

Classic Poetry Series

Louis Macneice
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Louis Macneice(12 September 1907 – 3 September 1963)

Attended Oxford, where he majored in classics and philosophy. In 1930, he married Giovanna Ezra and accepted a post as classics lecturer at the University of Birmingham, a position he held until 1936, when he went on to teach Greek at Bedford College for Women, University of London. In 1941, he joined the British Broadcasting Company as a staff writer and producer. Like many modern English poets, MacNeice found an audience for his work through British radio. Some of his best-known plays, including 'Christopher Columbus' (1944), and 'The Dark Tower' (1946), were originally written for radio and later published.

Early in his career, MacNeice was identified with a group of politically committed poets whose work appeared in Michael Roberts's anthology *New Signatures*. MacNeice drew many of the texts for *Modern Poetry: 'A Personal Essay from the New Signature poets'*. *Modern Poetry* was MacNeice's plea for an "impure" poetry expressive of the poet's immediate interests and his sense of the natural and the social world.

Despite his association with young British poets Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden, writer Christopher Isherwood, and other left-wing poets, MacNeice was as mistrustful of political programs as he was of philosophical systems. He was never a member of the Communist Party or any other political groups, and he was quite candid about the ambiguities of his political attitudes. "My sympathies are Left," he wrote. "But not in my heart or my guts."

Although he chose to live the majority of his adult life in London, MacNeice frequently returned to the landscapes of his childhood, and he took great pride in his Irish heritage. His poetry is characterized by its familiar, sometimes humorous tone and its integration of contemporary ideas and images. In addition to his poetry and radio dramas, MacNeice also wrote the verse translation 'The Agamemnon of Aeschylus' (1936), translated Goethe's 'Faust' (1951), and collaborated with Auden on the 'travelogue *Letters from Iceland*' (1937).

In August of 1963, MacNeice, on location with a BBC team, insisted on going down into a mineshaft to check on sound effects. He caught a chill that was not diagnosed as pneumonia until he was fatally ill.

He died on September 3, 1963, just before the publication of his last book of poems, *The Burning Perch*. He was 55 years old.

Autobiography

My father made the walls resound,
He wore his collar the wrong way round.

When I was five the black dreamscame;
Nothing after was quite the same.

When I woke they did not care;
Nobody, nobody was there.

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.

When my silent terror cried,
Nobody, nobody replied.

I got up; the chilly sun
Saw me walk away alone.

My mother wore a yellow dress;
Gentle, gently, gentleness.

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

*Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.
Come back early or never come.*

Louis Macneice

Bagpipe Music

It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crepe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with head of bison.

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whiskey,
Kept its bones for dumbbells to use when he was fifty.

It's no go the Yogi-man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the heather,
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,
All we want is a Dunlop tire and the devil mend the puncture.

The Laird o' Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was sober,
Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one foot over.
Mrs. Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with repulsion,
Said to the midwife "Take it away; I'm through with overproduction."

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh,
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the baby.

Willie Murray cut his thumb, couldn't count the damage,
Took the hide of an Ayrshire cow and used it for a bandage.
His brother caught three hundred cran when the seas were lavish,
Threw the bleeders back in the sea and went upon the parish.

It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible,
All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle.

It's no go the picture palace, it's no go the stadium,
It's no go the country cot with a pot of pink geraniums,
It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections,
Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a pension.

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall forever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

Louis Macneice

Carrickfergus

I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries
To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams:
Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim
Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which jams

The little boats beneath the Norman castle,
The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;
The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses
But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt.

The brook ran yellow from the factory stinking of chlorine,
The yarn-milled called its funeral cry at noon;
Our lights looked over the Lough to the lights of Bangor
Under the peacock aura of a drowning moon.

The Norman walled this town against the country
To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave
And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting
The List of Christ on the cross, in the angle of the nave.

I was the rector's son, born to the Anglican order,
Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;
The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept
With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

The war came and a huge camp of soldiers
Grew from the ground in sight of our house with long
Dummies hanging from gibbets for bayonet practice
And the sentry's challenge echoing all day long.

I went to school in Dorset, the world of parents
Contracted into a puppet world of sons
Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt mines
And the soldiers with their guns.

Louis Macneice

Christina

It all began so easy
With bricks upon the floor
Building motley houses
And knocking down your houses
And always building more.

The doll was called Christina,
Her under-wear was lace,
She smiled while you dressed her
And when you then undressed her
She kept a smiling face.

Until the day she tumbled
And broke herself in two
And her legs and arms were hollow
And her yellow head was hollow
Behind her eyes of blue.

He went to bed with a lady
Somewhere seen before,
He heard the name Christina
And suddenly saw Christina
Dead on the nursery floor.

Louis Macneice

Epilogue

Rows of books around me stand,
Fence me in on either hand;
Through that forest of dead words
I would hunt the living birds -
So I write these lines for you
Who have felt the death-wish too,
All the wires are cut, my friends
Live beyond the severed ends.

Louis Macneice

House On A Cliff

Indoors the tang of a tiny oil lamp. Outdoors
The winking signal on the waste of sea.
Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind.
Indoors the locked heart and the lost key.

Outdoors the chill, the void, the siren. Indoors
The strong man pained to find his red blood cools,
While the blind clock grows louder, faster. Outdoors
The silent moon, the garrulous tides she rules.

Indoors ancestral curse-cum-blessing. Outdoors
The empty bowl of heaven, the empty deep.
Indoors a purposeful man who talks at cross
Purposes, to himself, in a broken sleep.

Louis Macneice

June Thunder

The Junes were free and full, driving through tiny
Roads, the mudguards brushing the cowparsley,
Through fields of mustard and under boldly embattled
Mays and chestnuts

Or between beeches verdurous and voluptuous
Or where broom and gorse beflagged the chalkland--
All the flare and gusto of the unenduring
Joys of a season

Now returned but I note as more appropriate
To the maturer mood impending thunder
With an indigo sky and the garden hushed except for
The treetops moving.

Then the curtains in my room blow suddenly inward,
The shrubbery rustles, birds fly heavily homeward,
The white flowers fade to nothing on the trees and rain comes
Down like a dropscene.

Now there comes catharsis, the cleansing downpour
Breaking the blossoms of our overdated fancies
Our old sentimentality and whimsicality
Loves of the morning.

Blackness at half-past eight, the night's precursor,
Clouds like falling masonry and lightning's lavish
Annunciation, the sword of the mad archangel
Flashed from the scabbard.

If only you would come and dare the crystal
Rampart of the rain and the bottomless moat of thunder,
If only now you would come I should be happy
Now if now only.

Louis Macneice

Prayer Before Birth

I am not yet born; O hear me.

Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the
club-footed ghoul come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.

I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me

With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light
in the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me

For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,
my life when they murder by means of my
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me

In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white
waves call me to folly and the desert calls
me to doom and the beggar refuses
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,

Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me

With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would

blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me.

Louis Macneice

Snow

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes—
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of your hands—
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

Louis Macneice

Soap Suds

This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom open
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child.

And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.

To which he has now returned. The day of course is fine
And a grown-up voice cries Play! The mallet slowly swings,
Then crack, a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall and the ball
Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and then

Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn
And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play!
But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands
Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child.

Louis Macneice

Star-Gazer

Forty-two years ago (to me if to no one else
The number is of some interest) it was a brilliant starry night
And the westward train was empty and had no corridors
So darting from side to side I could catch the unwonted sight
Of those almost intolerably bright
Holes, punched in the sky, which excited me partly because
Of their Latin names and partly because I had read in the textbooks
How very far off they were, it seemed their light
Had left them (some at least) long years before I was.

And this remembering now I mark that what
Light was leaving some of them at least then,
Forty-two years ago, will never arrive
In time for me to catch it, which light when
It does get here may find that there is not
Anyone left alive
To run from side to side in a late night train
Admiring it and adding noughts in vain.

Louis Macneice

Sunday Morning

Down the road someone is practising scales,
The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,
Man's heart expands to tinker with his car
For this is Sunday morning, Fate's great bazaar;
Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now,

And you may grow to music or drive beyond Hindhead anyhow,
Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast
That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,
That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time
A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme.

But listen, up the road, something gulps, the church spire
Open its eight bells out, skulls' mouths which will not tire
To tell how there is no music or movement which secures
Escape from the weekday time. Which deadens and endures.

Louis Macneice

The Brandy Glass

Only let it form within his hands once more -
The moment cradled like a brandy glass.
Sitting alone in the empty dining hall...
From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall
Piling around carafes and table legs
And chokes the passage of the revolving door.
The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll
Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:
'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

Louis Macneice

The Suicide

And this, ladies and gentlemen, whom I am not in fact
Conducting, was his office all those minutes ago,
This man you never heard of. These are the bills
In the intray, the ash in the ashtray, the grey memoranda stacked
Against him, the serried ranks of the box-files, the packed
Jury of his unanswered correspondence
Nodding under the paperweight in the breeze
From the window by which he left; and here is the cracked
Receiver that never got mended and here is the jotter
With his last doodle which might be his own digestive tract
Ulcer and all or might be the flowery maze
Through which he had wandered deliciously till he stumbled
Suddenly finally conscious of all he lacked
On a manhole under the hollyhocks. The pencil
Point had obviously broken, yet, when he left this room
By catdrop sleight-of-foot or simple vanishing act,
To those who knew him for all that mess in the street
This man with the shy smile has left behind
Something that was intact.

Louis Macneice

The Sunlight On The Garden

The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold;
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels, upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying
Defying the church bells
And every evil iron
Siren and what it tells:
The earth compels,
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have sat under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden.

Louis Macneice

Wolves

I do not want to be reflective any more
Envy and despising unreflective things
Finding pathos in dogs and undeveloped handwriting
And young girls doing their hair and all the castles of sand
Flushed by the childrenæ's bedtime, level with the shore.

The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want
To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence,
I do not want to be a tragic or philosophic chorus
But to keep my eye only on the nearer future
And after that let the sea flow over us.

Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,
Join hands and make believe that joined
Hands will keep away the wolves of water
Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed
That no one hears them among the talk and laughter.

Louis Macneice