now and summer is going  South as I go north  Bound for the dead leaves falling, the burning bonfire,  The dying that brings forth  The harder life, revealing the trees’ girders,  The frost that kills the germs of *laissez-faire…* (MacNeice, Autumn Journal I.33-38)  The rhythmic flexibility of such lines mirrors and enables a fluid movement between the speaker’s personal journey and its larger geopolitical context (*laissez-faire* here being MacNeice’s shorthand for the appeasement policies of the Chamberlain government). Though ultimately unwilling or unable to offer anything in the way of solutions, *Autumn Journal* remains affecting precisely because of MacNeice’s ability to register political and social upheavals at the level of quotidian experience.  If MacNeice’s aversion to ideological entrenchment made him something of an odd man out in the politicized literary culture of the 1930s, critic Peter McDonald has noted that his fraught relations with the island of his birth present similar challenges for those inclined to connect his poetry to a larger Irish tradition (McDonald 3). Though he tended to consider himself an Irishman among the English, poems including ‘Valediction,’ ‘Belfast,’ ‘Autobiography,’ and ‘Carrickfergus’ present Ireland, especially the north, as a hard place characterized by recollections of personal trauma (including the premature death of his mother) and what Terence Brown has called a sense of ‘imprisonment and exclusion’ (T. Brown, ‘Louis MacNeice's Ireland’). Although MacNeice’s attitudes towards Ireland continued to evolve and soften throughout his life, he never moved back for any significant length of time, and his early poetic repudiations remain his most definitive statements on the home he left.  For all his contributions to twentieth-century verse, it is remarkable that Louis MacNeice made equally significant contributions to what is now a largely forgotten art form: the radio play. Though long neglected in assessments of his literary career, MacNeice’s tenure at the BBC provided him with yet another vehicle for his interest in the potential of form to guide the aesthetic investigation of human experience. His major early works for radio (*Alexander Nevsky* [1941] and *Christopher Columbus* [1942]) are long verse dramas that transcend their official propagandistic occasion. Following the war, MacNeice turned to more introspective works, including the cryptic parable play *The Dark Tower* (1946), and to adaptations or re-writings of, among other works, Goethe’s *Faust*, severalGreek plays, and three Icelandic sagas. He also wrote documentary-style radio features on the process of decolonization in India, Pakistan, and Ghana. MacNeice’s success at the BBC had as much to do with his talents as a producer as they did with his literary gifts: he wrote well over a hundred scripts, and produced the majority of them himself.  His employment at the BBC coincides with what critics generally treat as a mid-career dimming of his poetic powers, before a resurgence in *Solstices* (1961) and *The Burning Perch* (1963), but whether correlation signals causation is ultimately undecidable. One unfortunate truth is that his radio career contributed to his death: in late August of 1963, MacNeice insisted on accompanying technicians into a cave where they were recording sound effects for what would be his final radio play, *Persons from Porlock* (1963). MacNeice caught a severe chill that went untreated and developed into pneumonia. He died in hospital on 3 September 1963. |
| Further reading:  (Armitage and Clark)  (Brown and Reid)  (R. D. Brown)  (Coulton)  (Hynes)  (Keane)  (Longley)  (MacNeice, Autumn Journal)  (MacNeice, Blind Fireworks)  (MacNeice, Collected Poems)  (MacNeice, Holes in the Sky: Poems 1944-1947)  (MacNeice, Letters of Louis MacNeice)  (MacNeice, Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays)  (MacNeice, Modern Poetry)  (MacNeice, Out of the Picture)  (MacNeice, Plant and Phantom)  (MacNeice, Poems)  (MacNeice, Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice)  (MacNeice, Selected Plays of Louis MacNeice)  (MacNeice, Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice)  (MacNeice, Solstices)  (MacNeice, Springboard: Poems 1941-1944)  (MacNeice, Ten Burnt Offerings)  (MacNeice, The Burning Perch)  (MacNeice, The Earth Compels)  (MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats)  (MacNeice, The Strings Are False)  (MacNeice, Varieties of Parable)  (MacNeice, Visitations)  (MacNeice and Auden, Letters from Iceland)  (Marsack)  (McDonald)  (McKinnon)  (Stallworthy)  (MacNeice, Autumn Sequel)  (MacNeice, Christopher Columbus: A Radio Play)  (MacNeice, Persons from Porlock and Other Plays for Radio)  (MacNeice, The Mad Islands and The Administrator)  (Walker)  (MacNeice, The Dark Tower and other Radio Scripts) |