

Poetry and Autobiography in the 1930s: Auden, Isherwood, MacNeice, Spender

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The 1930s was a period in which autobiography flourished; it is also a period which occasioned what one may read as expressive silences. W. H. Auden dismissed the period as a 'low dishonest decade' (*English Auden* 245) in 'September 1, 1939', but he has relatively little to say about the period in later years and is often, though by no means always, circumspect about engaging in autobiography in the 1930s.

Conversely, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice wrote autobiographically about the period during and after it. The period running from 1928 to 1939 marks a period in which individualism re-emerges as a major creative force. Often it is in dialectical conflict with accounts of the human that stressed 'the tendency to consider oneself a product of circumstances and environment beyond one's control' (Spender, *Thirties* 106).

Samuel Hynes, noting the rise of autobiography as a form towards the end of the 1930s, comments on the dual nature of the genre. Autobiography, he notes, 'is a kind of documentary', yet it is also 'a self-conscious art that may sometimes be read as parable' (Hynes 322). The point is well made: autobiography in and of the period bears witness, yet it also constructs parable-like stories, and it does both things with a 'self-conscious art'. This chapter will examine autobiography in the work of three poets, Spender, MacNeice and Auden. It will do so by way of discussing the work of Christopher Isherwood, a novelist and prose autobiographer who collaborated with Auden and was a close friend of Spender.

Lions and Shadows (1938) by Isherwood exemplifies the ‘self-conscious art’ mentioned in the previous paragraph. As Hynes remarks, the work is at once a ‘portrait of the artist as a young man’ and ‘also a portrait of the artist’s generation during its formative years’ (323). It is extremely funny, its author ‘his own guinea-pig’, as ‘everyone must be’ ([7]), according to Isherwood in ‘To the Reader’ at the head of the work. It verges on parody as well as on fiction, even as it disclaims being, ‘in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography’: that is, Isherwood goes to say, in terms that suggest how the form is normally viewed, ‘it contains no “revelations”; it is never “indiscreet”; it is not even entirely “true”’ ([7]). It takes a newly dead-pan, laceratingly humorous view of the artist’s formation, as in the account of ‘Isherwood the artist’ who must endure ‘the self-imposed Test of his integrity as a writer’ (97), a test that ‘had to be kept absolutely secret: if you succeeded, there was no applause; if you failed, there was nobody to console’ (98). The phrasing – especially ‘nobody to console’, as though that is what others are for -- captures the latent egotism of the writer’s narratorial double. This egotism emerges overtly in the next paragraph when ‘Isherwood’ turns back into ‘I’ (the initial letter of the author’s surname). Isherwood’s autobiographical ‘ego’ is well and truly ‘alter’, thanks to the pointed way in which each impulse of his forming personality is fixed by the cruelly dexterous pin of the prose.

Yet the ‘I’ of *Lions and Shadows* maintains a ringmaster’s authority over the circus animals of his tale of the evolving self. That self exists in the shadow cast by the illuminated figures who surround him: Chalmers, fellow conspirator and co-creator of Mortmere; Mr Holmes, improbably charismatic schoolmaster, aloofly complicit in a system against which he half-wishes to rebel and of which he is inextricably a part

(Holmes keeps a copy, the narrator learns, of the latter's deliberately mocking and insolent answers in his Cambridge Tripos papers); Western, modelled on Auden, looking 'more than ever like an exceedingly dirty millionaire' (299); and Stephen Savage, based on Spender. The narrator sees Savage as a person who 'inhabited a world of self-created and absorbing drama, into which each new acquaintance was immediately conscripted to play a part' (281), a view with which Spender partly concurs in *World Within World*. Isherwood writes here with knowing irony; he himself conscripts his acquaintances and friends into a drama which is no less concerned with the self for being resolutely taciturn or matter-of-fact about subjective feeling. His art is beguilingly to offer his comments about others and himself with laconic precision as though they aimed only at a minimalist but tragic-comic exactitude, and yet to indicate the hinterland of bruised, reckless, and inchoate feelings that lie behind constructions devised by the artistic self, others, and the society of which he is a part.

In *Goodbye to Berlin* Isherwood again declines to be read in simply autobiographical terms. In his introductory note, he puts the matter like this:

Because I have given my own name to the 'I' of this narrative, readers are certainly not entitled to assume that its pages are purely autobiographical, or that its characters are libellously exact portraits of living persons.

'Christopher Isherwood' is a convenient ventriloquist's dummy, nothing more.

(Isherwood, *Goodbye* [7]).

The image implies that the 'Isherwood' we meet in the pages of the work's 'loosely-connected sequences of diaries and sketches' (Isherwood, *Goodbye* [9]) permits us access to the ventriloquist's voice, albeit distorted as it is thrown through his dummy. It is a voice achieving its own complexities of pitch and cadence through an illusion of extreme simplification. The writer's presence is reflexive, self-aware, uncanny. On the first page of 'A Berlin Diary' dated 'Autumn 1930', Isherwood asserts, famously: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed' (*Goodbye* 11). Throughout, we seem to watch without judgement, but the observations exercise a cumulative force, often darkly funny, sometimes chillingly prescient, as in the exchange in 'The Landauers' between Bernard and Christopher. Christopher tries to impress on Bernard (who is Jewish) the significance of anti-Semitic Nazi hate-mail (179-80). Bernhard, ironic as always, is unable to match Christopher's degree of concern. He dies of a heart attack, we discover, in an overheard conversation, after the narrator remarks in a low-key monotone that 'Hitler came, and the Reichstag fire, and the mock-elections' (182). Isherwood's mode is close to semi-fictional reportage; it uses the devices of autobiography to suggest how history makes itself known through a multitude of subjective particularities.

Stephen Spender is a poet and writer for whom autobiography is a necessary mode of existential truth-telling. 'I believe obstinately', he writes in the Introduction to his own 1951 prose autobiography *World Within World*, 'that, if I am able to write with truth about what has happened to me, this can help others who have lived through the same sort of thing' (Spender, *World* x). At a time when authors were under pressure

to surrender their private lives to some larger impersonal cause, Spender, in much of his finest writing, expresses, while wrestling with, his belief that a writer's subjective life has to be at the centre of his writing. At the same time, he acknowledges the pressure of the 'external events' by which he described himself as being 'hounded' (*World* 117).

Spender's poetry in the 1930s makes us continually aware of the self as it is shaped by and responsive to social and political forces. He is not exactly a confessional poet; there is little detail of the kind to be found in, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), though later poems are more hospitable to revelatory disclosures of an elegiac or long-perspectival kind, as in 'Auden's Funeral' or 'Worldsworth'. Instead, in the thirties poems we encounter a presence that is undeniably subjective, yet almost impersonally so. At times Spender uses the word 'I' less as a means of telling us about himself than about what it is to have a self. An example might be the poem that begins, 'My parents kept me from children who were rough'. It seems self-pitying, rawly thin-skinned and vulnerable. In fact, it is highly accomplished in its re-entrance into the mind of the young boy, who is envious in a snobbish, latently homoerotic way of the 'boys who were rough'. The last line, 'I longed to forgive them, yet they never smiled' (Spender, *New Collected Poems* 8-9), has the effect of exposing what Blake would call a 'state of the human soul' (see the subtitle to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*); we are given an insight into the boy's assumption of moral superiority, and thus to the complex construction of an adult self layered by awareness of, guilty pride in and shame about social privilege.

The poem illustrates well Spender's comment that the modern writer often only knows about his own 'individuality' and 'isolation'. These terms are used in what amounts to a subdued but eloquent apologia, his 1933 essay 'Poetry and Revolution', in which he writes: 'The majority of artists today are forced to remain individualists in the sense of the individualist who expresses nothing except his feeling for his own individuality, his isolation' (Spender, *Thirties and After* 53 – this text is 'reprinted in an abbreviated version and with some obscurities clarified', 31). It is not entirely surprising, as Spender wrote retrospectively, that 'The essay was not well received by the comrades' (Spender, *Thirties* 32). And yet Spender clings in his poetry to the belief that fidelity to individuality and isolation will perform a truth-telling function that might help bring about an improved society. The essay concludes with rivalling assertions: 'the majority of artists today are forced into isolation. But by making clear the causes of our present frustration they may prepare the way for a new and better world' (53).

Autobiography, in Spender's hands, is often a means of 'making clear the causes of our present frustration'. The view that what we share is difference, obstinate singleness, is one that reaches back to Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, in which he declares: 'Points have we all of us within our souls, / Where all stand single' (3. 186-7, Wordsworth ed. Halmi 199). Certainly in Spender's poetry the poet often treats himself as a test-case, and his finest poems leave the reader with the puzzling, enigmatic fact of what it is to be a singular, unique person. 'Moving through the silent crowd' is a small masterpiece that overthrows pages of worthy left-wing poetry as it explores the poet's fascination with 'the unemployed' (to use Spender's later title). 'I have the sense of falling light', he writes at the close of the first stanza

describing workless figures idling in the street, and the line speaks covertly of the poet's investment in the scene: he is most interested in an elegiac 'sense' which he gains from the scene, covertly conceding that he is using the men as copy, catalysts for a poetic experience.

That this concession avoids mere callousness has to do with an unstilled current of compassion that drives the poet in the end to perform an extraordinary act of self-sabotage. There, as the poem's experience moves beyond the outer scene into the depths of the viewing consciousness, Spender writes: 'I'm haunted by these images, / I'm haunted by their emptiness' (12). He hands over the 'images' by which he is 'haunted' to an aspect of himself watching himself writing the poem and speaks of being 'haunted by their emptiness'. The reader responds to this jettisoning by the poet of his ill-gotten imaginative loot, his haunting 'images', as to an act of attempted self-purgation taking place in the compositional process. We seem to touch the very quick of the poet's sensibility shaping and unshaping his poem.

Elsewhere, as in 'An "I" can never be great man', Spender tackles head-on in a post-Freudian fashion the idea of selfhood as conflicted. The creative self is at war with a bundle of other selves; it is depicted as 'Quarrelling with "I tiring" and "I sleeping" / And all those other "I"s who long for "We dying"' (6). Yet Spender retains a strong conviction of the self as continuous even as it evolves. He is, as he contrasts and compares himself with Auden and Day Lewis, 'an autobiographer restlessly searching for forms in which to express the stages of my development' (Spender, *World* 119). Among his finest moments of critical thought about his commitment to individuality in *World Within World* is his account of the poet's vocation. 'Most writers', Spender

asserts, ‘allow their ideas to lead them back from terrifying solitude to the consolatory society of approximate and familiar phrases.’ By contrast, ‘The writer who clings to his own metaphor is facing his own loneliness’, an encounter that is likely to result ‘in conflict with current ideas among people surrounding him, and face to face with the terrifying truth of his own isolated existence’ (Spender, *World* 80). Again, one notices how this ‘terrifying truth’ serves as a guarantor of existential authenticity. Spender ‘clings to his own metaphor’ in poem after poem in the thirties, doing so through a rhythm and syntax that mime encounters with the unforeseen, blockage, the aporetic.

His poems about the Spanish Civil War put into the foreground the ‘terrifying truth of his own isolated existence’. The result can be sardonically self-deflating, as in ‘Thoughts during an Air Raid’, where he muses on the difference between the ‘great “I”’ that is ‘propped upon / This girdered bed which seems more like a hearse’ and ‘The pressure of those names under my fingers’ which he is able to ‘ignore’. Here, however, the emphasis on ‘isolation’ is a means of obliquely connecting with others. Spender stumbles on a ‘truth’ about us all: ‘The essential is / That all the “I”s should remain separate’ and ‘no one suffer / For his neighbour’ (109-10). Thus, he re-connects with others, including the Spanish Republicans with whom he sides, whilst suggesting a human impulse that runs disconcertingly below the surface of partisanship.

In ‘Two Armies’ his imagination projects an erotic unitariness on the warring forces, as ‘a common suffering / Whitens the air with breath and makes both one / As though these enemies slept in each other’s arms’. The title’s word ‘Armies’ turns into

embracing 'arms' through a metaphor which is the poet's own, and emerges from his own 'isolation', yet which, paradoxically, results in a rare, utterly unpoetical vision of 'common suffering' (114-15). We are reminded how Spender's individualism is not divorced from and often links to a sense of collective experience. In 'Port Bou', arguably his finest poem about the Civil War, he works through 'metaphor' to evoke the yearning for 'freedom'. The poem begins with a comparison between the harbour and a child holding a pet, 'Arms clutching but with hands that do not join', allowing the creature a glimpse of 'outer freedom in animal air'. The moment suggests how Spender's autobiographical writing can be at its most arresting when it focuses on an external image, before it begins its work of internalisation. This internalising shows itself in 'Port Bou', first, as Spender draws attention to himself in the act of composing, 'I search for an image / And seeing an image I count out the coined words', and, second, through the dramatised fear of imagining himself as the target of the shooting practice that starts up: 'I tell myself the shooting is only for practice, / And my body seems a cloth which the machine-gun stitches / Like a sewing-machine, neatly, with cotton from a reel' (122-3). The poem moves between metaphors, that of the 'coiled animal', to begin with, and this of the 'sewing-machine', to end with, in each case finding a means of bringing to a focus 'the terrifying truth of his own isolated existence'. 'And my body' is later changed to the more obvious 'But my body', yet the original reading captures the eerie co-existence of contraries: rational reassurance, irrational but credible fear.

Spender's autobiographical material in prose quietly revolutionises the genre. It is, demonstrably, work produced in the long shadow of Rousseau's *Confessions*, fascinated by the self's idiosyncrasies, imperfections, and experience of the

‘humiliation’ from which Auden tells Spender ‘Art is born’ (Spender, *World* 45). That exchange is serio-comic, a moment of near-parodic epiphany, as Auden articulates something which, the reader senses, Spender has always known about himself. ‘But do you really think I’m any good?’ he reports himself as asking Auden. “‘Of course’”, comes the reply, with the explanation and unvoiced retort: ‘Because you are so infinitely capable of being humiliated. Art is born of humiliation,’ he added in his icy voice – and left me wondering when *he* could feel humiliated’ (Spender, *World* 45). Spender’s manner here typically verges on, without quite toppling over into, the masochistic. The moment is recalled with the relish of a climactic scene in a novel, yet viewed as part of the flow and process of an important if near-impossible human relationship. The writer is both vulnerable tyro and reflective reconstructor of the scene.

Spender is a master of the journal entry. Often his entries turn into a meditation on some aspect of self-understanding or meditation on others, as when he records Ernst Curtius listening to him with ‘amusement’ and comments in an entry for 12 September 1939: ‘Sometimes it is disconcerting to be laughed at when one is serious, but as long as it is done affectionately, one is grateful to people who enable one to see oneself a little from the outside’ (Spender, *Thirties* 120-1). Seeing ‘oneself a little from the outside’ is a device often pursued in autobiographical writings of or arising from the 1930s. In *World Within World* Spender, with a candour that he often uses to arresting effect, describes the effect of seeing his early work in print, ‘able by an act of self-projection to imagine myself as another person, an unknown reader, who opened the pages and read what I had written with eyes not my own.’ Here Spender combines self-mockery of a ‘mood of self-intoxication’ with a sense that ‘in the rôle

of this other self-amazed-self' he could 'see an error with the same clarity as I could recognize a certain rightness' (86). The passage suggests the drive towards self-analysis as a possible mode of truth-telling in Spender.

World Within World, like many of his poems in the period, does not so much uncritically valorise the self as view it as an instrument for exploration and interrogation. It is the examined self that emerges with some credit from Spender's pages, as when he discusses his response to Marxism with its explicit critique of 'my liberal concepts of freedom and truth': 'was my sense of my own individuality', asks Spender, 'simply an expression of the class interest which I, unknowingly and instinctively in everything I thought and wrote and did, represented?' (Spender, *World* 116). He concedes the force of the attack, but he refuses to accept that the notion of 'independent witnessing' (116) was invalid. Through its accumulation of engrossing insights, memories and observations, *World Within World* demonstrates convincingly the worth of such 'witnessing'.

Spender's mode is one in which remembrance and what feels close to present-time reportage interweave. So, the *September Journal*, which details his responses to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and was published in *Horizon* in 1940, looks back to his experiences of Germany in 1929 to 1932 before Hitler's rise to power. It swiftly connects the known and the nearly inexplicable, the peace, hedonistic parties and supposed sinlessness of Weimar Republic, and the later 'breakdown of external standards' (Spender *Thirties and After* 106). These generalisations risk national stereotyping, as when Spender opines that 'The German tends to think of his life as an operatic cycle emerging from a series of myths' (105).

But they hold our attention by virtue of Spender's ability to tie abstractions to evocative recollection – of German friends and acquaintances, for example, whose behaviour and gestures bore witness to 'a distress and restlessness of spirit that never ceased' (111) – and by his sense of writing as a desperate form of creative action as he seeks to 'make this journal into a book with several levels of time, present and past, which I am able to move in as I choose' (122).

Louis MacNeice illustrates ways in which poets of the thirties react against the doctrine of 'impersonality' associated with Eliot and other writers of the 1920s. The situation was a complicated one. Eliot may have hidden behind personae such as Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, but it was clear to his admiring juniors that his personal presence in his poetry was strong if elusive. Yeats positively thrust his self upon his readers, yet it was evident, too, that the self in his work has been recreated, reconstructed.

MacNeice is not unYeatsian in his own divided views of subjectivity in poetry. He comments in *Modern Poetry*, as John Kerrigan notes, that 'literary criticism should always be partly biographical' (Kerrigan 15). Yet Kerrigan is able with justice to assert that MacNeice 'rejected the idea that poetry is self-expression and argued that even the lyric voice is dramatic' (Kerrigan 15). In *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, MacNeice argues the point with some force and finesse, as he ventriloquises a poet's rejoinder to a Procrustean critic:

'So I am to speak only as myself,' the poet might say, 'my whole self, and nothing but myself?' If you know what my whole self and my only self is,

you know a lot more than I do. As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves, but I am often, as they say, not myself at all. Maybe it is just when I am not myself – when I am thrown out of gear by circumstances or emotion – that I feel like writing poetry. I suggest you read what Keats wrote in a letter about the poet’s personality.’ (MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats* 146)

It is when ‘thrown out of gear by circumstances or emotion’, on this argument, that the poetic voice comes into being, finding new aspects of selfhood, taking inspiration from the Keats who denied that a poet has a fixed personality. As Jonathan Allison notes in his introduction to the letters, ‘One way of evading the limitations of home and the singular, inherited self is to imagine personhood as multiple or various’ (MacNeice, *Letters* xvi). Allison draws attention to a revealing metaphor that MacNeice uses in a 1927 letter, on the threshold of his career as a poet: ‘One is like a fountain – always spouting in the same shape but formed of always different water drops’ (172). The phrasing suggests the MacNeice who delights in ‘the drunkenness of things being various’ (MacNeice, *Selected Poems* 23), and the shiftingly iridescent nature of being a person. But the passage that follows hints at another note, less delight in the ever-varying quality of personhood than a darker suggestion of unfathomable discontinuity: ‘Now suppose someone turns off the fountain; it is not. Turn it on again and it exists again (the same fountain). Where has it been in between?’ (172). Concern with sameness rubs against awareness of difference and what might be called the self’s interlunar vacancies.

The MacNeicean voice of thirties poems is vibrant with melancholy and muffled elation, rhetorically confident, defiant, and at its most compelling when articulating

uncertainty. Ireland, especially Northern Ireland, shadows his work; a cluster of images and stereotypes haunts his attempted goodbye in 'Valediction'. Here MacNeice suggests that selfhood is not merely a verbal construction, subject to the whims or vanishing tricks of the poet-mage: 'I cannot be', he writes in a ruefully self-incriminating couplet, 'Anything else than what this land engendered me'. The poem identifies what it calls in an elliptical phrase 'Memory in apostasy' (12), as though 'memory' bore involuntary witness in the face of the poet's attempted 'apostasy', a strong word since it means 'abandonment or renunciation of one's religious faith or moral allegiance' (*OED* 1a). The word gestures towards the young poet's struggles with the faith in which he was brought up, but in context it suggests more strongly the contention of mock-bravado and a deeper intensity.

Indeed, as the poem progresses, MacNeice does arrive at a position that differs from compulsive helplessness in the face of the past. But it does so through the increasing ferocity with which he shows the power of that past's hold over him and the corresponding vehemence of poetic utterance needed to prise its fingers from his throat. Within a few lines of the just-quoted passage he writes: 'I can say Ireland is hooey, Ireland is / A gallery of fake tapestries, / But I cannot deny my past to which my soul is wed, / The woven figure cannot undo its thread' (13). Yet the 'woven figure' that is Ireland starts to unspool its threads of images as the poet, in near-Yeatsian mode, asserts, affirms, and in the end banishes. The verb that MacNeice chooses, though, at the start of the climactic closing sentence, namely 'resign', is cunningly passive; even as it is consciously dismissive, it retains a lingering attentiveness. Valediction clings to that to which it says farewell: 'Therefore I resign, goodbye the chequered and the quiet hills ... Goodbye your hens running in and out

of the white house... Your drums and your dolled-up Virgins and your ignorant dead' (14). Renunciation builds to a crescendo of contempt in the final line, with its plague-on-both-your-sectarian-houses evenhandedness (Protestant 'drums' and Catholic 'Virgins'). The poet pitilessly does 'say Ireland is hooey' without denying the 'past to which my soul is wed'.

It is often for the expression of conflicted or varying views of the self that MacNeice's autobiographical poetry of the thirties is most memorable. 'Postscript to Iceland', dedicated to Auden with whom MacNeice had written *Letters from Iceland* (1937), a brilliant ragbag account of their visit to that country, shows off this array of selves, orchestrated throughout by the trochee-wielding poet. There is the quintessentially thirties awareness of the private life taking place within a framework of 'Nations germinating hell'. There are the mocking and self-mocking references to 'the don in me' and 'the don in you'. MacNeice's donnish self contends that 'the saga style' is explained by 'the landscape of the north', Auden's, trumping his friend's display of erudition, argues that 'the North begins inside' (34), the self interiorising a geography of ethos and style. The moment is a reminder that, though the reverse of 'academic' in the pejorative sense of the word, MacNeice's poetry intermittently alludes to the day-job (he was a lecturer in Classics at Birmingham University), often, as here, to provide a long perspective on the present, a long perspective that, as here, deflates its own knowingness. The poem admits personal dread, 'the fear of loneliness / And uncommunicableness', but it takes evident if anxiety-tinged pleasure in the bravura of its phrasing: 'Still I drink your health before / The gun-butt raps upon the door' (36) is MacNeice performing with relish the role of fiddler playing (or drinking) while the world awaits the apocalypse of war.

In *The Strings Are False*, his unfinished autobiography written in 1940 but unpublished until 1967, MacNeice writes with self-mocking assurance about his early addiction to phrase-making: ‘The right phrase was something with positive, or even absolute, value – even if, as so often, it was conveying denunciation, irony, scepticism, defeatism, nihilism. (If Nil is a word it can’t be nil.)’ (MacNeice, *Strings* 109). *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice’s poetic masterpiece about what it was like to live in the period after Munich 1938, is, in many ways, about the need to construct a self that can meet the challenges that it meets. Describing the poem in a letter to T. S. Eliot of November 1938, MacNeice describes how its sectionalising permits ‘different parts of myself (e.g. the anarchist, the defeatist, the sensual man, the philosopher, the would-be good citizen)’ to ‘be given their say in turn’ (MacNeice, *Letters* 312). With its irregular line-lengths and apparently improvised, often enjambed, rhyming, it shows the poetic self in action, arranging, orchestrating and pattern-making, yet all the time admitting the presence of forces that threaten the self’s powers of control. So in section VII, MacNeice writes, leaving ‘an all-night shelter’ he has gone to after finding his lost dog:

And as I go out I see a windscreen wiper

In an empty car

Wiping away like mad and I feel astounded

That things have gone so far.

And I come back here to my flat and wonder whether

From now on I need take

The trouble to go out choosing stuff for curtains

As I don't know anyone to make
 Curtains quickly. Rather one should quickly
 Stop the cracks for gas or dig a trench
 And take one's paltry measures against the coming
 Of the unknown Uebermensch. (53)

MacNeice's inventiveness is exuberantly on display throughout the poem, yet the above passage gives the flavour of its staple idiom: conversational but edgily so, as when a line-ending holds up the word 'quickly' for wry inspection before it ushers in the mock-panicky 'Stop the cracks'; aware of coming threat (as in the reference to the Nietzschean 'Uebermensch'), but often in a sardonic way; investing feeling in an image. That 'windscreen wiper / In an empty car / Wiping away like mad' is an image for the times and for a terrifying fear of automaton-driven nothingness.

Much in *The Strings Are False* and other autobiographical poems relies on MacNeice's ability to bring feeling and memory into resurrected life through images, images caught up in a syntax that allows both for the image's intensity and its existence in the life of remembering consciousness. Examples of different kinds, both concerned with the poet's childhood, occur in 'Carrickfergus' and 'Autobiography'. In 'Carrickfergus' MacNeice confronts his liminal status, brought up in Carrickfergus, 'the rector's son, born to the Anglican order, / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor' (24), educated in an English school. History impinges on the boy in the form of near-inconsequential, haunting images: 'Somewhere on the lough was a prison ship for Germans, / A cage across their sight' (25). As here, the poem works through a blend of declaration, mimicking the autobiographer's assertion of willed

control, and a mood close to reverie, recollections that speak of a world that makes no sense. ‘A cage across their sight’ picks up on the previous stanza’s reference to ‘flags on pins moving across and across’ (25), only to qualify suggestions of purposeless movement with an image of barred imprisonment.

MacNeice’s ‘Autobiography’, though written in 1940, is among the finest achievements of thirties autobiographical poetry; it evokes and bids farewell to a childhood that is both highly particular and quintessentially generational in its traumatised helplessness. MacNeice gives distilled expression to nightmare: the loss of a mother who ‘wore a yellow dress; / Gently, gently, gentleness’; the onset of ‘dreams’ in which ‘The dark was talking to the dead; / The lamp was dark beside the bed’; the sense of bereftness – all are rendered with an affecting economy of means, one evident in the refrain, ‘*Come back early or never come*’ (88). The refrain suggests that the images and the life they depict should come back, but in an altered form, so that they can assume a prelapsarian ‘earliness’; the imperative seems also to occupy its own autonomous and suggestive space, as though it were a mode of (possibly Platonic) self-address, meaning, ‘Reincarnate yourself as a pre-experiential being or never return’. Without the self there is no poetry, but MacNeice’s poetry is constantly fighting a courageously reckless battle against the fear, darkness and isolation of which his childhood in Northern Ireland offers examples, and which inform his adult understanding of what it is to be human.

W. H. Auden writes of ‘the nightmare of the dark’ (*English Auden* 244) in his elegy for Yeats, ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, composed the year before ‘Autobiography’ was written. MacNeice’s ‘dark’ is primarily personal; Auden’s is primarily objective,

public. MacNeice effortlessly moves between private and public when he wishes; Auden, more enigmatically and obliquely, subsumes the poet's self within his icy, confident diagnoses. Indeed, the very notion of the private life seems *sous rature* in his early poems, under investigation, almost certainly symptomatic of some larger socio-political malaise. The first person pronoun is kept under wraps; address is likely to be admonitory, directed at a faulty 'you', as when Auden deplores, with frenetic (and parodically Freudian) high spirits, 'The convolutions of your simple wish' (47). Over and over, self is under severe orders in the early poetry to wean itself from self-concern, to attend to a public sphere.

And yet it is striking how persistent Auden's preoccupation with the self is, and to this degree his poetry is, so to speak, a paradoxically autobiographical poetry. In it we can trace the struggle to track the process by which, as he puts it in the would-be ego-less clipped speech of the second section of 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens', 'Time passes and now is other, / Is knowledge in him now of other' (38). This poem seeks to confront 'solitary man' (deprived of an article) as the first section has it (37). Yet it concedes that there is no scene without a viewer, albeit one who is 'Tiny observer of enormous world' (38). Poems that seek to purge mere subjective emotionalism acknowledge the vital if suppressed presence of the edgily conscious onlooker and participant.

As the decade wears on, Auden grows less fearful of the word 'I' while always wishing to connect self and other. In *Letter to Lord Byron*, he is positively unbuttoned about his dislike of Wordsworth, love of particular landscapes ('Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on / The view from Birmingham to

Wolverhampton', 175), 'the large brown mole' on his 'right cheek' (189) and even childhood memories. And yet the effect is of someone playing at autobiography, suffering its generic demands with good humour, while the essential Auden, not to be confused with his play-acting, dramatised other self, remains enigmatically removed from the scene of writing. In Spender and MacNeice, by contrast, for all their differences, autobiography is a, often the, medium for a vitally, radically new means of narrating what it is to be alive.

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