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Thomas Dutoit

► **To cite this version:**

| Thomas Dutoit. Apart from MacNeice. 2020. hal-02956762

**HAL Id: hal-02956762**

**<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-02956762>**

Preprint submitted on 3 Oct 2020

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## Apart from MacNeice

Thomas Dutoit  
Université de Lille

Apart from Louis MacNeice is what most belongs to him, even if it is an apart that is only a part *of, around*, cleaving internally, him. Much has been written already on this partitioned writer (“Anglo-Irish,” in sum), constituted by so many separations or divided allegiances<sup>1</sup>. Eschewing an approach through his doubled national geographies, hewing rather to the iterative force in the poems of a single morpheme, *part*, and the cluster of terms that aggregate around it (sharing as belonging and/ or separation), this reading of Louis MacNeice's poetry endeavors to recognize the irreducible division of which “apart” is an effectual synonym. It selects only some instances from this poetic corpus that espouses, affirms and celebrates multiplicity, diversity, and plurality (of which “apart” is always an index). Thus, prior to examining “apart” in its most prominent manifestations and, ultimately, its perhaps most daring poetic flowerings, focus begins first on several of its symptoms, effects or necessary concomitants, such as “walls” as mediating sites, originary repetition as anachronic temporality, “ghostliness” as form of dis-possession, the separation between earth and unearthing, as well as those between death and living, a title and a subtitle, or a river and its lock.

### Walls

In MacNeice's poetry, walls, it has been observed, are recurrently the explicitly thematized topos for a separation that is also a joining.

In “Variation on Heraclitus” in *Visitations*, such a topos is not only not fixed or stable; moreover, it is singular, customized if one will. This singular or non-standard site of partition positions separation (but also suturing) as originary, such that appearance is always already reappearance constituted by an *a priori* principle of dis-appearance.

Even the walls are flowing, even the ceiling,  
Nor only in terms of physics.  
[...]  
[... t]hat standard lamp it keeps waltzing away  
Down an unbridgeable Ganges where nothing is standard  
[...]  
[... w]hatever you say,  
Reappearance presumes disappearance<sup>2</sup>.

The walls, the partitions/ separations, are not static. The notion of the interval, the spacing or partition between this and that, between me and you, or between X and not X, is not a notion of a fixation or motionlessness. The interval, the separation, the “wall” – taking here the

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<sup>1</sup> This reading of MacNeice's poetry is indebted in particular to studies by Adolphe Haberer (*Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) : l'homme et la poésie*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1986), Peter McDonald (*Louis MacNeice. The Poet in His Contexts*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), Joanny Moulin (*Louis MacNeice. The Burning Perch*, Neuilly, Atlante, 2016) and Tom Walker (*Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of His Time*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, Ed. Peter MacDonald, Winston-Salem, Wake Forest University Press, 2013, p. 560. Hereafter abbreviated after quotations as *CP*, plus page number.

"wall" as figure for the present defined as the separation between past and future – is never simple, never static. The wall, the division, the present, is never standard.

One cannot live in the same room twice *not* because one is different from time to time, but *rather* because the room is never a selfsame room; difference, in the form of an indeterminate space, spacing or interval, constitutes the ipseity of the room.<sup>3</sup>

Disappearance is not something that surprises appearance after the fact of appearance; disappearance is an originary condition of possibility of appearance. Yet such appearance is *re*-appearance because it comes only after disappearance. The survivor, the echoing status of appearance, is intrinsic, because appearance is always already a reappearance. The partition in appearance is that between originary disappearance and reappearance. This partition is a slide between them.

The flag that MacNeice, after Keats<sup>4</sup>, unfurls, the standard ("nothing is standard") under which his imagination sails, is this standard of the non-standard.

The beingness of a being is the fact of internal and irreducible division or spacing within every so-called unit. A part of MacNeice will always come apart.

### Reinvention of language

MacNeice, perhaps more than any poet during his time, renewed language (*Rede* in German) through cliché and chatter (*Gerede* in German). His exploit, as poet, is to seize the chance that repetition represents for originality or invention. The originality of disappearance constitutes invention as reinvention, such that originality must pass through the modality of that prefix *re*-. Consider "Idle Talk" in *Visitations*:

Shop-talk, club-talk, cliché, slang –  
The wind that makes the dead leaf fall  
Can also make the live leaf dance,  
Though the green of this was the green of that

And all our gems have been worn before  
And what we intend as new was never  
Not used by someone centuries back  
Or by oneself some weeks before. *CP* 543.

The chance of the reinvention or reactivation of language is irreducibly joined to the chance of language becoming dead metaphor or cliché. The most cliché is potentially the most originary, but also vice versa. Originality occurs in repetition. The point here is that the always already belatedness presupposes an inaugural cut whose temporality is the past of the

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<sup>3</sup> The great long sentence running thirteen lines at the beginning of "Variation on Heraclitus" anticipates the form of the later poem "Château Jackson" in *The Burning Perch*, where movement is constant displacement.

<sup>4</sup> "Nothing is standard" might echo Keats' 1818 verse letter, "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.":

Things cannot to the will  
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought;  
Or is it that Imagination brought  
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confin'd,  
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,  
Cannot refer to any standard law  
Of either earth or heaven? (John Keats, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Miriam Allott, New York, Longman, 1970 [1995], p. 324).

future, a future (death) always already past, in other words a partition or *partage* between future and past whose name is the experience of the present. This temporality, in MacNeice, affects his understanding of (what and how) language (is).

### Ghostly possessions

Invention pre-emptively haunted by reinvention, possessions always dispossessed by ghostly possessions, MacNeice's language never entirely appertains to him. From "Visitations":

The ghosts of pastoral tease and mingle  
With darker ghosts from that dark day  
Which means our own. Your own? say they;  
How can you prove your minds are single  
Or, muted words from worlds away  
Setting both ears and nerves a-tingle,  
Tell what your ears and nerves obey?

[...]  
Never so proud in pulse and petal,  
So much themselves in despite of spite,  
Look, they come back; and, burning bright,  
Turn roof and tree to dazzling metal  
Transmuting all our greys to white. *CP* 517-518.

The ghosts of pastoral arouse and mix with darker ghosts; pastoral ghosts seem to be from the past, whereas the dark ghost is from "that dark day/ Which means our own." However, the voice in the poem argues against deciding what is "our own": "Your own? Say they". The "they" might be pastoral ghosts or "darker ghosts." Whoever the "they" refers to here, the point here in the poem is that it is impossible to prove the singularity, the simple identity, of the mind. The mind is always mined by what is not mine. Thus, the poetic voice, in a punning first word and subsequent statement, announces that mutation is what constitutes property: "Or, [as in "ore"]," how can you "Tell what your ears and nerves obey" given that "muted words from worlds away/ Se[t] both ears and nerves a-tingle"? The idea that the I is distinct or that identity were self-contained and intact is one MacNeice's poetry constantly erodes.

Our words, which we think are our own, are only the sounds that mute out other words. Yet muted words, like ghosts, come back, transmuting, as exemplified right here by "nerve" in "never" and vice versa, so that "pastoral ghosts" or ghostly and past live ("oral") speech returns to reenchant what we see: "Never so proud in pulse and petal,/ So much themselves in despite of spite,/ Look, they come back; and, burning bright,/ Turn roof and tree to dazzling metal/ Transmuting all our greys to white" (*CP* 518). Dazzling like Blake's "Tyger" pounded into copper plates, our words are not our own, MacNeice implies or even poetically adduces.

Because language is never appropriable, it is never owned. Because language is never owned, it belongs only to what is other than belonging, to non-ownership. A part of MacNeice will always come apart.

## Buried, Poetry

For this poet with keen interest in geology, the earth is fundamentally poetry because the earth harbors the buried. But the earth is where things break surface. The buried – poetic potential – at bottom fractures the surfaces that border the air. In Jacques Derrida's elucidation of Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* (1938)<sup>5</sup>, the earth is the partition between the buried and the in the air (or between the in-the-water and the out-of-the-water). In that same analysis, language is understood two ways. One is when ideality becomes objectivity, and therefore this is understood as translatability whose ideal is univocity. The other is also when ideality becomes objectivity, but here the mode of passage is sheer idiom whose ideal is equivocity. The former is science, the latter is poetry. Such a *ligne de partage* structures many a MacNeician verse, for example, “Donegal Triptych”:

All our depth usurps our surface.  
Surface takes a glossier polish,  
Depth a richer gloom. And steel  
Skewers the heart. Our fingers feel  
The height of the sky, the ocean bottom.

Yet the cold voice chops and sniggers,  
Prosing on, maintains the thread  
Is broken and the phoenix fled,  
Youth and poetry departed. *CP* 499.

Depth infringes upon surface. Surface is to visibility what depth is to invisibility. Ideality is buried and invisible until it enters into objectivity, and that entrance is its emergence upon surface. Fingers touch the height of the sky: the outer limits of dematerialization, released from gravity. Fingers also touch the bottom, the buried. The partition is between what is below and above, in the ground or under gravity and what is in the air but even beyond the pull of gravity, sheer levitation, the height of the sky.

Surface and depth are mutually enriched by the fact that depth usurps the surface. Poetry spills out into science. The surface has a more interesting burnish, the gloom or oblivion of depth is richer when each is tied to the other: poetry is, practically speaking at least, richer if it can make its way into language and not remain buried in the earth, in sheer untranslatability, sheer incommunicability.

Still, the voice is coldly critical and analytical: the “cold voice chops and sniggers, / Prosing on.” Voice threatens to eradicate poetic voice and become critical voice, which is, here, prose. Rebirth, or the chance for the reinvention of language, is “fled” and thus both “Youth and poetry” are “departed.” Departure tells of a split, a severance, a radical partition constitutive of aporia: the road is blocked to poetry by a cold, critical, analytical voice, by the univocality of prose.

The poem proceeds to call upon prose to “desist” and to draw upon the figure of the “spiral.” This “spiral” is shorthand for poetry, or, rather, for the way in which poetry leaves depth and obscurity but then must dive back into it, in a screwturning or corkscrew movement. Unearthed thereby is a wary awareness: find in solitude, or separateness, communion, because what is shared is this being shorn. What we share is our incommunicability, or our poetic singularity. “Donegal Triptych” begins thus:

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origine de la géométrie*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, Collection Epiméthée, 1962.

Broken bollard, rusted hawser,  
Age-old reasons for new rhyme,  
Bring forward now their backward time:  
The glad sad poetry of departure. *CP* 498.

Antiquated or disused words rejuvenate poetic language in phonic ways (alliteration, assonance or meter in “Broken bollard, rusted hawser”), reason and rhyme entwine the old and the new. A time receding into the past (“backward”) propels the present (“now”) as the inauguration of the future (“forward”). “Departure” names death or the past as much as taking leave of the present in a new direction. Poetry is this blank space between “glad” and “sad.” “The “glad sad poetry of departure” is our only possession, the disposition of our positioning. “Bring forward” “backward time” might be glossed as the basic return movement constitutive of all progression towards the *avenir*, the to-come. I can only move forward by a movement backward: “protention” and “retention” are the phenomenological terms. I cannot move towards tomorrow, save thanks to memory of yesterday. If I could enter tomorrow without memory, then tomorrow would not even be tomorrow. It would be the cancellation of time and the transformation of tomorrow into an eternal today or even an eternal present. Husserl, as well as Derrida, simultaneous to MacNeice's career, posited rather the present as “bringing forward” “backward time”: i.e., the present is a back and forth movement between anticipation and recollection, taking place in at least three dimensions, therefore spiraling. “Donegal Triptych” continues further on:

*Why? Why?*  
Which it is good to ask provided the question is sung, and  
Provided  
We never expect an answer. Who could live  
If he knew it all in advance?  
No, let the rain keep sifting  
Into the earth while our minds become, like the earth, a sieve,

A halfway house between sky and sea, being of the water earthy,  
And drenched in echoes of our earlier lives  
Before we flipped ourselves ashore when our first and last horizon  
Was a steelbright sea cut round and sharp with the first of carving knives.

So now from this heathered and weathered perch I watch the grey waves pucker  
And feel the hand of the wind on my throat again,  
Once more having entered solitude once more to find communion  
With other solitary beings, with the whole race of men. *CP* 500-501.<sup>6</sup>

The question “Why?” is sung, which means is asked poetically, not scientifically. Poetry is not the establishment of the *a priori* truth that we seek to reach in the end. If we knew in advance the answer to the question, or if the question presupposes an answer, then it is not a real question.

The poem depicts poetry as a partition through which or across which things pass in part, partly. The rain sifts into the earth, passes through the earth which like a sieve remains partly solid, while partly open. The earth is a dwelling in between sky, which I take as

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<sup>6</sup> These lines refer to *Autumn Journal*, with “Plato ... define[d] the bodily pleasures as the pouring water into a hungry sieve” and “Aristotle was right to posit the Alter Ego/ But wrong to make it only a halfway house” (*CP* 142).

immateriality or levity, and sea, which I take as the oceans that, as Sandor Ferenczi among others, argues, we emerged from. The poet, no longer a fish, emerges from water onto the earth and sits on a “perch,” not yet a “burning perch” as the final collection, with its climate change image, proleptically calls it.

This embodied voice, gravity bound yet watching the wrinkling water from which it emerges, is being squeezed or pressured to poeticize (“I feel the hand of the wind on my throat again”). This entry into poetry is an entrance into solitude because poetic language, or lyric language, is not univocally communicable scientific critical prose. As poetry, it is solitary, because solitude has something to do with the secret, with the incommunicable, with the therefore infra-ideal. Yet poetry, as solitude, finds communion because what is common is our solitary or singular or idiomatic singularity. We share that we are shorn. We share that we share nothing other than our utterly partial, limited, and even unshareably incommunicable secret.

In common is to have nothing in common, save this separation and experience of the wall, the partition, the *partage*.

### **The partition of title and subtitle**

Partitioning also occurs as the separation, by the subtitle, from the title, opening onto the verse of the poem. MacNeice’s “Nature Morte” (in *Poems* [1935]) turns on the figure of the turnaround.

Nature morte  
(*Even so it is not so easy to be dead*)

As those who are not athletic at breakfast day by day  
Employ and enjoy the sinews of others vicariously,  
Shielded by the upheld journal from their dream-puncturing wives  
And finding in the printed word a multiplication of their lives,  
So we whose senses give us things misfelt and misheard  
Turn also, for our adjustment, to the pretentious word  
Which stabilises the light on the sun-fondled trees  
And, by photographing our ghosts, claims to put us at our ease;  
Yet even so, no matter how solid and staid we contrive  
Our reconstructions, even a still life is alive  
And in your Chardin the appalling unrest of the soul  
Exudes from the dried fish and brown jug and the bowl. *CP* 35.

Constructed by an epic simile (“As those who [...] / So we whose”), the poem’s first sentence (lines 1-8) pivots in the shift from line 4 to line 5, passing from the vicarious participants of sports, those who read the sports pages of the daily newspaper, and who thereby imagine themselves in the lives of their sportsmen (probably men) whom they read about or whom they see in the newspaper photographs, to the figure of the poet who, also, vicariously lives in the lives of those whom he depicts in the poems which he gives to be read, themselves then mirrored or reflected in the final four lines that invoke the Chardin painting, which itself continues the shift from the relation of onlooker and doer that we had first in the reader of newspapers and the sports players, then from the poet and those living people his poems are about (as in the reader of the sports page), to finally, Chardin depicting the dried fish, the brown jug and the bowl.

That pivot is therefore the pivot that turns the onlooker into the looked at, but also vice versa (this is the principle of the pivot), the looked-at into the onlooker. For the reader (the

onlooker) of the sports page turns into the object (the looked-at) of the poet who himself, as onlooker, will be read by us, the readers, who as readers are onlookers, even if, insofar as we attempt to record our reading of the poem, we consequently perform a reading (as in 'now') which in its turn can also be looked-at, as a representation of ourselves. That turning around, that pivoting, is what is described, or performed, right at the beginning of the poem. A "nature morte," in English a "still life," in the double sense of the English "still" (in fact in the triple sense of the English word "still"), is life that is represented in a "still" state, but since a "still" state is a nonmoving state, and even a radically motionless, inert, state, this stillness is death, and therefore a "still life" is a life that is dead, or, as in French, is a dead nature, a dead birth, a dead life, in short a corpse. Devoid of life, a body without life, a *Körper* without *Leib*. This "nature morte" is turned around in the parenthetical subtitle. This subtitle is put into a coffin, parenthesized, and buried below the nature, like a body is put in a shroud or in a coffin and buried beneath a headstone. All poetry is epitaphic, wrote Eliot in *Four Quartets*. This entombed corpse, this sort of fall or remainder or *chute* from the title, "Nature Morte," is in a sense the life of the name, the body that was the life, the *phusis* that was in its lifetime covered by the name or the *nomos* of the proper name, like a body is said to bear a proper name, that proper name which survives the body, or at least is that which structurally survives the body, even before it is given to the body, which is as much as to say that it precedes the body. "Nature morte" is therefore to the poem what the proper name is to the body, and the subtitle "(Even so it is not so easy to be dead)" is to the *content* (i.e., the contained) of the poem what the buried corpse is to the identity it had or has prior to or after death.

The subtitle, wrapped around by the parentheses, is also *italicized*, leaned on, inclining toward the ground like the corpse itself, given over to gravity and indeed become with it, become one with the grave. This italicization is the becoming horizontal of the letter, that which had stood or that which had instituted itself as the name, or as the *nomos*, in German one would say that which had been *gestiftet*, as in the sense of *Stiftung*, institution, or standing, and as such, vertical.

The sentence that is mummified in the enclosing parenthesis is a form of resistance to the affirmation of the title. *Nature morte* is a statement that consists in a claim, an affirmation: this nature is dead, this is dead nature. Such a statement is not however as certain or absolute as it might be taken to be, relative to a simple understanding of nature and death. Is death so simple, or, in the words of the subtitle, is it so easy to be dead? Despite the affirmation or the claim of dead nature, being dead is not so flattened out, so lacking in depth, so reduced to surface or to relative stratification. Even if nature is dead, even if the dead nature is so even or evened as to be flattened, so even as to be without remainder ("*Even so*"), well, even so being dead is not so easy, is not that easy, is not as easy as that. Being dead has a depth and an oddness. Being dead is not as still, not as tranquil, etymologically not as *easy* as easiness, or tranquility and stillness denote. This *nature morte*, or this "still life," might still have some life in it, if only that of the ghostliness of a photographed face.

Resistance, this enwrapped yet restless (like an even number is without remainder) and therefore agitated, or uneasy, corpse, syntactically at least, knotted up, bound up, wound up, sprung like a trigger or a trap or a bomb, knotted up in the centrally encrypted word, "not," the middle world between five syllables to its left and five syllables to its right, that occupies an impenetrable place: a not, a negativity, an absence that by definition is absolutely inaccessible, unless the absolute is itself by definition always caught up in a mesh of relations, a kind of entangled knot.

Although, even though, the poem is entitled, and about a *nature morte*, a dead organism, it is also a poem, and therefore a piece of writing, that turns about, is organized around, without being, a dead organism. Mimesis, or representation, cannot so easily access that which is simply not. Although the verb "to be" is used twice in the subtitle, once



conjugated in the third impersonal singular and in the present tense, and once in the timeless infinitive, the verb “to be” is antithetical with “dead”: for being to be dead, being would have to be non-being. It is not so easy for being to be non-being. Being that is non-being must be uneasy, uncomfortable, agitated, anxious, unstable. The poetic voice uses an impersonal pronoun as the subject of the sentence : “it.” Rather than writing, “to be dead is not so easy,” the poetic voice (a he? A she? An it?) says, “it is not so easy to be dead.” What or who is this “it”? Perhaps the “it” is impersonal and a mere undefined grammatical function without referent because “it” is the closest expression can get to a sort of agency that could be non-being.

MacNeice’s “Nature Morte” is therefore about this impossibility of representing death without such a representation having something living in it. Another mode for and of *partage* or partaking.

### River lock

Merging, as in marriage, is a form of sharing that shears its participants apart from each other. In “Les Sylphides” from “Novelettes,” a man takes “his girl,” his beloved, to a ballet during the performance of which the man imagines a sheer together or even oneness:

Now there is no separation, from now on  
You will be wearing white  
Satin and a red sash  
Under the waltzing trees. *CP* 187.

Yet caesura intervenes; a passageway must be negotiated, in the terms of the poem:

The river had come to a lock [...]  
And we cannot continue down  
Stream unless we are ready  
To enter the lock and drop. *CP* 187.

This “lock” is marriage, the embodiment of which is division:

So they were married – to be the more together –  
And found they were never again so much together,  
Divided by the morning tea,  
By the evening paper,  
By children and tradesmen’s bills. *CP* 187.

Marriage is a “river lock” riven from the river flow.

### Plural parts

MacNeice’s poem “Plurality,” whose title both encapsulates while implying a fractal multitude of partitions, gives an overview of philosophy’s obsession with oneness, while also shifting to MacNeician mixing as represented for example in the riming couplets reminiscent of Pope’s “Essay on Man.”

“Plurality” is written against “smug philosophers” who “lie” when they “say the world is one” (*CP* 204). Such philosophy “evokes a dead ideal of white/ All-white Universal, refusing to allow/ Division or dispersal” (*CP* 204). Division or dispersal were announced in

the epigraph from Nietzsche to the 1941 collection, *Plant and Phantom*, the title of which is a translation from the epigraph, that read, in English, “a fissure in two and a trembling of plant and of ghost,” the fissure, or *Zweispalt* that could be said to be the basic fact, or value, of irreducible partition. Univocity, the philosophical ideal, and equivocality, the poetic ideal, are each split from the other, the former the absence of splitting, the latter as its infinite recurrence.

The poem “Plurality” is a manifesto for the *partage* that is the ethical correlative of the Nietzschean *Zweispalt*. In its ending written as the poetic imperative, the poem refers obscurely, or poetically, to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and the plurality that it embodies

And so he must continue, raiding the abyss  
With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,  
Conscious [...]  
Of dissension with his neighbor, of beggars at the gate,  
But conscious also [...]  
Of going beyond and above the limits. *CP* 206.

The notion of “raiding the abyss” refers to how writing is figured in *Finnegans Wake*:

The prouts who will invent a writing there ultimately is the poeta, still more learned, who discovered the raiding there originally. That’s the point of eschatology our book of kills reaches for now in soandso many counterpoint words<sup>7</sup>.

And *Finnegans Wake*, as Derrida put it<sup>8</sup> is the buried ideal communication of all languages in sheer communication, which however when liberated from pure ideality in the underground has the appearance of incomprehensibility. MacNeice’s “amiss,” “dissension,” and the “above” or “beyond” the limit, doubly inscribe the shortcoming before and the overcoming of the *ligne de partage*.

“Plurality” is the first or one of the first poems in the corpus that draws on the figure of partition explicitly or semantically. The epigraph from Nietzsche is not without cause for this incision from here up to, but stopping before, *Burning Perch*. Structuring all around or by the caesura of a comma in mid-line, and then by the pendants of adverbs, “Plurality” ends with these two final lines that both are also echoes of Wordsworth, the latter’s mutability sonnet about “the unimaginable touch of time,” and also his “the world is too much with us”:

Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death’s inveigling touch,  
Not completely conscious but partly – and that is much. *CP* 206.

Until “Visitations,” MacNeice will draw on this figure of the part, the partial, the incomplete, and in “Plurality” this “partly” is that without which the title wouldn’t exist.

In the corpus, the poem that draws most upon the notion of the part – a sharing that is a shearing – is the poem from *Springboard* entitled “The Kingdom.” This poem posits the sovereign domain as the underfoot, the underground, the poetic:

Under the surface of flux and of fear there is an underground movement  
Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters,  
Unconscious but palpably there – the Kingdom of individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, New York, Viking Press, 1939 [1984], pp. 482.31-36.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origine de la géométrie, op.cit.*, p. 104-105.

And of these is the Kingdom –  
Equal in difference, interchangeably sovereign – . CP 241.

This underground is where MacNeice finds what he calls the “apart,” those who are “apart”:

These, as being themselves, are apart from not each other  
But from such as being false are merely other,  
So these are apart as parts within a pattern  
Not merged nor yet excluded, members of a Kingdom  
Which has no king except each subject, therefore  
Apart from slaves and tyrants and from every  
Community of mere convenience; these are  
Apart from those who drift and those who force,  
Apart from partisan order and egotistical anarchy,  
Apart from the easy religion of him who find in God  
A boss, a ponce, an alibi, and apart from  
The logic of him who arrogates to himself  
The secret of the universe. CP 242.

These people who MacNeice singles out in their apartness are what, at the end of the poem, he calls “Subjects all of the Kingdom but each in himself a king” (248). Such figures are celebrated in the poem’s ending crescendo. All these figures, MacNeice writes – and here the word “apart” is to be heard as a heart beating – “are/ The voices whose words, whether in code or in clear,/ Are to the point and be received *apart* from/ The buzz of jargon” (248). At stake in this poetics of the apart is, at the very least, a poetry that shares the sensible (*partage du sensible*, in Rancière’s terminology) but this sensible is deeply bound to the earth, and as such, to where poetic language is, in its infra-ideality, at its richest, at its most equivocal. MacNeice unfurls this poetics in an insistent repetition of the word “apart”:

*Apart* from the cranks, the timid,  
The self-deceiving realist, the self-seeking  
Altruist, the self-indulgent penitent,  
*Apart* from all the frauds are these who have the courage  
Of their own vision and their friends’ good will  
And have not lost their cosmic pride, responding  
Both the simple lyrics of blood and the architectonic fugues of reason. CP 248-49.

The “these” who are *apart* are, MacNeice adds, “fault[ed]” – divided, split – “creators”: these apart artists are faulted because they die, and because one of their hands tries to fit things into gloves (MacNeice, throughout the corpus, does not like gloves), but they are “beautiful,” “grotesque,” and “hard as meteorites.” Of these “aparts,” “amnesty,” “advent,” and “Rebirth” are made, in other words of these aparts, “the archetype and the vindication of history” are made. This archetypal vindication of history is what MacNeice, in the poem’s final affirmative line, calls “The hierarchy of the equal – the Kingdom of Earth” (CP 249).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> To this theory of poetry (but also the earth, and its dwellers) and not State politics, as sovereign, one could relate here the poem “The Drunkard,” from *Holes in the Sky*:

[...] disperse  
On a sickly wind which drives all wraiths pell-mell  
Through tunnels to their appointed, separate places.

The “Kingdom of the Earth” here is the earth as kingdom. Sovereign is the earth. The earth is sovereign, and the earth is the sacred order, or “hierarchy,” of the “equal” because the earth is the realm of the equivocal, of equivocality. As the potency and potential of the equivocal, equivocality is the realm of poetic language. Derrida, early on, formulated this:

[...] répéter et reprendre en charge la totalité de l'équivoque elle-même, en un langage qui fasse affleurer à la plus grande synchronie possible la plus grande puissance des intentions enfouies, accumulées et entremêlées dans l'âme de chaque atome linguistique, de chaque vocable, de chaque mot, de chaque proposition simple, par la totalité des cultures mondaines, dans la plus grande génialité de leurs formes (mythologie, religion, sciences, arts, littérature, politique, philosophie, etc.); faire apparaître l'unité structurale de la culture totale dans l'équivoque généralisée d'une écriture qui [...] circule à travers toutes les langues à la fois [...] et retrouve la valeur poétique de la passivité<sup>10</sup>.

Perhaps obviously, Seamus Heaney's 1966 “Digging” is nearby: the “squat pen rests” in that poem. Heaney's “squat pen” that “rests” is crouched down, crack open to the ground, ground full of remainders opened, such that “squelch and slap/ Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge/ Through living roots awaken in my head<sup>11</sup>”. With the etymology of the word “squat,” which is not simply the flattened, but more specifically the “compelled” (from Old French *esquatir* ‘flatten’, based on Latin *coactus*, past participle of *cogere* ‘compel’), this phrase “squat pen rests” ought to be pressed as tightly as possible to MacNeice's 1938 collection, *The Earth Compels*. Indeed, the earth compels, like the grave. The earth compels, such a statement enounces a climate change problematic, and would take us down into a careful plumbing of Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* (1938), which is precisely about the irreducible earth in any phenomenological reduction. That irreducible earth, which is, in Jean Hyppolite's terms, the “transcendental *field* of writing,” is why, in Husserl, the earth is equal to the self, both being unrepresentable. The work on climate change and the earth, by the likes of Timothy Clark is especially germane, cogent, here<sup>12</sup>.

With its poem about slabs of tombstone, “The Cromlech,” in the collection *Holes in the Sky* (1948), anticipates Heaney's excavating diggers, explicitly in terms of the “apart,” here the articulation of MacNeice's much-beloved pair, “fact” and “value”:

Extracters and abstracters ask  
What emerges, what survives,  
And once the stopper is unstopped  
What was the essence in the flask  
And what is Life apart from lives  
And where, apart from fact, the value. *CP* 260.

This partition binds the value of Life in the fact of lives, and vice versa, the fact of life in the value of Lives. MacNeice's poetry constantly is in the mix of this irreducible mutual

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And he is separate too, who had but now ascended  
Into the panarchy of created things. *CP* 277.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origine de la géométrie, op.cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Digging”, *Poems 1965-1975*, New York, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1966 [1997], p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Especially to “Imaging and Imagining the Whole Earth: the Terrestrial as Norm”, in his *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 29-46), in which, as in Derrida and Husserl, the earth and poetic language call for a radical rethinking of political sovereignty and man's place on the earth as geometer.

imbrication. “Western Landscape,” from the same collection, chiasmatically crisscrosses abstraction and extraction, the pure ideal and the sensible glut:

One *thought of God*, **one feeling of the ocean**,  
Fused in the **moving body**, the *unmoved soul*,  
Made him a part of a not to be parted whole.  
Whole.  
And the West all the world, the lonely was the only,  
The chosen – and there was no choice – the Best,  
For the beyond was here. *CP 267*, my emphases.

In the magical interval of synecdoche, part is whole, activity, passivity, and the *pas au-delà* happens while standing still.

### **Apart remaining**

The recollection of being a child among the pigeons and sparrows comes in the poem “Time for a Smoke” while the poetic voice sits outside it, represented as follows:

I turn to my left and Queen Victoria’s gift,  
An Easter Island idol, looks back through me  
And I turn to my right hand and an Easter Island idol  
Looks back, over my head. We remain apart  
While behind us a million books wait to be opened. *CP 508*.

Separation here takes the form of the speaker sitting between the two Easter Island statues, each of which is facing the other. Remarkable is the non-meeting of the contemporary man, presumably someone like MacNeice doing work on the “million books” when inside the Museum, and the Easter Island idols whose stone faces look back at the man, but in a way indicating the radical non-recognition between the two. “We remain apart” tells of a radical cultural separation, between the colonialist Empire and the artifact from a former culture, yet a virtual separation also suggests otherwise a their being caught up in a shared history: “We [each] remain a [ ] part” of a vast history.

### **“A strange and intense sharing [*partage*] had begun. A partnership perhaps”<sup>13</sup>**

MacNeice's poetry, and the experience it attests and records, undergoes and thus shoulders the test of an inaugural cut the gaping of which cannot be closed or sutured into meaning even while making semblances of meaning persist.

His poem “The Stygian Banks” in *Holes in the Sky* bears witness to experience as participation in such partitioning or cutting:

that lives and pieces of lives  
Are cut off is needed to shape them, time is a chisel,  
So what was is. If it were not cut off,  
Youth would not be youth. *CP 283*.

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<sup>13</sup> This subtitle is a quotation from Jacques Derrida’s *Béliers. Le dialogue ininterrompu : entre deux infinis, le poème* (Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 10) ; this latter essay informs this current part.

“Cut off” names not only what comes after “youth” or even after life itself; it names, first and foremost, what precedes them as their condition of possibility. That which “is” (as in “So was [...] is”) is preceded by its being-past, its past tense: “So what was is.” ‘I was’ comes before ‘I am’. Without this cut, no shape or form. Without this future past, no presence. All of MacNeice's deployment of the “apart” participates in this separation.

Because of separation, MacNeice is particularly interested in sharing, in partnerships, even mergers. Artistically, as in a musical partition, a certain merging is possible, yet what he calls history undergoes and shoulders an infinite probation or test of difference.

But as notes are together in music – no merging of history. *CP 283.*

MacNeice's lines lie upon lives; his verse veers back and forth across the ground or separation between the underneath and the above, the inchoate and its apparent score:

The slab in the floor of the nave  
Makes one family a sonnet, each name with a line to itself,  
But the lines, however the bones may be jumbled beneath,  
Merge no more than the lives did. *CP 284.*

The proximity of “nave” and “name” might seem to indicate that each genealogical line is one “to itself,” each family (“one”) its own network or “sonnet”; however, no matter how inchoate multiplicity is, it never coalesces in sameness or merger. “Lines” as much as “lives” are hiatuses, shorn through and through, riven.

Analogy, correspondence, metaphor, harmonics –  
We have no word for the bridges between our present  
Selves and our past selves or between ourselves and others  
Or between one part of ourselves and another part. *CP 284.*

There is no word, because the word itself is shorn, as in *a()part*, *partage* or share, but others can substitute in their malapropism, such as *differance*. Determining the carry, the range, the offspring, the bearing or even partition of this between is our only foundation, yet such ground is a nameless bridge, a temporary suspension of gravity, our grounding as in reason but also as in the particles of our humble bodily existence.

I am alone  
And you are alone and he and she are alone  
But in that we carry our grounds we can superimpose them,  
No more fusing them than a pack of cards is fused. *CP 284.*

In the carrying of our residues, in separate existences bearing precisely what founds and grounds them, i.e., their apartness, we place a piece of clothing upon which an embroidery will be laid. There is no fusion of such *phusis*, our ground remains grounded precisely in being ground up, which means its falling down, grinded and thus the ground of ground.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Alice asserts, “nothing but a pack of cards<sup>15</sup>”, and Eva Trout asks, “‘Nothing but a pack of cards’<sup>16</sup>?” MacNeice cuts and shuffles.

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<sup>14</sup> On the meanings of “ground,” Martin Heidegger's *Der Satz vom Grund* is relevant.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, London, Penguin Classics. 1865 [1998], p.108.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1968, p. 216.

Death, as cut off, is a final seal upon life there, always already, as life's inauguration. The separation between life and death inheres in every separation and is what divvies up all the "parts" we've been tracking in MacNeice's poetry. Such separation, for Derrida, "defies thought right from a first enigmatic seal" with which "death" seals living, from the outset. This seal is "difficult to read," and "we will endlessly seek to decipher [it]<sup>17</sup>". For MacNeice, the partiality of life, its always apartness and being but a part, also seals:

Now it is Spring  
And the blossoms fall like sighs but we can hold them  
Each as note in the air, a chain of defiance,  
Making the transient last by having Seen it  
And so distilled value from mere existence;  
Thus when our existence is cut off  
That stroke will put a seal upon our value  
The eye will close but the vision it borrowed  
Has sealed the roses red. CP 288.

These roses are sealed as having the value of "red," yet they are as "'note[s]" in the air,'" and thus truly phonic phenomena: for, although it may seem as if "value" is what puts a "seal" upon sight thereby preserving "the vision" for which the roses were "red," in fact the "stroke" or "cut" as much seals the value as does it seal the roses as *read*, sealing the roses as that which had always to be read, deciphered, experienced.

### **A rose, two lips**

Separation forms in the poems a wound the lips of which will never close. These lips form around a speaking mouth and even in its silence never close. About Paul Celan, Derrida writes that this gaping marks in his poem "Grosse, glühende Wölbung" "the hiatus of a wound whose lips never close or join. These lips are drawn around a speaking mouth that, even when it stays silent, call the other unconditionally<sup>18</sup>". Reading "Another Cold May," in *The Burning Perch*, hinges on the opening of the mouth, the crack that lets the light in, to speak like Leonard Cohen. The crack that lets the light in, this line, was uttered by MacNeice in (my favorite of MacNeice poems,) *Autumn Sequel* that well-seeking celebration of the originarity of the supplement or the sequentiality, the Parrot or elongated Part, when MacNeice writes, "Let the wall/ Of isolation crumble and the light/ Break in, but also out" (489). The crack that lets the light in, this punctured wall, is, in "Another Cold May" that crack of any Gainsbourgian orifice, but perhaps emblematically that of the two lips of its "tulips."

With heads like chessmen, bishop or queen,  
The tulips tug at their roots and mourn  
In inaudible frequencies, the move  
Is the wind's, not theirs; fender to fender  
The cars will never emerge, not even  
Should their owners emerge to claim them, the move  
Is time's, not theirs; elbow to elbow  
Inside the roadhouse drinks are raised  
And downed, and downed, the pawns and drains

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Béliers. Le dialogue ininterrompu : entre deux infinis, le poème*, op.cit., p. 20, my translation.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54, my translation.

Are blocked, are choked, the move is nil,  
 The lounge is, like the carpark, full,  
 The tulips also feel the chill  
 And tilting leeward do no more  
 Than mimic a bishop's move, the square  
 Ahead remains ahead, their petals  
 Will merely fall and choke the drains  
 Which will be all; this month remains  
 False animation of failed levitation,  
 The move is time's, the loss is ours. CP 560.

Be it the flowers, here called "tulips," pieces on a chessboard, cars in a parking lot, or the movement of what seems to be the people in a packed roadhouse lounge, there is an impossibility of agency. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, spoke not of movement (*Bewegung*) but of *Bewegtheit*, a "being-moved-ness." In short, he meant that history happens to us. Time happens to us. We are not actors upon time. Rather, time is what acts on us. We are the actors in a play written or directed by something called Time, and Time is history.

The title, "Another Cold May," is not really to be taken as the month of "May," even if the tulips could make one think of the month of May. The "Cold May" is the sterile frozenness of the modal verb "may." A "Cold May" is not a "hot can." The "may" is something that remains merely hypothetical, imagined but never realized. The "tulips" are perhaps to be taken as the "two lips." These tulips or two lips are male and female, bishop or queen. The tulips and the two lips yearn and squirm in their rootedness, and would like to be able to have mobility, in other words be able to reach and touch the other, to kiss the other. Their desire is the same thing as their mourning. They would like to uproot themselves and move together, and they send silent signals, waves, frequencies, to each other. This mourning is the awareness that they cannot cease to be each stuck in his or her or its singularity. Were they to make a move, in fact it would only mean that the wind moves them. There is no agency; instead, there is a passivity which submits to the force of the wind which itself however can move them. They can be moved. I cannot move myself. There is no subjective agency. I am acted upon, I do not act. The fenders, which are the sort of the hips and shoulders of a car, not quite the bumpers, which would be the two lips of a car, the fenders are contiguous, almost touching, but they will not merge, and they will not e-merge, i.e., appear, become prominent, hatch. Even if the owners of these cars, who are therefore also the owners of these fenders, the owners of these hips and shoulders, even if those who own their curved parts were to come out of their shell ("emerge" means to hatch, to come out of one's shell), well even then those who own (and "own" is contained in "downed," repeated twice), and whose fenders are their own bodies or shells, even those will not move. If any move belongs to time, and not to any entity, be it a flower, a car, or a person, it is because temporality, which is historicity, is the only movement, the only flux.

We do not move, because we are not that which is moving. That which is moving, is history, is time, and that happens to us or through us. We are its effect, not its cause<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> The way Heidegger says this is as follows, recapitulated by Derrida : "La mouvance (*Bewegtheit*) de l'existence n'est pas la mobilité (*Bewegung*) d'un *Vorhandenen* [d'un présent, d'une entité présent, d'un étant présent]. Cette mouvance (*Bewegtheit*) se détermine à partir de l'ex-tension du *Dasein*. La mouvance spécifique de *erstreckten Sicherstrecken*, de l'étendre étendu [de l'extension qui se constitue soi-même], nous l'appelons le *Geschehen du Dasein* : l'historicité du *Dasein*" (in Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger. La question de l'Être et l'Histoire. Cours de l'ENS-Ulm, 1964-65*, Paris, Galilée, 2013, p. 226). What characterizes being-moved, the specific being-movedness of living beings is the happening of their being-here. We are moved by being alive,



In MacNeice's poem, "the move is time's, not theirs"; "the move is the wind's, not theirs"; and "the move is time's, the loss is ours." If things are blocked and choked, it is because there is here inhibition. The "cold may" is the absence of a "hot can," or a "hot do." The "chill" makes the tulips or the two lips lean to where there is no wind, in other words, put themselves outside the force that could make them move. They can only mime a move. The "square" on the chessboard remains merely "ahead," where "ahead" is to be contrasted with "the heads" of the tulips. The "head" of the tulips, or the head in which the two lips form the mouth, if not the sexual organ, that head will never reach the *Da-sein* or the being-there of another head, "ahead remains ahead." Our life, our bodies, our "petals," will fall; we will die. We will return to the earth. This "cold May" will remain a fake spirituality. The "false animation" indicates that the "May" will never be a release from materiality, a release from gravity, from rootedness. We will not levitate. We will not become spirits. We will not leave our bodies and enter the mind of the other. The "May" will not be "ani-may-tion." Any move belongs only to time, which is something that happens to us, and the happening of which makes our being-here, our *Dasein*.

Two features of this singularity (this inescapability from self): Movement belongs to time, which means that movement belongs to being alive. But if movement is not something I operate or control or effect, on the contrary "loss" is what constitutes us. The "ours," which sounds exactly like "hours," names the fact that what constitutes our ownmost quality is precisely loss. What we own more than anything is not even our bodies, or our fenders, or our cars, or our "elb-ows." What we own more than anything is that we are dispossessed of the other. We are separated, originally, from the other. We are separated, originally from any other modality than a "cold may", which is the impossible wish for a "hot do," a "hot can." This is why "our loss is ours" and "mourn" are the most important words in the poem.

MacNeice's poetry is structured, in part at least, by the genesis and the geniality of a partition, a separation, caesura or inaugural cut. This poetry that leaves our mouth gaping ultimately, perhaps, belongs neither to the meaning, nor to the phenomenon nor to the truth but, by making them possible in their remaining, marks in its many parts or partitions the hiatus of a wound the lips of which will never come to close. These lips, these many tulips, form around an oh so garrulous mouth that, even when it keeps silent, initiates something we might, or may, possibly can, call a partnership.

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but, Heidegger wants to say, my moving my feet or my toes is not what uproots me (Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Pfullingen, Günther Neske Verlag, 1957).

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