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Michael A. Moir Jr.



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3422>
DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3422
ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: July 30, 2013
ISBN: 978-2-7535-2673-0
ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Michael A. Moir Jr., ““Like the tombs of nameless kings”: Louis MacNeice’s Western Anti-Pastoral”, *Études irlandaises* [Online], 38-1 | 2013, Online since 30 June 2015, connection on 19 October 2023.
URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3422> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3422>



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“Like the tombs of nameless kings”: Louis MacNeice’s Western Anti-Pastoral

Michael A. MOIR, Jr.

Catholic University of America, Washington

Abstract

Throughout his career as a poet, Louis MacNeice, born in Belfast but schooled and resident in England, looks at the western counties of Ireland, and indeed the island itself, as a repository of historical memory, including the western Irish roots of his own family. While the east – that is, continental Europe – is embroiled in the Spanish Civil War and the coming Second World War and is thus seen as a site of significant contemporary action in MacNeice’s work, what action takes place in western Ireland tends to be in the past; both celebratory poems like the “Sligo and Mayo” and “Galway” parts of “The Closing Album”, and more ambivalent pieces like “Valediction” and “Neutrality” stress an attachment to the past bred by insularity. Ireland’s concerns, to the expatriate MacNeice, are exclusively local and rooted in ancient history. The Irish Sea separates the island from the broader currents of European history, and it becomes an attraction for tourists from across the water, as noted in “Valediction”. Ireland – particularly the cultural nationalist ideal promoted by the Revival – is a kind of archive, but it is one which has become obscure, as indicated by “the tombs of nameless kings” (CP 181) in “Sligo and Mayo”. The holiday visitors who come to look into the past can no longer comprehend it, as the rest of the world has moved on. The pastoral modes that Yeats and his immediate successors applied to the west of Ireland obscure the violence of the present in favor of an idealized past that MacNeice cannot endorse.

Keywords: Louis MacNeice, pastoral, family history, World War II, Western Ireland, memory, islands, W.B. Yeats.

Résumé

Le poète Louis MacNeice est né à Belfast, mais il fut éduqué et vécu en Angleterre. Tout au long de sa carrière, il insiste sur le fait que les comtés de l’ouest de l’Irlande – et l’île toute entière – sont imprégnés d’une histoire qui embrasse ses propres racines familiales dans l’Ouest. Alors que l’Est, c’est-à-dire l’Europe continentale, doit composer avec la Guerre civile en Espagne et les tourments de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, MacNeice ancre cette Europe dans une réalité contemporaine où se déroulent d’intenses débats. À l’inverse, le travail de MacNeice évoque l’Ouest de l’Irlande par le recours au passé. Les poèmes « Sligo and Mayo », « Galway », qui font partie de « The Closing Album », ainsi que « Valediction » et « Neutrality », racontent tous l’histoire d’une Irlande insulaire et révolue. Les préoccupations de cette Irlande, selon MacNeice l’expatrié, sont de nature locale et font référence à des temps anciens. La mer d’Irlande isole de l’histoire européenne l’île prise par les touristes, comme l’auteur le note dans « Valediction ». L’Irlande – particulièrement l’idéal du nationalisme culturel au temps du Revival – est une archive obscure qui est devenue aussi illisible que « the tombs of nameless kings » (CP 181) de son poème « Sligo and Mayo ». Les touristes qui veulent

découvrir son passé n'arriveront pas à la comprendre puisque le reste du monde est déjà passé à autre chose. Il en résulte que les représentations bucoliques de l'Ouest de l'Irlande que cultivèrent Yeats et ses successeurs immédiats obscurcissent les violences contemporaines au profit d'une version idéalisée du passé que MacNeice ne peut partager.

Mots clés : Louis MacNeice, pastorale, histoire familiale, Seconde Guerre mondiale, Irlande occidentale, mémoire, insularité, W.B. Yeats.

■ MacNeice, Ireland, and Pastoral

Much recent criticism of Louis MacNeice's work has focused on its Irish dimension; specifically, it has attempted to solve the problem of where, or indeed whether, to place MacNeice in some canon or other of Anglo-Irish or Northern Irish poetry. Irish critics have paid particular attention to the question of MacNeice's nationality, which has been something of a vexed issue throughout the poet's career and its afterlife. Critics and poets of nationalist inclination like Tom Paulin, Declan Kiberd and Thomas Kinsella have tended either to exclude MacNeice altogether, as Kinsella famously banished him from his *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, or to damn him with faint praise, as Kiberd does in *Inventing Ireland*, in which he (wrongly) associates MacNeice with the Ascendancy and casts him as a critic of Ireland, both North and South, "calling down a plague on both houses"¹. Paulin, meanwhile, calls him "The Man From No Part" whose poetry of modern urban life "often resembles a commercial jingle"². While these statements are meant to be complimentary to MacNeice, they nonetheless suggest a poet of surfaces whose engagement with issues of Irish regional identity is, at most, limited. MacNeice fares little better with English and American critics; Samuel Hynes, for example, refers to MacNeice as a "professional lachrymose Irishman"³. Such assessments of MacNeice treat his attitude towards Ireland in his poetry as unitary – the whole island is the same to him, and he rejects everything to do with it.

Critics from Northern Ireland, meanwhile, like Edna Longley, Terence Brown, and Peter McDonald, have been more sensitive to nuance in the way MacNeice deals with his native country, acknowledging that his Ireland is split into Northern and Southern halves. I would like to take this division of the island into

1. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 449.

2. Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis*, Newcastle, Bloodaxe, 1984, p. 75-76.

3. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, New York, Viking, 1972, p. 334.

parts a step further and propose that MacNeice differentiates not only between the political entities of Northern Ireland and the Republic, but also subdivides the Republic into eastern and western halves. The comparatively urbanized East, with Dublin at its center, is, like the North where he grew up, treated largely in terms of the layers of history that can be read into the landscape. The West, meanwhile, the Eden from which his family was forcibly expelled, is essentially unreadable; the markers of its history are there, but they are impossible to interpret. This ahistoricity is related to MacNeice's engagement with, and distrust of, pastoral conventions; like pastoral, the West is a very attractive potential prison, but one from which MacNeice leaves open several possible avenues of escape. The clearest example of this can be found in MacNeice's 1939 sequence "The Closing Album", written in Ireland as Britain was on the verge of declaring war on Germany; for MacNeice this presents the pastoral dilemma in stark terms of escape or engagement.

I would like to begin by defining the pastoral conventions in question and explaining MacNeice's general attitudes toward them, as expressed in his poetry and his autobiographical prose. In *Literature and the Pastoral*, Andrew Ettin writes that "Pastoral space... defines a privileged spot marked off and enclosed from the world at large⁴". Pastoral is also, to an extent, about rewriting or ignoring the past and the processes of historical change; Theocritus located his idylls on a rural island on which not much had changed from generation to generation, and Virgil wrote his eclogues in part to ingratiate himself with a regime his family had initially opposed. The ideal pastoral *locus amoenus* for MacNeice seems to be an island. Indeed, he sometimes describes places that are not in fact surrounded on all sides by water as islands. For MacNeice, island life is both admirable and founded on a kind of deception or avoidance. As Terence Brown argues,

[MacNeice] was attracted by much in island life; but there was something he distrusted about islands, as well as finding in them images of possible social life, paradigms of a coherent international order. They represented evasion, escapism, an unwillingness to confront responsibility⁵.

The island provides a sense of pastoral *otium*, or freedom from duty⁶, which is necessary for pastoral but which bothers MacNeice's social conscience. MacNeice's explicitly pastoral poems tend to treat the pastoral idyll as a trap, as in "An Eclogue for Christmas", in which speaker A's noisy, dirty, ephemeral, but

4. Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 131.

5. Terence Brown, "MacNeice's Ireland, MacNeice's Islands", Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (eds.), *Literature and Nationalism*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1991, p. 233.

6. Thomas G. Rosenmery, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, p. 67.

lively city is in the end preferable to speaker B's rigidly old-fashioned, decaying countryside, or "Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate", in which Death tricks a pair of poets masquerading as shepherds into his illusory sheepfold. For MacNeice, the idyll never lasts, and it must always end in loss or pain.

This is the case in MacNeice's description of his first marriage, which he describes in *The Strings are False* as "living on an island" in which the newlyweds "ignored [their] Birmingham context as much as possible"⁷, and which Peter McDonald refers to, using pastoral terminology, as "idyllic to a stifling degree"⁸. We can trace these associations further back into a childhood that is marked by a sense of disinheritance compensated for by the construction of "various dream worlds", as in this excerpt from the autobiographical fragment, "Landscapes of Childhood and Youth":

The first of these dream worlds was "The West of Ireland", a phrase which still stirs me, if not like a trumpet, like a fiddle half heard through a cattle fair. My parents came from that West or, more precisely, from Connemara, and it was obvious that both of them vastly preferred it to Ulster. The very name Connemara seemed too rich for any ordinary place. It appeared to be a country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet, with drowned palaces beneath them, and seals and eagles and turf smoke and cottagers who gave you milk when you asked for a glass of water... All this was hearsay, spindrift, but we had a little visual evidence – two photographs of Achill Island framed in plush... it was the plush frames that beatified this vision⁹.

MacNeice's boyhood vision of the West is purely aesthetic; he is bewitched by the magic of a name and the glamour of a pair of framed photographs. Unlike the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, however, most of whom had more direct contact with the West than did MacNeice, he refuses to validate the fantasy, admitting that, in the end, what impressed him most were the pretty frames. That is, the way the West was presented to him by his elders was what shaped his idea of it rather than some concept of what F.R. Higgins might have called his "racial blood-music"¹⁰. Even as a child, the poet admits that his "visual evidence" of the West is insufficient to validate the tales he has been told – or, as David Fitzpatrick has recently argued, the tales MacNeice wants us to think his father told

7. Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, London, Faber & Faber, 2007, p. 133.

8. Peter McDonald, "Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility", Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 61.

9. MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 216-217.

10. Qtd. in Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, London, Faber & Faber, 1995, p. 256.

him; Fitzpatrick argues that MacNeice's biographers have tended to take him at his word about his father's political and cultural sympathies, while the historical record suggests that the elder MacNeice was a fairly conventional Liberal Unionist¹¹. This remains a question of framing, but perhaps it is the younger MacNeice who constructs the frames.

Indeed, MacNeice's family history suggests a past that was interrupted violently and thus could not be recovered, whether through art or by other means. Edna Longley refers to the West as "the prototype for other Hy Brasils and Utopias in MacNeice's writing", but we must remember that we are dealing with a poet who seems to want to believe in Utopian visions but cannot bring himself to do so, perhaps because of this hereditary expulsion from an Edenic western past. MacNeice's paternal grandfather, William Lindsay MacNeice, ran a school for the evangelizing Irish Church Missions on the island of Omey and ran afoul of the local Catholic clergy in 1879, resulting in a mob attacking the family home and a late-night escape in a cart¹². The poet's father, John Frederick, Rector of Carrickfergus and later Church of Ireland Bishop of Down and Connor and Dromore, despite his (alleged) Home Rule sympathies and his fond memories of Connemara, avoided visiting the Republic of Ireland until Louis was 17, as he agonized over the possibility of "mix[ing] with people who might be murderers without you knowing it¹³". The glamour of the West was offset by a hereditary distrust, and by the possibility that the people one met on the street might not be what they seemed.

■ Urban Life and Hybrid Histories

Dublin, Belfast, and MacNeice's hometown of Carrickfergus provide examples against which we can test his treatment of the western counties. In the North and the East, as far as MacNeice is concerned, everything is more or less historically determined and is as such knowable, even if it is often unpleasant. In "Carrickfergus", MacNeice refers to the visible markers of the town's history: we have "the Norman castle", the walls the conqueror built "to stop his ears to the yelping of his slave", and, perhaps most importantly, a church where "The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept/With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure¹⁴". The walls, the castle and the church can be connected to specific events

11. David Fitzpatrick, "I will acquire an attitude not yours': Was Fredrick MacNeice a Home Ruler, and Why Does This Matter?", Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (eds.), *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2012, p. 55-69.

12. Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, London, Faber & Faber, 1998, p. 2-5.

13. Longley, p. 89.

14. Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, Peter McDonald (ed.), London, Faber & Faber, 2007, p. 55.

and a particular moment in time – they were built by the Norman knight John de Courcy in the late 12th century. The Chichesters are marked as Elizabethan not only by their well-known name but by their style of dress; they are wearing ruffs. When MacNeice revisits this place a decade later in “Carrick Revisited”, the Norman castle is still “plumb assured¹⁵”; its place in history is definite.

This strong sense of the past, however, seems to insulate Carrickfergus – and the young boy – from the turmoil of the present. The First World War, for example, is experienced only vicariously through the “camp of soldiers” that springs up near the rectory, which is “barred to civilians”; for the poet’s neighbors, the war seems to be an abstraction represented by “maps above the fireplace/With flags on pins moving across and across”. There is also, we are told, “a prison ship for Germans”, but its location is given only as “somewhere on the Lough¹⁶”; we are not given specific coordinates, presumably because the speaker does not know with certainty where it is. While history is set solidly in stone, the present, particularly as concerns events outside of the immediate vicinity of Carrickfergus, is a bit more difficult to pin down.

When MacNeice writes about the Republic of Ireland, he treats the largest urban center, the city of Dublin, in much the same way, though he is now an adult and Europe is about to plunge into a different war. “The Closing Album”, written in 1939 as “The Coming of War” and retitled for inclusion in the 1941 volume *Plant and Phantom*, describes a journey from east to west, beginning in Dublin and ending in Galway, written while the poet was on holiday in Ireland with his friend Ernst Stahl. The Dublin MacNeice describes in the poem that begins the cycle is historically inscribed like Carrickfergus:

Declamatory bronze
On somber pedestals –
O’Connell, Grattan, Moore – [...]
And Nelson on his pillar
Watching his world collapse. (l. 2-4, 12-13)

Fort of the Dane,
Garrison of the Saxon,
Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought [...] (l. 52-57)¹⁷

15. *CP*, p. 261.

16. *CP*, p. 55-56.

17. *CP*, p. 178, 180.

We have in the first stanza a description of monuments erected as permanent tribute to important figures in politics and art – bronze and stone – and in the final stanza an almost archaeological description of the various layers of history discernible in Dublin, largely in order of arrival: Viking, Saxon, Georgian. It seems odd, then, that the last and most recent layer should be “Gaelic”; the “Gaelic nation” MacNeice describes, a result of efforts by cultural nationalists like the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association in the years before and after the creation of the Irish Free State, must be yet another imposition from outside, as he claims earlier that Dublin “is not an Irish town” – that is, while the nation that is governed from Dublin is “Gaelic” in character, the city itself is not¹⁸. Richard Danson Brown reads “Dublin” as a response to Yeats’s “Easter 1916” and considers both to be concerned with hardening a heroic mythology into fact: “Where ‘Easter 1916’ constructs a martyrological lament for ‘MacDonagh and MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse’, ‘Dublin’ petrifies the heroes of the past, be they Irish patriots or English admirals, as ‘Declamatory bronze[s]’¹⁹”. Danson Brown is correct in noting that MacNeice, unlike Yeats, whose purpose is a sort of ambivalent elegy of the heroes of the Rising, does not differentiate between Irish and English heroes. I think that the point here, though, is that the city itself, as described by MacNeice, does not allow for such a distinction. Dublin is caught up in its own history, which is not a specifically Irish history. It is also an appropriator of histories from elsewhere. While Admiral Nelson himself had nothing to do with Dublin or with Ireland, his monument, a symbol of British rule, becomes part of the city and its history.

This history, like that of the North in “Carrickfergus” and “Carrick Revisited”, is essentially insular, removed from both the “Gaelic nation” and historical currents in Europe. On the holiday which inspired “The Closing Album”, MacNeice spent the day before England declared war on Germany “drinking in a bar with Irish literary friends who, far from sharing his sense of catastrophe, only wanted to discuss variant versions of Dublin street songs²⁰”. In Dublin, the impending declaration of war is not discussed even as an abstraction, as it has nothing to do with the city. Dublin is an island within an island, and is thus doubly insulated from the conflicts that define the times elsewhere. Eire’s “juggler’s trick” of neutrality allows Dublin to “poise the toppling hour²¹” and avoid commitment and responsibility.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

19. Richard Danson Brown, “Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland, and the Second World War”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 28 no. 3, Spring 2005, p. 120.

20. Stallworthy, p. 259.

21. *CP*, p. 180.

■ Sleeping Through the Nightmare of History

As the poet heads out into the country and further (geographically) from Europe and its troubles, the war seems, paradoxically, to keep coming closer. From “Dublin”, MacNeice moves north to “Cushendun” in County Antrim, where his father and stepmother had rented a holiday cottage. The penultimate stanza of the second poem in “The Closing Album” outlines the creature comforts provided by such a refuge:

Forgetfulness: brass lamps and copper jugs
And home-made bread and the smell of turf or flax
And the air a glove and the water lathering easy
And convolvulus in the hedge. (l. 9-12)

Everything in this stanza speaks of pastoral security, from the home-made and home-grown food to the flowering hedge and the “walled garden” mentioned in the preceding stanza; even the air is “a glove”, isolating the inhabitants from the unpleasantness outside. The cottage is presented as a self-sufficient ecosystem that gives forth its produce with little or no effort. Everything here is easy and safe. The cottage’s only connection to the outside world is the radio in the sitting room:

Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
What a place to talk of war²². (l. 13-16)

Despite the relative mildness of tone in the final stanza, this is the first sense we get of a breach in security, and the first signs of human effort to keep catastrophe at bay. The protective elements described in previous stanzas are intrinsic to the cottage and its environs. Here, the inhabitants of the cottage draw the curtains to keep out natural forces that were previously described as contributing to the sense of pastoral isolation the cottage affords. Despite their best efforts, however, they are unable to ignore the coming of war, unlike the neutral Dubliners in the first poem.

As in “Carrickfergus”, the war that invades the peace and privacy of “Cushendun” is still just an abstraction – it is a disembodied voice broadcast to a pastoral island, much like the Voice of Europe in MacNeice’s 1936 poem, “Eclogue from Iceland”. In that poem, the Voice draws the urbane European tourists Ryan and Craven, stand-ins for MacNeice and W.H. Auden, back to the problems of the Continent they had come to Iceland to escape. The point here, as it was there,

22. *Ibid.*

is that in an age of mass communication over great distances, it is impossible to ignore current events simply by retreating to a remote location and waiting for the storm to pass. While Grettir's ghost celebrates island life – he tells Ryan and Craven that "There is only hope for people who live upon islands" – when danger threatens, the island becomes a prison, and the only place to which the outlaw can retreat is an island within an island:

In the end I lived on an island with two others.
To fetch fire I swam the crinkled fjord,
The crags were alive with ravens whose low croak
Told my ears what filtered in my veins –
The sense of doom.²³ (l. 97-101)

Despite the rosy scenario Grettir initially paints regarding islands, his own island becomes a trap where he is unable to obtain the basic necessities for survival without exposing himself to danger, and where he is constantly reminded of the inevitability of death by the presence of the carrion birds.

As the ravens circle around Europe, we see the reality of the situation becoming clear in the third poem of "The Closing Album", "Sligo and Mayo". The poem begins as picture-postcard pastoral,

In Sligo the country was soft; there were turkeys
Gobbling under sycamore trees
And the shadows of clouds on the mountains moving
Like browsing cattle at ease. (l. 1-4)

only to remind us halfway through of

[...] pullets pecking the flies from around the eyes of heifers
Sitting in farmyard mud
Among hydrangeas and the falling ear-rings
Of fuchsias red as blood.²⁴ (l. 9-12)

This is an example of what Longley argues the poem accomplishes "By holding Irish and European horizons in the same frame"; we end up with a poem in which "Sligo flickers from milkmaid pastoral [...] to less Arcadian prospects whereby the first of MacNeice's dream worlds supplies his last thirties omens²⁵". The cows in the mud, plagued by flies, and the blood-red flowers signify the carnage soon to be revisited upon Europe in the coming conflict, one in which

23. *CP*, p. 73, 75.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

25. Longley, 25.

the western counties of Sligo and Mayo, like their eastern capital, will play no direct part.

There is a sense of this avoidance of history in the description of Mayo as “bogland”; the peat bogs do not give up their secrets easily and are well-known hiding places for things (or people) that one doesn’t want found. The poem ends with the recollection that “When the night came down upon the bogland/The coal-black turfstacks rose against the darkness/Like the tombs of nameless kings²⁶”. Whatever history there is in the West is so ancient and is buried so deeply that the names of those who figured in it are forgotten. MacNeice has visited this territory before, as the early poem “Valediction” bears witness, in which the authenticity of conventional markers of Irish history is called into question:

I have to observe milestone and curio
The beaten buried gold of an old king’s bravado,
Falsetto antiquities, I have to gesture,
Take part in, or renounce, each imposture²⁷... (l. 95-98)

The unearthed artifacts that are reputed to shed light on Irish history, and, in particular, to verify elements of nationalist mythology, are themselves silent and subject to misinterpretation. The “beaten buried gold” speaks in “falsetto” – that is, in a voice not its own – that can only be an imposture. The emblems of “Irishness” are revealed as commercial frauds:

On a cardboard lid I saw when I was four
Was the trade-mark of a hound and a round tower.
And that was Irish glamour, and in the cemetery
Sham Celtic crosses claimed our individuality²⁸... (l. 45-48)

The Celtic crosses are billboards to attract tourists, and the round tower which, in *Autumn Journal*, “stand(s) aloof/In a world of bursting mortar²⁹”, is used to sell paper; the purpose of “Irish glamour” becomes profit. The true history of the objects is rendered unknowable, as are the names of the kings whose tombs are compared to anonymous turfstacks, since there is no one left who cares to interpret the signs in a manner that is driven neither by economics nor by sentimentality – and since history is not especially important in a pastoral landscape, MacNeice does not aim to recreate or construct one.

There are a few lines in “Valediction” that seem out of place, however; immediately after he indicts the sham crosses and the round towers, a personal memory

26. *CP*, p. 181.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

takes over: "And my father talked about the West where years back/He played hurley on the sands with a stick of wrack" (l. 49-50). Here we see something like sincere reverence for the West; the elder MacNeice recalls playing a traditional Irish game with a stick made out of hardened seaweed, not on any GAA-sanctioned playing field, but on the beach. This seems to be the vision of the West that MacNeice finds hardest to resist; it is the image that speaks most directly to his childhood fantasies, and must immediately be sandbagged by pointing out once again how crass and commercial everything else in Ireland is ("Park your car in Killarney, buy a souvenir/Of green marble or black bog-oak³⁰ [...]") (l. 51-52).

These 1930s complaints carry over into MacNeice's wartime work, notably "Neutrality", published in 1944 and written in response to the death of MacNeice's school friend Graham Shepherd aboard a destroyer in the North Atlantic. We see the same lack of historical specificity in regards to the West, though in this case it is employed in the service of an unstable dreamscape that tries in vain to keep the outside world at bay, much like the cottage in "Cushendun." The poem manages some specificity in regards to place, but the meanings of the places mentioned are irretrievable:

Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo,
A Knocknarea with for navel a cairn of stones,
You will find the shadow and sheen of a moleskin mountain
And a litter of chronicles and bones. (l. 5-8)

MacNeice locates this stanza firmly in the West – a Yeatsian West, no less – but it is a place where history has been reduced to debris. We cannot read the chronicles or know to whom the bones belonged. They are, as MacNeice writes in the first stanza, "bitterly soft reminders of the beginnings/That ended before the end began". They are "soft" because they can only hint at a prehistory that, for all the attempts to recover it by Yeats and his friends at the turn of the 20th century, is lost; all that remains are "ducats of dream and great doubloons of ceremony/As nobody to-day would mint³¹" (l. 11-12). As Longley reminds us, Sligo is one of those lost western homelands MacNeice saw in the plush frames; she notes that "the poem enjoins its author, as well as Ireland, to resist the mythic backward look, the lure of western seas now polluted by U-boats³²". If we read the poem in this way, it becomes more than an argument against Yeatsian pastoral; it is also the author's attempt to inoculate himself against the attractive fantasy that the West offers.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

32. Longley, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Indeed, “Neutrality” and the Sligo portion of “Sligo and Mayo” illustrate the seductiveness of the West and what it represents for MacNeice, forcing him to remind himself that his impressions of it are fictions based on a single old photograph and half-remembered family stories. Brown has noted the way in which “Ireland’s *penchant* for dangerous fantasy, for myopic myth, for political and cultural befuddlement, for human waste in the cause of unrealistic abstraction, would be surgically analyzed in [MacNeice’s] poems”; this is perhaps not, as Brown goes on to suggest, due to “a near total disillusionment” brought on by “the country’s callous self-absorption at a time of international crisis³³”. Rather, it seems that MacNeice is quite taken with the illusion for most of the poem and can only bring himself around to criticize it at the end. This is a familiar pattern in his work, particularly in these wartime poems about Ireland: a largely positive pastoral landscape is suddenly undermined by a shocking image that brings the poet out of his reverie and back to “reality”.

This psychic pressure, which the speaker experiences halfway through “Sligo and Mayo”, is based on an unwillingness to give into an appealing fantasy and is the dominant tone in “Galway”. At the end of every stanza we are reminded that “The war came down on us here”, on the extreme western end of the island; one could hardly get farther from the European mainland and still be in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is here, not in Dublin, that MacNeice comes to grips with the implications of the declaration of war, in a place where we are given dreams rather than history, even when those dreams are nightmares. The first stanza presents a ghost town gone to seed:

O the crossbones of Galway,
The hollow grey houses,
The rubbish and sewage,
The grass-grown pier,
And the dredger grumbling
All night in the harbour:
The war came down on us here. (l. 1-7)³⁴

The scenario is dystopian, but, much like the pastoral scenes in other poems and in the second stanza of this one, there is no interpretable history. We have no idea when the town was deserted, or for what reason; all we know is that the houses are empty and no one is taking care of the harbor.

The second stanza also focuses on the harbor, but is more straightforward pastoral. While Galway seems to be empty of human beings, it is not lifeless:

33. Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1975, p. 12.

34. *CP*, p. 181-182.

Salmon in the Corrib
Gently swaying
And the water combed out
Over the weir
And a hundred swans
Dreaming on the harbour:
The war came down on us here. (l. 8-14)³⁵

The fish is an image to which MacNeice will return in a later war poem with western resonance, the aforementioned "Neutrality", though in that poem the fish are man-eaters: "While to the West off your own shores the mackerel/Are fat – on the flesh of your kin³⁶". Danson Brown detects a dialogue with Yeats in both poems, which is particularly appropriate given that MacNeice was working on a study of Yeats during the same holiday that ultimately produced "The Closing Album"; he notes that MacNeice "Borrow[s] numbered swans from "The Wild Swans at Coole" and evoke[s] a symbolic moon". The emphasis on "dreaming" is also distinctly Yeatsian; for the Neoplatonist Yeats, "dreaming" allows the poet access to a transcendent reality. MacNeice is, typically, more skeptical. Despite Danson Brown's contention that the "poetic properties [in "Galway"] seem more real than the fact that "The war came down on us here"³⁷", it is this refrain that continues to deflate the pastoral dream-world. It should also be noted that MacNeice rounds out the number of swans in the harbor; instead of Yeats's "nine and fifty", leaving one without a mate, MacNeice gives us an even hundred, lending to the scene a harmony that is disrupted by the ominous refrain.

The third and final stanza also reads almost like typical pastoral, but it is invaded by images of nightmare, and the wrong gods are in charge here:

The night was gay
With the moon's music
But Mars was angry
On the hills of Clare
And September dawned
Upon willows and ruins:
The war came down on us here. (l. 15-21)³⁸

The moon – another favorite Yeatsian image, and one of the bases of the philosophical system he outlined in *A Vision* – is essentially fiddling while Europe burns. The gaiety of "the moon's music" (that is, of Yeatsian pastoralism) is out

35. *CP*, p. 182.

36. *CP*, p. 224.

37. Danson Brown, p. 118.

38. *CP*, p. 182.

of keeping with an idyll ruled over not by Pan or Ceres, but by Mars; we are reminded that, Irish neutrality notwithstanding, war has once again broken out in Europe. We are left in the territory of pastoral elegy, but one which offers no consolation; the landscape is already empty, a mass of “willows and ruins” peopled only by dream-images.

“The Closing Album” ends with an untitled poem which both acknowledges and questions the varieties of stasis addressed in the rest of the cycle. In the third stanza, the poet asks, “And why, now it has happened,/Should the atlas still be full of the maps of countries/We never shall see again³⁹?”. MacNeice detects in Ireland, particularly in the ahistorical West, an inability to realize that the world is changing and, indeed, has changed. The consolations of the pastoral are rendered powerless and meaningless by the towering reality of war. In “Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain”, Patricia Rae locates much of the pastoral writing of the First World War and afterward in what she calls a tradition of “proleptic elegy” – that is, “consolatory writing produced in anticipation of sorrow, where the expected loss is of a familiar kind⁴⁰”. The decay of Arcadia – like MacNeice’s West, a pastoral wonderland with no readable past or future – in this case is what the visitor brings with him; as in the case of Georgian-influenced war poets like Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke, there is a “green and pleasant land” back home that needs defending, but MacNeice can’t seem to forget the unsettling fact that, in order to protect Ireland, someone else is doing the dying.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Patricia Rae, “Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 49 n° 2, Summer 2003, p. 247.