

Louis MacNeice and the 'Dark Conceit'

T. BROWN

WHEN Louis MacNeice was invited to give the Clark Lectures in Cambridge in 1963, it must have surprised those of his critics who had accepted the fashionable estimation of his work as superficial and journalistic, that he chose a far from superficial topic: the nature of allegory and parable. Had they followed more closely the development of MacNeice's career (which was rightly recognized in the invitation to lecture at Cambridge) they might not have been so surprised.¹ For MacNeice's interest in allegory had been long standing, while his own poetry in the 'forties and 'fifties exhibited an increasing symbolic and allegorical content.

Even in the 1930s, when MacNeice's reputation as a journalistic poet of social commitment was established, his interest in double-level writing was evident. He early felt that 'The best poems are written on two or more planes at once, just as they are written from a multitude of motives. Poetry is essentially ambiguous, but ambiguity is not necessarily obscure² — an awareness that must have co-existed somewhat uneasily with fashionable 'thirties' views of the poet as an educated ordinary man communicating with his public. By 1941, however, we find MacNeice, in his study of W. B. Yeats, categorically disclaiming mere descriptive

¹ Desmond Pacey, who dined with MacNeice at the Trinity high table after each lecture, records his own surprise at MacNeice's serious interest in allegory: 'His lectures . . . dealing with the element of parable in English literature, were thoroughly prepared and revealed that MacNeice had read and pondered all the major works of modern criticism . . . I made some reference to the amount of reading he must have had to do in preparing the lectures, and he informed me a little testily that he would have read all the books anyway.' Desmond Pacey, 'The Dance Above the Dazzling Wave', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, III, Series IV, June 1965, pp. 152-3.

² Louis MacNeice, 'Poetry', in *The Arts Today*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson, 1935, p. 66.

realism in poetry, in preference for a more complex (perhaps double, or multiple-levelled) kind of writing, sensing that the 'daylight of "realism" is itself largely a fiction . . .'¹ and that 'Truth, whether poetic or scientific, tends as often as not to be neither simple nor easily intelligible'.² In the introduction to his radio play *The Dark Tower*, the poet's interest in allegory becomes explicit:

The Dark Tower is a parable play, belonging to that wide class of writings which includes *Everyman*, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Though under the name of allegory this kind of writing is sometimes dismissed as outmoded, the clothed as distinct from the naked allegory is in fact very much alive . . .

My own impression is that pure 'realism' is in our time almost played out, though most works of fiction will remain realistic *on the surface*. The single track mind and the single-plane novel or play are almost bound to falsify the world in which we live. The fact that there is method in madness and the fact that there is fact in fantasy (and equally fantasy in 'fact') have been brought home to us not only by Freud and other psychologists but by events themselves. This being so, reportage can no longer masquerade as art. So the novelist, abandoning the 'straight' method of photography, is likely to resort once more not only to the twist of plot but to all kinds of other twists which may help him to do justice to the world's complexity. Some element of parable therefore, far from making a work thinner and more abstract, ought to make it more concrete. Man does after all live by symbols.³

As his career progressed this interest in parable or allegory writing becomes even more developed. Even in an essay where MacNeice is dealing with the importance of a poet's communication with his public, he is at pains to point out that 'Every poet knows that poetic sense is not the same thing as common sense or logical sense'.⁴ It may use the logic of the imagination or of dream. By 1949 in an article entitled 'Experiences with Images' he is pointing to the allegorical element in his own work as he states that "'Springboard" will be lost on those who have no dream logic, as will other poems of mine such as "The Dowser" and

¹ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, 1941, p. 135.

² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³ Louis MacNeice, *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts*, 1947, p. 21.

⁴ Louis MacNeice, 'Poetry, the Public and the Critic', *New Statesman and Nation*, Vol. xxxviii, no. 970, 8 October 1949, p. 381.

"Order to View" which are a blend of rational allegory and dream suggestiveness'.¹

MacNeice's interest in allegory and dream is most developed in his series of Clark lectures which comprise *Varieties of Parable*. This work is a broad survey of allegorical writing in English. A sensitive book, perhaps its most interesting aspect is its treatment of modern allegory, since this throws light on some of the poet's own experiments in the form. In his study MacNeice broadly accepts the views of allegory as presented by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, by Graham Hough in *A Preface to the Fairie Queene* and by Edwin Honig in his detailed work *Dark Conceit*, to which MacNeice is particularly indebted. His view of allegory accords with (and develops in specific application to individual works) Honig's statement that "The double purpose of *making* a reality and making it *mean* something is peculiar to allegory and its directive language".² MacNeice sees allegory as the exploration of an image, the creation of a 'special world' with a relationship of meaning to the real. Traditionally this relationship was fairly simple—image embodied concepts familiar to most readers, while the image was comprehensible to them since it received its significance from cultural authority, as, for instance, Bunyan's imaginative world in *Pilgrim's Progress* depends for its meaning upon the received cultural and doctrinal traditions of Puritan religion. With cultural pluralism the situation, as MacNeice sees it, becomes much more complex. Allegory and parable become much less didactically clear, since the poet has no accepted tradition of concepts and related imagery within which he can work. He cites with approval Honig's explanation for the puzzle-like quality of much modern allegorical writing: 'Some explanation for the elusive pattern and the increasing ambiguity in modern allegories may be found in the destruction of the rigid base of cultural authority upon which allegory traditionally depended...'.³ By comparison with traditional allegory the modern parable is ambiguous, obscure. Its relationship with reality is conceptually vague. In *Varieties of Parable* MacNeice expands upon this 'constitutional ambiguity...'.³

¹ Louis MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', *Orpheus II*, 1949, p. 131.

² Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit*, 1960, p. 113.

³ MacNeice citing Honig, *Varieties of Parable*, Cambridge, p. 28.

He quotes a passage from a study of Kafka's elusive parables, commenting upon it:

Mr. Gray suggests that other critics may have gone astray because they treat Kafka as though he were 'a priest or psychologist who mistook his vocation', whereas Mr. Gray — rightly, I think — prefers to treat him 'as a literary artist, not inventing complex equivalents for a system of beliefs already held, but exploring the possibilities of an image which presented itself to his imagination, in this case the image of a castle and of a man trying to reach it'. Now this, as we have seen, seems to have been the procedure — at least at moments — even of a professedly allegorical writer like Spenser. And this is often the procedure when one writes a poem. Which brings me back to the point of 'irreducibility'. Whatever the basic beliefs implicit in *The Castle*, the book cannot be reduced to a mere exposition of such beliefs. If you expound something, that something is not only prior to but more important than the work in which you embody it.¹

The meaning of modern parable, the structuring and ordering of the work is, according to this view, implicit within the work itself, not imposed upon it from beyond itself. The meaning is not imposed from without, by a necessarily ordered, meaningful reality, or by an intellectual system. The writer of a modern parable explores an image, creates a special world, self-consistent, yet tantalizingly without simple conceptual meaning. His 'conceit' is indeed a 'dark' one.

Throughout MacNeice's poetic career and particularly since about 1940, poems appear which have to be understood as MacNeice suggests we should understand Kafka. They are allegory or parable of the kind that the poet eventually in his lectures identified as the modern variety. They explore an image that ambiguously suggests a relationship of meaning to our world, but they do not make it explicit. The first stanza of 'Order to View' will give some indication of this:

It was a big house, bleak;
Grass on the drive;
We had been there before
But memory, weak in front of
A blistered door, could find
Nothing alive now;
The shrubbery dripped, a crypt

¹ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 134.

Of leafmould dreams; a tarnished
 Arrow over an empty stable
 Shifted a little in the tenuous wind,

And wishes were unable
 To rise . . .¹

This creates, in its flat bare statement, a peculiarly unreal atmosphere. There is a strange fusion between subjective and objective experience as there is in a trance or delirium. The crypt is a crypt of leafmould dreams, while wishes cannot rise in the almost windless air. It is a special landscape, an image explored, a new disturbing world which we must attempt to interpret. Another poem of this semi-allegorical nature is 'The rest house'.² This also opens in a haunting, dreamlike landscape: 'The thick night fell, the folding table unfolded . . .' The scene is nightmarishly alive, objects have an unpleasant, spontaneous life of their own. The description which follows: 'The hissing lamp had hypnotised the lizards / That splayed their baby hands on the wired window.' is particularly suggestive of nightmare experience. This seems to be no natural landscape, but an inner imaginative world. The second stanza strangely suggests birth and death: 'The bed beneath the ghostly netting beckoned / To chrysalid or sepulchral sleep.' Reading the final lines: But such / Was now the river's dominance that he filtered / Through even the deepest sleep, weaving his journey / out of too little history into too much . . .' we wonder if this is some allegorical river of life, winding from birth to death. The suggestion is implicit.

In MacNeice's later poems, such interior, mental landscapes and dream experiences become more frequent — perhaps as his interest in parable became greater. One of the best of these poems is 'After the crash'.³ The first stanza of this perplexing poem moves with the assured illogic of a dream:

When he came to he knew
 Time must have passed because
 The asphalt was high with hemlock . . .

¹ *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. E. R. Dodds, 1966, pp. 169-70. Henceforth referred to as *C.P.*

² *C.P.*, pp. 452-3.

³ *C.P.*, p. 524.

But in the dreamworld we accept such logic without quibble. The last stanza suggests an allegorical vision of judgement, but its meaning remains unstated and ambiguous:

Then he looked up and marked
The gigantic scales in the sky,
The pan on the left dead empty
And the pan on the right dead empty,
And he knew in the dead, dead calm
It was too late to die.

Yet the poem, although conceptually inexplicable in any fully satisfying way, has a haunting, memorable power. Oblique and ambiguous, the irreducible image fixes gruesomely in the mind 'Light . . .', John Holloway wrote of Edwin Muir's allegories, 'cast from a great distance may carry its own decisive revelation'¹ since in the kind of poem Muir wrote all his life, and MacNeice wrote in his later years,

It seems — as if the poet has broken through . . . as if through a surface: and has confronted us, by what is a kind of skeletal presentation, with the essential quality of a deeply disturbing reality. Not, if you like, the suave intricacies of day-time observations, but the poignant or frightening diagrams of dream or nightmare . . . which rivet the attention and at their most powerful seem to stamp themselves indelibly on the mind.²

They do this not only because of their fascination as special worlds, but because they seem to say something true about our world. As Holloway writes of Muir's poem 'Milton': "To wander in this imaginary landscape, to experience its strangeness and terror, is to re-enter our own landscape by a unexpected and revelatory gate."³ Such a re-entry occurs in 'After the crash' where we feel that the nightmare world tells us something of our own. We live after a crash, after some cosmic catastrophe, which has rendered the world a place where hens

Fire themselves black in the batteries
And the silence of small blind cats
Debating whether to pounce . . .

¹ John Holloway, 'The Modernity of Edwin Muir', *The Colours of Clarity*, 1964, p. 98. MacNeice's own view of Muir's poems is that they are so purely allegorical that 'reading many of his poems on end is like walking through a gallery of abstract paintings', *Varieties of Parable*, p. 125.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

can be heard. Overhead are the gigantic scales of judgement, ominous in the dead calm. We live after the fall, and for this we are to be judged and found wanting. But we must not over-interpret. The poem may be an allegory of original sin and judgement, or it may not. The image is explored by the poet in the hope that it will by an indirect means reveal some truth which no simpler approach could discover. Yet the poem in its ambiguity resists all rational explanation. It is a modern parable of the variety MacNeice identified in his lectures at Cambridge.

Yet MacNeice, in areas where cultural consensus still exists, was perfectly capable of writing convincing traditional allegories. Some of the best of his late poems are of this kind.¹ The discovery of Romantic love is a theme MacNeice treats allegorically with some success. "The Burnt Bridge"² is an assured, economical and convincing allegory of a traditional kind. The hero, in a dream landscape, journeys to find a 'shining lady' (surely suggested by the Shining Ones of *Pilgrim's Progress*). The first two stanzas give an indication of the nature of the poem:

So, passing through the rustic gate,
He slammed it to (it broke in two)
And he took quick strides to tempt his fate
And the world ahead was daylight.

But when he reached the haunted coombe,
Glancing left, glancing right,
On either ridge he glimpsed his doom
And the world ahead was darkness.

There is a suggestion of dream logic here. In line two we encounter a typical element of dream experience where images well up into consciousness, drawn by the sound relations of words, words following their own peculiar logic. Not every image in the poem of course has a conceptual correlative. Much of the detail, as in Bunyan, provides imaginative flesh to the allegorical skeleton. The hero moves through a mysterious landscape where the feared dragon dwells in a creaking wood until he, against all

¹ Sometimes MacNeice's attempts at traditional allegory must be adjudged failures. See particularly the allegorical sections of *Autumn Sequel*, Cantos xiv-xvi, where the effort to maintain an allegory at length without a received cultural tradition to draw on results to my mind, in sad failure.

² *C.P.*, pp. 460-1.

odds, meets his shining lady and they walk hand in hand by the side 'Of the sea that leads to nowhere . . .'. Love in our world must be striven for against great odds, but once discovered our life achieves its spiritual dimension, partakes of mystery.

But was it strand? Or was it sea?
As near they came it went as far.
Dragon? she said, Let dragons be,
Those waves ahead are shoreless.

So, far they came and found no shore,
The waves falling, the night falling,
To board a ship sunk years before,
And all the world was daylight.

MacNeice in his late poetry also demonstrates his ability to write convincing short semi-allegorical poems, when he organizes them round a central motif or ikon. These have the trenchancy and effectiveness of some of Herbert's or Henryson's short allegories. The effect of these poems is related to the fact that he uses traditional imagery and iconography deeply engrained even in our fragmented culture. The poems communicate without explanation. 'The tree of guilt'¹ is an allegorical presentation of the well-known fact that we pay for our weaknesses. At times of self-indulgence the tree of guilt (obviously suggestive of the tree in Eden which wrought our fall) seems lush and green, utterly without danger; but time passes for the hero:

Till he finds later, waking cold
The leaves fallen, himself old
And his carved heart, though vastly grown,
Not recognisably his own.

Another poem which is very similar in technique is 'The habits'.² This uses the motif of the ages of man. In each stanza enervating habits enter like allegorical personifications of the vices in a medieval morality play; they tempt and destroy the hero:

When they put him in rompers the habits
Fanned out to close in, they were dressed
In primary colours and each of them
Carried a rattle and a hypodermic . . .

¹ *C.P.*, pp. 461-2.

² *C.P.*, pp. 534-5.

Each stanza is a dramatic representation of temptations appropriate to particular stages of life — games, bonhomie, woman, and alcohol — until in the last stanza ‘Everyman’ (for this is what the simple ‘he’ suggests) is left with nothing but death. The poem is extraordinarily effective, with its dark, sombre tone and trenchant honesty. A traditional allegory in technique, it proves the genre to be a living form in modern verse. MacNeice, when he died, was perfecting this kind of poem, and from a passage in *Varieties of Parable* we know that this was the realm he wished to continue to explore:

What I myself would now like to write, if I could, would be double-level poetry, of the type of Wordsworth’s ‘Resolution and Independence’; and, secondly, more overt parable poems in a line of descent both from folk ballads such as ‘True Thomas’ and some of George Herbert’s allegories in miniature such as ‘Redemption’.¹

Sadly, we were robbed of these further experiments in the writing of allegory and near allegory, by MacNeice’s sudden death.

¹ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 8.

Deya Summer

these sunlit mountains with their barren rocks.
now steady me and give me peace

but in the winter I will dream
of frenzied women dancing
naked in the moonlight
around the jagged mountain tops

BRUCE KING