
LOUIS MACNEICE

*1907 IN BELFAST †1963 IN LONDON

was an extraordinary, very versatile, but unfortunately long-neglected 20th century poet. Although he was born in Northern Ireland, due to his father's plans, he would spend most of his lifetime in England and complete his entire schooling and university education there. Also, later he never left England, but worked there throughout his life except for a short stay in Athens, Greece, where he took the position of director of the British Institute. These biographical peculiarities are probably a major reason for MacNeice's belated entry into both the Irish and the English literary canon, although his poetry was highly appreciated by the English public during his lifetime.

Among the most influential poets who influenced MacNeice's writing were Dante, Percy B. Shelley, William Butler Yeats, on whom MacNeice wrote a textbook, John Betjeman and Wystan Hugh Auden. MacNeice was friends with the latter and wrote the travelogue *Letters from Iceland* together with him. MacNeice also befriended Stephen Spender, another member of the so-called Auden Group, and together they published the anthology of *Oxford Poetry 1929*.

MacNeice early on found his own lyrical tone, which clearly set him apart from his contemporaries. He was a very form-conscious lyrical poet who absorbed the new stylistic devices of modernism, but always kept an eye on the poems' form and fluid readability. For this purpose, he developed a flexible blank verse meter and rhyming techniques allowing him to give everyday language an aesthetic aura. His poems, as semantically complex and multilayered as they may be, always stand out for their special rhythm and sound and are often so enchanting that, even when first heard or read, they make the reader feel to have understood the text, even before he has been able to grasp it rationally. Eliot attributed this phenomenon of direct communication to true poetry. MacNeice's poem *Glass Falling* (1926), for example, has such an effect. Through the finely tuned interplay of variable rhythms, internal and terminal rhymes, assonances, alliterations, verbal echoes and repetitions, it is as immediately catchy as a piece of appealing music:

Glass Falling¹

The glass is going down. The sun
Is going down. The forecasts say
It will be warm, with frequent showers.
We ramble down the showery hours
And amble up and down the day.
Mary will wear her black goloshes
And splash the puddles on the town;
And soon on fleets of macintoshes
The rain is coming down, the frown
Is coming down of heaven showing
A wet night coming ... ²

Already in his early poetry, MacNeice had developed these stylistic devices, he later would perfect, thus, being able to achieve a strong intensification of the semantic statements of his poems.

This can be beautifully seen in the *The sunlight on the garden* (1937), which he wrote when his Jewish wife Mary Ezra left him for another man. The elegiac, prayer-like effect of the poem is quite typical of the MacNeice tone, which is based on the precise interplay of rhyme, rhythm, sound and poetic fantasy. The poem is divided into four stanzas (here only the first two and the last are considered), which have an analogous end rhyme scheme of the kind: A B X B B A (X= orphan) and an analogous metric with iambic trimeters (sometimes interspersed with dactyls) in the first four and in the last verse respectively, while the fifth verse always shows an iambic dimeter.

The Sunlight on the Garden³

The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute

1 Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London UK 2007

2 Excerpt from Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Peter McDonald (Ed), Faber & Faber, London 2016, S.638

3 Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London UK 2007

Within its nets of gold;
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.

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.

...

And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have set under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden.

The above poem is a good example of a major part of MacNeice's lyrical poetry that, in general, does not lend itself to a simple translation into German. If one translates semantically faithfully, the danger is great, that the sophisticated interplay of sound, rhythm and semantics, which constitutes a well-woven fabric, is torn apart and the unique MacNeice tone gets lost. Therefore, in MacNeice's case, it seems wiser, more so than with Auden and others of the English »Thirties Poets,« to give priority to a tone- based rendering of the poems over their literal translation.

In contrast to Eliot or Auden, MacNeice tried in his poetry to break up conventional notions of places by making people, spaces and times in transition a main theme and embedding each of them in a historically concrete context. In this respect his treatise *Modern Poetry. A private essay* is quite revealing. Here MacNeice defines the role of the modern poet, and implicitly also his own poetic agenda: »*The poet, I consider, is both critic and entertainer (and his criticism will cut no ice unless he entertains). Poetry to-day should steer a middle course between pure entertainment ('escape poetry') and propaganda. Propaganda, the extreme development of 'critical' poetry, is also the defeat of criticism. And the mere slogan-poet contradicts his name-*

poiètes, a 'maker.' The poet is a maker, not a retail trader. The writer to-day should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct. In a world intransigent and over-specialized, falsified by practical necessities, the poet must maintain his elasticity and refuse to tell lies to order. Others can tell lies more efficiently; no one except the poet can give us poetic truth⁴.«

Regarding the importance of lyrical language MacNeice wrote:

»We are speaking poetically rather than scientifically when we 'make conversation,' when we make a joke, when we use cliché metaphors or racy slang, when we express any emotion either by meiosis or hyperbole, when we let off steam by using bad language or surplus superlatives, when we say, 'It would rain just now when I've hung my washing out.'«

As one can see, MacNeice's poetics is based on the meaning of the word, which, in his view, only develops meaning through its social use, and its purpose of communication. Words are therefore communication products, as he puts it, and the poet's task should be to use them in such a way that the things mentioned in a poem become their main characteristic. While this attitude is diametrically opposed to the conception of Eliot, it is quite compatible with that of Auden, who defined poetry by its effect on the reader as »unforgettable, particularly memorable language«:

»[Poetry] must move our emotions, or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender, as we do when talking to an intimate friend«⁵.

However, while both Auden and Eliot wrote for a select, intellectual audience, MacNeice had a broader readership from all classes in mind, though not at the expense of his poetic standards. He sought not to write poetry for the inhabitants of a closed world, but for all accessible people regardless of their social class and their political beliefs.

4 Louis MacNeice *Modern Poetry. A Personal Essay*. Oxford University Press 1938

5 Auden's 'Introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*' 1935

This is reminiscent of another great modern poet, Yehuda Amichai, who, like MacNeice, wrote for everyone and believed that being a poet was not a special profession above other professions⁶. The secret of the popularity of MacNeice's and Amichai's poems is probably that their poetry is double coded. In other words, on the one hand the poems are written in clearly understandable language, sometimes even in everyday language, and yet on the other hand they are designed in such a way that they can unfold additional meanings on a deeper level that is only accessible to an experienced and educated readership. Like Amichai, MacNeice thought that a poem must always be about something tangible, that it must deal with the world of facts: »Poetry and real life must not be separated in hermetically sealed jars. Rather, they should be allowed to fertilize each other.«⁷ At the same token, however, it was clear to him that pure journalistic reportage alone did not make a poem. For this reason, his poems are always placed in a larger context of meaning that takes the human condition into consideration. And that is why his poems are always designed according to aesthetic principles, so that content and form constitute a unity. MacNeice did not, however, understand his poetry as escapist, as an escape into a beautiful, intact world. As escapist poets, who in his opinion ultimately shied away from responsibility, he defined the poets on the ivory tower on the one hand and the poets on the tower of ideological dogmatism on the other: »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 oneself as an individual.«⁸

In his role as a poet, MacNeice saw himself as a representative of the bourgeoisie, but also as a representative of a pronounced individualism. In a certain sense, this attitude was meant as a deliberate affront to the left-wing Romanticism prevalent among intellectuals at the time. Interestingly, the long poem *Autumn Journal* represents a kind of rejection of the compulsion to constantly apologize for »ideological impurity,« as for example Spender used to do. The ego, according to MacNeice, is equally responsible to itself and its environment. The private and public spheres cannot be separated, but are organically linked. The very compo-

6 Esperer HDA. Die Bedeutung von Jehuda Amichais Lyrik. In: Jehuda Amichai. Poems. Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, Germany 2018

7 Louis MacNeice, 'The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment,' Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice. In: Williams K., Matthews S. Rewriting the Thirties. Modernism and After. Routledge, London & New York 1997

8 see ref. 7

sition of *Autumn Journal* is revealing in that it makes the different lyrical voices of the poet speak, who is in dialogue with himself, so to speak, in changing moods of his lyrical ego. Unlike other contemporaries, MacNeice did not use the persona technique of speaking in roles. Instead, he always gave the floor to the authentically speaking lyrical ego. In this lyrical ego, however, the »*different parts of me* (e.g. *the anarchist, the defeatist, the sensual man, the philosopher, the would-be bourgeois*) *have their say*.« In *Autumn Journal*, conceived as a poetic diary and written in 1938 on the eve of the Second World War, MacNeice interweaves everyday events with current political and social issues, with news of market and stock exchange, with the public, private and professional, with city and country. Meditative and metapoetic passages are interspersed again and again, such as the following one, in which the poet reflects on the transitory nature of art and poetry:

Autumn Journal XXI (Excerpt)

And when we clear away⁹
 All this debris of day-to-day experience,
What comes out to light, what is there of value
 Lasting from day-to-day?
I sit in my room in comfort
 Looking at enormous flowers –
Equipment purchased with my working hours,
 A daily mint of perishable petals.
The figures of the dance repeat
 The unending cycle of making and spending money,
Eating our daily bread in order to earn it
 And earning in order to eat.
And is that all the story,
 The mainspring and the plot,
Or merely a mechanism without which not
 Any story could be written?
 Sine qua non!
 Sine qua non indeed, we cannot ever
Live by soul alone; the soul without the stomach
 Would find its glory gone.
...

9 Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London UK 2007

The *Autumn Journal* is indeed very revealing as to MacNeice's poetics. Thus, we learn in the preface that, contrary to what was expected of a poet at the time, the author is not willing to make any final verdict or judgement of political events, because: »*It is the nature of this poem to be neither final nor balanced. I have certain beliefs which, I hope, emerge in the course of it but which I have refused to abstract from their context. For this reason, I shall probably be called a trimmer by some and a sentimental extremist by others. But poetry in my opinion must be honest before anything else and I refuse to be 'objective' or clear-cut at the cost of honesty*¹⁰.«

Autumn Journal XV (Excerpt)¹¹

Shelley and jazz and lieder and love and hymn-tunes
And a day returns too soon;
We'll get drunk among roses
In the valley of the moon.
Give me an aphrodisiac, give me lotus,
Give me the same again;
[...]
Let the old Muse loosen her stays
Or give me a new Muse with stockings and suspenders
And a smile like a cat,
With false eyelashes and finger-nails of carmine
And dressed by Schiaparelli, with a pill-box hat.
[...]
O look who comes here. I cannot see their faces
Walking in file, slowly in file;
They have no shoes on their feet, the knobs of their ankles
Catch the moon light as they pass the stile
And cross the moor among the skeletons of bog-oak
Following the track from the gallows back to the town;
Each has the end of a rope around his neck. I wonder
Who let these men come back, who cut them down –
And now they reach the gate and line up opposite

10 S. Burges Watson, 'Orpheus: A Guide to Selected Sources,' *Living Poets* (Durham, 2013), https://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk/w/Orpheus:_A_Guide_to_Selected_Sources

11 Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London UK 2007

The neon lights on the medieval wall
And underneath the sky-signs
Each one takes his cowl and lets it fall
And we see their faces, each the same as the other,
Men and women, each like a closed door,
But something about their faces is familiar;
Where have we seen them before?
Was it the murderer on the nursery ceiling
Or Judas Iscariot in the Field of Blood
Or someone at Gallipoli or in Flanders
Caught in the end-all mud?
...

The following excerpt from *A Christmas Eclogue* also shows how MacNeice sees himself impaired by the aestheticism of modernism prevailing at the time, and how he necessarily stands out from it, for what he perceives as a whole belonging to the humanum, he sees fragmented and negated by the new style. Where MacNeice focuses on the special characteristics (soul and flesh) of man, of what constitutes the real life of the human, others, such as Eliot, are interested in abstraction, symbol and pure form.

An Eclogue for Christmas (Excerpt)¹²

[...]
I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century,
Posed by Picasso beside an endless opaque sea,
Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets,
Tentative pencillings, endless liabilities, no assets,
Abstractions scalped with a palette-knife
Without reference to this particular life.
And so it has gone on; I have not been allowed to be
Myself in flesh or face, but abstracting and dissecting me,
They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,
Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh...

12 Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London UK 2007

Louis MacNeice, long misunderstood and often better known for being a classical philologist who has accomplished a congenial translation of Aeschylus' Agamemnon, than for his own literary work, has so far escaped the attention of German readers. This was, so it appears, mainly due to the fact that, with very few exceptions in literary history books, German translations of MacNeice's poems were virtually completely missing. And this despite the fact that MacNeice, in spite of his premature death, published an enormous body of work, comprising 15 volumes of poetry alone, about 10 dramas, a novel, a children's book, short prose and radio plays. The fact that MacNeice has escaped the radar of the literary establishment for so long and so thoroughly was not least due to the circumstance that he was so blatantly neglected by the English literary critics themselves for a long time, who used to rank him as a minor poet of the Auden Group. It was only in the last two decades that MacNeice received the attention in Anglo-Saxon criticism that is commensurate to the quality and significance of his poetry. Only recently has he ceased to be referred to just as »MacSpaunday,« an acronym made up of parts of the names of MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Day-Lewis. And only recently has MacNeice been considered a poet of the greatest stature. That MacNeice's poetry has at least the poetic quality of Auden's should be evident to anyone who is not only informed by secondary literature, but who is willing to deal directly with his poems. However, whereas Yeats, Eliot and Auden, for example, tended to construct religious or political utopias that were detached from the chaos of their time, MacNeice rejected the validity of such utopian constructs. Instead, he pictured the real life of people of his time and took them into poetic focus independently of ideological constructs like »home,« »church« or »nation.« The fact that MacNeice, unlike Auden and Spender, decidedly did not adopt a politically correct attitude certainly contributed greatly to the poet's negative reception by contemporary critics precisely because of this lack of attitude: *"MacNeice can serve as a very good example of the many young poets...who failed to form an opinion on society, philosophy and religion and whose tragedy is that they drift aimlessly through a hostile world and waste their talent."*¹³

In addition, the inclusion of MacNeice's work in the literary canon was severely hampered by the various scholars from Ireland and England, since the former considered MacNeice not Irish enough, while the latter deemed him not English enough.

13 Michael A. Moir. 'More than glass': Louis MacNeice's Poetics of Expansion. A dissertation. The Catholic University of America, Washington DC, USA 2012

All these factors may have contributed to preventing German literary critics and publishers from taking a closer look at MacNeice's poetry and making it available to the German public. The publication of MacNeice simply didn't seem to promise much profit, because unlike other poets of the time, he was not left-wing enough, not left at all actually, but rather unimpressed by any leftist ideology. However, exactly these ideologies were in vogue in Germany since the students' revolt, and the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a feverish tendency to revolutionary attitudes. Thus, German publishers preferred to rely on appropriately colored Anglo-Saxon authors.

Thanks to the German Elif-Verlag, now a bilingual anthology is available. It gives a cross-section of MacNeice's different creative phases by means of selected poems and poem excerpts, which are presented in chronological order. Forty-two English poems and the respective German translations are included in the book authored by the English native speaker Henry Holland and the German poet Jonis Hartmann. Although this book is apt to enable the German reader to get a first overview on MacNeice's tremendous lyrical work, precisely because of the unfamiliarity of MacNeice, it would have been a good idea, if the authors had addressed the literary significance of MacNeice and also offered some biographical context. Regarding the translation's quality, Holland and Hartmann tried to make use of contemporary language. However, they did not always succeed in rendering the typical MacNeice-sound. One might forgive that, because they accomplished a literally faithful translation. In quite a few poems, however, one would have wished that the English poems' sound, brought about by the richness of assonances, alliterations, internal rhymes and changing meters, would have also been rendered in the German translation. Thus, unfortunately, the musical charm and the magical flair of some of the finest poems are lost in the translation. Nevertheless, it is to the great merit of the authors, through their courageous translation, to finally provide the German-speaking world with a first glimpse of MacNeice's brilliant work. For this they indeed deserve the greatest of thanks and recognition.

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