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Louis MacNeice's poems in the thirties are often preoccupied with the contemporary political and social issues. His *tour de force*, *Autumn Journal*, is a brilliant sketch of a man's life in the time of the political turbulence around the Munich Agreement in 1938. MacNeice admits the need to write about contemporary events in poetry, claiming that 'the best English poets have been those most successfully determined by their context'.[1] He begins the 'Preface' of his book of poetry criticism published in 1938, *Modern Poetry*, as follows: 'This book is a plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.[2] This claim for the inseparable connection between art and reality is a hallmark theme of the thirties; since the thirties was the decade that experienced the aftermath of the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and in the ideological level, the rise of Communism and Fascism, many young writers of this period were concerned with the question, 'how can an artist respond to the immediate crises of this time, and yet remain true to his art?'[3]

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[1] Louis MacNeice. 'Poetry To-day'. *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*. Ed. Alan Heuser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. p. 14. Subsequent references to this book will be shown with the abbreviated title, *SLC*.
[2] Louis MacNeice. *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. n.p. Subsequent references to this book will be shown with the abbreviated title, *MP*.
[3] Samuel Hynes. *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*. 1976. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979. p. 207.

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MacNeice has been considered as one of these writers, a 'social consciousness poet' of the thirties.[4] However, it is also true that MacNeice is distinct from other political poets. Samuel Hynes states that 'MacNeice had always been the least political writer of his generation'.[5] Critics such as Anthony Thwaite aptly argue, 'many of his best poems draw on the past, on common emotions, and on personal matters.'[6] MacNeice rejects the idea of making poetry a place for political argument. The foremost asset of his poetry is not its sharp political opinions but its outstanding sensitivity to things surrounding him as well as a readiness to embrace uncertainty. In this article, I will discuss two poems in *Poems*, 'Snow' and 'Train to Dublin'. The justification for focusing on these poems together is twofold: first, both poems heavily depend on the poet's perception or his experience of perceiving. As explained later, each of these poems is based on MacNeice's experiences and, crucially, the poet finds that the peculiarity of ordinary things could become special through his vivid and peculiar ways of description. Secondly, these poems show the process of perceiving and developing concrete perception into more general thought on life and the world. This generalisation in writing can be called philosophising, but how he verbalises his perception, along with what he asserts in the poems, seems to reflect MacNeice's attempt to philosophise without being obscure. Principally through techniques of close reading, this article will clarify that his attentiveness to the objects shown in these poems is not only the subject of each poem but also forms and supports his sense of being a poet, which is socially and historically formulated in his work throughout the thirties. The main aim of this article is

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[4] It is the phrase MacNeice quotes when he recollects the thirties and restates his definition of the poet's role. Louis MacNeice. 'Notes on the Way [2]'. *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*. Ed. Alan Heuser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. p. 180. Subsequent references to this book will be shown with the abbreviated title, *SP*.
[5] Hynes, pp. 293-4.
[6] Anthony Thwaite. *Twentieth-Century English Poetry: An Introduction*. London: Heinemann; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978. p. 63.

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therefore to trace MacNeice's act of developing his thoughts and how he fuses them with perceived scenes.

'Snow' is a poem that seems to be the direct reflection of what MacNeice perceives in life. His friend and mentor, E. R. Dodds, recollects in his autobiography that the poem was inspired in his house 'on a winter evening at Sir Harry's Road'; images such as the roses and tangerines that work vividly and symbolically in the poem were actually present in the room they spent time together.[7] At the same time, it is easy to see that the poem contains MacNeice's ideas about life. Richard Danson Brown's account summarises the meditative tendency that is often seen in MacNeice's works:

> Frequently MacNeice's poetry is meditative, often pondering problems of metaphysics or politics or religion. Often, however, the meditative verse is interrupted by a sudden sense of the vigour of nature, of the reality of the outside world. A meditative, subjective poem will suddenly become celebrative or descriptive of the natural world. It is as if the world has suddenly impinged itself on the introspective, meditative consciousness of the poet.[8]

Indeed, in 'Snow', the poet, recollecting what he saw and did, repeatedly expresses the notions about the world he elicits from his experience: 'World is suddener than we fancy it' (4), 'World is crazier and more of it than we think' (5), 'world / Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes – ' (9-10).[9] These lines seem to present the poet's firmly affirmative view on the world's unexpectedness.

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[7] The roses were from the 'heated greenhouse' in his house, and the Dodds and MacNeice were eating tangerines around the fire in the study. E. R. Dodds. *Missing Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. p. 117.
[8] Richard Danson Brown. *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s*. Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2009. p. 96.
[9] Louis MacNeice. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Peter McDonald. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. p. 24. Subsequent references to MacNeice's poems are also from this edition. The line numbers will be indicated in the in-text parenthesis.

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The issue about how and to what extent we should take his philosophical statements seriously in the poem needs consideration. There was a small critical controversy over the reading of ‘Snow’ in *Essays in Criticism* during the 1950s when MacNeice was still alive. It started with R. C. Cragg’s claim in 1953 that the poem can be read as ‘an intellectual poem presenting a philosophical problem’;[10] Although this is followed by Cragg’s self-criticism that the poem is ‘an experience, not a thought’,[11] Cragg argues that the poem includes a metaphysical idea about ‘moments uncaught, similar occasions [that] let slip into wanton oblivion, moments of lost living’; he concludes that ‘Snow’ is ‘a difficult poem’ that ‘rides on its own philosophy’.[12] M. A. M. Roberts, who wrote an article for the same journal the following year, does not think ‘Snow’ is ‘difficult’ in the way that Cragg claims.[13] Roberts’ reading of the poem tries to show that the importance lies in direct experience, which is to sense world ‘as a living thing’, rather than to develop ‘abstract’ thoughts.[14]

The discussion continued for some years in the journal, more critics joining in, but what should be stressed here is that Cragg and Roberts focused on whether or not we need to read ‘philosophy’ in the poem. This is a fundamental issue about what a poem is, since it is natural to think that a poem contain a certain message or ‘thought’ of the poet. To borrow Cragg’s word, as Roberts does, the ‘substance’ of the poem can be some kind of ‘philosophy’.[15]

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[10] R. C. Cragg. ‘Snow, A Philosophical Poem: A Study in Critical Procedure’. *Essays in Criticism*, 1953 III (4): p. 426.
[11] Ibid., p. 432.
[12] Ibid., p. 433.
[13] M. A. M. Roberts. ‘“Snow”: An Answer to Mr. Cragg’, *Essays in Criticism* (1954) IV (2): p. 227.
[14] Ibid., p. 230.
[15] Cragg concludes that the ‘substance’ of ‘Snow’ is ‘the whole of cosmology, its glossary the history of philosophy’. Cragg, p. 433. Roberts, who disagrees with this, claims that ‘There is no need for philosophy. The experience which the poem re-creates is familiar enough’; the ‘substance’ of the poem, for Roberts, is the principle expressed in the poem: ‘Our day-to-day experience of “world” is lifeless, killed by the dead weight of our abstract “knowledge about” it. But there was a time, and there still are times, of experiencing that world as a living thing, not abstractly but “face to face”’. Roberts, p. 230.

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Marie Barroff's attempt of reading 'Snow' as 'a verbal artifact' also succeeds the fundamental issue about what the poem is, which the dispute between Cragg and Roberts suggested five years before.[16] Even before these arguments rose, MacNeice himself refers to the possible interpretation and his original intention of writing this poem. He recognises that the reader could read 'Snow' as a poem with deep insights because some images 'which carry the weight of dream or of too direct an experience' need 'something more—or less—than reason'.[17] This seems to mean that the very fact that the poem is 'the direct record of a direct experience' encourages the reader to explore a meaning that might be hidden behind it. Nevertheless, MacNeice asserts that the poem 'means exactly what it says':

> [T]he images here are not voices off, they are bang centre stage, for this is the direct record of a direct experience, the realization of a very obvious fact, that one thing is different from another—a fact which everyone knows but few people perhaps have had it brought home to them in this particular way, i.e. through the sudden violent perception of snow and rose juxtaposed.[18]

The first stanza starts with the surprise the speaker experienced:

> 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. (1-4)

He talks as if the room had undergone a sudden change, but it might also be possible that the change was only the change in his perception of the room. The static verb 'was', which denotes the immutability of the state of the room, gives more emphasis on 'suddenly'. Furthermore, the poem also starts 'suddenly'. The speaker does not tell the reader anything

[16] Marie Barroff. 'What a Poem Is: For Instance "Snow"'. *Essays in Criticism* (1958) VIII (4): p. 393.
[17] MacNeice. 'Experiences with Images'. *SLC*. p. 162.
[18] Ibid., p. 162.

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about the context of the room or of the creation of this poem. The adjective ‘rich’ is also unclear until the following lines where one could guess that the vivid contrast of ‘snow and pink roses’ was the cause of the richness. The first two lines therefore trace the speaker’s process of understanding the situation.

The poem follows the course of the poet’s perceiving of things; this precision is also a fidelity to the speaker’s view in the expression itself. As for the past progressive in ‘the great bay-window was / Spawning’, Marie Barroff considers that it ‘implies not only the continuousness of the snowfall, but the fact that it had begun before the speaker became aware of it’.[19] This interpretation is congruent with the idea of gradual revelation, but M. A. M. Roberts interprets that the past progressive works to show how increasingly the snow falls and accumulates.[20] Both readings by Barroff and Roberts are reasonable, but neither of them seem to notice the important fact that the agent of ‘spawning’ is ‘the great bay window’. The speaker states as if the window was generating snow, when sky or cloud should actually make snow fall. It is not a mere metaphor, but the strictest description of what and how the speaker was seeing. Since the window defines and limits his vision of the outside scene, the snow appears to be falling from the upper frame of the window. There is a significant paradox here: the image of the window producing snow is metaphorical, but at the same time it is factual. MacNeice, who can only see the outside within the frame of the window, describes the snow as he perceives it. The scene of the outside, for MacNeice in the room, is the world defined by the window frame. Thus, the factual description, based on adherence to the perceived reality, results in a highly poetical image.

MacNeice’s ambitious attempt to reconstruct his perception and notion with words in the

[19] Barroff, p. 395.
[20] Roberts, p. 229.

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poem is reflected in his use of polysyllabic words in line 3. It is unlikely that snow and rose make any notable sound, but the adverb 'Soundlessly', which appealingly includes another word 'sound' within it, implies a presumption that two things in conflict could make noise. Likewise, 'collateral and incompatible' can be analysed etymologically; both words originate from Latin and have a prefix and a suffix. 'Collateral' means 'side by side', just like 'lateral', but the *OED* says that it is also used for a unit such as a family 'Descended from the same stock, but in a different line', which is opposite to 'lineal'.[21] It is important that 'collateral' means correspondence and difference at the same time; the 'collateral' things are neither identical nor mutually agreeable, they are just close to each other. The prefix 'co-', which seems to signify togetherness, clarifies in this case that there are two or more independent existences. On the other hand, despite that the word 'incompatible' denotes disagreement with others, it partly consists of the word of the opposite meaning, 'compatible'. Since the prefix 'com-' in 'compatible' suggests a union with others, and 'patible' derives from Latin 'patī' that means 'to suffer'[22], the word 'compatible' used to represent the capability for feeling for others.[23] While 'collateral' contains a sense of detached adjacency, the word 'incompatible', just as the adverb 'soundlessly' presupposes 'sound', involves an expectation about the possible intimacy. That is to say, each of the words 'collateral' and 'incompatible' singly and differently contains the contrast of meanings between two.

The profundity in meaning of these words doubly represents the variety expressed in the second stanza as 'Incorrigibly plural' (6). The prefix 'in-' in 'incorrigibly' nullifies the possibility ('able'). Since 'World' is not only beyond our imagination but also beyond our

[21] 'collateral, adj. and n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 19 May 2016.
[22] '† patible, adj.'; 'patient, adj. and n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 19 May 2016.
[23] 'compatible, adj. and n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 20 May 2016.

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control, the speaker cannot help but refer to our sense of helplessness, even though the plurality itself is agreeable. After thus seeing 'world' as a whole, the speaker narrows his attention to his own actions. He uses the first person singular for the first time in 'I peel and portion / A tangerine and spit the pips and feel / The drunkenness of things being various' (6-8). The accumulating overlaps of the internal rhyme (peel / feel, spit / pips), the alliteration (peel / portion) and polysyndeton confirm the craziness of the world and the 'drunkenness of things'. The subtle act of an individual told between the axioms about plurality shows that the poem does not merely present the process of the poet's philosophical musings, but the experience and the man's perception of it coexist, with no definite cause and effect; the seemingly arbitrary flow of the speaker's words thus structurally implies his conviction that even his acute awareness is not a logical conclusion or end but merely a part of the world.

The claim of the fused state of experience and its perception seems to reach the final phase in the final 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. (11-12)

The speaker links the animated fire with the liveliness of world; this statement is followed by the reference to a man's four senses and the implication about something between the snow and the roses. He refers to something without stating what it exactly is. Although the last line seems to suggest a certain substance that is qualitatively or quantitatively beyond the 'glass', the speaker avoids defining it. To interpret this enigmatic last sentence, some critics focus on the importance of the preposition 'between'. Edna Longley in her comprehensive study of MacNeice's poems repeatedly refers to the contradictory notion that the word 'both separates

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and joins'.[24] This ambiguity in the word, Longley thinks, represents MacNeice's basic attitude. Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves also note that the word is 'tricky' and has 'two, "collateral" and "incompatible", meanings': '"between" as in "in common"' and '"between" as in "gulf between"'.[25] It is true that the 'glass' window, which is now actually 'between the snow and the huge roses', can be regarded as a boundary that offers and limits the view; while its transparency allows us to see the snow outside and the roses inside at once, the glass embodies an unbreakable gap between them because of their difference. Barroff states that the original meaning of the word 'incompatible' is appropriate for the situation: 'the roses and snow really "cannot suffer together" the same conditions, since what enables one to exist would destroy the other'.[26]

Taking these views into consideration, there can be another way of interpretation; it seems that the reference to the senses in the penultimate line is important. As seen above, it is the poet who noticed the vivid plurality in the juxtaposition of the snow and the roses. The remarkable parallel between them must have been there even before that, but it was not until his senses recognised it that the contrast became special. If it is reasonable to read the last line as a continuation from the previous one, something 'more than glass' can be a man's sensibility and his ability to find particularity in the sensed objects. T. S. Eliot in his essay 'Metaphysical Poets' raises this kind of sensibility as a foremost requirement for poet:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences

[24] Edna Longley. *Louis MacNeice: A Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. p. x. Also see p. 61 and p. 127.
[25] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves. *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education LTD, 1992. p. 68.
[26] Barroff, p. 397.

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are always forming new wholes.[27]

MacNeice mentions the same idea in his commentary on ‘Snow’, cited in the beginning of this article; he states that the situation he appraised in the poem is ‘a fact which everyone knows but few people perhaps have had it brought home to them in this particular way’.[28] That is, ‘Snow’ articulates the way the poet makes his common experience original and memorable.

Even so, it is still true that MacNeice’s intention is not to say that this skill of associating the seemingly irrelevant experiences is exclusive to the poet. He implies in the poem not only that the experience itself is common, but also that anyone can be the person in the room responding as he did. Read in this way, the purpose of choosing the impersonal ‘one’ in the last stanza is to suggest that anyone could exercise the senses over things around him/her. MacNeice appraises the possibility of seeing that is open to everyone by offering the poet’s own. This seems to be a plausible account, since it supports the poet’s role that MacNeice asserted around the time when he wrote this poem. In a public letter to Auden in *New Verse*, MacNeice evaluates Auden’s peculiarity as a poet, expressing his view of the poet. Since he believes that ‘poetry itself is important’, he critically refers to the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* that stresses the superiority of the poet:

> Poets are not legislators (what is an “unacknowledged legislator” anyway?), but they put facts and feelings in italics, which makes people think about them and such thinking may in the end have an outcome in action.
> Poets have different methods of italicization. What are yours? What is it in your poetry which shakes people up?[29]

[27] T. S. Eliot. ‘Metaphysical Poets’. *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed and Intro. Frank Kermode. London: Faber and Faber, 1975. p. 64.
[28] MacNeice. *SLC*. p. 162.
[29] MacNeice. ‘Letter to W. H. Auden. October 21st, 1937’. *SLC*. p. 83.

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Both of Auden and MacNeice often quote this definition Shelley created, an 'unacknowledged legislator', just to disagree with it. When he declares his definition of a poet, MacNeice states that 'I consider that the poet is a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer; he is not a legislator, however unacknowledged, nor yet, essentially, a prophet'.[30] In the 'Introduction' to the anthology *Poems of Freedom*, Auden admits that poets have been considered as a 'social force', i.e., 'the critics of life, the trumpets that sing men to battle, the unacknowledged legislators of the world'; although he detects the cause in the fact that 'the medium of poetry is language, the medium in which all social activities are conducted', he denies the general notion of poets, stating that they 'are rarely and only incidentally priests or philosophers or party agitators'.[31]

MacNeice and Auden discard the idea of the absolute power that the poet of Shelley's definition possesses. In MacNeice's assertion, we can see the notion that the poet is not outstanding in his/her particular experience or thought drawn from it, although he has a slightly more attentive eye on the world than other people. Auden gives the identical claim; it is true that poets 'are people with a particular interest and skill in handling words in a particular kind of way which is extremely difficult to describe and extremely easy to recognise',[32] but the 'primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us'.[33]

'Train to Dublin' seems to show MacNeice's 'philosophical' thoughts at work. One of the

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[30] MacNeice. *MP*. p. 197.
[31] W. H. Auden. 'Introduction to "Poems of Freedom'. *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 1977. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. p. 370.
[32] Ibid., p. 370.
[33] Ibid., p. 371.

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most notable aspects in the poem is that it is self-referential in a way that it elucidates the speaker's act of contemplation. Robyn Marsack aptly indicates that the poem 'concerns not only what we think about but also the way in which we think, and this MacNeice endeavours to convey with sensuous particularity, no longer abstractions'.[34]

Unlike 'Snow', the poet first expresses his thoughts about thoughts in 'Train to Dublin':

> Our half-thought thoughts divide in sifted wisps
> Against the basic facts repatterned without pause,
> I can no more gather my mind up in my fist
> Than the shadow of the smoke of this train upon that grass –
> This is the way that animals' lives pass. (1-5)[35]

The 'half-thought thoughts' is an obscure expression. If there should be any complete 'thoughts', the 'half-thought thoughts' would not be called as 'thoughts'; they are merely some amorphous fragments. The poet seems to mean by these pre-thoughts in 'sifted wisps' that we tend to be satisfied with a temporary conclusion before going through adequate contemplation. It is revealed in line 2 that the 'facts' are also liable to undergo the process of being 'repatterned'. Since the 'facts' can be a 'base' and a subject of the 'thoughts', we should inevitably follow the incessant transformations of the 'facts' without stopping at each thought. The impossibility of concentrating on his thought directs his eyes towards the similarity between his absent mind and the 'shadow of the smoke of this train'; the image is doubly ephemeral because the smoke is unstable vapour, and the shadow only appears under a particular condition of light and darkness. The flowing shadow of the running train has thus an affinity with the speaker's consciousness and the 'basic facts' in terms of changeability.

Another significant characteristic in the speaker's act of making his experience into

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[34] Robyn Marsack. *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. p. 8.
[35] MacNeice. *CP*. p. 17.

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thought is his way of generalisation. He gives a conclusion to his thoughts with the expansion of the personal case to the universal principle of the 'animals'. The last statement, 'This is the way that animals' lives pass', can simply be interpreted as follows: we, like the animals, let our lives pass without stopping for deep investigation; this idle flow of life is just like the train's procession and its ephemerality is parallel with the 'shadow of the smoke of this train upon the grass'.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering MacNeice's notion of the 'animal' and its relation with the act of thinking. Although 'animals' can include men, they can also imply irrationality and wilderness, which are opposite to 'thoughts' of men. In his quasi-guidebook about the London Zoo, MacNeice distinguishes human beings from other animals:

> I am more proud of what distinguishes man from the animals than of what he has in common with them. . . . I do not envy any animal, though I envy many of their capacities. I should like to be able to jump like a leopard or swim like a sea-lion or—needless to say—fly like a bird, but, if given a chance of transmigration, I should always say it wasn't worth it. Better a quarter of an hour of gossip than all their fins and pinions'.[36]

He repeats later in the same book that he is the sort of person who seeks in animals an escape from human beings because they 'are not human and never can be'.[37] He values the animals for their difference from himself. MacNeice here compares the animals' physical superiority with the man's act of talking, which is more cerebral than physical. The emphasis on this activity is especially important because it is also an essential aspect of a poet. In *Modern Poetry*, his definition of a poet quoted earlier in this article, 'the poet is a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer', is in fact followed by the further explanation of

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[36] MacNeice. *Zoo*. 1938. London: Faber and Faber, 2013. p. 33.
[37] Ibid., p. 64.

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‘informer’: ‘As informer, he is not a photographic or scientific informer, but more like the ‘informer’, in the derogatory sense—he is grinding an axe or showing off, *telling tales about his enemies*, *flattering his friends*’ (italics mine);[38] this figure of poet, who gives the slight influence over others through talking, is again shared by Auden, who notes that a poet ‘ is a mixture of spy and gossip…he is the little boy who comes into the drawing-room and says, “I saw St. Peter in the hall” or “I saw Aunt Emma in the bath without her wig”’.[39] Furthermore, MacNeice mentions the difference between human and animals when he insists on the importance of writing about the experience with the judgment in words: ‘A twist in human nature, not found in lower animals, makes people look to thoughts for the vindication of their experience’.[40] It is worth pointing out that he refers to the ‘thoughts’ that people must develop when they judge their experience. Hence, it can be said that MacNeice’s belief that the acts of talking and thinking are allowed exclusively to men is central to his notion of man; and precisely for this reason, this is also applied to his definition of poet as an ordinary man with a little more sensibility. Considering the fact that ‘Train to Dublin’ starts with the expression of the poet’s thought on thoughts or lack of thoughts, it can be said that the poem represents the poetic act that is a part of human activities. The speaker’s conclusive statement in the last line of the first stanza, ‘This is the way that animals’ lives pass’, might therefore include a witty, ironic comment on the deficiency of thinking or thinking ability that man should have as his nature.

In spite of his comments on the inadequacy of thinking, he attempts to mingle his thoughts with the train in the successive stanzas. He refers to the ‘train’s rhythm’ (6), which

[38] MacNeice. *MP*. p. 197.
[39] Auden. ‘Poetry, Poets, and Taste’, *The English Auden*. p. 359.
[40] MacNeice. *MP*. p. 199.

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implies certain regularity of movement as well as the train's sound. The personified image of the 'telephone posts / Go striding backwards like the legs of time' (6-7) are described as if they were voluntarily moving, when it is only the train that is moving. It is a metaphor, but a metaphor based on fidelity to vision, as in the 'spawning' of snow in 'Snow'. Although the train passes by and leaves the posts behind, he changes his focus of attention; his description accords with how he sees them in the limited framework of the window.

A certain accordance is also seen between form and content in the poem.

> The train keeps moving and the rain holds off,
> I count the buttons on the seat, I hear a shell
> Held hollow to the ear, the mere
> Reiteration of integers, the bell
> That tolls and tolls, the monotony of fear. (11-15)

Several enjambments in this stanza seem to resonate with the rhythm of train's procession. Both 'a shell / Held hollow to the ear' and its variations—'the mere / Reiteration of integers' and 'the bell / That tolls and tolls'—run on over two lines. This can be interpreted as showing that the enjambment makes the sentence flow, as it normally does. At the same time, the enjambment here can be considered to divide the sentence and give a sense of an unexpected pause, since three phrases, which are similarly enjambed, cause caesuras. On the other hand, the successive enjambments also reflect his boredom; the empty gaze on the 'buttons on the seat' in front of him and the hollowness of the place that makes no sound indicates the speaker's solitary and enclosed state on train. That he imagines he is hearing the ominous sound of a bell means that the monotonousness of train and the boredom he feels inspire the speaker's thought on the helplessness men must have for the reality of death.

The inevitable passivity of our being then starts preoccupying the speaker's mind so

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arrestingly enough to make him say that

> . . . the strength of us does not come out of us.
> It is we, I think, are the idols and it is God
> Has set us up as men who are painted wood,
>
> And the trains carry us about. (18-21)

MacNeice, in spite of his sceptical attitude, sometimes dares to use the Christian imagery or thought. His earlier poem 'The Creditor', for instance, reveals the speaker's recognition that 'My debts to God' (3,12) cannot be cancelled out, 'for His [God's] mind strays / Over and under and all ways / All days and always' (12-14).[41] This 'always' haunting consciousness about God is seen in the notion expressed in 'Train to Dublin' that human beings are the creation of God. The image of 'painted wood' is also the symbol of passivity, which might also suggest the theatrical artificiality and absurdity of life. This negative view on human beings changes his sentence passive too to set 'train', not 'I', as the subject. It can be regarded as another embodiment of how the construction of syntax with words is affected by thoughts.

There are some other structural and linguistic characteristics in the speaker's statements here. His use of collective noun when he says 'It is we, I think, are the idols' suggests that the speaker is again absorbed in building up a general idea about the world. The speaker deploys the same syntax he used in 'Snow', 'It is X that…', to announce that God makes men the unmovable, thoughtless objects. The decisiveness of the sentence, however, is here intruded by the phrase, 'I think'. The use of 'I' distinguishes the contemplating self from the subject of general idea in his contemplation, and in addition to that, this insertion multiplies the possible

[41] MacNeice. *CP*. p. 19.

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nuances implied in the statement; it can emphasise that it is the speaker's own opinion, while the phrase can also work as a pretext that it is merely one way of thinking, rather than the absolutely assured truth. On either interpretation, the speaker introduces a pause in his thinking. The speaker, alone and confined in the train, tries to develop his contemplation as a conversational debate to avoid making it a smug dogma. The speaker regards 'you' as some substantial presence rather than just as an imaginary existence. The obvious fact that he is visiting 'you' enables him easily to imagine that his friend should be at the end of the way on which the train is now running.

The connection between him and 'you' is thus actual at the same time as it is invisible. MacNeice often shows his awareness of this invisible-visible connection with someone whom he addresses in his poems. It is often seen when the telephone calls or journeys are the subject of the poem. In the latter case, the insertion of a conversational phrase indicates that the speaker supposes particular person or people whom he is addressing. For instance, MacNeice employs the phrase 'you know' in the epistle poems in *Letters from Iceland*, 'Letter to Graham and Anna' and 'Postscript to Iceland (for W. H. Auden)'; the addresser and addressee(s) are close friends but physically distant. The phrase creates not only emotional but formal intimacy to friend.

This sense of direct communication is fortified in the following stanzas of 'Train to Dublin' where the speaker starts repeating the words for toast, 'I give you'. He refuses the authoritative or abstract things such as 'idol or idea, creed or king' (28), manifesting that 'I give you the incidental things which pass / Outward through space exactly as each was' (29-30). What is especially interesting is the enumeration of the 'incidental things' in the Irish scenery. It should be noted that some images are not as 'incidental' as the speaker asserts, in

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terms of the metaphorical elaboration. The description of the ‘laughter of the Galway sea / Juggling with spars and bones irresponsibly’ (32-3) is firsthand and immediate, but since MacNeice was on the train from Belfast to Dublin, it is a reconstruction of his memory or impression of the actual sea.[42] The ‘laughter’, along with the words ‘Juggling’ and ‘irresponsibly’, show the spitefulness of world as the ‘bubbling sound’ of fire does in ‘Snow’. The syntax is also worth noting here; the ‘laughter of the Galway sea’ is stronger as a metaphor than other possible expressions, say, ‘the Galway sea is laughing’. Since the speaker predefines the wave by the word ‘laughter’, he seems to be talking as if it were a matter of course that the sea laughs. Another unrealistic, but impressive expression is seen in ‘I give you the toy Liffey and the vast gulls’ (34). The river and the gulls seem to be compared, but the language reverses their actual sizes. This can be assumed to be another faithful vision that he reveals; if he is in such a situation as he stands on a bridge over the river and sees seagulls near him, the ‘seagulls’ must look bigger than the river ‘Liffey’. That these expressions deeply reflect the speaker’s own perception indicates the poet’s confident reliance on his way of seeing. Considering the fact that ‘I give you’ literally means to present something to someone, the act of celebrating things is also a manifestation of the speaker’s ability to give them. Although he is only verbalising the imaginary act of giving things, this can be regarded as a kind of declaration of the power of the poet.

His descriptions of the Irish sceneries become more poetical when MacNeice refers to his body senses that feel them:

> I give you the smell of Norman stone, the squelch
> Of bog beneath your boots, the red bog-grass,

[42] Jon Stallworthy estimates that in the journey that is the model of ‘Train to Dublin’, ‘MacNeice took the ferry to Belfast [from England] and saw his father and stepmother before heading south by train’. *Louis MacNeice*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995. p. 160.

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> The vivid chequer of the Antrim hills, the trough of dark
> Golden water for the cart-horses, the brass
> Belt of serene sun upon the lough. (36-40)

The 'smell' of the stone and the 'squelch / Of bog', are some subtle features of the objects that you can only perceive when you dare to perceive. His sensitivity is especially acute to the colours and texture of sunlight in the landscape. It should be noted that he stresses the changeable but multiple colours the sunlight creates. Indeed, MacNeice appreciates the peculiarity of the Irish sunlight in his essay: '. . . the important element is light. Owing to the moisture in the air sunlight in Ireland has the effect of a prism; nowhere else in the British Isles can you find this liquid rainbow quality which at once diffuses and clarifies'.[43] Considering this, the 'vivid chequer' that seemingly refers to the different colouring leaves might also be the contrast of the bright and shaded parts of the hills, while the 'dark / Golden water' in the 'trough' may get its opposing colours from the 'golden' light of the sun. Understandably, several critics also show a special interest in this stanza. Stallworthy notes that MacNeice is 'cataloguing the light and dark delights of the Irish landscape seen from his train'.[44] Peter McDonald, likewise focusing on the descriptions of the 'shifting light and shade', considers that the poem 'comes close to the language of the tourist brochure'; he seems to allude to what Stallworthy called the 'cataloguing', but he further asserts that as well as these things, 'the experience of perception itself, the flux of the passing moment' is centred on 'Train to Dublin'.[45] This is an insightful account; as discussed so far, the elusive act of thinking tells that not only the beauty of things but also the perception of it can be ephemeral. Being 'incidental' holds the unexpectedness and the momentariness that are

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[43] MacNeice. 'Northern Ireland and Her People'. *SP*. p. 151.
[44] Stallworthy, p. 161.
[45] Peter McDonald. *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. p. 209.

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common to ‘suddenly’ in ‘Snow’. It is only the speaker’s view that sees something being ‘incidental’ or ‘suddenly’ impressive. The peculiar perception, however, does the important work to shed light on the hidden or unnoticed value in the world.

The formal elaboration in this stanza also contributes to prove this assertion. Three sets of enjambed lines in this stanza work differently. Since the word ‘squelch’ is at the line-end, the repeated ‘s’ sound (‘smell’, ‘stone’, and ‘squelch’) becomes more conspicuous and the ‘bog’ in the next line also resonates with ‘beneath’, ‘boots’ and ‘bog-grass’. The second enjambment in this stanza divides the two adjectives (‘dark/Golden’); thereby the opposition of colours is revealed in the head of the next line. In the last enjambment, the metaphorical expression (‘brass’) comes at the line-end rather than at the head of the following line; until we read onto the following line, we do not know that the word is a metaphor for a simple description of the sun’s reflection. These statements are themselves something that the speaker can ‘give’ to ‘you’; the poetic device, enjambment in this case, is deliberately various to show both the variety of things and his ability as a poet to offer the variety in words. This intricacy keeps a delicate equipoise with the casual phrase ‘I give you’.

Furthermore, the changeability and the unchangeable value of various things can be found in the images associated with the sea. The men’s faces affected by situations and feelings are described as ‘the faces balanced in the toppling wave’(42), while ‘the sea’s / Tumultuous marble’(46-7) illustrates the stability the sea represents at the same time as it suggests the uncontrollable harshness.[46] The oxymoron sounds outstanding especially because of the effect of enjambment. O’Neill and Reeves regard that it expresses ‘a reconciliation between concrete and abstract’, which ‘not only states the conjunction of fluidity and stasis, flux and

[46] MacNeice. *CP*. p. 18.

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permanence, but also demonstrates it with an impressive conjunction of the visual and the conceptual'; the expression therefore reflects 'MacNeice's poetic endeavour to reconcile the liquidity of experience with the permanence of artistic form'.[47] It is certain that MacNeice sees both flux and permanence in one image and reveals the contradictory yet attractive aspect that the 'faces' in the wave might have indicated.

At the same time, the process of making this image itself should be considered. The speaker, or MacNeice, sees the 'incompatible' elements in the sea, which is described as the accompanying image of 'Thor's Thunder' (48). Thor, the god who killed giants in the Norse Mythology,[48] is normally represented with a hammer ('Mjǫllnir') that 'produces thunder and lightning . . . when it is thrown, and then it returns like a boomerang to Thor's hand'.[49] This God of power also has the stasis and the mobility in him; while he is 'taking his ease akimbo' (48), he is a marble that is clumsily moving ('Lumbering torso' [49]); the description, however, again returns to the flexible side of Thor, the 'finger-tips [that is] a marvel / Of surgeon's accuracy' (49-50). Terence Brown quotes this passage as an example of MacNeice's sometimes poor choice of words. According to Brown, the diction can fall into an end itself; the 'overtly physical diction' calls the attention of the reader and makes him see only the 'words themselves'. For Brown, 'such words as "tumultuous marble", "Thor's thunder" "akimbo" and "lumbering" are selected for their impressiveness—one might argue that this conveys the majestic impressiveness of the sea. Yet one has uneasy suspicions.'[50] It

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[47] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 67.
[48] For further account of the giant slaying by Thor, see John Lindow. 'Thor'. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heros, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. pp. 287-91.
[49] Rudolf Simek. 'Mjǫllnir'. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. Trans. Angela Hall. 1984. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007. pp. 219-20.
[50] Terence Brown. *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Limited; New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1975. p. 173.

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is difficult to agree with Brown: the oxymoron he thinks as the 'bad diction' is certainly a meaningful poetical device. The reason why Brown finds the dictions too physical is probably the personification of the wild sea these words attempt to realise; yet it is not a simple personification. As for the images that fortify the state of the 'sea's tumultuous marble', MacNeice succeeds in presenting a clearer and more dynamic vision of it by firstly making the bringer of thunder, 'Thor' the god, visible. Notably, the sea's inclusiveness is shown in the different motions of a man—the flexibility in being 'akimbo' and the dexterity of the 'finger-tips', the roughness in the act of 'Lumbering'. The imaginary vision of the sea and the thunder enriches the scene of the sea storm as a whole. Eamon Grennan asserts that the Irish landscape often represents freedom for MacNeice in his poems, as this trip to Dublin was for him; according to Grennan, the 'sense of freedom anchors a metaphysical idea in physical phenomena, releasing MacNeice's imagination into gestures of expansive liberality'.[51] This can be applied to the images of the 'sea's tumultuous marble' too, to which the speaker adds the more mythical and visionary images. The celebration of 'incidental things' thus reaches at its height when he develops the associations of the material things with his imagination.

The speaker in the last stanza stops the act of giving.

I would like to give you more but I cannot hold
This stuff within my hands and the train goes on;
I know that there are further syntheses to which,
As you have perhaps, people at last attain
And find that they are rich and breathing gold. (51-5)

The reference to the physical inability to 'hold' things confirms the literal meaning of the

[51] Eamon Grennan. 'In a Topographical Frame: Ireland in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice'. *An Irish Quarterly Review*. 70. 278/279 (1981): p. 150.

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phrase ‘I give you’. Although a man can propose a toast theoretically to anything, the act of giving or holding things has its limit. The continued sentence flatly reveals the unchangeable fact that the train, unlike the speaker’s temporary indulgence on his thought, is still running on. In spite of that, the declaration of his impossibility does not mean his resignation or denial of his practice as a poet. It can be inferred that the speaker in the ending enjoys the play with words whose meaning are determined by their social context, in order to ‘give’ us the persuasive account of the importance of loving and valuing the minute and unpredictable aspects in life.

The utmost instance of this is an abstract word, ‘syntheses’, which rather unexpectedly appears. As the *OED* notes, ‘synthesis’ is a philosophical term that was reoriented by Marxist philosophy.[52] If MacNeice is conscious about this Hegelian concept, which the Marxist theory applied to its political ideology, he must use it deliberately to resist its ideological demands. MacNeice was sceptical about Marxism, for, as he declared earlier in the poem, he rejects any ‘idea’ or ‘creed’. In his earlier poem, ‘Turf-stacks’, he also warns against the ‘ideas’ (9) given by the ‘theory-venders’ (10), who are associated with the Greek soldiers in the Trojan War, ‘The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy / Who tilt their aggregate beast against our crumbling Troy’ (11-12).[53] The secret plan to hide in the wooden horse to attack Troy is suggestive of low cunning, the threat MacNeice perceived in political enthusiasm. The confined status of the ‘little sardine men’ seems to name the mass of people who have lost their mind to think. The syntheses, therefore, denotes the state in which ‘people’ recognise and appreciate the subtle things around them in their ordinary lives. Another insertion of a friendly remark to the particular ‘you’ implies the speaker’s fellow

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[52] “synthesis, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 4 June 2016.
[53] MacNeice. *CP*. p. 16.

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feeling for him that they share the similar view on the world. They will certainly get 'syntheses', but their 'syntheses' should be something far better and closer to life. In the concluding stanza, MacNeice gives the greatest tribute to the world he lives in and has been appreciated so far, by the very means of deploying the words of the opposite ideology to what he tries to justify.

The poems that consist of the transition from and to the description of perceived objects and the inward meditation can be called as philosophical or meditative. Both the experience and the perceived event or things in it are important themselves, and the thoughts drawn from them can be conceived as a poet's 'philosophy' about life, world or whatever seems relevant to the poet's concerns. At the same time, however, what is more arresting in MacNeice's poems is his keen awareness of his thinking self. He not only expresses the content of his contemplation but also unfolds his state at the time of expanding his thoughts. The reference to the peeling and eating motions in 'Snow' and the suggestion of his boredom and sense of constraint in the train in 'Train to Dublin' enable the poet to evade the thoughts from remaining as pure thoughts. In those poems, MacNeice proves the power of his italicizing perception at the same time as he claims it as pointing up what is always there to be seen in the supposedly ordinary.

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