

Kit Fryatt**'Banyan Riot of Dialectic': Louis MacNeice's India**

In August 1947, the BBC sent a joint Features and News team to report on and commemorate the independence and partition of the Indian subcontinent. The team consisted of a News reporter, Wynford Vaughan Thomas, MacNeice himself, Francis Dillon, the poet's colleague from the Features Department, and a support group of technicians. Aged nearly forty, MacNeice had been working for the BBC for just over six years. His reputation as a poet was well-established: the following year would see the publication of his *Collected Poems*. He had been educated and spent most of his working life in England, but was born and passed his early childhood in the north of Ireland. His father, John Frederick MacNeice, was rector of St. Nicholas Church, Carrickfergus during the poet's childhood, and became Bishop of Down and Connor in 1934. Unusually for a Protestant clergyman in the north, J.F. MacNeice was a supporter of Home Rule, and later, an opponent of Partition. His son shared this moderate nationalism and also his father's love of the landscapes of the west of Ireland.

MacNeice had not been to India before, and his only substantial connection to Indian culture was his friendship with the novelist Mulk Raj Anand. Anand shared MacNeice's distaste for what the poet called 'all that yogi-cum-swami stuff' (MacNeice, *India at First Sight* 2). In both his unfinished autobiography and his study of Yeats, MacNeice quotes the novelist's dismissal of 'spiritual India' (*Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 133; *The Strings Are False* 209). The central character of MacNeice's unpublished drama documentary

'India at First Sight' approximates crudely the poet's own feelings when he claims he 'was all for the Indian nationalists, but apart from that – well, I was allergic to India' (2).

MacNeice arrived in Delhi in time to observe the Independence Day celebrations on 14th August, and then travelled to Pakistan. Near Lahore the team witnessed the consequences of inter-communal violence: refugees both on the roads and in squalid camps. North of Peshawar, they met the founder of the Pathan Red Shirt Movement, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, whom MacNeice found 'v[ery] Irish' in both his hospitality and his vociferous advocacy of separatist revolution (Stallworthy 360). They then spent a few days in Kashmir, before MacNeice returned alone to Delhi. He spent the remaining two months of his trip travelling in central and southern India. MacNeice was dissatisfied by the amount of time he was forced to spend in Delhi because of the absence of a BBC office in Pakistan and the increasing instability of the northern subcontinent. He explained his rather unbalanced itinerary in a defensive memorandum: as well as encountering inevitable logistical problems, MacNeice found that much of what he experienced (particularly in the Western Punjab) was unsuitable for the upbeat, educational remit of the Features Department: 'it was not my job to send home despatches about murder and arson'. MacNeice's typical distrust of politicians is also evident in the memo. He states blithely that he did not bother to meet many 'leading politicians or Ministers' in either India or Pakistan: 'I thought it rather a waste of time to go around collecting party tracts' ('Comment on Indian Itinerary', 28th November 1947, folder R19/550, BBC Written Archives Centre).

An earlier letter from India to Laurence Gilliam, the Head of Features, however, records considerable enthusiasm for Indian culture: MacNeice planned feature programmes on the contemporary high culture of India and Pakistan, the Indian family, and most exciting of all, on the Mogul Empire - 'Glamour obvious, and personally it's got me', he noted (Letter to Gilliam, 19th September 1947, folder R19/550). None of these proposed programmes was eventually made. MacNeice was dismissive of the pedestrian suggestions for programmes on the Indian Civil Service and 'rural betterment' included in his brief, and countered with a plan to produce a 'Trial of' or 'Post-Mortem on the British Raj' (Letter to Gilliam). Above all, he was anxious that the programmes avoid triumphalism over the achievements of British rule. He thought such 'bragging' would be in particularly 'bad taste' considering the inter-communal violence that had begun during his stay (Letter to Gilliam). On his return, MacNeice admitted to his superiors in the Features Department that he was 'convinced that this is not a good series to put out at this moment'. Not only did he feel that a series commemorating the Raj and celebrating British magnanimity in granting Indian independence would be in poor taste but also that such an emphasis on British rule was at odds with both what he had seen and learnt about the subcontinent. With characteristic empiricism, he remarks: 'I can only honestly offer you programmes based on what I saw and felt myself; I saw and felt too much to offer you anything else'. What he saw was 'India in the melting pot [...] hubble-bubble' rather than the smooth transfer of 'an administrative machine in perfect working order'. Anticipating a view of Indian history which is more widely accepted now than in the 1940s, he cautions against over-emphasis on either the attainments or

the depredations of the Raj: 'In India at this moment the last two hundred years seem obscured by the next two or three years and the last few thousand' (Memorandum to Director of Features, 19th November 1947, folder R19/550).

In the end, MacNeice overcame his doubts to contribute three hour-long features to the department's coverage of Indian Independence: one stand-alone introductory programme, *India at First Sight*, and two to the six-part 'India and Pakistan' series. These were entitled *Portrait of Delhi* and *The Road to Independence*. All the programmes use a drama-documentary technique in which information is furnished to an Everyman observer by personifications, stereotypical characters, historical and contemporary figures. Few of the reservations expressed in the above memorandum emerge explicitly in the broadcast programmes, though there are moments, particularly when MacNeice encounters similarities between Ireland and India, when the optimistic, didactic voice of the Reithian Features writer wavers significantly.¹ The next section of this essay looks at a couple of these moments in more detail. MacNeice also wrote a number of poems dealing directly with his Indian experience: 'Letter from India: for Hedli' and 'Mahabalipuram' were written respectively during and shortly after his stay, 'Didymus' was published in 1952 as one of the 'Ten Burnt Offerings'. A later group of poems, 'Return to Lahore', 'Jungle Clearance Ceylon' and 'Indian Village', appeared in *Visitations* (1957) and *Solstices* (1961). These were the result of a much briefer and less momentous trip to the subcontinent which

¹ John Reith (1889-1971), first director-general of the BBC (1927-1938). Reith formulated the directive that the BBC should "inform, educate and entertain". Although he left the BBC in 1938, Reithian principles of centralisation, high moral and programming standards continued to inform the organisation's policy throughout MacNeice's tenure there.

MacNeice made in October 1955, this time to record Eastern music, poems and voices for a Christmas programme on the Magi. In the final section, I explore both groups of Indian-themed poems, suggesting their importance as examples of MacNeice's changing poetic technique.

'Banyan Riot of Dialectic' is a phrase MacNeice uses in the poem 'Didymus'. MacNeice's Indian poems and documentary features return compulsively to ideas of paradox and antinomy, as well as to a notion of the subcontinent as a place of pullulating plurality. These concepts are in any case MacNeicean favourites, appearing throughout his poetic and dramatic work. Paradox, multiplicity and Platonic dialectic are all devices he used to express emotional (and sometimes political) complexity. However, the poet's writing on India brings him up sharply against a colonial discourse which used the very idea of oppositional otherness to perpetuate inequality, and at certain moments the reader might sense unease alongside the dominant image of India as a place of proliferating antinomies. Such unease may have impeded MacNeice's progress with a long poem he planned to write on the subject, which he abandoned towards the middle of 1948.

India at First Sight, MacNeice's first broadcast feature about India, approaches the subcontinent 'solely through Western eyes while the visitor is attended by the Western familiars of his mind.' ('Opening Announcement', Programme Report, folder R19/549) The eyes are those of Edward, our 'representative' middle-class Englishman, the 'familiars' his Nanny, his Uncle Howard (an old India hand), and a prurient Missionary. Edward is also accompanied by his 'Still Voice', a more progressive presence who urges openness to new experience and cultural relativism, while reminding Edward

that he cannot encounter India 'from scratch' but is 'enmeshed in his own background'. The Irish actor Cyril Cusack played the Still Voice, and in the absence of a tape of the broadcast programme it's interesting to speculate whether the only non-reactionary 'familiar' voice in this feature had an Irish intonation.²

The programme assumes that, in the words of the *Radio Times* billing, written by MacNeice, 'the average educated Westerner making such a visit can only discover India as it were through translation', an intriguing figure under the circumstances. ('Billing', folder R19/549) MacNeice conceives the otherness of India in terms of culture and language, rather than as intrinsic or racial, but the comment rather begs the question of who is to do the translating. The Still Voice repeatedly claims this function: 'I will be your translator.' It continues: 'You don't have to read; I speak to you.' 'Learn Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Pushto [...] you still won't have learnt the language of the Indian soul or souls. So when people discuss the Indian question – or questions – don't be too sure you know the answers.' (*First Sight* 34) The Still Voice is an ambiguous guide: urging humility as it implies the Englishman's intuition is all he needs to access the colonial territory, which in its turn may be ultimately alien and inaccessible. The mischievous echo of the old saying about the Irish and *their* question suggests another form of translation: by analogy.

² The fact that in one of MacNeice's subsequent Indian features a representative Pakistani Muslim was played by Duncan McIntyre, who apparently did not moderate his Scottish accent (some listeners, in the charming locution of the Programme Report, were "worried" by this), suggests that MacNeice as producer was not greatly bothered that Edward's internal voice was of a different nationality to his external one. ('Programme Report', India and Pakistan Series [folder R19/550])

Some of the work of translation is also undertaken by a female personification of India. She is meant to suggest plurality, but too often that plurality breaks down into crudely delineated binaries: ‘Here I come in my squalor and my serenity/ With my vast riches and immemorial hunger/ The Gita in one hand and the Koran in the other’ (*First Sight* 10). In another speech she claims at once to be a Communist and a peasant too hungry to care about politics; a feminist and a secluded Muslim woman; a supporter of Gandhi and a partisan of the caste system (*First Sight* 34-5). Like all national allegories, this can only convince as evidence of Indian plurality if we forget that the subcontinent is not a person but a place with people in it. In this context, the sentiment of ‘I am large, I contain multitudes’ is a notably false resolution.³

MacNeice’s disquiet with his personified India betrays itself in a problem of naming: in the script she appears as ‘ “India” ’, in his *Radio Times* billing as ‘ “Mother India” ’, in a correction to that billing in MacNeice’s hand, as ‘The Other’. Doubtless it’s possible to make too much of this rather startling anticipation of the terminology of postcolonial theory. ‘India at First Sight’ does not *interrogate* representations of India as the setting for displays of daunting difference and multiplicity, nor the repressive potential of translating a place into a person. MacNeice’s ‘India’ goes unquestioned as a colonial Other in that her ultimate function is to bring the Western characters to a fuller understanding of themselves, though, this being MacNeice, that understanding equates not to stability and unification of identity, but its blurring, so that Nanny becomes an Indian ayah, the Missionary a Buddhist,

³ MacNeice often quoted Whitman’s famous line in his critical essays, and used it as an epigraph to the long poem *Autumn Sequel* (1954).

and racist Uncle Howard is forced to admit that barbarity is just as much a feature of Europe as Asia.

It is curious, though, that MacNeice uses a Mother India figure at all. After all, this is the poet who wrote, in *Autumn Journal*, of his own country:

Kathaleen ni Houlihan! Why
 Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female
 Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by,
 We did but see her passing.
 Passing like a patch of sun on the rainy hill
 And yet we love her for ever and hate our neighbour
 And each one in his will
 Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred.
 (MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 132)

Considering this antipathy to feminised personifications of nations, one might think he might be more sensitive in his treatment of India. There are a number of possible reasons why MacNeice did not extend his impatience with Kathleen to Mother India. He may have seen his radio audience as different – less discriminating, presumably – from the readers of his poetry, and the personification is undeniably dramatically useful. However, MacNeice rarely underestimated his audience: he expected it, for instance, to enjoy adaptations of Goethe's *Faust* and *Njal's Saga*.⁴ It must be noted that a small number of listeners felt sufficiently patronised by the know-nothing personae in MacNeice's Indian programmes to write in complaint, though these were mostly people with extensive experience of the subcontinent, whose grievances were in part invalidated by clear advertisement of all the programmes as impressionistic drama-documentaries for general audiences.
 (Folder R19/948, BBC WAC)

⁴ One correspondent, who regretted that MacNeice's dramatisations of the saga were broadcast only on the Third Programme received a reply in broad agreement with his point that *The Death of Gunnar* and *Burnt Njal* were of interest to a mass audience. (Letter to Shaun Herrion, 6th May 1948, folder R19/948, BBC WAC)

That MacNeice simply did not see the contradiction between endorsing Mother India and deploring Kathleen seems, equally, only half-convincing. Parallels between India and Ireland appear, for instance, in the last of his programmes of the India and Pakistan series *The Road To Independence*. On one occasion in that script an Englishman helps to nuance an Indian's reading of George Bernard Shaw and they come to agree on the undesirability of militant nationalism:

HINDU: [...] you [British] people never understand anyone. Look how you treated Ireland! I have read Bernard Shaw on the subject and –

ENGLISHMAN: I have read Bernard Shaw on it too; I can quote him to you from Nineteen-Four. "Nationalism stands between Ireland and the light of the world" –

HINDU: But – !

ENGLISHMAN: "Nobody in Ireland of any intelligence likes nationalism" –

HINDU: But Shaw was a nationalist!

ENGLISHMAN: Wait: "any more than a man with a broken arm likes having it set. A healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man of its bones. But if you break a nation's nationality it will think of nothing else but getting it set again." And that I think is pretty true of India.

HINDU: Yes, it is true of India. (*First Sight* 8)

On one hand, this represents a typical liberal-imperialist tactic: acknowledging the force of nationalist claims, only to suggest that by definition nationalism is exceptional, reactive and monomaniacal. The Englishman quotes an apparently subversive idea to draw the Hindu away from militancy to 'reason' and harmlessness. On another, it is a much odder manoeuvre. Both Englishman and Hindu appeal to the preface of a play, *John Bull's Other Island*, which contains some of Shaw's most complex characterisations, and in Yeats's words, displayed 'for the first time a geographical conscience'

(Evans 122). Larry Doyle is a character whose melancholy and sense of displacement might well have found a sympathetic hearer in MacNeice, and the play also features in the person of Peter Keegan one of Shaw's most thought-provoking portraits of mystical idealism. The 'Preface for Politicians' itself, though it includes its fair share of Shavian rhetoric, is a more uneasy performance than other prefaces from a similar period. Shaw's tendency to soften intractable political issues 'into the complacent attitudes of the debating chamber' is perhaps nowhere less evident than in *John Bull's Other Island* (Greene 100). The text provides curiously appropriate grounds for the Englishman and the Indian to reach *détente*: coloniser and colonised agree over a play set in Ireland, a country whose (post)colonial status is debated; intransigent positions are reconciled over a uncharacteristically uncertain work by a famously arrogant writer.

Two other small instances of a comparison between India and Ireland in *The Road to Independence* suggest MacNeice's interest in the subject, albeit this time in a more combative mood. The Hindu describes the failure of gradualism and reformism to persuade Britain to relinquish imperial possessions:

HINDU: [...] it wasn't reformism got us here. We had to force you to it.

ENGLISHMAN: That is arguable too. But to go back to the last century when you were still trying constitutional methods.

HINDU: Oh yes, I tried them. Just as the Irish tried them –

ENGLISHMAN: Oh forget that deceptive analogy. (*First Sight* 27)

The Englishman's irritable dismissal (followed by an abrupt change of subject), suggests he has no riposte to the parallel raised by the Hindu, and that parallel is indeed legitimate, if not of foremost relevance to the

programme's tour through recent Indian history. When the Hindu mentions the previous involvement of an Edwardian Secretary of State for India in the campaign for Irish Home Rule a couple of pages later, the Englishman again remains silent, and the discussion mutates into a consideration of Muslim separatism. In these instances, superiority of argument rests with the Indian characters, and their interest in Ireland shows that 'that deceptive analogy' is a valid concern.

There's also plenty of evidence in MacNeice's BBC correspondence that Ireland was rarely far from his mind when he was engaged on the Indian programmes. After the broadcasts he received a number of complaints from listeners, which mainly concerned perceived mispronunciations of Indian words by the actors. MacNeice replied to each letter individually, emphasising that he had taken care to research the pronunciation of Indian words and instruct the actors, but that he also wanted some of them to mispronounce words in order to suggest the careless attitude of some British colonists to Indian languages and culture. To the oft-repeated complaint that the mispronunciations were offensive to Indian listeners, MacNeice replied again and again with the same illustration. His response to H.I. Lane is typical:

I know that if one has a strong feeling for a country it is most distressing to hear its place names garbled. I myself still wince when I hear English speakers pronouncing the first syllable of 'Donegal' as 'Don' instead of 'Dun'. All the same I am resigned to it. (Folder R19/948)

The inconsistency of MacNeice's rejection of a personified identity for Ireland and his acceptance of the same for India is unlikely to be a simple oversight. Rather, it might relate to articulated themes of 'dialectic' and paradox. MacNeice's poems about Irish subjects, especially when they are

denunciatory, like 'Valediction' or the section of *Autumn Journal* quoted above, make use of many of the same rhetorical devices as the prose of *India at First Sight*: lists, strings of grammatically undifferentiated clauses, paradox. The furious parataxis of the closing lines of 'Valediction' is comparable to the overwhelming sense-impressions created by Mother India's litanies in *India At First Sight*:

Goodbye your hens running in and out of the white house
 Your absent-minded goats along the road, your black cows
 Your greyhounds and your hunters beautifully bred
 Your drums and your dolled-up Virgins and your ignorant dead.
 (CP 54)

"INDIA": Here I come now with my mantras and yantras and mudras –

STILL VOICE: With her mosques and temples and sacred trees, her
 stupas and chatiyas and towers of silence –

"INDIA": with my gods that dance in the rock, with my living dancers
 timeless as they keep time (*First Sight* 9)

Autumn Journal's outburst against Kathleen Ni Houlihan is prompted by the poet's reading of Maud Gonne's memoir *A Servant of the Queen* – the queen in question, being, of course, a personified Ireland. For MacNeice, Gonne's nationalism is based on contradiction:

I note how a single purpose can be founded on
 A jumble of opposites:
 Dublin Castle, the vice-regal ball,
 The embassies of Europe,
 Hatred scribbled on a wall,
 Gaols and revolvers. (CP 131)

Gonne's nationalism seeks to unify a divided consciousness into a 'single purpose', nourished by its own repressed ambivalence. The 'opposites' of established power and revolutionary insurgency are locked into a kind of dystopian dependence, enabling the existence of one another, but more important, allowing the poet to make his gesture: 'a plague on both your

houses!' Gonne, or Kathleen,⁵ is different from 'India' in that she attempts to force coherence out of contradiction where India remains plural. If this rage to unity is the target of MacNeice's bile, however, it is something which he barely avoids himself in his attempts to summarise Ireland, dragging together as he does at the close of 'Valediction' such diverse features as landscape and animals, sectarianism and misguided nostalgia to provide a remarkably effective, if dyspeptic, portrait of a nation.

MacNeice's evocations of 'a jumble of opposites' in India perform a remarkably similar function. They allow the poet to preside over the conflicts of decolonising nations, in the Indian work usually in a mood of reconciliation rather than irritation. In the end, however, it doesn't matter whether Kathleen or Mother India are deplored or endorsed; indeed, they may be the same figure: both simply function to give the poet a vantage point from which to view territory. 'A plague on both your houses!', the presiding mood of 'Valediction' and section XIX of *Autumn Journal*, is another aspect of 'I am large, I contain multitudes'.

The techniques of litany and paradox employed by MacNeice in his earlier poetry about Ireland and in *India at First Sight* serve him rather less well in his longer poems about India. The wordplay of 'Mahabalipuram' ('the lingam fronts, affronts the sea', 'Reliefs. Relief is the word') captures only too well the jaded mood of the tourist overwhelmed by artefacts of extraordinary stature and craft. Long, discursive lines punctuated by trimeters are exactly suited to the poem's alternation of bland metaphysical speculation and well-worn aphorism. 'Letter from India: for Hedli', a more successful poem,

⁵ Stallworthy suggests that MacNeice may have associated Kathleen with Clytemnestra and the malevolent Hallgerd, who begins and prolongs the feud in *Njal's Saga*, which the poet adapted for radio earlier in 1947 (351).

allows a glimpse of the disillusion evident in MacNeice's BBC memoranda regarding his trip and successfully suppressed in the broadcast scripts. He depicts the diversity of India as sinister almost throughout, turning the whole world into 'a mere sabbath of bacilli': as in the Irish poems, lists work best as a form of invective. 'Letter from India' sometimes succumbs to cliché – Europeans, have, apparently, 'written off what looms behind/ the fragile fences of our mind'; India can reacquaint them with unconscious 'horror [...] things that creep' (*CP* 269). However, it also intriguingly reverses gender stereotype – the male speaker sees himself as representative of the East, his 'proud and finite' lover of the West – while its final image of their sexual union in a liminal space (on your breast/ I could find too that undistressed/ East which is east and west and neither') brings to the poem's Indian setting a typically MacNeicean sense of displacement and rejection of identitarianism (*CP* 270).

'Didymus', the longest poem MacNeice wrote about India, offers if not exactly a critique, an exploration of this East / West binarism. The poem projects its concerns about imperial dissolution onto a primal, perhaps even mythic, missionary endeavour: the tradition that Thomas the apostle travelled as far as India. The central conceit of 'Didymus' is a manipulation of the cliché of pagan plurality set against monotheistic unity. Thomas confronts a 'banyan riot of dialectic' which is actually founded in the unity of the 'unsculptured lingam', symbol of the god Shiva (*CP* 295). His own monotheistic faith, by contrast, is based on duality: both his own physical resemblance to Christ, which gives him his nickname, 'Didymus' ('the twin') and in the divided consciousness implied by doubt. India manifests plurality

animated by a singularity, while Thomas is dualistic, highlighting his dualism with wordplay.

MacNeice identifies dualism, and more widely an urge to produce binary oppositions, as products of this 'Western' visitor's imagination, but moreover, and most important, as signifiers of failure. MacNeice typically valorises doubt and scepticism, and there is plenty of sympathy with Thomas here, but groping for meaning, asking for proof and differentiating between self and Other he is 'tested and proved, yet [he] failed through needing a test' (CP 299). Throughout 'Didymus' runs a theme of unease with dualism, with the partitioned Christian mind, culminating in a powerful image:

If never there,
The Indies yet can show in a bare church
On a bare plaque the bare but adequate tribute
To one who has thrust his fingers into the wounds of God. (CP 299)

The sceptical poet raises the possibility that Thomas was never in India at all; that the church and plaque are as 'bare' of his presence as they are simple. This imagery of absence resonates with the context of imperial withdrawal and legacy: how will India manage its post-colonial landscape, marked with tributes to an absent British power? The Utopian wish that the empire could be as 'if never there' is rebuked by the transgressive, painful, final line. Thomas's great fame and failure was an empirical incursion into the body of Christ; by analogy, the final, agonizing image suggests the dubiety surrounding *imperial* incursions.

In occasional reviews and essays on Indian subjects written in the late 1940s and throughout the next decade, MacNeice reasserts his ideas of India as a 'land of paradoxes' ('Indian Approaches', *Prose* 201-4, 201) and of the subcontinent supplying to its European visitors something lost, forgotten or

unconscious ('Notes on the Way', *Prose* 176-9, 176).⁶ Later poetry, the result of his second trip to Pakistan, India and Ceylon moved away from these well-worn notions. 'Return to Lahore', blends travelogue flippancy: 'The sober lawn/ Regrets the Punjab Boundary Force/ (Which, like the drinks, has been withdrawn)' with a surrealistic murder-mystery involving a 'tall scared Sikh' and a 'cyclist with [a] spear' (*CP* 435). The mood of the poem is comparable rather to MacNeice's 'nightmare and cinders' late poetry (*CP* 515) than the occasionally windy ratiocination of 'Mahabalipuram' and 'Didymus'; the wordplay thankfully understated, based on reiteration of 'so long', 'along' and 'back', neatly encapsulating the theme of return.

'Indian Village', based on the Euripedean maxim that life is 'whatever glints', more closely integrates MacNeice's lifelong preoccupation with sparkle, movement and dazzle with its Indian subject matter than, for instance, 'Didymus' reconciles the poet's characteristic scepticism with the legend of Doubting Thomas in India. Its emphatic four-stress lines hold metaphysics more confidently than the longer line predominant in 'Mahabalipuram'. The closing imagery of peasants hunkered over their hookahs, looking towards sunrise and the East, posits them as the model for humanity, rather than as exoticised Others or archetypes within a 'Mother India' herself archetypal (*CP* 498). In the proto-ecological 'Jungle Clearance Ceylon', engineers 'Who had drowned a valley to found a town- / Power and water for human beings' are representatives of humanity who act 'in spite of'

⁶ Direct parallel between India and Ireland continued to be a feature of MacNeice's writing about both places into the 1950s. In one of the round-ups of coffee-table books about Ireland for which MacNeice was an obvious choice of reviewer, he refers to Dublin as a paradoxical city of 'cold gaiety' ('Under the Sugar-Loaf', *Prose* 246-252, 250). Conversely, in letters to his wife from Ceylon in 1955, MacNeice noted the similarity of the Indian Ocean to Belfast Lough. Stallworthy, with a little geographical imprecision, comments "every ocean was the Atlantic, his father's ocean and his own" (Stallworthy 418).

the 'archaic' world around them and in spite of their own nature 'as human beings' (CP 499). The poem uses enjambment, minimal punctuation and paratactic syntax, all characteristics of MacNeice's very late work, to suggest the illogic and insensitivity of such technological meddling:

The pelican perched as though in a glass
 Case where the wind could never blow
 Nor elephant come to drink nor human
 Beings presume in the grey dawn
 To press a button or throw a switch
 To slap the west on the back of the east
 In spite of archaic and absent elephant
 In spite of archaic and present pelican
 In spite of themselves as human beings. (CP 499)

This is the reverse of the allegorical impulse evident in *India at First Sight*: instead of seeking to explain the external world by giving it a human shape, enclosing India within the gigantic maternal body of 'India', MacNeice envisions the world as something alien and inaccessible to human consciousness. Prefiguring later nightmare poems, in which the world actively resists human attempts to modify or control it, humankind-ness itself ('themselves as human beings') is something from which, with button-pressing and switch-flicking, humans have alienated themselves. Even the echo of the East / West opposition assumes a surrealistic tinge, as if a half-remembered idea of the 'white man's burden' had somehow been mixed up with the image of a hearty, insincere slap on the back.

The differences between MacNeice's first group of Indian poems and the later ones illustrate in miniature changes in his poetic practice between 1948 and his death in 1963: from informationism and explication to obliquity, from long, hypotactic lines to short, paratactic ones, from concrete evocations

of real places to the liminal dream spaces of 'parable'.⁷ They also indicate a development in MacNeice's writing about national identity, as 'the most "foreign" country I have visited' ('Notes on the Way', *Prose* 176) becomes simply another part of the typical rebarbative, hostile landscape of his parable poems. The universal non-places of MacNeice's later poetry are not a panacea for damaging oppositions between coloniser and native, West and East: universalism has its political dangers too. Nor, considering the opportunities offered MacNeice to travel in India and his evident interest in the subcontinent's cultures, is his poetic output on it large or, in comparison with the rest of his poetry, particularly distinguished. But because MacNeice's Indian work reproduces on a small scale technical and intellectual changes evident in his career as a whole, it can act as a paradigm through which to understand his prolific and hugely accomplished oeuvre. It can perhaps even illuminate the vexed, room-clearing question (Mahon 21) of MacNeice's national identity and his relationship to Ireland and its culture. If we know how he got from 'Mahabalipuram' to 'Jungle Clearance Ceylon', we are in a better position to understand the more complex question of how the descriptive tirade of 'Valediction' mutates into the unnamed but distinctly Irish spaces of 'House on a Cliff' or 'Soap Suds'.

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⁷ For 'parable', see MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, ed. E.R. Dodds, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965 and Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

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