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MacNeice, Munich and Self-Sufficiency

Peter Robinson

In *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, Louis MacNeice makes ‘a plea for impure poetry’, which is ‘conditioned by the poet’s life and the world around him.’ A poet is also to be a community’s ‘conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct.’¹ The Munich crisis of September 1938 was an occasion upon which both conscience and criticism were engaged. The political analyses of the immediate moment and the retrospect of the following three months helped shape the character of MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal* as an object and a reading experience. The poet’s desire for an impure poetry conditioned by circumstances is qualified by his sense that the way circumstance interacts with a poem is mediated by ‘the question of Form’.² A poet’s technique then becomes a negotiation with context in which both dependence and independence are exercised. These issues are informed by MacNeice’s debate with Aristotle in *Autumn Journal* about the desire to be ‘spiritually self-supporting’ or to recognise that ‘other people are always / Organic to the self’, a debate whose terms reverberate both for questions in the poet’s private life, and for the policy of appeasement adopted in the face of Hitler’s territorial ambitions.

An aim of this essay is to consider how, when MacNeice writes that ‘the sensible man must keep his aesthetic / And his moral standards apart’,³ the lines calculatedly travesty the poet’s manifest beliefs about ethics and art, beliefs demonstrated in the formal ordering of the poem — ones which, nevertheless, MacNeice has ‘refused to abstract from their context’.⁴ At the close of *Modern Poetry* MacNeice, writing in early 1938, imagined that

> When the crisis comes, poetry may for a time be degraded or even silenced, but it will reappear, as one of the chief embodiments of human dignity, when people once more have time for play and criticism.⁵

Yet, in the event, poetry was neither silenced nor degraded, and it did not need to wait until people had ‘time for play and criticism’ — itself
a phrase which faintly and haplessly degrades the place poetry can and does have in life, whether there is a crisis going on or not. So my chapter on *Autumn Journal* and Munich looks at the relationship between the individual poet and a dramatic public event to underline how, by means of its formal and thematic procedures, a poem can play a role in its times — delineating by implication, as I do, ways in which poems obviously cannot undo the damage done by the various politicians’ errors of judgement in late September 1938.

On 27 May 1992, the British Prime Minister John Major signed a document formally nullifying the Munich Agreement. Neville Chamberlain had put his signature to the original document at 2 a.m. on 30 September 1938. First rumours of a Czech putsch had begun on 21 May of the same year, when the Czech army, in response to well-founded rumours of German aggression had partially mobilized. Resulting diplomatic pressure had obliged Hitler, much to his annoyance, to postpone his plans. In August, the month *Autumn Journal* begins, Lord Runciman visited the Sudetenlands to pressurize the Czech government into appeasing German interests there. On 15 September Neville Chamberlain flew to Berchtesgaden. He met Hitler again on 22-3 September at Godesberg, where Hitler presented what amounted to an ultimatum, the Godesberg Memorandum. On the 25th, the British Cabinet decided it could not accept the terms of this memorandum, nor urge them on the Czech Government. On the 26th, preparations for war began, and Chamberlain sent via Sir Horace Wilson a personal letter to Hitler. At 10.30 p.m. on 27 September, Hitler directed a reply to Chamberlain asking him to judge if he could ‘bring the Government in Prague to reason at the very last hour’.

On 28 September, ‘Black Wednesday’, the day war seemed inevitable, the British Fleet was mobilized. Further diplomatic efforts involving British appeals to Mussolini and ambassadorial visits to Hitler from France, Britain, and Italy, produced the suggestion of a conference. Thus, on 29-30 September came about the historic Munich Pact, which effectively acceded to Hitler’s Godesberg Memorandum, with its 1 October deadline for the secession of the Sudetenlands. It also produced Chamberlain’s scrap of paper, a private agreement between himself and Hitler, which promised ‘Peace for our time’. Alan Bullock sardonically observes that after the agreement was
reached ‘the two dictators left to the British and French the odious task of communicating to the Czechs the terms for the partition of their country.’ On 1 October, German troops marched into the Sudetenlands. The Czechs went down, ‘and without fighting’ (117), in MacNeice’s words.

‘No case of this kind can be judged apart from its circumstances’, Winston Churchill wrote, and ‘The facts may be unknown at the time, and estimates of them must be largely guesswork’. Indeed, Chamberlain had himself explained that ‘we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances’, meaning that our straitened finances justified appeasement. It came to light at the Nuremberg Trials, however, that while Chamberlain assumed that Hitler’s final territorial demand in Europe was that involving the Sudeten Germans, the ‘objective in Hitler’s mind was, from the first, the destruction of the Czechoslovak State’. Similarly, the German readiness for war may have been overestimated: ‘Some of his generals were so convinced that it would not be possible to carry out a successful invasion . . . that they were apparently ready to overthrow Hitler’. According to Churchill’s highly partisan account, this plot was postponed when Chamberlain flew to Berchtesgaden on 15 September, and abandoned when the Munich Pact seemed to prove that Hitler’s bluff had succeeded. That there was a plot appears beyond doubt. John Wheeler Bennet, however, in his detailed version, notes that this theory for the plotters’ failure to act, which was ‘circulated by interested parties, does not hold water for a moment.’

Wheeler-Bennett does, nevertheless, note that ‘it was manifestly evident that conditions for such an enterprise were vastly less favourable after the signing of the Munich Agreement.’ Immediate events quickly proved Chamberlain wrong about peace for our time. When, on 2 November, Ribbentrop and Ciano dictated the new Czech-Hungarian frontier, the other two signatories of the Munich Pact were not invited. On 15 March 1939, two weeks after MacNeice had composed the head note to Autumn Journal, Hitler annexed the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia. Two days later in a speech at Birmingham, the British Prime Minister abandoned appeasement. The Czech leader in London, Thomas Masaryk, had pointed to the gamble taken by Chamberlain at Munich by agreeing to allow Hitler to absorb the Sudetenlands: ‘If you have sacrificed my nation to preserve the peace of the world, I will be the first to applaud you; but if not, gentlemen, God help your souls.’ Haile Selassie more wryly observed: ‘I hear
you have the support of the British government. You have my pro-
found sympathy.'

In *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, Richard Griffiths suggests that ‘The immediate aftermath of the Munich agreement was, for most people, either disgust or relief.’ On the back of a postcard showing a photograph entitled ‘The Pilgrim of Peace / Bravo! Mr. Chamberlain’, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote with evident disgust: ‘In case you want an Emetic, there it is.’ Christopher Isherwood admitted to a secret relief: ‘What do I care for the Czechs? What does it matter if we are traitors? A war has been postponed — and a war postponed is a war which may never happen.’ William Empson, who explained later that ‘the point is to join up the crisis-feeling to what can be felt all the time in normal life’, had written ‘Courage Means Running’ in 1936. Many years later he felt obliged to alter his final verse’s ‘wise patience’ to ‘flat patience’ in the light of the shame that had descended upon the entire policy of appeasement after Munich:

As the flat patience of England is a gaze
Over the drop, and ‘high’ policy means clinging;
There is not much else that we dare to praise.

Christopher Ricks, echoing Empson’s own alignment of the poem with inter-war foreign policy, describes ‘Courage Means Running’ as ‘about what can be said for Munich.’ Patrick Kavanagh, in the interests of a felt and vital parochialism, counterposes a local and international border dispute in ‘Epic’, first published in 1951:

I heard the Duffy’s shouting ‘Damn your soul’
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel —
‘Here is the march along these iron stones’
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important?  

While Kavanagh uses the contrast to state a case for his kind of poetry, the thrust of my argument is that there must be similarities of principle involved in both disputes, similarities which MacNeice explores in *Autumn Journal*. One problem with Ricks’s phrase ‘what can be said for Munich’ is that Empson himself did not write his poem with Munich in mind, and, not being inclined to appease Germany at any point, assumed, like MacNeice, that war would come and should be fought. At the time, everyone will have felt what could be said for Munich: we have been spared the endurance of another war. Yet many,
including Empson, will have also understood the cost of what could be said for that piece of paper.

MacNeice appears to have experienced both disgust and relief. He writes in *The Strings are False* of first fear: ‘The terror that seized London during the Munich crisis was that dumb, chattering terror of beasts in a forest fire’; then of relief: ‘Chamberlain signed on the line and we all relapsed’; then, something less sharp than Wittgenstein’s contempt: ‘Newsreels featured the life of Chamberlain — the Man of Peace after 2,000 years.’ Yet there is a further complex of feelings in *Autumn Journal*, for out of this slide through fear and relief to an empty disbelief comes a sense of shame and inadequacy.

2

The threat of war is insinuated into the opening passage of *Autumn Journal*. Where ‘summer is ending in Hampshire’ there are ‘retired generals and admirals’ —

> And the spinster sitting in a deck-chair picking up stitches  
> Not raising her eyes to the noise of the ‘planes that pass  
> Northward from Lee-on-Solent.  

The retired military men will have seen service in the First World War, and the planes are from a Naval Air Station. At this point the political situation seems a noise off-stage. By section V of the poem, MacNeice is exploring the attempt to deal with the ‘chattering terror’, an attempt to which the poem’s mock-garrulousness acknowledges a complicity that two of its most recent critics have called ‘an immensely winning demonstration of how not to “stop talking”, though all the time behind the talk lurks fear’: 

> The latest? You mean whether Cobb has bust the record  
> Or do you mean the Australians have lost their last ten  
> Wickets or do you mean that the autumn fashions —  
> *No, we don’t mean anything like that again.*  
> No, what we mean is Hodza, Henlein, Hitler,  
> The Maginot Line,  
> The heavy panic that cramps the lungs and presses  
> The collar down the spine.  

Milan Hodza was a Slovak statesman and Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia from 1935 to just before the Munich Pact. Konrad Henlein was the Sudeten leader, who had visited London on 12 May 1938 to press the claim that his people had been oppressed by the Czech gov-
The issue of Czechoslovakia is taken up again in section VII, which opens by listing ‘Conferences, adjournments, ultimatums, / Flights in the air, castles in the air, / The autopsy of treaties . . .’ (113) ‘Flights in the air’, with its hint of escape in the offing, almost certainly refers to Chamberlain’s meetings with Hitler in mid-September. There was possible folly even in Chamberlain’s taking to the air. Bullock notes that Hitler’s ‘vanity was gratified by the prospect of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, a man twenty years older than himself, making his first flight at the age of sixty-nine in order to come and plead with him.’25 The ‘autopsy of treaties’ probably refers to the argument justifying Hitler’s foreign policy as a necessary correction to the Treaty of Versailles.26

The passage usually cited in discussions of Munich and MacNeice’s poem is that describing ‘cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill’.27 Later in the section, though, there is this sequence of lines:

But one — meaning I — is bored, am bored, the issue
   Involving principle but bound in fact
To squander principle in panic and self-deception —
   Accessories after the act,
So that all we foresee is rivers in spate sprouting
   With drowning hands
And men like dead frogs floating till the rivers
   Lose themselves in the sands. (114)

There is a vertiginous enjambment in this passage, where the phrase ‘Involving principle but bound in fact’ shifts sense, taking from ‘in fact’ its substance as a statement and turning it into a colloquial filler, as if the line end read: bound, in fact, to squander. This shift may be related to Chamberlain’s ‘we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances’ and to the encouragement it gave to the French leaders Bonnet and Daladier to abandon their treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia.28 Any ‘issue / Involving principle’ must be ‘bound in fact’, for an issue is just that: a context of fact in which principles are conflictingly involved. The disturbing of ‘in fact’ by the enjambment works to ruin the balance of this statement, to upset the integrity of the line. The phrase ‘Accessories after the act’ indicates, with its rhyming recall of the judicial phrase ‘after the fact’, that those who wish to appease may be offering as a principle what is, in fact, ‘panic and self-deception’. The poet ambiguously includes himself by writing ‘all we foresee’, but his opening, ‘one — meaning I — is bored, am bored’, offers a guiding viewpoint for the lines. MacNeice hints here at a disjunction
between the versions of the crisis with which he is surrounded and his own view of an ‘issue / Involving principle but bound in fact’, which will be lost in misconceptions and fear, a fear of ‘drowning hands’ and ‘men like dead frogs’. Boredom and fear: those express MacNeice’s being both a part of the crisis and isolated, detached from it by his own views. Such combinations of involvement in a context and distance from it are at the ambivalent heart of MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal*.

Yet the mixtures of involvement and detachment are unstable, preventing the poetry from settling into a single view of the crisis. The next eight lines introduce a further response to the public debate:

And we who have been brought up to think of ‘Gallant Belgium’  
As so much blague  
Are now preparing again to essay good through evil  
For the sake of Prague;  
And must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive,  
And must, in order to beat  
The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,  
A howling radio for our paraclete.  

Edna Longley cites this passage to suggest that MacNeice ‘makes the poem a warning against the two “musts” in that passage, thus acting as Grigson’s “critical moralist”’. 29 This is undoubtedly part of the passage’s meaning: we must preserve ourselves from irrational hate, even if it is in the interests of saving ourselves and defeating Hitler. The reference to the First World War’s ‘issue / Involving principle’ (Britain declared war in 1914 when Belgian neutrality was violated) carries over into the implicit aversion to becoming ‘uncritical, vindictive’, for this had also produced the wartime anti-German hysteria and contributed to the dangerously punitive reparation clauses in the Versailles Treaty.

Yet there is another way of reading the passage which, instead of adopting the stance of the detached ‘critical moralist’, involves itself in the desire for appeasement that may also derive from memories of the Great War and the wish, hardly an evil one, that such things should never happen again. MacNeice’s passage may even be responding to Hitler’s speech at the Nuremberg Rally on 12 September, or that of 26 September at the Berlin Sportpalast, ‘a masterpiece of invective which even he never surpassed.’ 30 In it, Hitler contrasted his own war service with the life of President Benč, and stated that ‘there marches a different people from that of 1918.’ 31 This aligns the passage with Chamberlain’s pacifism, for it assumes that if war comes we will have to model
ourselves on the enemy, as, for instance, in the style of Bomber Harris; we will have to be uncritical and vindictive; we will have to ‘essay good through evil / For the sake of Prague’. Thus, the detachment indicated by the ‘we suppose’ in MacNeice’s lines produces a double significance in the ‘warning against the two “musts”’. One meaning makes these lines, caught up in the context of the Munich crisis, sound as appeals for peace at any price, so as to avoid the need to brutalize ourselves; the other implies that if fight we must, then it is the task of detached intellectuals like MacNeice to preserve us from having to ‘model ourselves upon the enemy’.

It is crucial to *Autumn Journal* that intellectual high-mindedness, that’s to say, in more generous parlance, being a ‘critical moralist’, has to remain in contact with its subject matter, the actual, ordinary conflicts of emotion and desire which people felt at the time. Thus, similarly, in the page on Munich from *The Strings are False*, MacNeice writes of a George Formby show that ‘His pawky Lancashire charm was just what we wanted’, the word ‘pawky’ nevertheless giving an evaluative detachment to the line. The occasion also finds its way into *Autumn Journal*:

> And I go to the Birmingham Hippodrome  
> Packed to the roof and primed for laughter  
> And beautifully at home  
> With the ukelele and the comic chestnuts . . .

(116)

That phrase ‘beautifully at home’ is a reminder that MacNeice in his isolation also needed to belong. However detached from contexts by his upbringing and education, MacNeice strove to be in context, and that involved accepting that his work would contain the ordinary sensations he shared with those around him.

The conclusion of section VIII coincides with those events in Munich at the end of September:

> The crisis is put off and things look better  
> And we feel negotiation is not in vain —  
> Save my skin and damn my conscience.  
> And negotiation wins,  
> If you can call it winning,  
> And here we are — just as before — safe in our skins;  
> Glory to God for Munich.  
> And stocks go up and wrecks  
> Are salved and politicians’ reputations  
> Go up like Jack-on-the-Beanstalk; only the Czechs
Go down and without fighting.

The benefit of MacNeice’s expansive style lies in its ability to move quickly through a series of inter-related feelings: relief, high hopes, low motives, disgust, bitter mockery, underlying self-interest, and, finally, shame. Richard Griffiths summarised responses to Munich as ‘either disgust or relief’; MacNeice combines both of these in the passage where the European leaders sacrifice Benes and Masaryk’s country, and produces from the combination of these feelings the further one of shame. We feel relief, but sense our motives for feeling it are poor, and are then disgusted with ourselves for feeling it, and so feel ashamed. MacNeice’s own italicised pronoun in the following lines may contain tonally all these sensations:

_We_ are safe though others have crashed the railings  
Over the river ravine; their wheel-tracks carve the bank  
But after the event all we can do is argue  
And count the widening ripples where they sank._

At this point, Munich as such appears to fade from the poem, though in section XII MacNeice evokes a pre-war mood, a recognition, if any were still needed, that war is inevitable despite the agreement: ‘People have not recovered from the crisis’ (123) and ‘Those who are about to die try out their paces.’ (124) Yet the atmosphere of Munich seems to hang over the entire poem, as a matter of ‘Principle . . . bound in fact’. First, though, there is the by-election.

Robyn Marsack spells out the precise relation of this event to Munich: ‘Quinton Hogg, son of the Lord Chancellor and a university contemporary of MacNeice’s, was defending the seat specifically on the issue of foreign policy and the Munich Agreement; against him stood A. D. Lindsay, the Master of Balliol. Hogg’s majority was almost halved but he retained the seat.’ In section XIV, MacNeice writes about his involvement in the election, once again emphasising mixed emotions and motives:

_And what am I doing it for?  
Mainly for fun, partly for a half-believed-in  
Principle, a core  
Of fact in a pulp of verbiage . . ._

Again there is the conjunction of those two words ‘Principle’ and ‘fact’. Yet because MacNeice writes with such honesty about his misgivings, his sense that there are ‘only too many who say’ that ‘[“]To
turn the stream of history will take / More than a by-election’” (128), because MacNeice is trying to resist the pull of political illusion, again in the light of Munich, he may have been, and may still be, taken to be absenting himself in isolation and detachment. Samuel Hynes, who grants MacNeice’s honesty, sees the poem as an expression of helplessness:

> It has no personal momentum, no important decisions are made; the most positive thing that MacNeice does is to work in an Oxford by-election (which his candidate loses). Nor does it propose any positive values, any programme for confronting the future . . . .

I don’t recognise MacNeice’s poem in these opinions, certainly not its ‘principle bound in fact’ or its ‘Principle, a core / Of fact’. Autumn Journal summarises the election result as follows:

> So Thursday came and Oxford went to the polls
> And made its coward vote and the streets resounded
> To the triumphant cheers of the lost souls —
> The profiteers, the dunderheads, the smarties. (128-9)

Yet MacNeice’s poem states why it is important to take part in the political process, even if you lose, and reserves the right to castigate even the winners if he does not believe in their values. The phrase ‘coward vote’, for instance, comes into sharp relief when read in the light of Hogg’s defence of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy.

In his Clark Lectures of twenty-five years later, MacNeice has forged a false distinction when he notes that ‘the cruder kind of allegory . . . can be used to cover subjects from which the inner life is excluded — such things as General Elections.’ The inner life in Autumn Journal is not excluded from a by-election, at least, and Hynes accurately answers his own question (‘what have politicians to do with a man’s loneliness?’) when he notes, referring to passages of the poem about MacNeice’s broken marriage: ‘the private loss is an analogue of public loss, and the poet’s helpless misery is an appropriate response to the public situation as well as to the private one.” How odd, and how common, that writers on poetry fail to register the significance of the poem’s mere existence in their comments on the state of mind supposedly revealed by it. By being ‘a way of happening’, the completed poem makes something happen for the poet doing things with words too. Hynes refers to the ‘poet’s helpless misery’, but anyone who as early as 22 November 1938 could outline to T. S. Eliot
at Faber and Faber a clear image of *Autumn Journal* (‘A long poem from 2,000 to 3,000 lines written from August to December 1938’) would not be someone I would describe as, in any way, ‘helpless’.

MacNeice concludes by calling his poem ‘a confession of faith’ — one in which ‘There is a constant interrelation of abstract and concrete’. In poems the confessions of faith are best located in the nature of the poem itself, often counterpointing, and counteracting, the expressions of overt feeling, such as ‘helpless misery’ or ‘boredom’, which the poem includes. This is to contradict Samuel Hynes’s belief that *Autumn Journal* ‘has no alternatives to offer, beyond a vague solidarity of resistance against the common enemy.’ It is not true that of MacNeice’s past in the poem, each element is treated ‘with the ironic knowledge that it is irrelevant to the present crisis.’

The achievement of *Autumn Journal* is partly to articulate the interrelated relevance of these things to the experiences of people in crises, while acknowledging the ordinary appearance of irrelevance in relations between one person’s life and a public crisis gripping Europe.

Reviewing Gilbert Murray’s translation of *The Seven Against Thebes* on 10 May 1935, MacNeice argued for the preservation of the integrity of the original’s verse lines wherever possible: ‘I think a translation should start from the Greek, preferably line for line.’ A good translator should also be able to ‘see what the English looks like just as English.’

The integral rhythmic structure of a poetic line is at the heart of MacNeice’s poetics. In the whole of *Autumn Journal* there are only fifteen lines which have full stops or question marks syntactically dividing them. MacNeice noted in the letter to T.S. Eliot that *Autumn Journal* ‘is written throughout in an elastic kind of quatrain. This form a) gives the whole poem a formal unity but b) saves it from monotony by allowing it a great range of appropriate variations . . . ‘ Yet clearly these variations are ones of line length, enjambment, syntactical extension, and of rhyme confirming syntactic closure or chiming against the movement of the sentence. MacNeice is sparing in his use of the strong medial caesura created by a full-stop. There is a relation between the integrity of verse lines, whether enjambed or end-stopped, and the philosophy of Self and Other in *Autumn Journal*.

Section XVII dramatizes a debate between the virtue in self-coherent autonomy and the virtue in relationship, in interdependence:
And Aristotle was right to posit the Alter Ego
   But wrong to make it only a halfway house:
Who could expect — or want — to be spiritually self-supporting,
   Eternal self-abuse?
Why not admit that other people are always
   Organic to the self, that a monologue
Is the death of language and that a single lion
   Is less himself, or alive, than a dog and another dog? (135)

MacNeice’s deployment of verse lines here dramatizes the issue for him. So, ‘Who could expect — or want — to be spiritually self-supporting,’ and ‘Eternal self-abuse?’ are both end stopped, isolated in themselves; while, in the following quatrain, the first three enjambed line-ends point to isolations which they counteract by linking the sense to the following line: ‘other people are always / Organic to the self’, ‘a monologue / Is the death of language’, and ‘a single lion / Is less himself, or alive, than a dog and another dog’. Still, it must be noted that MacNeice is not advocating a blurring of differences. His enjambments are significant exactly because his sense of lineal rhythm emphasises the lines as units even when they form parts of long syntactic chains:

A point here and a point there: the current
   Jumps the gap, the ego cannot live
Without becoming other for the Other
   Has got yourself to give. (135)

What MacNeice is dramatizing, then, in the syntax and rhythm of his lines, is a belief in the virtue of autonomy, of lines having their own rhythmic coherence and integrity, but that this virtue is only valuable when brought into relation with other such autonomous entities. MacNeice is appealing for the interrelation of the distinct, as a core value, and the form of Autumn Journal is a sustained hymn, not quite to what Peter McDonald calls ‘the self being realized in the other, the other in the self’,42 for just as I cannot presume upon another’s self-realization in me, so too I can’t presume to lodge my self-realization in another. The self and other have to be realizing themselves, each in the context of the relation with the other.

The poem’s linear movement, its concern, as indicated not least by the title, in time and the passage of time, an issue again dramatized by the enjambing of longer syntactic units, also contributes to this belief in the value of interrelation, of involvement:
Aristotle was right to think of man-in-action
   As the essential and really existent man
And man means men in action; try and confine your
   Self to yourself if you can.
Nothing is self-sufficient, pleasure implies hunger
   But hunger implies hope:
I cannot lie in this bath for ever, clouding
   The cooling water with rose geranium soap.                   (136)

The formal intelligence in such lineation has the ambivalence of an internal debate: he is drawn to the idea of virtue in internal coherence, the self as virtuous insofar as it can separate itself from the contingencies and accidents of circumstance; he is attracted to the soothing detachment and isolation of staying in the bath; but he has experienced how limiting and partial such a virtue would inevitably prove. Thus, ‘try and confine your / Self to yourself if you can’ is, for MacNeice, an impossible dare. You can’t. Nevertheless, this false isolation, something distinct from independence, is an attractive illusion which the poet will acknowledge, even as he recognises that he must, sooner or later, get out of the bath.

An enforced isolation is identified in the next section: ‘This England is tight and narrow, teeming with unwanted / Children who are so many, each is alone . . . ’ (137) and McDonald links the passage in section XVII to the previous section’s account of Ireland: ‘Ourselves alone! Let the round tower stand aloof / In a world of bursting mortar!’ (133) Thus, the remarks in the poem that seem to concern MacNeice’s ideas about relations between individuals are also to be understood as comments on nations and foreign affairs. MacNeice was not to be impressed by the Republic’s policy during the war, a note which may be detected in his reporting a comment on hearing in Dublin that Chamberlain had declared war: ‘A young man in sports clothes said to us: “Eire of course will stay neutral. But I hope the English knock hell out of Hitler.”’ MacNeice’s remarks about translation are again relevant. You must begin with a respect for the integrity of the foreign original (‘start from the Greek, preferably line for line’), and you must also appreciate the language of the translation for itself (‘what the English looks like just as English’), but the act of translating itself, by which ‘Diction and rhythm will . . . differentiate’, instances a necessary involvement of one with another, exemplifying McDonald’s phrase ‘the self being realized in the other’, or, perhaps, of one work of art being re-realized in the textures of another language.
The relation of these principles to the Munich crisis is not straightforward. MacNeice’s views of translation would seem to suggest that the integrity of countries needs to be respected. This indicates a belief that Czechoslovakia should be left to determine her own affairs. The issue is complicated by the problem of ethnic minorities and the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, an idea Hitler was good at exploiting, as at Saarbrucken on 9 October 1938 when he stated that ‘inquiries of British politicians concerning the fate of Germans within the frontiers of the Reich — or of others belonging to the Reich are not in place . . . . We would like to give these gentlemen the advice that they should busy themselves with their own affairs and leave us in peace.’46 The Kristallnacht Pogrom took place just over a month later on 9-10 November, again raising the issue of when persecution of minorities in a country justifies the active involvement of neighbours in their domestic politics. Is it then right to wish to preserve the principle of non-intervention in another nation’s affairs by remaining aloof? Does it protect the principle of sovereignty to maintain peace and non-intervention by sacrificing the Sudetenlands? MacNeice’s poem is shaped upon the principle, and it seems a direct response to the problems of acting rightly over Czechoslovakia, that the integrity and value of someone’s self-sufficiency, a state’s independence, can only exist and be maintained by involvement with and from others. Similarly, you respect the identity of a foreign text not by leaving it alone, but by translating it in as accurate and vital a way as possible. Once Hitler has violated the principle of not meddling in the internal affairs of a country, non-intervention cannot protect the principle, for to follow the principle of non-intervention is to sacrifice that very principle, or, as MacNeice puts it, ‘the issue / Involving principle’ is ‘bound in fact / To squander principle in panic and self-deception’ (114).

In the letter to Eliot, MacNeice stated that ‘There is constant interrelation of abstract and concrete’, while in the March 1939 Note to Autumn Journal, he announced that ‘I have certain beliefs which, I hope, emerge in the course of it but which I have refused to abstract from their context.’ (101) One reason why the Munich crisis demanded ‘principle . . . bound in fact’ and not principle which is ‘bound in fact /To squander principle’ is that the principles involved only had their specific significance in that context. This interrelation of principle and context is one plank in MacNeice’s anti-Platonic stance, so that when ‘reading Plato talking about his Forms / To damn the artist touting round his mirror . . .’ the poet counters:
The interrelation also finds an echo in MacNeice’s ideas about poetic form. He notes in *Modern Poetry* that ‘My object in writing this essay is partly to show that one and the same poetic activity produces different forms in adaption to circumstances.’

This is not the same as Chamberlain’s ‘we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances’. The difference is that the Prime Minister is explaining appeasement as necessary because we are not in a position to mobilize: our straitened circumstances provide him with an excuse. In MacNeice’s remark the circumstances offer a resistance with which the poetic activity, in adapting itself, works to produce a particular formal solution: the circumstances help to generate the effects and qualities of the specific form. The flexibility of the *Autumn Journal*’s quatrains, in relation to the Munich crisis, generates literary contexts in which ordinary utterances can express the anxiety and anguish of the moment, while simultaneously discovering a shape that counteracts that ‘chattering terror’. MacNeice had lost his dog:

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But found the police had got her at St. John’s Wood station
And fetched her in the rain and went for a cup
Of coffee to an all-night shelter and heard a taxi-driver
Say ‘It turns me up
When I see these soldiers in lorries’ — rumble of tumbrils
Drums in the trees
Breaking the eardrums of the ravished dryads —
It turns me up; a coffee, please.
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He also observes in *Modern Poetry* that ‘the Poet’s first business is mentioning things. Whatever musical or other harmonies he may incidentally evoke, the fact will remain that such and such things —and not others —have been mentioned in his poem.’ This assertion would be ingenuous about formal contributions to poems if MacNeice did not qualify it with a parenthesis: ‘(on analysis even this selection [of materials] will be found to come under the question of Form)’. Among the pleasures of *Autumn Journal* is the discovery of an improvised rhythmic ordering and an alternation of rhymed lines and non-rhymed feminine-endings, this discovery occurring often amid the narration of unpromisingly mundane incidents, such as saying ‘a coffee, please’
—banal details which in times of crisis have a valuable solidity just because the ordinary transactions of life are themselves under threat.

Such shaping is self-referentially focused upon the beliefs involved at the close of several parts. Section IV, for instance, concludes:

And though I have suffered from your special strength
Who never flatter for points nor fake responses
I should be proud if I could evolve at length
An equal thrust and pattern. (108)

Thrust and pattern in *Autumn Journal* are provided by the variations of paratactic and hypotactic syntax, and the ‘elastic kind of quatrain’. Again, in *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice notes that in the poets of his generation, ‘history is recognised as something having a shape and still alive, something more than a mere accumulation of random and dead facts.’ Yet *Autumn Journal*, I think, does not believe in ‘the stream of history’, as MacNeice calls it in the by-election section, not in history’s having a definite course, but in its being shaped, like syntax, by the constrained choices of particular people. If the politicians and leaders are making mad or foolish moves, others may notice, respond, and criticise. This, MacNeice’s poem affirms, is vitally important to all our futures. Thus, the ‘something more’ is what is provided in a poem by the rhythmic and syntactic ordering. In finding such pattern through the shaping of circumstance in poetic form, and the adaptions of such form to the recalcitrant circumstances of mentioned things, MacNeice attributes ‘shape’ and vitality to the days of crisis in which history may seem arbitrarily chaotic, shaped by nothing to which value could be ascribed. At the close of section XVII, the poet associates his creative activity not with the ‘musical or other harmonies he may incidentally evoke’, but with the discovery of meaning and choice, something not incidental to music or harmonies, but the music of the poetry itself:

Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice
Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
And while a man has voice
He may recover music. (139)

Through such pattern-making, MacNeice is able to signal relations between the political, personal, and philosophical issues of freedom, choice, fulfilment, and responsibility.
On his way to Spain in December 1938, MacNeice spent Christmas in Paris. As he describes the visit in his autobiography, ‘Paris was under snow and very beautiful. We ate and drank a great deal’. In Autumn Journal XXII, MacNeice makes of his time there a debate between what he calls in his letter to Eliot ‘the sensual man, the philosopher, the would-be good citizen’. The sensual man gets his say, but his headlong tone and catalogue of needs are prefaced by ‘So here where tourist values are the only values, where we pretend’. Among the things they pretend is:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[\prime]} & \text{that gossip} \\
\text{Is the characteristic of art} \\
\text{And that the sensible man must keep his aesthetic} \\
\text{And his moral standards apart —} & \text{'} \\
\end{align*}
\]

I think MacNeice’s values are travestied here, but the ideas directly expressed are ones which he could contemplate. In ‘Letter to W. H. Auden’ of 21 October 1937, he states that ‘Poetry is related to the sermon and you have your penchant for preaching, but it is more closely related to conversation and you, my dear, if any, are a born gossip.’ MacNeice’s method is to affirm what a philosopher and would-be good citizen might think, namely that aesthetic and moral standards are neither clearly distinguishable nor ever dissociable, by expressing it as the implied opposite of what the sensual man would prefer to think, which is that if it’s beauty you want, forget about morality — as in the jaded jest about translations and women: the more beautiful the more unfaithful.

In ‘A Statement’ for the New Verse ‘Commitments’ double number of Autumn 1938, MacNeice noted that ‘The poet at the moment will tend to be moralist rather than aesthete.’ He had prefaced this remark, however, by observing that though ‘I have been asked to commit myself about poetry’, ‘I have committed myself already so much in poetry that this seems almost superfluous.’ While not an aesthete, the poet as ‘critical moralist’ is also necessarily committing himself in poetry, his poem ‘cannot live by morals alone’, and to this end the formal principles of Autumn Journal are an aspect of its ethical principles regarding personal relations and foreign affairs. At the end of the poem, we sleep —

On the banks of Rubicon — the die is cast;
There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later
And the equation will come out at last. (153)

Here the deferring of the final rhyme to one line later than expected, performs the deferral of auditing accounts, of sunlight, and the equation’s coming out. The expressions of the future in these final three lines, whether predictions or hopes, are affirmed by that final rhyme. The rhyme sound comes round, though later than you thought, and the poem’s formal equation does come out at last. *Autumn Journal* ends by promising that in nurturing the seeds of ‘energy and choice’ (139) we can face the future arising from our bungled past.

After citing some criticism of the poem, Edna Longley concludes: ‘not every commentator has found *Autumn Journal* psychologically or politically adequate to its task’.\(^5^6\) MacNeice, himself, lost confidence in the shape that he had made. Fifteen years later, in *Autumn Sequel* (1953), he wrote:

An autumn journal — or journey. The clocks tick
Just as they did but that was a slice of life
And there is no such thing. (331)

Yet MacNeice is right, ‘there is no such thing’, and the poet has forgotten what he wrote in *Modern Poetry*. The ‘slice’ is his selection of material, ‘which will be found to come under the question of Form’. What’s happening is being done, not by the psychological or political adequacy, but by the relationship between the mentionings of things, in all their various inadequacies, and the formal shaping of these things in and by the poem. MacNeice had written in his letter to T. S. Eliot that he thought *Autumn Journal* his ‘best work to date’. Looking back sixty-odd years, I’m inclined not only to agree with him, but to think it his best work.

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**Notes**

2. Ibid. 2.
5 Ibid. 205.
7 For an Italian poet’s responses to Munich, see Vittorio Sereni’s ‘In una casa vuota’, *Poesie* ed. D. Isella (Milan, 1995), 190, or *Selected Poems of Vittorio Sereni* trans. M. Perryman and P. Robinson (1990), 122.
8 Bullock, 469.
11 Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1946), 324; see also 366-8.
12 Bullock, 444.
14 *The Nemesis of Power*, 421.
15 Ibid., 424.
18 Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990), illustrations 44-5. See also Fania Pascal, ‘A Personal Memoir’, in *Recollections of Wittgenstein* ed. R. Rhees (Oxford, 1984), 39-40: ‘It was the days before Munich; Mr Chamberlain was making a stand, acting as though the country was preparing for war. We looked on in silence at the diggers’ efforts. I turned to Wittgenstain to protest, to cry out that it’s all a sham, that we are lost, but he silenced me by raising his hand forbiddingly. He said: I am as much ashamed of what it happening as you are. But we must not talk of it.’
19 Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (1977), 241; cited in McDonald, 90.
24 For details of the proposals, see Churchill, 256.
25 Bullock, 454.
26 See *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, 297, and *The Nemesis of Power*. 


30 Bullock, 461.

31 Cited in Bullock, 463.

32 *The Strings are False*, 174.


34 Marsack, 50.

35 Hynes, 372.

36 *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge, 1965), 76.

37 Hynes, 368.

38 Cited in Marsack, 43.

39 Hynes, 372, 370, but see also 369.


41 Cited in Marsack, 43.

42 McDonald, 89.

43 See McDonald, 88-9.

44 *The Strings are False*, 212.

45 *Selected Literary Criticism*, 9-10.

46 Cited in Bullock, 472.


48 In *Zoo*, published during November 1938, MacNeice describes keeping a dog: ‘When I am alone with my dog, there are not two of us. There is myself — and something Other. It gives me a pleasant feeling of power, even of black magic, to be able to order this Other about and give it food which it actually eats’ in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* ed. A. Heuser (Oxford, 1990), 49 and see also 58.

49 *Modern Poetry*, 5.

50 Ibid., 17.

51 *The Strings are False*, 176.

52 Cited in Marsack, 43.


54 *Selected Literary Criticism*, 98.

55 MacNeice had criticised the Auden-Isherwood collaboration *On the Frontier* in these words on 18 Nov 1938: ‘But a play cannot live by morals alone’, *Selected Literary Criticism*, 103.

56 Edna Longley, 61.