



# Explaining the Modernist Joke

As Reviewed By:  
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W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and  
*Letters from Iceland*

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## Travel Writing and the Canon

Like many odd literary creatures from the British 1930's, W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland* (1936) is referred to more frequently as a representative period piece than as an achieved work of art. As Tim Youngs notes, in his essay on Auden's travel writing in the recent *Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden* (2004), Paul Fussell, Philip Dodd, and others have emphasized the historical importance of travel writing in the 'thirties. Much of this writing captures the perspective of European cosmopolitanism in a period of intense nationalist feeling, of a deracinated liberalism brought by curiosity and passenger ship into contact with actual primitive civilizations, as well as the neo-paganisms or pseudo-classicisms of fascist movements. In the pages of such travel books, in other words, we have the opportunity to peek in on the exacerbation of self-doubt and alarm that greeted discontented English intellectuals as they disembarked in lands whose instability and potential for radical political rupture made one insistent promise: liberal industrial society is coming to an end. But if the interest of travel books for cultural history goes unchallenged, again, their value as works of art has remained at best undebated and at worst dismissed.

Such dismissal appears as especially odd in the case of Auden's collaborative travel books—*Iceland*, of course, but also *Journey to a War* (1938), which he coauthored with Christopher Isherwood. Unfortunately, Auden did not long

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allow *Journey* to be taken seriously as a single work. While it was reprinted as late as 1972, he had long suppressed the “Verse Commentary” from that volume (his most topical contribution, which, Edward Mendelson has observed, Auden came to view as dishonest, along with most of his verses written in syllabic tercets); and “In Time of War,” a sonnet sequence that displays Auden’s masterful versatility with the form, would be truncated and republished out of context in the *Collected Poems*. *Letters from Iceland* encourages us not to take it seriously as a work of art for similar reasons. A number of Auden’s important early lyrics first appeared scattered in its pages, only to be reprinted elsewhere, consolidated with his other poems of the period. His most important single contribution to the book, the extended light verse “Letter to Lord Byron,” would also be mildly revised—deleting several stanzas of brilliant literary satire, Marxist historical prophecy, and gossipy nether-worldly chat, and reducing in the process the number of parts from five to four. This slightly more compact “Letter” would then take its place as part of the Auden canon, where it appears as an odd and frothy predecessor to his late philosophical and meditative long poems, “New Year Letter,” “The Age of Anxiety,” “For the Time Being,” and “The Sea and the Mirror.”

If Auden could chop up and parcel out elements of the travel books so easily, one wonders, why should the reader attempt to see the books themselves as organic wholes, as single works of art? The obvious response that they are single works does not entirely satisfy. For, *Journey* breaks unevenly in two—Isherwood’s travel diary divides naturally from the sonnets and “Commentary” that precede and follow it. More troublingly, *Iceland*, as even a cursory glance through its pages suggests, is apparently entirely disorganized. The seventeen chapters do not lead logically from one to the next, with the exception of the sequence of parts in the “Byron” letter—all of which, as I have noted, would be united elsewhere. Even the individual chapters do not always cohere, for several different reasons. A few chapters comprise a lyric poem or two of Auden’s, followed by a prose letter to friends or family back home, the relation between verse and prose sometimes only that of chronological coincidence (he happened to write them on the same day). The fourth and sixth chapters, “For Tourists” and “Sheaves from Sagaland,” are ostensibly random snatches of information gathered into the same bag. The first offers what once might have been honestly helpful information for an English tourist trying to make his way through the rugged landscape and repugnant cuisine of Iceland. The second, however, calls the sincerity of the tourist information, and of the whole literary enterprise, into question by facetiously quoting observations from past British “authorities” on Iceland. To offer just a few instances, some of the

“sheaves” note,

*Iceland is real*

“Iceland is not a myth; it is a solid portion of the earth’s surface.” - Pliny Miles

*The Icelanders are human*

“They are not so robust and hardy that nothing can hurt them; for they are human beings and experience the sensations common to mankind.” - Horrebow.

*Concerning the literary taste of the Clergy*

“Assessor Grondal also composed several poetical satires in which, according to the information of the Bishop, there is much successful ridicule.” - McKenzie.

The chapter consists of ninety-one such snippets, followed by an uninspiring account of one of the great non-events of Icelandic history, “The 1809 Revolution,” and an unappetizing account of “An Icelandic Supper” from the same year. If we tend to think of quoting out of context the over-serious and preposterous language of would-be authorities and bureaucrats a brand of humor peculiar to the last generation or two, we are mistaken. Auden and MacNeice possessed a great appreciation for how absurd sincerity can appear when lopped free from the atmosphere of its authority. Much of the book, in fact, is funny in this deprecating, parodic, campy sort of way. The “Sheaves” chapter in particular encourages us to take *Iceland* no more seriously than its authors take the previous writers they plunder, and to read it or leave it in bits and pieces as we so desire. Auden and MacNeice, that is, seem to insist that we embrace their book precisely because it is *less* than the sum of its parts, and to speak of it as an artistic whole risks taking seriously what was not seriously intended, risks promoting to high art what was meant as an idyll for the casual tripper awaiting his passage—or, rather, as an in-joke for the Oxbridge aesthete.

Nevertheless, some such promotion seems overdue. *Iceland* has long gone out of print, except in the first prose volume of the Princeton *Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, which for the book’s ideal reader may be prohibitively expensive (because Auden’s ideal readers are always real people with real budgets to

balance). Critics and casual readers alike have had too easy a time ignoring the vital, lengthy context in which some of Auden and MacNeice's best early poems first appeared. It is possible that a desire to skip the prose of the volume has incited some among us to insist that the book is a mess not to be bothered with, that the real meat can be had elsewhere. I would argue, however, that *Iceland* is the last, best joke of high modernist literature, bringing to a hilarious close what T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* had begun with a whimper. In what follows, I would like to lay out that argument and then turn exclusively to MacNeice's contribution to the volume. If *Iceland* is often overlooked, MacNeice's slight but significant contribution to its swollen page count is frequently eclipsed by Auden's "Byron." Along with recovering the book, we should recover the second of its two authors.

## One Cockeyed Triumph of Modernism

The publication of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 was the apotheosis of literary modernism in English. Modern poetry had been around for quite some time before that, of course, but the poem and its quickly achieved reputation ensured that the poetics of symbol and fragment had taken a decisive and lasting turn. Moreover, it testified to the possibility of realizing the poem as a hermetically sealed aesthetic object (as unquestionably and authoritatively *literature*, rather than something else) and simultaneously as a capacious and polyglot form, capable of absorbing a wide range of human experience, history, and historiography into its aesthetic node. In brief, one knew one was in the presence of distinctly high art and yet that one saw therein the sprawling, broken furniture of the low- and middlebrow life of modern mankind.

The ideas of symbol and fragment actually capture this paradoxical innovation of the modernist poem. The modernist symbol—much like those of the French *symbolistes* on whom the modernists relied—signified in a manner that parodied and aspired to the sacramental acts of the Roman Catholic liturgy: Eliot's Londoners crossing the bridge on their way to work (who inspire Tiresias to observe in the poem, "I had not known death had undone so many") are at once themselves, the damned of Dante's Hell, figurations of modern humanity, and of modern history. They must be all these things, and not just one or two of them. The line Eliot translates from Dante abets this polysemantic symbolic system, but it is also and unmistakably a fragment. It comes from elsewhere—and has been broken off, severed from its place in a native organism called *The Comedy*. It therefore lies athwart the integrity of Eliot's own poem, leading us to a historical vision of the West in shambles, of modernity as the ruins of a greatness and wholeness (*Integritas*) that can still be imagined.

Taking Eliot as prototypical, then, I suggest that any modernist poem must display in some measure its identity as symbolic, as "autotelic" in Eliot's terminology, and thus as some kind of privileged discourse apart from the white noise of everyday speech. It must also appear as a fragment, that is, as scored by its belated position in history and by an accompanying historiography that envisions a rupture or break between modernity and the organic, whole culture that constituted a flourishing pre-modernity. Finally, synthesizing these two attributes, the poem's structure, however autonomous it may be as art, must be capable of drawing into its aesthetic zone a wide swath of human experience. Art is always art, rather than something else, but

everything else can always be absorbed within its integral form.

If these three elements define the essence of artistic modernism, then *Letters from Iceland* stands out as the kind of final masterpiece that takes them all for granted and looks behind and beyond them with a skeptical eye. More successfully than Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, *Letters* absorbs everything that comes into its authors' paths. Auden writes in the opening pages,

I want a form that's large enough to swim in,  
And talk on any subject that I choose,  
From natural scenery to men and women,  
Myself, the arts, the European news:  
And since she's on a holiday, my Muse  
Is out to please, find everything delightful  
And only now and then be mildly spiteful.

Auden refers directly to rhyme royal, the stanza in which he writes his letter to the late Lord Byron, but these lines serve as an apology for the volume as a whole. Anything can be fitted into the form of the travel book. Indeed, because Iceland provokes the authors to extended meditation on their homeland and on modern life more generally, even the purported subject of the book proves no bar to straying elsewhere. Once more, Auden anticipates and in some sense defends the book's untidy, digressive appearance:

Though it's in keeping with the best traditions  
For Travel Books to wander from the point  
(There is no other rhyme except anoint),  
They may well charge me with—I've no defenses—  
Obtaining money under false pretenses.

*Iceland* is sprawling but also capacious: it does in fact hold in one volume all that its authors feed it. Just as Eliot's *Waste Land* depends on a synthesis of symbol and fragment through the syntactical leaps of collage, so does the travel book. Apparent discontinuities are only apparent, because what they continuously reaffirm is the discontinuity (the ruins) of modern life. Letter after letter, "sheave" after "sheave,"

rhyme after rhyme, the book builds itself into a gigantic, demanding collage of facts and fictions. And again, as with Eliot, this collage comes equipped with a historiography of the pre-modern and the modern. In the second chapter, "Journey to Iceland," Auden contemplates the romantic ideas of Iceland as primitive, authentic "sagaland." Its romantic exoticism and promise of a better way of living than our own, he summarizes neatly: "And North means to all: 'Reject!'"

This historiography stains and justifies every digressive movement in the text. In the middle parts of "Byron," Auden outlines the condition of modern industrial man, his bourgeois intellectual contemporary, as well as the straitened conditions of the "autonomous" modern artist. In pre-modern organic society, artists were integrated within the functioning hierarchy of society:

The important point to notice, though, is this:

Each poet knew for whom he had to write,

Because their life was still the same as his.

As long as art remains a parasite,

On any class of persons it's alright;

The advent of modern individualism and consumerism, however, had cut the artist off from his "parasitical" role. To be a self-possessed individual is fine for a veterinarian or a cab driver, "But to the artist this is quite forbidden." Here we have, in relatively compact stanzas, a whole theory of the ties of the organic society unbinding themselves and spreading out in their various, frayed threads. Although Auden's focus here is on the transformation of the social function of art and artists, his critique is leveled at the whole of modern life of which the artist's pathos appears merely symptomatic. The rest of the "Letter" makes this abundantly clear, since it has begun with a dissection of the soul of man under capitalism and concludes with an austere sociological version of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, an autobiography of Auden's own maturation as a modern Englishman and Artist. His personal narrative is provoked in a typically Audenesque manner:

A child may ask when our strange epoch passes,

During a history lesson, "Please, sir, what's

An intellectual of the middle classes?

Is he a maker of ceramic pots

Or does he choose his king by drawing lots?"

What follows now may set him on the rail,

A plain, perhaps a cautionary, tale.

The story Auden tells, of modern chaos and cowardice, of artistic autonomy and isolation, is one he would repeat in the introduction to his edition of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938). There we see laid out plainly a historical narrative of an Arcadian pre-modernity from which we have fallen and to which we must return. Perhaps it is unsurprising to find Auden speculating on the philosophy of history at a time when most intelligent persons believed the West was coming to an almost apocalyptic crisis that would transform the face of its civilization. *Letters from Iceland*, like most 'thirties writing, presents the imminent transformation in terms of Freudian complexes and especially Marxist historical necessity. This furniture of Freud and Marx is the 'thirties leftist "advance" on Eliot's more conservative deployment of the explanatory power of myth and Christianity. Auden and the left, one can fairly say, elected to use sociology to interpret historical crisis, whereas Eliot and the right elected for anthropology, with its implicit hope in recovering the vitality of the primitive (pre-modern) cultures it studied. Auden, for instance, became enamored of John Layard's psychosomatic theories, whereas Eliot would make famous Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. The psychotherapist represents this "sociological" orientation in the sense that he attempts to "heal" the modern individual so that he might live more comfortably within modernity. The anthropological orientation, of which Eliot's use of Weston is exemplary and of Frazer complex, attempts to penetrate into the mythological substructures of human culture obscured by modernity, in hopes of recovering their forms and, in the process, escaping the formlessness of twentieth-century life.

Conventionally, this divide between political left and right has been helpful in sorting out Auden and his generation from the high modernism of Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, with their alternately monarchist and fascist attractions. But *Letters* does not let us rest on this distinction so easily. Auden's language continues to show the wash of Marxism with which he had been brushed, but it appears now a tool of convenience to allow him to express his sense of impending historical—and military—crisis in clinical (sociological) fashion. However, his sense of how that crisis came about has become decidedly closer to Eliot's famous thesis of the "dissociation of sensibility." In *The Oxford Book*, Auden concludes his reflections on the social transformation of the poet and of the use of light verse thus:



The problem for the modern poet, as for every one else to-day, is how to find or form a genuine community, in which each has his valued place and can feel at home. The old pre-industrial community and culture are gone and cannot be brought back. Nor is it desirable that they should be. They were too unjust, too squalid, and too custom-bound. Virtues which were once nursed unconsciously by the forces of nature must now be recovered and fostered by a deliberate effort of the will and the intelligence. In the future, societies will now grow of themselves. They will either be made consciously or decay. A democracy in which each citizen is as fully conscious and capable of making a rational choice, as in the past has been possible only for the wealthier few, is the only kind of society which in the future is likely to survive for long.

In such a society, and in such alone, will it be possible for the poet, without sacrificing any of his subtleties of sensibility or his integrity, to write poetry which is simple, clear, and gay.

For poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free.

In a word, the light verse in which he wrote "Byron," and the comedic collage of *Letters* as a whole, are meant to be first steps toward the "self-conscious" reintegration of modern society. One opens *The Waste Land* and knows its author is very serious and very mournful of the present state of humanity. One does not suspect anything of the kind on first peeping into the lighter bits of *Iceland*. However, Auden's historical vision overlaps with Eliot's to a remarkable degree. He has simply elected to speak, not like Tiresias listing fragments and losses in a plangent tone, but like a court jester, laughing society whole again.

The lightness of *Iceland* is so serious that it deserves more attention as an artifact of Auden's own biography than most of his critics have previously granted. Auden's conversion to Christianity in 1939-40 has been much debated and will continue to be so, in part thanks to Arthur Kirsch's interesting if a bit cursory *Auden and Christianity* (2005). Central to our understanding of that conversion is Auden's abandoning of the Marxist and Freudian "systems" as means of explaining human experience in favor of the framework Christianity offers. As such, his "conversion" can, strictly speaking, only have occurred once Auden embraced Christian faith itself. However, sudden converts are rare, and it seems likely that his gradual movement back into the Anglo-Catholic fold began not as late as 1937, when the closed and vandalized churches of Civil War-era Spain shocked him into longing for the liturgy and prayer of his youth, but at least as early as the summer of 1936, when he took up pen to scratch out amusing verses in rhyme royal.

In discovering the importance of laughter—of communal laughter above all—

Auden discovered also that class revolution and the cataloging of psychosomatic symptoms was, as it were, no laughing matter. Marx and Freud could account for the centrality of comedy in human experience, but they accounted for it by dismissing it as ideology, psychosis, or at best sublimation. As the author of poetry that was increasingly “simple, clear, and gay,” Auden was a person discovering that he was a humanist and a humanitarian as well. He found himself laughing in a state of *agape*, of complete *caritas* for the world and its creatures. Such absolute love and empathy almost inevitably led him back (in some three years’ time) to its ultimate symbol and foundation, the comedy that begins with the broken body of Christ on his Cross. For this reason, *Letters*, much like *The Waste Land*, offers faint intimations of hope for cultural renewal amid its fragmentary laughter at modern and Icelandic life. But whereas Eliot prophesies rain from the East, Auden and MacNeice deploy an endgame strategy, trying to renew society with a comedic collage rather than an unspecific Oriental spirituality.

### **Louis MacNeice and the Tokens of Authorship**

MacNeice’s name next to Auden’s on the title page of *Letters from Iceland* invites an assumption that may satisfy our desire to paint the literary ‘thirties red, but distorts the meaning of this collaborative work. *Iceland*, like other co-authored works Auden published during the decade (including his plays with Christopher Isherwood), may appear at first as an experiment in collectivist art after the fashion of Bertolt Brecht, wherein the notion of bourgeois property is challenged by the refusal to assign a single *auteur*. The subsequent pages disabuse us of this notion and indeed suggest that the conversion from a loose Marxism toward a Christian humanism was already well underway. Attribution to either Auden or MacNeice appears at the end of nearly all the seventeen chapters. Moreover, the book really is largely composed of letters: of chatty, frequently personal always personable, correspondence from the authors to their friends and family back home (one letter, from Auden to Kristian Andreirsson, actually was sent *to* Iceland after Auden’s return to England). For all the foreboding of class revolution and the end of liberal bourgeois society—and there is much of that—the volume suggests a confident pair of Oxonians testing their wit on the barren rocky matter they find abroad.

In fact, once one has set by the hypothesis that *Iceland* might be a weak leftist literary revolution, one begins to suspect that the book is really Auden’s, with a

few MacNeice poems tagged on by grace of the real author's generosity. The book's publication in Auden's collected works, and the paucity of text that made the leap into MacNeice's *Collected Poems* encourages this impression. This is not quite fair either, however. MacNeice and Auden may have compiled together the tourist and "Sheaves" chapters, of which neither could be called author so much as editor in any case. MacNeice also penned the only straight travel narrative in the volume: "Hetty to Nancy," a bizarre imagining of their horseback journey around the Langjökull, in which MacNeice and Auden appear as Girl Scout leaders, Hetty and Masie. The addressee, Nancy, is in fact that "Nancy boy," classmate, art historian, and Soviet spy, Anthony Blunt. Auden is of course Masie, while MacNeice, the one "lover of women in Donegal," is the "Hetty" of the bunch. MacNeice's narrative is very amusing indeed, although, like most travel narratives, it does not reward a second reading. More importantly, the narrative's late appearance in the volume vouchsafes it as a travel book in the conventional sense, while its sexual (identity) inversions let us know those same conventions are being turned on their head, or at least crooked. According to a letter Auden wrote shortly after the book's publication, MacNeice contributed eighty-one pages out of the first edition's two hundred forty. That makes him a minority, but substantial, contributor; and his "Hetty to Nancy" serves a central role in giving those pages the formal identity of a travel book rather than a hodge-podge.

Two themes occupy the entirety of *Iceland* and impel its impressive experimentation with modernist strategies in literary form. The first such theme is the book's preoccupation with the romance surrounding Iceland as the home of saga literature and as the locus of a rugged, primitive white people. As Auden observes several times in the book, Nazi anthropologists have by coincidence arrived in Iceland during his own visit. Their search for the aboriginal Aryan superman among the peasants of the volcanic island serves as a frightening and preposterous incarnation of the conservative anthropological interests of high modernist writing in general. This Auden and MacNeice counter with debunking, sociological observations, insisting that the sagas of Iceland are mere fictions representing a cultural ethos long since extinguished. They acknowledge their own attraction to this romantic anthropology, but it only leads them to highlight the absurd, unappetizing and hypermundane aspects of Iceland all the more. Auden, for instance, writes to Isherwood of Reykjavik as "built of corrugated iron . . . Lutheran, drab and remote," and of the people as "realistic" mediocrities:

As a race, I don't think the Icelanders are very ambitious. A few of the professional classes would like to get to Europe; most would prefer to stay

where they are and make a certain amount of money. Compared with most countries, there is little unemployment in Iceland. My general impression of the Icelander is that he is realistic, in a petit bourgeois sort of way, unromantic and unidealistic. Unlike the German, he shows no romantic longing for the south, and I can't picture him in a uniform. The attitude to the sagas is like that of the average Englishman to Shakespeare; but I only found one man, a painter, who dared to say he thought they were "rather rough."

The second theme, on which I touched above, is the reflection on the crisis of European civilization from which Auden and MacNeice have tried to escape, and on which they gain the perspective of distance, by traveling to Iceland. Nazi imperial ambition, symbolized by the 1936 Munich Olympics, and nationalist convulsions, instanced by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, both weigh heavily on the text and explain the air of foreboding that makes this visit seem at times like a final voyage. That the book ends with a poetic "Last Will and Testament" and MacNeice's verse "Epilogue" confirms a sense of the civilization of bourgeois tourists coming to a rough end. The "Epilogue" concludes,

So I write these lines for you  
Who have felt the death-wish too,  
But your lust for life prevails—  
Drinking coffee, telling tales.

Our prerogatives as men  
Will be cancelled who knows when;  
Still I drink your health before  
The gun-butt raps upon the door.

The overblown romance of the past and the uncertainty of the future cooperate to justify the form of the book. On the one hand, the extensive use of modernist poetic and prose techniques to create a catch-all collage form acknowledges and toys with modernity's signature chaos. On the other hand, its very capaciousness combined with the light verse and camp humor of much of the volume present the book as a last will and testament, and last act of resistance, on the part of traditional English humanism. The book is itself a kind of toast to the health of the Audenesque spirit before an uncertain calamity comes knocking.

Auden's "Byron" captures all this exquisitely; hence the relative fame of that poem in comparison with the rest of *Iceland's* contents. However, MacNeice's poems in the volume, because shorter and more clearly rooted in the time of their travels, make a more powerful statement on the relation of these two themes and the formal strategies they inspire. "Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard" stands out as MacNeice's only bit of light verse in the volume, aside from his contribution to the "Will" at the end. The voice of the poem, at the time, would have seemed very un-MacNeisian:

To Graham and Anna: from the Arctic Gate

I send this letter to N.W. 8,

Hoping that Town is not the usual mess,

That Pauli is rid of worms, the new cook a success.

In 1936, MacNeice was best known as the author of polished modernist lyrics that, much like Auden's, might display an unusual comfort with the personal "I," but avoided any sort of disarming journalistic candor. He had almost certainly seen the opening passages of Auden's "Byron," and took up the charge of writing his own humanist light verse. He elects, instead of rhyme royal, the heroic couplet from which he deviates only by adding anapests freely along with the occasional extra foot. The question MacNeice answers in the poem is "what am I doing here? Qu'allais-je faire / Among these volcanic rocks and this grey air?" His answer flirts with the romance of escape from civilized hell to primitive simplicity, but this he soon qualifies with a bit of self-deprecating empiricism:

You and I

Know very well the immediate reason why

I am in Iceland. Three months ago or so

Wystan said that he was planning to go

To Iceland to write a book and would I come too;

And I said yes, having nothing better to do.

But all the same we never make any choice

On such a merely mechanical stimulus.

The match is not the cause of fire, so pause

And look for the formal as well as the efficient cause.

Aristotle's pedantic phraseology

Serves better than common sense or hand to mouth psychology.

“έσχε τήν ορύσιν”—“found its nature”

MacNeice explains here the kind of humanist poet he was already on the path to becoming. Auden's rediscovery of his essentially humanist ethics, as I have suggested, would lead him to the Protestant Christianity of Reinhold Neibhur and Soren Kierkegaard. MacNeice's similar discovery would, more modestly, lead the professor of Classics at Birmingham to an extended wrestling with the conceptual realist metaphysics and causal (teleological) ethics of Aristotle.

Always anxious about the possibility that the materialists might be right (that only the material universe is real—and the rest mere ideology), MacNeice appreciated Aristotle's grounding of his worldview in the efficient causes visible in our experience along with those formal, first, and final causes that may only be deduced by reasoning. As a typical modern individualist, MacNeice also misinterpreted Aristotle's teleological ethics so that it became reconcilable with Max Weber's liberal conception of all human beings having their own private ends, which they should be allowed to realize on their own. MacNeice writes, “the crude / Embryo rummages every latitude / Looking for itself, its nature, its final pattern.” Aristotle understood one's nature, in part, as the final cause (an end) toward which any given being of a species desires to move. MacNeice's lines suggest that there might be a plurality of ends, and that therefore we should not speak of, say, human nature, but of this or that particular person's indeterminate and malleable nature. In affirming this distorted Aristotelian notion of causality, MacNeice suggests that, unlike Auden and Eliot, he will not return to a mode of belief in tension with modern culture (which, crucially, understands neither final causes nor the necessity of narrative for ethics). Rather than returning to the Greeks, he appropriates the Philosopher in order to justify contemporary humanism more or less as it is: caught between, on one hand, a strong sense of decency and fair play, and on the other, a suspicion of prescriptive truth claims and consequent moral relativism. Loose heroic couplets capture and exemplify this ethos gorgeously.

Since the poem's “classicism” is unapologetically modernized, one would expect its treatment of romantic notions of place and the past—of rootedness and tradition—to be at least somewhat condescending. In the cleverest lines of the

poem, MacNeice takes to task this particular romanticism that Americans tend to inherit from Thoreau, Englishmen from Wordsworth, and Catholics from Chesterton:

And there are some who scorn this poésie de departs  
 And say "Escape by staying where you are;  
 A man is what he thinks he is and can  
 Find happiness within." How nice to be born a man.

Such a startling and deadpan riposte bears repeating: "How nice to be born a man." The romantic conception of the human person as inherently and infinitely deep because the creative imagination is itself potentially infinite, and because the details of everyday life in a traditional society are small, yet infinitely rich, is not one MacNeice can easily affirm. The very individualism he celebrates may result in an exciting diversity of human types but also leads to a kind of fragmentation of personhood, in which most persons are broken, blinkered, and boring—MacNeice included. His is a variety of humanism that acknowledges how truly "without qualities" modern experience has become, and hence the necessity of traveling to Iceland to encounter—however incredulously—the "vital" pre-modern civilization of its inhabitants and the untamed rock of its geography:

Here is a different rhythm, the juggling balls  
 Hang in the air—the pause before the soufflé falls.  
 Here we can take a breath, sit back, admire  
 Stills from the film of life, the frozen fire;  
 Among these rocks can roll upon the tongue  
 Morsels of thought, not jostled by the throng,  
 Or morsels of un-thought, which is still better,

Geoffrey Gorer's review of *Letters* in *Time and Tide* (7 August 1937) insisted light verse was not MacNeice's "*forte*." "To Graham and Anne" shows otherwise. More importantly, it shows MacNeice's acceptance of Auden's premise that light verse can be serious, and that it may be the only form of public poetry that can speak to an entire society rather than just an educated and self-possessed coterie. The casual couplets make its meditations on modern ennui and ancient Aristotle entertaining without rendering them trivial. The practice this poem afforded

MacNeice at parodying Auden's unbuttoned and light tone in "Byron" would stand him in good stead. If MacNeice were up to this time best known for the ornate surfaces of his short lyrics, this verse letter opened his eyes to the potential of a discursive poetic voice that, like Horace's odes, could range about for subjects in any digressive direction and still remain a coherent whole, held together by an ostensibly Augustan verse form. This poem is the prototype, in other words, for MacNeice's most famous long poem, *Autumn Journal* (1938), which refashions the couplet into roughly free verse rhymed quatrains. It also anticipates the important if less successful discourses of *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952), and that terza rima memoir of Dylan Thomas (among other things), *Autumn Sequel* (1953). It is rare to see a poet form his mature style in such direct and intimate conversation with one of his contemporaries, but this is what MacNeice has done in appropriating Auden's "Byron" to his more classical yet relativistic sensibility. Far from thinking MacNeice a modernist lyric poet who occasionally dabbled in epistolary verse, we find that the interest of his maturity was to experiment with poetic form in search of that most serviceable for discursive poetry. These labors would yield many accomplished failures, of which, I think, "To Graham and Anne"'s adaptation of the Augustan couplet is the most impressive.

### MacNeice's Three Islands

Auden and MacNeice were both superb appropriators of the harsh cadences of Nordic saga and Old English literature. They excelled also at poetry depicting the harsh landscapes of the north of England, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere. MacNeice's tersely named "Iceland" brings together cadence and landscape, while holding in contrast the romantic terror of the society of the sagas and the blandness of modern Icelandic life:

No shields now  
                                 Cross the knoll,  
 The hills are dull  
                                 With leaden shale,  
 Whose arms could squeeze  
                                 The breath from time



And the climb is long  
 From cairn to cairn.

The lines themselves climb “From cairn to cairn,” with MacNeice breaking into dimeter lines what would otherwise be irregularly rhymed tetrameter quatrains. The effect of this lineation on the rhythm is to make obvious the intended heavy meter that renders “No shields now” a line of headless dimeter, rather than allowing to emerge the more suave iambic trimeter of “No shields now cross the knoll.” The clunk from line to line, that is, clarifies the intention of a meter equivalent to the alliterative tetrameter of Old English verse (with its regular caesura), achieved without actually relying on the perhaps overly constraining use of regular alliteration. Three of the poem’s nine stanzas use rhyme between an internal word in the sixth and the end word in the eighth lines to strengthen the echo of Old English alliteration. We find that “Tongues,” in “Tongues deride / Our pride of life, / Our flashy songs,” rhymes with “songs.” The pattern repeats at the end of the next stanza:

And the radio  
 With tags of tune  
 Defies their pillared  
 Basalt crags.

In those stanzas where this regular pattern does not appear, other internal rhyme leaps out so that, again, rhyme and meter establish a snarling cadence for the whole:

And all go back  
 Relapse to rock  
 Under the shawl  
 Of the ice-caps,  
 The cape which night  
 Will spread to cover  
 The world when the living  
 Flags are furled.

The poem's comparison between the Iceland of modernity and of the sagas ends with this stanza, so that MacNeice suggests the complacency of the present, like the tragic ethos of the Nordic gods, will end with Ragnarock, an apocalypse in which all things at last go fiercely into the night. Poems threatening the bland civilized present with spectacular, natural destruction are a commonplace among modernist poets on the left and the right. Think of Auden's "Out on the lawn, I lie in bed," or Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and John Crowe Ransom's "Miriam Tazewell." As I have suggested, such poets had a clear sense that the world was ending, whether they intended the bourgeois world of industrialized Europe, the triumphalist world of "Yankee" America, or the world full stop. "Iceland" distinguishes itself not by its theme, but by its astounding development of poetic rhythm to capture the imagined and geographical ferocity of a volcanic island in the north Atlantic.

MacNeice's "Eclogue from Iceland" is probably a better-known poem, but much the less successful. One of four eclogues MacNeice wrote, it depicts Craven, representing Auden, and Ryan, representing the author, discussing the meaning of their visit to Iceland as a romantic escape. Both poets deplore the anonymity, time- and wage- slavery of urban life, with its "sour alarum clock." Ryan adds to his complaint the atavistic sectarian violence of his native Ireland. MacNeice was a wonderful poet of the Irish landscape and urban topography, especially when the geography penetrated his autobiographical musings, but whenever he sought to address the map of Ireland's cultural politics, he lapsed into the shrill self-righteousness of the liberal who believes politics should be confined to a parliamentary present, and that history and communal memory are mere irrational impositions rather than the very condition and subject of the political. Ryan gripes,

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation  
 Built upon violence and morose vendettas.  
 My diehard countrymen, like drayhorses,  
 Drag their ruin behind them.

The acidity of these lines foreshadows Canto XVI of *Autumn Journal*, in which MacNeice's poetic craft collapses under the weight of his hatred for the long memories of his fellow countrymen. Beginning with Edna Longley's *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (1988), Irish literary scholars have made a productive effort to recover MacNeice as a poet of his native land. Since MacNeice was always thought of—and thought of himself—as an Irishman, and since so much of his poetry

captures snippets of Ireland, such a recovery is appropriate. However, it must come as a disappointment to discover that, MacNeice's national origin notwithstanding, his worldview, much like Auden's, was that of a left-leaning English liberal humanist. When he sought to engage Ireland's politics, the real presence of long and still active historical injustices defeated his well meaning "presentism." This suits a critic like Longley just fine, for just as MacNeice wished to exclude history from politics and the sense of the past from sessions of parliament, she wishes to segregate politics from poetry. For those hoping to glean some new, keen insight on Ireland from the perspective of one of its most talented literary expatriates, however, they will have to look beyond the lines that explicitly address it, to those more oblique poems about the ontological insecurity of human identity, such as the late meditation, "Didymus," from *Ten Burnt Offerings*.

The passage sighted above is prompted by the ghost of Grettir coming upon the poets, and they consider at length how their modern ways differ from the ancient sagaland out of which he has emerged. Another specter—the distant voice of the modern city—also intrudes to express the twin barbarisms of mass culture and nationalist or natural atrocities, the former distracting the "lotus-eating" consumer from the latter:

Blues, blues, sit back, relax,

Let your self-pity swell with the music and clutch

Your tiny lavendered fetishes. Who cares

If floods depopulate China?

This dramatic scene ends with a doubtful affirmation that the poets must, after their brief exile, return to the land of the unhappy and doomed to defend humanistic values:

**G.** Minute your gesture but it must be made—

Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,

Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,

Which is now your only duty.

**C.** Is it our only duty?

G. Yes, my friends.

What did you say? The night falls now and I

Must beat the dales to chase my remembered acts.

Yes, my friends, it is your only duty,

And, it may be added, it is your only chance.

Grettir serves as the ghost of historical memory, whose imperative that the poets should leave the past to him in his useless and eternal “chase,” while they uphold their duty to the crises of the present, MacNeice must have found attractive. Auden mistrusted the Nazis’ romantic anthropology of the “Aryan” past because of its patent racism, but MacNeice’s “Eclogue” suggests that his suspicion of the romance of Icelandic sagas stemmed largely from a fear that history might make its meaning and imperatives felt too strongly in the present. In allowing Grettir to bow politely into the shadows, he rejected not just Iceland, but (as I have suggested) the legacy of another island, his native Ireland. He was, therefore, reluctantly but decisively accepting the modernity of that third island, Great Britain.

MacNeice’s lines in “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament” complicate this liberal presentism only slightly. One of the gifts he leaves his homeland is “credit for that which may endure / Within myself of peasant vitality and / Of the peasant’s sense of humor.” But he also leaves his “admiration” to his father, a Church of Ireland priest who adamantly refused to support the Unionist cause or get caught up in the sectarianism of Irish politics. Having spent most of his adult life in England, MacNeice loved the Ireland of summer holidays, but reviled the Ireland with real problems and demands that it could not simply forget or escape.

Because Auden authored the bulk of *Letters from Iceland*, it was appropriate that MacNeice should have the last lines of the book and that they should be addressed to Auden himself. The “Epilogue,” written in the tetrameter couplets grouped into quatrains that Auden would deploy just a few years later for the last section of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” summarizes in pithy lines the poets’ “Iceland trip” and reviews the tumultuous events transpiring in their absence. While MacNeice was off indulging yet refusing the “Idyll on a mythic shore,”

Down in Europe Seville fell,

Nations germinating hell,  
 The Olympic games were run—  
 Sputs upon the Aryan sun.

Writing from his library in Hampstead, MacNeice reflects on their time in Iceland as a fine vacation. “Holidays should be like this,” he says, explaining once and for all that any hope for a major discovery—of a personal, historical, or mythological nature—was not to be had during their trip. Indeed, for all the imaginative resonance of an island whose landscape appears like “a sketch of Judgment Day,” MacNeice insists that it was the blankness—the absence of history and modern everyday life—that he most enjoyed during their time in exile. Now he has returned home and the impending crisis of European civilization invades his consciousness and promises to invade his and Auden’s homes. Thus, *Iceland* concludes with the toast I have quoted once already: “Still I drink your health before / The gun-butt raps upon the door.”

The achievement of the volume as a whole lies in the way it insists on being at once a campy, trivial miscellany for tourists and an extended reflection on the problematic of modern European life. This synthesis of the massive and the minute, of casual tourism and cultural theory—snapshot sociology—, echoes *Iceland’s* successful use of symbol and fragment, making it not a bit of hack writing Auden and MacNeice did in exchange for a free trip abroad, but one of the most complex and entertaining literary works of the modernist period.

After the publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, most of his contemporaries sought to offer a counter-poem that would outdo its tragic vision while offering a more affirmative perspective on modernity. Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* are the best known failures in this literary competition. And if Theodor W. Adorno is to be believed, the insoluble tension between symbolic autonomy and fragmentary totality—the foundational elements of literary modernism—paradoxically condemned all such works to fail. Modernist aesthetics, he claims, was founded on principles that contradict and undermine each other. *Iceland*, like Eliot’s early masterpiece, may be therefore a failure, but it stands alongside it and merits our admiration as a coherent work rather than a grab-bag that happens to contain some nice poems. Beyond that, readers of Auden and MacNeice must return to these pages if they wish to discover how Auden’s ethics and MacNeice’s prosody developed beyond the fashions of Marxism and high modernism toward the humane, Horacian modes both would assume around the

start of the Second World War. As such, this travel book is not just, like many other such specimens, an interesting document of a chaotic and insouciant literary decade. It is rather the obscure birth of two justly famous poetic masters.

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