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Given to the River

and

Form, Context and Tone in Eliot, Auden and MacNeice

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PhD in Creative Writing
The University of Edinburgh
2021

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Dated: 10th January 2021

Signed: Dorothy Lawrenson

Acknowledgments

My utmost thanks to my supervisor, Alan Gillis, for his unfailing support and guidance throughout this project. Thanks also to my second supervisors, Robert Alan Jamieson and Jane McKie, for their kind and constructive criticism.

Thank you to the Poetry Gang, not only for offering extremely useful feedback on early drafts of these poems but also for being so generous with their friendship and moral support. I would also like to thank Mary Johnston for her comments on the Scots poems in particular.

Many thanks to my friends Miriam Huxley and Alycia Pirmohamed for their help and companionship during our shared PhD journey. Fulsome thanks to my margarita buddy, Thais Rutledge, for her good-humoured solidarity.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my family for their support and encouragement. Finally, my love and thanks go to John, who has been an inspiration not only for these poems but also in life.

Abstract

Given to the River is a collection of poetry in which I explore themes of landscape, memory, mortality and the passage of time. Predominantly comprising lyric poetry in free verse, the collection also features some traditional and experimental forms, as well as a suite of six poems that exist in both Scots and English language versions. The collection is unified by recurring motifs of rivers, bridges, shorelines, estuaries and the sea. It attends to the flow of rivers and tides, and to activities such as beachcombing and seafaring, to meditate on the relationship between human emotional or intellectual concerns and the larger recurring movements of nature.

A specific sense of place is evident in some of the poems, especially those concerning the river Tay, which explore childhood memories as well as the history of the Tay Bridge disaster. Many of the poems draw on personal, autobiographical subject matter. "The cut-off" and "My mother asks me to knit her a hat", for example, explore the emotional challenges involved in navigating relationships between people who are widely separated geographically. "The lowes" / "The fires" and "Hansel" / "New-Year gift" explore the tension between the speaker's desire to look backwards – to the past year or to the security of childhood – and her acknowledgment of the future's inevitable uncertainty and the impermanence of physical forms. An element of fantasy enters into some poems, as in the speaker's desire to be divested of her name in "A meditation on my Christian name", or in the erasure "Epitaph for a Tragedian", which reorganises William McGonagall's words into stream-of-consciousness free verse. The collection is punctuated by four instalments of a long sequence, "Rax me that poem", whose haiku-like stanzas obliquely approach the problems of writing poetry.

In the accompanying critical study, *Form, Context and Tone in Eliot, Auden and MacNeice,* I analyse aspects of poems by T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, to demonstrate how formal features depend on context to influence tone and thereby voice and meaning. Focusing on Eliot's use of chiasmus in *Four Quartets*, voice and verse in early Auden, and iterativity in early and late MacNeice, I discuss various ways in which these works exploit relationships between form and context, and I consider the resulting tonal effects. I argue that, for all three poets, these relationships and effects contribute to addressing preoccupations with identity, temporality and mortality.

Lay Summary

Given to the River is a collection of poetry in which I explore themes of landscape, memory, mortality and the passage of time. Predominantly comprising lyric poetry in free verse, the collection also features some traditional and experimental forms, as well as a suite of six poems that exist in both Scots and English language versions. The collection is unified by recurring motifs of rivers, bridges, shorelines, estuaries and the sea. It attends to the flow of rivers and tides, and to activities such as beachcombing and seafaring, to meditate on the relationship between human emotional or intellectual concerns and the larger recurring movements of nature.

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Preface

The impetus for writing both parts of this thesis came out of the four years I spent living in the United States, where I completed my MFA degree. This was an experience that, perhaps inevitably, caused me to reflect on the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of where I had come from. Thus, it was in America that I first started writing in Scots, and my subjects were the landscapes of Scotland and the North of England drawn from childhood memories, as well as the experience of travelling between continents and communicating across time zones. At the same time, I was formulating a proposal to research conversational, clichéd, formulaic and culturally specific language in poetry, sparked off by reading about one of the first American readers of *The Waste Land*, for whom the line "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" lost its "terrifying" impact once he learned that it refers to the commonplace announcement of closing time in a British pub (Rainey 109). I was interested in the possibility that both these registers – the everyday and the apocalyptic – could exist simultaneously in this phrase, and that the resulting tonal combination could have a unique effect on a reader equipped to recognise the allusion. These creative and critical focuses subsequently developed in somewhat divergent ways, though there are also various points of correspondence between them.

As I crossed and recrossed the Atlantic, I thought of Eliot and Auden making their parallel, opposite journeys: the anglicised Eliot adopting the idiom of the British pub, the jazz-loving Auden heading for one of the dives on 52nd Street. It was in the public bar, too, that Louis MacNeice set his "Homage to Clichés", a poem whose exploration of the seductive, addictive nature of "the same again" fascinated me, perhaps because my international move had uprooted me from so many things that were familiar to me. MacNeice was the newest of these poets to me, and as I read more of his work, I felt a growing sympathy with his paradoxical preoccupation with repetition; it tapped into a conflict within

myself between tradition and innovation, which the defamiliarising experience of my American adventure had foregrounded and enabled me to explore.

The poems in Scots come out of this encounter between the familiar and the novel: fresh from reading a lot of Robert Creeley, I was to some extent applying his short lines and free-verse stanzas to the context of Scots verse, allowing me to approach a long tradition from a new angle. A certain dynamism results, I think, from how the language's condensed, Germanic vocabulary inhabits such a concise, 'modern' form. Nevertheless, these small poems also entailed much 'dictionary work' and consultation with older Scots speakers. Another 'making-new' of the past is "Epitaph for a Tragedian", in which I directly address the infamous Dundonian poet McGonagall, rearranging his words to imagine the poem he might have produced if freed from Victorian conventions and his own formal rules.

As the critical project developed, my initial interest in tone and allusion became concentrated more on Auden, in whose verse I identified what I have described as a characteristically "unsettling juxtaposition of the catastrophic and the colloquial". I also used this chapter to explore the tonal implications of certain song forms and of Auden's allusions to specific song and verse models. With Eliot, I shifted my attention to *Four Quartets*, homing in on the rhetorical, tonal and allusive effects of his use of chiasmic forms. My focus on clichéd language in MacNeice's poems broadened to a discussion of it as one aspect of iterativity, and it is here that the clearest connection between the critical and creative parts of the thesis is to be found, both in formal and thematic terms.

I have consciously responded to MacNeice's 'envelope' form in the triolets that begin the collection and in "Enough is enough", where the ending is the same or almost the same as the beginning, and in a sense I have pursued this to its logical conclusion with the reversible poem "Ouroboros". "Collared dove", too, plays on the idea of the bird's repetitive, monotonous call being variously interpreted in different cultures, and the poem's beginning

and end invert the traditional relationship between call and response. Elsewhere, my interest in iterativity manifests more thematically. In poems written during the Covid-19 lockdown, like "Hunter's Bog" and "Lockdown sounds", there is a sense of life being confined to a daily routine and of finding value in those simple repetitions and changes. Some poems describe repetitive work (printing, knitting, tree-felling, digging), and "My mother asks me to knit her a hat", in particular, explores the emotional significance of making, unmaking and remaking. "Last year's Grand National" and "The cut-off" explore how a single experience can be doubled in a disjointed way because of a lag or the difference in time zones.

Somewhat relatedly, my argument about Eliot's use of chiasmus led me to reflect on ends and beginnings in my own poems, both in terms of form and content. "Enough is enough" and "Ouroboros" invite repeated reading and imply a circular, endless form, whereas the serial format of the "Rax me that poem" sequence offers an alternative, extending the poem's or poems' end(s) and beginning(s) throughout the collection. The thematic exploration of endlessness announces its connection to water imagery in the opening of the first poem: "The river never stops flowing". The speaker in "When" contemplates death as the beginning of grief and the inadequacy of human notions of time to circumscribe the grieving process. The final poem, "Snow day", while "neither confessing / nor refuting" it, posits "a belief in endlessness".

From a craft point of view, there are two features of Auden's verse that I have always admired, but which do not come easily to me as a poet: his use of consonance instead of perfect rhyme, as in "'O where are you going?' said reader to rider", and his repurposing of hackneyed expressions, as with "Let wishes be horses" in "The sun shines down on the ships at sea". Nevertheless, I have made some use of the first feature in my own poems, for example in the triolets and in "On Wormit Beach", and the second occurs occasionally, perhaps to greatest effect in "Rax me that poem". Similarly, although none of my poems

explicitly adopts the song forms I highlight in the Auden chapter, the opening of "Elegy in October" evokes the same ballad convention Auden uses in "As I walked out one evening", and "Doxology" references religious song. Folk song, the ballad tradition, and poetry's original roots in musical performance underlie these free-verse poems, and I think these influences can be glimpsed in poems like "Collared dove" and "Open mic".

In fact, although it is true that this thesis germinated during my time in America, its seed was an earlier encounter between tradition and modernity that lay in a book my parents gave me as a child: *The Penguin Book of Ballads*, edited by Geoffrey Grigson. At the time, I preferred the earlier, anonymous ballads that comprise most of Grigson's selection, though I could understand the inclusion of broadside ballads and music hall songs in the book's second half. Even Kipling and W.S. Gilbert's compositions perpetuated, in a broad sense, a tradition of popular narrative verse or, as Grigson puts it, "versified stories in alliance with music" (9). Auden's poem "Victor was a Little Baby", however, stood out as different, and not only because of its tenuous connection to any musical context. It attracted but also confused me, because it both was and was not trying to consciously fit into this tradition. Whereas the ballads are of their time, the effect of Auden's poem derived from the juxtaposition of the traditional style with the vocabulary and trappings of 1930s life ("the Midland Counties Bank", "that Baby Austin car"). This modern, literary ballad also refers to banal aspects of written culture, to bank cashiers and clerks, and even Victor's pleas to God in Heaven are returned with the flat shorthand "Address not known". Of the ballads, Grigson says "These we have as poems of a special kind. And every poem has its own secret, or proffers its own secret in the immediate terms of its effect" (11). In Auden's poem, however, the immediate terms of its effect depend significantly on nuances of tone and context within ostensibly the same form as the earlier ballads. Thus, my exploration in this thesis of the work of Eliot, Auden and MacNeice, in which I have sought to grasp the secrets they proffer

through understanding the terms of their effects, ultimately derives from this early interest in form, context and tone in a single poem by Auden.

Although I didn't start writing poems myself till some years later, I now discern a link between my early interest in Auden's ballad and my later approach to poetry. If the better poems in this thesis succeed in revealing any secrets, however modest, to the reader, I think they do so by concentrating attention on the immediate terms of their effect, whether those terms are formal exploration of the concept of endlessness, a concern with the making-new of traditional language, or a thematic interest in iterativity.

Given to the River

Conversation

The river never stops flowing. Knowing this,
you linger to question it: is a kind of answer
bobbing like a basket in the bulrushes?
The river never stops flowing, knowing this
tempts you to wade out, a dark utterance
in answer to its babble, venturing a gesture
the river never stops. Flowing, knowing this,
you linger. To question it is a kind of answer.

Intention

Every day, those are difficult moments. To seize
the tide as it turns from taking to giving,
as a brave wave renounces its claim twice
every day. Those are difficult moments to seize:
the sea abdicating, trusting driftwood and cowries
to write its chronicle. And in life’s work of loving
every day, those are difficult moments: to seize
the tide as it turns, from taking to giving.

The limits

The librarian shakes her head like a bank manager. Poor sap,
who never knew your limits, books stacked like Staffa
between the bed and the door, you clinging to the north face,
and in the shadow of the wardrobe, a necropolis of bottles
clinking wickedly in the moonlight. Measure once, cut twice:
the pain in your side a final demand. Sitting drinking
your Tick Tock tea, as if that's a counter. And often,
you knew. Crossing Carter Bar with nothing in the tank,
watching the needle settle at less than zero. We made it,
coasting into Jedburgh, but we were long since off the clock.

Once so proud the trees

now loiter gawkily
on their trashy leaf-carpet

rowans naked and ashamed
of their remaindered fruit

I own the rain and welcome
the wind’s scourge

my face a willing host
I walk the day’s gauntlet

now ice mosaics
the fractured pavement

I try to versify
prick out pretty patterns

as frost knits his spidery lace
then drapes it over every thing

begging the low sun to unravel
the work of a night that took such pains.

The last day of summer

It was too chilly for sandals, yet I painted my toenails
all the warm colours of autumn: this little piggy, cherry;
this little piggy, damson. A secret harvest, stored away
under thick woollen socks, to see me through winter.
A brief glut – then week by week, the berries shrank
and vanished, until March remembered September
only as two stubborn crescents: sickle-shaped shadows
like those cast on my bare feet by wind-ridden trees
as I sat in the old orchard letting the lacquer dry,
wishing to force fruitfulness and shield it from frost.

Last year's Grand National

It was my bright idea to watch it
on widescreen in a cacophonous pub
but listen to the radio app's commentary.
I didn't factor in the digital signal's

massive lag. An earpiece each,
we heard the pundits chatting unconcerned
as the race began, *under starter's orders*
as the horses took the first fence,

and they're off! as we saw them clear the fourth.
Rising in pitch *it's Becher's Brook*
as they streamed over the Canal Turn,
medics and vets running like clairvoyants

before a fall had been called.
And as they're heading for the elbow
it's Tiger Roll in the lead, with hindsight we hear
the favourite's victory predicted,

as we watch the drenched horse walked
to the winner's enclosure, the jockey leaning
from a saddle wet with champagne,
while runners, not yet also-rans,

are still within earshot
and now they're on the home straight
the voice keeps pace with the delay
of their thunder, keeps faith with a past

when the field was still open, the going good,
and we might yet have been backing a winner.

Sundays, North Berwick

I used to walk
even in snow to visit
the stone doocots

above town, empty
and monumental
in the old fields.

I argued *love*
is limitless; still
you scrimped,

reckoning joy
some zero-
sum game.

Now, I admit
your logic
had a sense to it:

how each lucid
winter afternoon
was a small debt,

the days like vivid
finches in the aviary
of the Lodge grounds.

One must walk
truly to know the lie
of land, believe

how every road out
is an uphill toil.
Through the jaw-

bone arch
from the summit
of the Law

the Bass Rock, still,
is like a celebrant
robed in white.

The cut-off

Plotting to end our decade
I lie awake at dawn, decide
to make the call at noon –
for you, it is noon already.

Since hitting the runway
my mind is always running
six hours ahead. I rise,
unrested, performing

the rituals of a morning
already lost to you.
I make the call at noon
as your clock strikes 6 pm:

I picture you poised
like your first cigarette
between early dinner
and the first drink

as I inflict the sentence
on us both. Then: for me,
the motions of work,
for you, the frozen face

of evening. Stock talk
to fend off thought,
sinking triples
in the old haunts.

What you suffer
I almost share,
like hostages held
in separate rooms.

Your whisky stupor
in the small hours

will mimic sleep. In turn,

let me court oblivion

in my single bed

when you rise at dawn.

For some time yet,

like some cruel sport

we must run this course,

handing the brutal baton

back and

forth

back and

forth over

a constant ocean.

My mother asks me to knit her a hat

Before the Skype call ends I've armed myself
with a quiver of needles, ordered fuchsia wool.
'…but not one of those *pussy hats*.' I minimise
that easy pattern, opt instead for 'The Aviator'.
On a sweltering porch five thousand miles from her,
what can I do but craft a complicated hat? Once,
I joked that a lost letter 'did an Amelia Earhart',
like in Kinky Friedman's song about her last flight.
Remember when Kinky ran for governor? Damn –

this pilot has an ear on top of her head. Concentrate.
I unravel my work. Yet that is work too. *Emotional labour.*
If unknitting could reverse hair loss, I'd specialise in it.
Doing what shouldn't be needed, millions of women
have caused a shortage of pink yarn. I knit and unknit
all through the hot night, send 'The Aviator' by airmail
with a note telling how I got my money's worth
from the rare wool, making the same hat seven times,
like some enchanted garment from a fairy tale.

Dedication

You can write as the tide goes out,
but what? Will you offer the ocean
prayers for its safe return? Do what
you can. Write, *As the tide goes out,*
a pair of oystercatchers annotate
the mud: a mock answer to a question
you can write as *the tide goes out,*
but what will you offer the ocean?

Rax me that poem

Rax me that buik
– motto of the National Library of Scotland

Talk about pulling teeth
from a stone.

*

Here I am, circling around again,
my back to the wall.

*

I try to trap a word but it escapes,
roams the badlands like a feral child,
howls the language of wolves.

*

Are those hens' teeth, or dragons'?

*

If I could only find the entrance
to the labyrinth, then I could worry
about getting out of it.

*

I tried to play fetch with Heather's dog,
but he chewed each stick into bits
rather than bring it back.

*

Those sudden blossoms
now sodden in the gutter –
a half-formed paper
on which I write these lines.

Painting windows

I find I can do the job from inside
if I lower the top sash, stand on the sill,
lean over to reach the outside astragals.
(What is neither outside nor inside
the house, but essential for a home?)
I must prioritise the weather-threatened
woodwork. The sky stands on the threshold
of rain, as I am perched in the wind's eye:
a riddle. Raising the sash, I straddle
the sill, reach out and up to peel away
the tape – afraid to fall, till falling
rain mercifully ushers me inside.

Under the bridge

The bridge is silent,
the usual clatter
of trains stopped
by strikes or works.

We skim stones
on mud as if on water
under the bridge, silence
the normal clamour

of rivals vying
for larger and flatter
stones. We won't scare
the heron who stalks

the bridge in silence,
the familiar rattle
of trains stopped
by strikes or works.

On North Bridge

On the gum-pocked pavement
someone has scrawled *I SURRENDER*
in pink chalk. A man in a dark suit
leans against a parapet slashed
with rain dirt, his face smudged
as he turns. Beyond the depth of field
Calton Hill is dissolving,
its monumental clutter
anonymised by haar: suggestions
of obelisks, tombs. On the bridge
over the lost loch, the man
straightens, briefly holds himself
motionless, seems a cenotaph.

Boat trip

Landlubbers scare easily,
exaggerate the size of waves
so I'm surprised when the skipper says

we nearly didn't get into open water,
the harbour was too choppy
the pier too dangerous for our return

at times we can't speak
can't see for spray
heads down into the wind

another wave rinses us
soaking every stitch
the surf bludgeons us

the hull crashes on the crest of each wave
the sea wants to clobber us
drag us away like a seal's pelt

I try to lick the salt from my lips
but I'm drenched with saltwater
and the sea's tongue enters my head

tomorrow my clothes will be stiff with brine
and I will have a headache
from the sea's pounding

in their snug sea
the longed-for seals and dolphins
nestled out of sight

Potato printing

The late crop huddles
in its long night, menaced
by frost. Singling out
the fattest, I pluck off
its sun-thirsting shoots.

On the chopping board
a single slice coins two
new gleaming moon-faces.
One remains flawless and full,
while from the firm flesh
of her twin, whose scabby skin
gives the best grip, I cut cleanly,
precisely. To her milky weeping
I turn a blind eye.

Then laying out
the black cotton throw, yellow
and white paints, I sow the darkness
with five-pointed stars that wink
like gold stirring in soil:
garden escapes, potatoes
flourishing their flowers.

Dinggedicht

you can never quite
put your finger on it

it’s an assembly
or it’s single

together they pile up
they get on top of you

you catch a glimpse
when they assert themselves

when they’re not good
they get you down

the thing is

it’s so specific
when you lack it

but it’s anything
and everything

this is it
you see

this is the thing

When

Grief strides in like he owns the place,
kicks off his boots and puts his feet up
on the coffee table. Over the fruit bowl
you stare at each other while the apples
wrinkle their russet skins, pears turn
soft and blotchy. You sit there until coke
in the glass goes flat, milk in the fridge
rancid, raw eggs forgotten underwater
float to the surface. You recall how she
would champion the banana as a unit
of time: its window of edibility defined
differently for each eater. You sit there
until green bananas in the bowl turn black;
spots of mould on their skins coalesce
and whiten the bananas; until the ghosts
of bananas shrivel up, and all but disappear.

On Wormit Beach

The old quern stone was likely ballast
from a boat wrecked off the coast,
but it seemed proverbial, the biblical

millstone hung like an albatross
round the neck of some wretch cast
from an ill-starred ship. Or a goddess

was strolling, distaff in hand, and lost
her giant spindle whorl as she passed
at low tide – when seaweed like offcast

finery adorned the shore, and the last
gems of a scattered hoard of sea-glass
were lavished among the worm casts

and razor shells. That was decades past:
now the millstone yields to the caress
of pebbles, thins to a ring, atoms lost

with every tide as the estuary's grist
grinds like fate – for water is no less
patient than stone, or than the old cast
iron stumps of the bridge that was lost.

Memento

> Boat-hooks and irons grappled with the bodies of three more women as they rose to the surface that day, but each of them refused to leave the river, and turned over and floated away and sank, leaving a handkerchief or a tortoiseshell comb adrift on the water.
>
> – John Prebble, *The High Girders*

Jealous of the living, the river was prodigal
with the dead, returning more than half
the bodies. Some would be granted
to the mussel-dredgers, some surrendered

on the tide – others were only paroled
long enough to leave a token: a handkerchief,
a comb. The rest slept on the riverbed and kept
their keepsakes, or bequeathed them to the sea.

A stopped pocket-watch among the limpet
shells. A pearl cufflink. A nacre collar stud.
A dismembered corset, its delicate ribcage
of whalebone briefly borrowed from the deep.

Today, the new bridge sustains
its strait and narrow line of iron.
Persistent as a revenant, its silhouette
graces every sunset. It gives a dignity

to the diesel engine shuddering
through its girders, despite the stumps
that run alongside, the whisper in the ear
of every traveller: *remember you are mortal.*

Epitaph for a Tragedian (An erasure of William McGonagall's *Poetic Gems*)

In the dim sun's rays, half-hidden with sable drapery,
often has his lustre shed
volley after volley of violets, with azure
effulgence among the yellow corn –

He lived as a Christian gentleman
in his time, ready to die or to dare;
among dark swarms of men, foolish
and benighted, he handed down to posterity
lectures against strong drink.

– Now sound drums and trumpets, for weird-like
comes the iron horse snorting and rumbling
with its long, white curling cloud of steam
composed of cream-coloured silk, and its cargo
of cheap tea, bread, and Lipton's ham,
window-glass, coal, and linseed oil.

As the sleet drove thick, furious and fast, it was awful to witness
the central girders thus cut down, crushed,
mangled and gigantic. Coal-dust blackened
the water, the screaming of the sea-birds ascended
like a shower of white flowers, and flame
weltered in the water –

silvery

silvery

until only a jagged reef of rocks
glinted dimly, almost
as hush as death.

Alas! Noble but empty-handed, and ankle deep
in snow, he enacted a tragic part until the last:
pale, dejected, careworn, and forlorn.
The silence was profound. Void
of all vanity, he confesses
a stave of a song – a solemn monument,
and engraven thereon in letters of gold:

will clear all expenses in a very short time.

Solstice

As the days shrink you swaddle
your body more. The ebbing sun
inks you in, a fatted silhouette
on Calton Hill. The wind rakes

its fingers through the folly,
through you, and through
sun-silvered pools of slush.
But lift your muffled head.

Now is the hour of alchemy:
the distilled day has reached
cask strength and renders
its angels' share, the light

that turns stones molten.
Treasure this – every finite
second of the gilded minute,

before the gloaming once again
gives back to a darkening world
its unfinished monument.

Gathering daffodils

In bulb-beds in the public park, daffodils
lie headlong, scythed by Spring storms.
The rate of attrition is high: one in ten felled

beyond saving, fodder for slugs.
I triage the casualties, their snapped stems,
bruised blooms spattered with mud.

These I bring home, and a vase of water
will be their hospice: a tattered corps
of buglers sounding the last post.

Craigmillar

A single magpie struts in the quiet street
where the scheme peters into the park. I stop
on the path, look back at the tower blocks:
grey gatekeepers between this foreground hush
and the rush of the city, in the northern distance
Arthur's Seat a gorse-embroidered backcloth.

The woods, once a tapestry of hawk,
horse and hound, are now patrolled by joggers
and dogwalkers. I reach the defensive doocot
that launched birds from its turret, musket balls
from its gunloops. In the courtyard, two yew trees
more stoic than stone, an eroded coat-of-arms
on the wall mouthing like a crestfallen queen
I am but a body whose heart's torn away.

In an upstairs bedchamber, a jackdaw's nest
makes a mock of the fireplace. I retreat to walk
in the grounds, as far as the sitooterie of rusty
corrugated iron in its grove of blackthorn, creamy
lace ornamenting the leafless black spines,
a magpie hopping over cracked tarmac.

Elegy in October
15.10.17

As I walk out, my pocket sings
    its merry, aimless tune:
far from town, all coins
    are toys. The pound

my fingers play with, this-way
    that-way, is like a little model
of the great bales that roll
    their gold across the stubble

while in the next field
    shoots of winter wheat
chorus through red soil.
    After the first leaf fall,

before the first frost, earth
    gluts the senses:
a blushing rowan, a blanched ash
    with blackened fingers

clutching rusty keys.
    Yellowed nettles loiter
in ditches, and sallow stalks
    of rosebay willowherb

hawk their old silk.
    The creeping shadow
of a hawthorn hedge
    clips the field margin

where, like the milled edge
    of a coin, serrated grasses
skirt the crop: an ornament
    and a safeguard.

I turn the coin in my pocket,
    unspent and obsolete,
though I knew this day
    was the last to tender it.

Sometimes furniture is so depressing

Assembling a flatpack desk, I crouch inside
its upturned wooden frame, tightening screws.
Once, this space would have seemed a boat or fort
instead of a coffin. At best necessity, at worst
stumbling block, furniture is so insistent now.
I remember it as an ally, friendly to games
of round-the-room-without-touching-the-floor
when we climbed on bookcases and armchairs
our parents had studied and saved for.

We left home and divested ourselves of clutter,
renting bare rooms, crashing on floors.
Now we are older, and somehow furniture
re-asserts itself, accumulates in every corner,
encroaching on space. How did it get here?
We must have deliberately collected sofas
and tables till there's no sign of the carpet
and no place to stand, as if we suspect the floor
might yet turn molten or open under our feet.

Thursday, 7am

The pips: dredged from sleep
you meet a brittle brightness
and can but obey. The ritual
of toast and tea, teeth. Rattle
on the tracks, shuffle, shuttle
from city to city. Head throbbing
on a throbbing pane, blank page
on the lap. You write: *sentences,*
commuted. To make vital what is
over and again, feel the gradient,
the grit, the yawn's rictus.
Get coffee: reflect how, instead
of swirling futures in tea leaves
you taste the past in coffee grounds
choked down, as at a teetotal funeral.

OVER UNDER OVER UNDER OVER
UNDER OVER UNDER OVER UNDER
ONE ANOTHER ONE ANOTHER ONE
TWO ONE TWO ONE TWO ONE
AFTER THE OTHER ONE AFTER
THE OTHER ONE AFTER THE
OTHER ONE AFTER THE OTHER
EVER AFTER EVER AFTER EVER
AFTER EVER AFTER EVER AFTER
ALL AND AFTER ALL AND AFTER ALL
THIS ALL THIS ALL THIS ALL THIS
AND THIS AND THIS AND THIS AND
THAT AND THAT AND THAT
THIS AND THAT AND THIS AND THAT
AND THE OTHER AND THE OTHER
AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN
AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND
SO ON AND SO ON AND SO
ON AND SO ON AND SO ON
AND SO ON AND SO ON AND
SOON AND SOON AND SOON
ENOUGH IS ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
OVER AND OVER AGAIN AND AGAIN
AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER
UNDER AND UNDER AND UNDER
OVER AND UNDER AND OVER AND
UNDER OVER UNDER OVER UNDER
OVER UNDER OVER UNDER OVER

Wood for the trees

Lost and myopic
in the mind's forest

I beseech a leaf
as it blinks green

to yellow, fingertips
enquiring of birch bark

on the soul's mountain.
I am a tourist in flip-flops

benighted, without signal
and on the heart's shore

notating every pebble
I am overtaken

swept out by tides
into the heart of the ocean.

At Tottenham Court Road Underground

> For every static world that you or I impose
> Upon the real one must crack at times and new
> Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
> And old assumptions yield to new sensation
>
> – Louis MacNeice, 'Mutations'

Where red and black lines intersect

arterial Central Line
the Northern Line like heavy lead
in a stained-glass window
a wave of warm air

breaks
a timelapse migration

of office workers
sweeps past
where I stand
camera in hand

inhabiting the dimension of tourism.

A butterfly's sight transforms what to us is
analogue organic into a pixellated blur

a chequerboard of tessellated allsorts

dreamtime of asymmetric moths

a meccano chicken
a clockwork cow.

The butterfly flutters its wings myriad eyes
averted as the doors close the train flows

like a corpuscle. Why speak of fragments of

reconstruction original context

as if a kaleidoscope were not

for turning confetti
for falling the earth

for giving birth?

Londoners know the tube is a cocoon

a painted sarcophagus

conveying us

fractal
and
falling

from life

to life.

On Deptford Beach

I discover treasure, pocketing pieces
of tobacco pipes smoked by long-dead men:
each fragment smooth as wampum, cowrie-pale,

the slender tips like songbirds' hollow bones.
A tapered section sprouts a spur, a shoulder joins
a stem to a smoke-stained, broken bowl.

Pipeclay is light, but my pocket grows heavy
with sludge. Crouched in the debris, I salvage
a hook and line to clean each bead's narrow bore.

Around my neck they rattle like teeth. Talismans
blackened by tobacco juice, tinted with cuttlefish ink,
given to the river by a departed clipper crew.

Rax me that poem (contd)

That summer we smashed open
mussels for pearls.
Was it worth it?
Tiny, misshapen things
irridescing
in a litter of wrecked shell
and desecrated flesh.

*

Having reset the margins
I agonise over typeface and size,
headings,
leading,
smartquotes,
m-dash,
n-.

*

Shackled to my desk
late into the night
till a huge moth looms
through the open window
and silently pilots me
to the door of the room.

*

The brewery retains its logo
(a woodcut of men with a barrel)
even after they learn a barrel
slung on a pole between two men
would have held piss for tanning.

*

A friend plants dowsing rods
in my trembling hands.
They wave aimlessly.

I badly want to feel

a twitch,
a pull,
anything

but her insistent
‘Don’t you feel it?
Don’t you feel anything at all?’

*

Fussing with the colour palette,
fancying myself a gene editor
I tinker with the hex codes
from #000000 to #ffffff
and watch as digit-by-digit
my letters disappear.

The lowes

Daunderin on the shore
thae simmer forenichts
heid doon lik a whaup
wi’s neb i the grummel,

Aa’d rake the glessy sand
fur buckies or clinkers,
ony toy Aa cud fordel.

Syne Aa’d strauchten, rax
ma hippit hurdies,
an stell masel fur the lowe
i the westren lift, that still

Aa canna thole.
Thae gleeds o reid an gowd
wad wrack the thrawnest hert;

they steik me yet
an reive ma saul
athoot Aa jink ma een
the ither airt

oot owre the brae,
tae thon hooses
whaur ilka lozen lunts

wi a glent o reid-gowd
lik a bairnie’s nicht-licht
that lowes stieve an siccar,
an bides the hale nicht lang.

The fires

Wandering on the shore
those summer evenings
head down like a curlew
with its beak in the mud,

I'd rake the glassy sand
for shells or coins,
any toy I could hoard.

Then I'd straighten, stretch
my stiff haunches,
and brace myself for the blaze
in the western sky, that still

I can't bear.
Those embers of red and gold
would wreck the bitterest heart;

they pierce me still
and plunder my soul
unless I dart my eyes
in the other direction

over the top of the brae,
to those houses
where each windowpane kindles

with a glint of red-gold
like a child's night-light
that burns steady and safe,
and remains the whole night long.

Bladnoch 5.10.19

Ablow the brig
we pit up oor tent
fornent the threit

o the onding
the misk o the haugh
wauchie i the dayligaun

an us waukrife
drookit wi smirr
tentie o watter

abune an ablaw
blatter an souch
the girse reeshlin

ilk syke and sheuch
wi fleet watter
reamin ower.

Bladnoch 5.10.19

Under the bridge
we put up our tent
against the threat

of the downpour
the grassland by the river
boggy in the twilight

and us sleepless
soaked with mist
heedful of water

above and below
storm and sigh
the grass rustling

each ditch and stream
with running water
overflowing.

Cutty days

When the sun’s sweir
tae rise an gleg tae dern
his licht ablow a bowie
he juist kittles the lift
syne yirds his braivity

whiles the mensefu mune
wi nae sic fause blateness
busks hersel an taks
the road she’s uised wi
tentless o day or nicht

or whether she’s hailly
or ainly hauf hersel
till, jimp an dwynin,
she kens it’s lowsin time
an syne she’s brand new.

Short days

When the sun's reluctant
to rise and quick to hide
his light under a bushel
he just teases the sky
then buries his splendour

while the seemly moon
with no such false modesty
dresses herself and takes
the road she's used to
heedless of day or night

or whether she's wholly
or only half herself
till, slim and waning,
she knows it's knocking-off time
and then she's brand new.

The muckle shockle

The brick-biggit airch
wis ringin wi vyces
o lads that wis daffin

an chuckin stanes
at the muckle shockle:
thon gey wark o dreeps

– a stalactite o ice
if ilka drap stuid
for a hunner year –

wis gart shoogle and dirl
and dingit doon
in an oor.

Fleggit bi fawin
skimes o ice
the boys wis soon again

rypin the wrack
tae mak a wappenshaw
o shables o licht.

The big icicle

The brick-built arch
was ringing with voices
of lads who were playing

and chucking stones
at the big icicle:
that great work of drips

– a stalactite of ice
if every drop stood
for a hundred years –

was made to shake and ring
and knocked down
in an hour.

Frightened by falling
flashes of ice
the lads were soon back

plundering the wreckage
to make a wappenshaw
of sabres of light.

Hansel
Wormit Bay 01.01.20

Athort the strand, peens o ice glent
lik gless the bairns dinged
fae the bothy's blin windaes.

Cranreuch on the auld waas
minds me o yestreen's cauld,
een's it blaws wi the day's flooers.

Yince mair Aa've sprauchelt
ower the black craigs
at the snell end o the year,

doiterin on chuckies clottert wi frost,
crumpin jeeled wrack unnerfit,
an noo Aa skail thir shockles:

shairds o a bottle no lang at sea,
its message tint.
                                        The morn's morn, aiblins

Aa'll forthink thon lowsed sklinters,
aiblins mak a hansel o thaim.
Anither oor or twa, an the bauch ice

will jyne the seawart fluid, whiles,
lik the muckle firth itsel, switherin
gin it's weirdit tae be fresh or saut.

New-Year gift
Wormit Bay 01.01.20

Across the beach, panes of ice glint
like glass the children smashed
from the bothy's blind windows.

Hoar frost on the old walls
reminds me of last night's cold,
even as it blooms with today's flowers.

Once more I've clambered
over the black rocks
at the bitter end of the year,

stumbling on pebbles clotted with frost,
crunching frozen seaweed underfoot,
and now I scatter these icicles:

shards of a bottle not long at sea,
its message lost.
Tomorrow, perhaps

I'll regret those released splinters,
perhaps make a good-luck gift of them.
Another hour or two, and the thawing ice

will join the seaward flood, sometimes,
like the great firth itself, swithering
whether it's fated to be fresh or salt.

Aubade

Yestreen we twa smoort the fire,
dreeblin ess on ilka yella glaim
tae mak it smooder till morn.

We cooried doon, doverin taigled
ticht as a wappit raip
abuird a ship on a gurly sea.

Whiles yin o's wad feeze or jee,
as if ettlin tae mak an affgang
in's ain dozent currach.

Sae ye girded your barrel-breist
wi ma airms, but fient a craw-nest
could gainstaun when peep-o-day's

essie glowe wis sent tae sinder us:
auld mune i the new mune's airms,
fou as the fouth o ma hert.

Aubade

Last night we two smothered the fire,
dribbling ash on each yellow flame
to make it smoulder till morning.

We went to bed, dozing off tangled
tight as a spliced rope
aboard a ship on a stormy sea.

Sometimes one of us would twist or turn,
as if trying to make a departure
in an individual coracle of sleep.

So you girded your barrel chest
with my arms, but no crow's-nest
could withstand when dawn's

ashen glow was sent to separate us:
old moon in the new moon's arms,
full as the fullness of my heart.

Rax me that poem (contd)

Brief lines of verse engraved
on window glass:
frost crystals, unwritten by sunrise.

*

John draws the cartoon first
then comes up with the caption.

*

Passing the paddock, I thought
poor old horse,
he looks knackered.

Remember the abattoir
the school bus passed every day,
us kids craning for the sight of carcases?

*

You don't know you have rules
until someone breaks them:

> She gives you a present of polkadot socks.
> He cuts his fingernails in public.
> They centre your poem.

*

I stand with my ball of string, listening
for the minotaur's distant bellow.

Magic eye

On the wall beside my childhood bed
a cheap but faithful print
of Durer’s hare,
whiskered and twitching.

On the wall beside my childhood bed
gaudy wallpaper
with pink, white and yellow
stylised flowers.

The hours I spent
on my childhood bed
wandering
within those walls.

Childhood

Photographers on the hill
 said such a glut of sunsets
 was precious, collectible,

 but I let each copper disc
trickle through my mind
like change from a pound:

a burnished penny failing
 to find a slot in the Sidlaws
 and nightly running molten

 over the Carse of Gowrie
to be quenched in the Tay.
Now I total the loss

of an inheritance
 coined and melted down
 in the space of a summer.

 Yet some days I discover
new-minted in my memory
a sovereign, impossible

to hoard or squander –
 struck just to commemorate
 a day that passed away.

The pony girls

At a grown-up’s nod
you swing, slither
to trodden earth,

legs in hand-
me-down wellies
buckling. You wait –

thighs saddle
sore, hands black
with saddle soap –

holding his head
while a brusque girl
bosses and hauls

at the girth, cluck-
clucks and clicks.
Sun-struck, you shrink

shy as shadows
against the wall.
The pony girls know

tack by heart,
stride about in proper
boots and jodhpurs,

stay to muck out.
You clutch the treat
mum brings: a can

of lemonade shandy,
sipping it on the river
path, skipping

over roots one-
two, on your own
two happy feet.

Instructions for foragers

Leave the road by the kissing gate
where the Allen flows over the weir,
and at Tommy Stout's well

drink three times from your cupped hands,
throw a handful over your shoulder:
a gift of silver for the sun.

The path clambers through the wood,
then slopes to a meadow clear of trees –
that's Bishopfield Haugh.

Here the river has shifted,
leaving a plane like a tray prepared
for some delicate operation.

Sheep bustle through walls more gap than stone,
scattering scraps of wool.
Reach the shade of the alders

where a nameless burn feeds the river:
there you'll find wild watercress
half-wading, half-floating,

and gather handfuls of its leggy,
leafy sprawl, and shake the droplets
on the dappled grass.

Be careful not to snap the hollow stalks,
but curl them into a green nest
in the hat that serves as a basket.

If you go on, remember
you carry poison; unsterilised,
your harvest will make you sick.

Follow the farm track if you will,
past Bridge Eal and Kitty Green,
on as far as Oak Pool,

but do not be tempted – however long
the road over Keenleyside

to the Blue Back Bridge,

up the Cupola Bend and at last
down the old drove road
past Folly Farm –

however hot the afternoon
you must not risk a cool
crunch of those fresh stems;

you must not chance
the peppery bite
of those bright leaves.

A friend of the family

He had one of the old reiving surnames
and five grown children living in the dale.
Semi-retired at eighty, he still rolled up
the sleeves of his soft checked shirt,
took a quad bike to check on the sheep.

We drank tea by the tiled fireplace – a shrine
for his late wife's porcelain birds – and spoke
of the new vicar, the winners at the leek show
and of farmers killed by their tractors. In a lull,
wistful into the gas flame, 'Of course,'

he said, 'there'll soon be no English left'.
The clock ticked. My mind fumbled, scrabbled
and finally proffered 'Well, *I'm* not English…'
We gulped tea, were mutually embarrassed,
as he reassured us both that he didn't mean *me.*

Cutting down the bullace

The summer’s task was to kill
the feral plum trees whose sly spread
from next door saw young roots
lift old stones, disrupt our wall.

My brother and I felled one a day,
tugging a rope so they’d land clear
of the oak. We lopped and burned
branches, improvised a saw-horse

from a crux of the fused trunks,
cut limbs to nine-inch logs, stacked
for next year. Littered with twigs,
the lawn became a forest floor;

spines lodged in my boot soles,
strong as horseshoe nails. Cutting
the remnants flush with the ground
had us gasping, resting –

Tom said sawing so low was sheer
bloody murder, so when the bow saw
had cut a wedge he swung the axe,
clumsy blows smashing the stump.

To stop regrowth we drilled holes
in the shattered stumps, blew away
frothing heaps of creamy sawdust,
packed the holes with salt. But the sweet

smell of sap portended rain. We fled
as a storm sluiced salt from the wood’s
raw wounds, revealing its mangled,
meaty flesh, its blood-dark heart.

Digging a cesspit

After a week the *Elsan* was at high tide,
thick bluish fluid lapping with foul flotsam.
My sister's new boyfriend arrived on cue.
Dad marked out a square metre, the blade
of the trenching spade deftly slicing
the lank grass, handed it to the youth
and said he would fetch the pickaxe:
there were bound to be rocks.

In the kitchen, the thick stone walls
and flagged floor kept out the July heat.
Mum strained and bottled elderflower cordial
to put in the cold-room. I played on the floor.

The lad was knackered after an hour,
tormented by sweat-seeking flies.
But still he toiled in the noon heat:
his legs slowly disappearing
he grew shorter and more stooped
as if reconciling himself to his grave.

I stopped pretending to be a horse.
A hole as deep as a man is tall!
I had heard the story about the Jew
who fell in a cesspit on a Saturday
and refused help, only to die on Sunday
when the Christian rescue party would do no work.

In the afternoon, I helped the boy clamber out.
Mum poured the bucket's brimming contents
into the pit where they frothed, sloshed
and settled, sheets of the pink paper she favoured
floating like waterlilies on the surface.

That was thirty years ago. For a long time –
and maybe still – square patches of lush grass
and big-leaved nettles high as a child's head
grew in that rough ground under the elder tree.

Doxology

Praise these half-gold,
half-green evenings
in June, constellations

of cotton-grass dazzling
the heather, a curlew
circling. Praise

these citronella nights
when under a frail awning
we congregate, and praise

the pallid skyline, the fell
a faded counterpane
pricked with lights. Praise

departed bluebottles
that earlier racketed
against the canvas,

though now white moths
martyr themselves
in still-wet paint

on the white gate
until the half-dark
pales, and with a fresh song

of praise, dawn calls time
on us: the heavens
above, the creatures

here below, all those
who crave darkness
but are drawn to light.

here

is
truth
enough

form
gives
fancy

a
helping
hand
a

permission
of
sorts

granting
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Rax me that poem (contd)

‘Metaphor’ my father propounds
‘is the last refuge of the scoundrel’.

*

And later: ‘we got on
like a horse on fire’.

*

A meditation, not a trap:
perhaps the labyrinth begins
as penance only to end
in prayer.

*

In the back court
the tourists never look up.
Like a forgotten deity,
I gaze down from my window.
I have the guide’s script by heart,
can almost kid myself
I author his words.

*

A faraway look in his eye
my father extemporises
clerihews, mid-sentence.

*

In the Canongate, a child
climbs on Fergusson’s statue.
Little sister,
standing on his shoulders
taller than us all,
above the fallen blossoms
and the pennies on his book.

‘Magic!’

It’s become second nature
to co-opt the supernatural
for ordinary praise or thanks

as if these pints are rabbits
the barman pulled from a hat,
that meal you cooked just

the card I was thinking of,
this poem conjured
from a puff of smoke.

Or might ‘magic’ invoke
not trickery but a blessing?
Illusionism has nothing

to offer one who seeks
an amulet against harm.
Let the word not dispel

but expand mysteries,
the way my scientist father
once, defending the Bible

against a sceptical priest,
argued quantum physics
allows for miracles.

So when I say you charm
soup from a stone, music
from maple and nylon,

I consent to an enchantment
by whatever power moves us
to beguile or to protect.

Open mic

You whisper *speak into the mic with every word.*
And relax! My breathing's shallow, I've a dry mouth.
I know you spot bad technique from the first *one*

two, one two. Thing is I'm too tall: the microphone
demands I adopt a weird stoop to feed it words,
like some tortured britpop act. I see you mouth

because maybe as I open and close my mouth,
daring me to sing *you're gonna be the one*
that saves me… and after all, I exhale word

after word mouth-to-mouth into the microphone.

The haar again

On the second day of lockdown
the haar pays a visit, just to rub it in.

It loves what we've done with the place:
very *noir*, the loneliness, the edge of fear.

In the drenched deserted streets
of the city, it tightens its velvet grip,

erasing the names of shuttered pubs,
fashioning ruffs for streetlamps,

wreathing wellheads. The miasma
does not exist. The haar is just a sea-mist

that recalls an old idea of pestilence, somewhat
as 'miasma' gestured towards germ theory:

one fog figuring the past, the other the future.
Soon, the haar will lift, leave us

groping about in the present, in daylight,
guessing at when it might return.

Estuary

As we stumble upriver, sand becomes
grit, becomes gravel; and we, lovers

in search of the source, who would defy
dusk and outpace tides, are captivated

by the pebbles underfoot. Marbles
flatten to coins: a trove of stones

gathered by waves that seek
the seekers. We forget our quest,

scrabbling in drunken circles
to squirrel the prettiest discs,

as if we doubt the morning tide
will leave another bounty.

A wave breaches your boots.
I raise my head: the sun is sinking

and we must bear the treasure home.
Footsteps sink in the grit, the sand,

pockets over-ballasted with pebbles
drag us down. We prize our cargo

all the more as jettison: a tribute
gladly forfeited to the advancing tide.

The truth about jellyfish

You believed the ocean would reclaim
them safely after their day trip,
when they'd had enough sun and dry land:
a strange life, helpless and happy.

Yet they were stranded: strewn randomly
on the still-damp sand, darkly puddled
in dry rock-pools, a mess of spilt marmalade
among shards of tide-shattered crockery.

I indulged you as we picked our way
between the dead and dying – but later,
our fiction exposed, you couldn't bear
how I'd conspired to deny death.

In my place, would you have spoken
a truth that would kill the choice
or, like me, have chosen
to be the sadder and wiser one?

Collared dove

Streptopelia decaocto

I've FOUND you, *I've FOUND you*
she insists from her perch in the pecan tree.
An immigrant herself, she seeks me out

to make me feel at home, her tone as sullen
here in Houston as in Rome, Paris, Córdoba.
In Greece, she's an overworked housewife

baking *eighTEEN loaves, eighTEEN loaves.*
In England, some wit hears the chant
of a despondent fan: *u-NI-ted, u-NI-ted…*

She'll keep up her complaint all morning,
as she used to in Kirkcudbright
in the fir tree by the gate. And in a garden

in Isfahan, her kinsman who stayed behind
will be pleading from the cypresses,
where ARE you, where ARE you, where ARE you?

The pigeon wars

Five weeks into lockdown, he's found a project:
the new feeder needs protection against pigeons
who gobble the seed and scare the finches. By night,
he affixes scalpel blades round the little table's lip –
a circle of jutting teeth, like the maw of an anglerfish.
In the morning, there's blood.

Two days later, the sound of big wings wakes him.
A wood pigeon making slow passes pulls up, treads air,
tastes the strangeness of hovering, heraldically splayed.
Horrified, he witnesses her lumbering descent
to dance on bleeding feet, neck craned, contorted
till she's half-emptied the hopper.

He glues wooden skewers at insane angles,
refills the seed to the brim. Two more days
of reconnaissance flights, aborted attempts –
and she's cracked it: spatchcocking herself
as she lands in the forest of spears, he swears
she impales her wings and tail feathers.

It can't be worth such pig-headed effort.
Yet taller and sharper, the arsenal bristles.
The blades rust. The smell keeps the blue tits away.
It's an ugly, feather-tufted fetish.
And still he wakes from pigeon-ridden dreams
to the *whoomf* of big wings.

A meditation on my Christian name
(*Dorothy*: from Greek Δωροθέα, ‘gift of God’)

All our lives we carry these
names, gifts from our parents.
Showering or in bed

I wear mine, like a soldier
his dog tags, a pilgrim
her St Christopher medal

but I daren’t look my old gift
horse in the mouth, for fear
of what the Greeks who bore it

nested within it: another gift
and the god who bestows it.
I carry my name as a man might

give a piggyback to a child
who grows ever heavier
as they cross a swift river

until he dreads he holds
the one who holds the world.
It’s Christmas, and my name

is on boxes under the tree.
I make a wish to leave it there
this once, to climb naked

on the back of a strong horse,
ride out into the rapids
and let them carry me away.

Hunter's Bog

I wonder you're so taken
with this spot: a puddle
with pretensions to a pond.

In March, a bourach of tadpoles
all apostrophes and commas
the jackdaws edit as they snack:

little futures
coming to nothing
like sperm under a microscope.

You say *let's walk as far as the big tree*
and then go home, so we do.

When we come back in April,
the tadpoles are gone –
whether gobbled or grown
we can't know.

June is so dry
we expect a muddy hollow
not deep enough
to get a bad dog wet

but last month's rain
trickling through the hill
has made a lochan at our feet

brandishing flag irises
and hoisting bulrushes.
I decline to wade out

but, crouching, photograph
marsh orchids
that peep through the mare's tails.

You say *let's walk as far as the big tree*
and then go home, and we do.

Rorschach

Sometimes in bed
you turn your back
on me and I on you,

and a lazy game
of footsie is the product
of those two negatives,

a slow dancing
cheek to cheek.

I like the tangle
and the tightness
of a hug,
the snug asymmetry

of spooning.
But when our heads
diverge, reflecting
each on its own pillow,

our solitary dreams
replenish the heart-
shaped space
we make between us.

Lockdown sounds

We are woken by a magpie
brandishing his football rattle
outside the window

and the distant ack-ack
of returning geese
seems near in the clean air.

The woman across the street
has moved her caged bird
away from the window.

Other neighbours exercise
behind the railings on the roof.
All we desire is to be passed over.

For weeks now,
that cruise ship in the firth –
quarantined or harbourless

– and rats fleeing
the sinking restaurants.
The radio is relentless.

At one o’clock, the boom of the gun
from the castle. An echo of pigeons
clattering through empty streets.

Furloughed workers
returned to the land
rescue neglected gardens.

The zoos are closed.
The radio broadcasts birdsong
from the presenter’s garden

and our hectoring wood pigeon,
like a fat school master
drones his lesson to the trees.

At eight o’clock, applause
and the banging of saucepans.

Perhaps tomorrow

we will be graced by the sight
of a blue tit. All we desire
is to be visited. Sometimes,

in the night,
the bell of St Giles
tolls an absurd number

and over the rooftops, haunting
and weird, comes the hoot of a fox.

Eyes closed

Wishing is a trust game,
kissing a game of peekaboo.

I sneeze and you bless me.
Eyes in clenched darkness

make an image of God.
Lashes sweep me to sleep,

black plumes nodding,
eyelids loaded as if

with two silver coins
midnight has loaned.

Snow day

We set up the turntable and returned
to bed. Plans and warnings were judged
wanting and whited-out, like the selves
we blurred under bedclothes, insulated
four flights above the muffled streets.
Down and up were anyhow abolished
as snow swooped in arcs, or spiralled
like flakes in a shaken paperweight.
The stylus reached the centre and we let it
ride the lock-groove for an hour, laying
its crackle under peaks and troughs
of ragged breath, neither confessing
nor refuting a belief in endlessness,
just letting the noise of silence loop.

Form, Context and Tone
in Eliot, Auden and MacNeice

Introduction

T.S. Eliot once observed, in a letter to a fellow writer, "One has to take account of the fact that to many people, every writer on mystical subjects appears not only to be saying the same things as other writers, but himself to be saying the same things again and again" (qtd. in Eliot et al. 944). Eliot was drawing attention to the formal feature perhaps most apparent to casual readers of *Four Quartets*, who – it is implied – perceive only 'vain repetition', without appreciating any meaning inherent in the repetition of words, ideas, or aspects of form. As well as highlighting this specific authorial choice, however, Eliot's observation illustrates more broadly that the success of a writer's formal choices depends on readers recognising certain contextual elements: that is, both the context in which the work itself exists and any external contexts alluded to therein. In this study, I analyse aspects of poems by T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, to demonstrate how formal features depend on context to influence tone and thereby voice and meaning. I discuss how these works exploit relationships between form and context, and I consider the resulting tonal effects. I argue that, for all three poets, these relationships and effects contribute to addressing preoccupations with identity, temporality and mortality.

The first chapter discusses Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), whose constituent poems initially appeared separately between 1936 and 1942. I analyse Eliot's use throughout the poems of chiasmic forms: inverted parallelism, extended and modified chiasmus, and pseudo-chiastic structures. I discuss their use for aphoristic effect, to convey equivalence and reciprocity, and as a kind of counterpoint that drives the logic of the poetry. Religious content, most evident in explicit allusions in *East Coker* and *Little Gidding*, is also evoked in Eliot's use of centre-focused chiasmi reminiscent of biblical poetry. Further, chiasmus is a

formal means of exploring the work's major thematic concerns: time, ends and beginnings, "the point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (*DS* V, 18–19).[1]

A major strand running through *Four Quartets* is the inadequacy or obsolescence of language, "the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (*EC* II, 20–21) in which any success is futile because "one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it" (*EC* V, 5–7). Ultimately, I argue that Eliot's use of chiasmus represents an attempt to square this circle, a crucial way in which he addresses the problem of using language to transcend the limits of language.

In the second chapter, I turn to an analysis of voice in Auden's early poetry, covering the period from 1928 to 1939. Textual analysis focuses on diction, syntax, rhythm, allusion and parody, identifying changes of register and idiom and analysing the resulting effects. Definitions of tone are concerned with the relationship between writer and reader, but such definitions are complicated by the notion of the poetic speaker: in certain of Auden's poems, poet and speaker seem synonymous; in others, they are clearly different. I discuss how tone and thus voice is influenced by Auden's use of repetition and ritualised language and by his skilful modulation between perfect rhyme and consonance.

Drawing on Auden's theory of light verse, the second half of the chapter discusses his 'lighter' poetry, contending that he used popular forms to respond to the complicated writer–speaker–reader relationship. Circling back towards the original musical definition of tone, I argue that echoes of specific songs, through connotation, affect tone. Meaning depends on the reader's ability to recognise contextual allusions that are sometimes clearly stated (as in "Miss Gee" and "Victor") and sometimes only implied. Auden's intertextual relationship

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[1] In referring to the poems that make up *Four Quartets*, I use the abbreviations *BN* (Burnt Norton), *EC* (East Coker), *DS* (Dry Salvages) and *LG* (Little Gidding), followed by Roman numerals to denote the poem's part and Arabic numerals to indicate line numbers.

with popular song walks a fine line between the parodic or ironic ("The sun shines down on the ships at sea") and a sincere appropriation of the form ("Refugee Blues"). In between these two extremes, I discuss a sonnet in which he addresses popular song directly and argue that his pastiche of folk song paradoxically results in a uniquely authoritative voice. Through metre, Auden's voice became less ironic and more 'at home' during the 1930s, reflecting his growing sense of community and historical continuity.

The third chapter examines Louis MacNeice's preoccupation with repetition, in poems from *The Earth Compels* (1938), *Plant and Phantom* (1941) and *Springboard* (1944), as well as the later collections *Solstices* (1961) and *The Burning Perch* (1963). I use the umbrella term 'iterativity' to encompass formal features such as rhyme, refrain and repetend, as well as thematic concerns with repetition, return, memory and cliché. I highlight MacNeice's skilful handling of feminine rhyme and identical rhyme. Discussing definitions of repetition, refrain and rhyme, I connect these with Heraclitus's dictum that "one cannot step into the same river twice": repetition necessarily entails difference since a word changes its meaning when repeated in a different context, and MacNeice's poetry constantly explores and exploits this paradox. He uses specific formal means to achieve varying and sometimes opposite effects: identical rhyme contributes to anxiety-inducing loss of identity in "Reflections", whereas in "Apple Blossom" it effects a consolatory harmony of sound and sense. Similarly, the so-called 'envelope' form is used to beautifully ironic effect in "The Sunlight on the Garden", with a nightmarish result in "The Brandy Glass", and to magically suspend time in love poems such as "Déjà Vu".

MacNeice's fascination with cliché is given free rein in several of the poems. I draw attention to how the later poems' tendency towards repetition contributes to their "nightmare logic", and how they incorporate allusions to fairytales and nursery rhymes. The late poems'

preoccupation with childhood intensifies their thematic and formal iterativity, once again echoing MacNeice's obsession with returning to an earlier state and recapturing lost time.

Running through the chapters are some common threads, for whose discussion the individual focus of each chapter does not allow room. The concluding chapter explores these, before conducting a comparative analysis of tonal differences between the three poets, which points to their respective attitudes to the problems of existence and time and to the roles of love and language in addressing these questions.

Chiasmus in *Four Quartets*

In *The Art of T S Eliot*, Helen Gardner offers this "brief and abstract" summary of the content of *Four Quartets*:

> […] it presents a series of meditations upon existence in time, which, beginning from a place and at a point in time, and coming back to another place and another point, attempts to discover in these points and places what is the meaning and content of an experience, what leads to it, and what follows from it, what we bring to it and what it brings to us. (44)

The first poem, *Burnt Norton*, certainly invokes a specific visit Eliot made to the titular stately home, and the sequence does indeed end with the poem inspired by the 17th-century religious community of Little Gidding. But significantly, Gardner uses the phrase "coming back to" to describe the work's overall progress, and this sense that the structure as a whole consists in a return to its origin, rather than in a linear movement from start to finish, is echoed in other descriptions. Steve Ellis, for example, states that "*Four Quartets* is among many things a journey, or a process of exploration that ends where it began" (104). Eliot himself, in *The Music of Poetry*, claimed that "the use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music" (27), but the most convincingly argued musical analogue for *Burnt Norton*, Bartok's string quartet no.4, notably has an essentially chiastic rather than recursive structure (Eliot et al. 895). It is arguable whether the whole structure of *Four Quartets*, or that of its constituent poems, is more accurately characterised as chiastic or cyclical. However, at the level of the line and the sentence, Eliot makes frequent use of inverted parallelism, extended and modified chiasmus, and pseudo-chiastic structures. This habitual use of chiasmus both echoes and drives poetic meaning, contributing to what Michael O'Neill describes as "Eliot's imaginative and rhythmic practice […] to move in a transitional way between passages, focusing maximum although unforced readerly concentration on their line-by-line workings. It is a poetry in which each line makes something happen" (31). This

chapter traces Eliot's use of chiasmus throughout *Four Quartets*, to explore how his poetry uses this device to "make things happen".

In its most easily recognisable form, also known as antimetabole (from Greek *anti* 'opposite' + *metabole* 'turning about'), chiasmus consists of the repetition of identical words in reverse order: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The resulting ABBA pattern,[2] suggesting an X-shaped cross, is more clearly seen when the figure is organised with the first phrase placed on top of the second, as in two lines of poetry. Eliot's propensity for verbal repetition in *Four Quartets* prompts him to draw on this classical rhetorical figure in a fairly obvious and deliberate manner:

> We had the experience but missed the meaning,
> And approach to the meaning restores the experience […]
> (*DS* II, 45–46)

It is important to appreciate, however, that classical chiasmus goes beyond the simple swapping of identical words. As Brad McCoy describes it, "chiasmus involves inverted parallelism between two or more (synonymously or antithetically) corresponding words, phrases, or units of thought" (19). Nils Lund demonstrates the inversion of corresponding "units of thought" with another New Testament example (Mat. 7:6):

> Give not that which is holy unto the *dogs*,
> Neither cast your pearls before *swine*,
> Lest haply they (the swine) *trample* them under their feet,
> And they (the dogs) turn and *rend* you. (32, emphasis and insertions in original)

As he points out, recognising the chiastic structure in these words is essential, "for only so do they become intelligible […] This passage becomes clear at once, if we connect the two central and the two extreme lines, for swine trample and dogs rend" (32).

[2] Throughout this chapter, I follow the example of Lund and McCoy in using capital letters to refer to the corresponding elements of a chiasmus. This should not be confused with the use of capital letters to denote terminal rhyme, a convention not used in this chapter.

Eliot's use of chiasmus is rarely so easy to 'solve', partly because it rarely occurs as a self-contained figure of simple inverted parallelism. The example given above, for instance, is only part of a longer meditation:

> We had the **experience** but missed the **meaning**,
> And approach to the **meaning** restores the **experience**
> In a different form, beyond any **meaning**
> We can assign to happiness. I have said before
> That the past **experience** revived in the **meaning**
> Is not the **experience** of one life only
> But of many generations […]
>
> (*DS* II, 45–51, my emphasis)

Having set up the AB/BA correspondence between the terms "experience" and "meaning" in the first two lines, Eliot then repeats the B term on the third line, before introducing another abstract noun, "happiness". After a pause, the new sentence returns to the repetition of terms, this time in the order AB/A. This asymmetric, contrapuntal repetition of the two key terms results in a subtle rhythm that blends the incantatory and the conversational. The loose pattern of repetition that proceeds from the third line cannot in any strict sense be described as chiastic – but it has clearly taken its impetus from the initial chiasmus.

Gardner points out that *Four Quartets'* predominant metre is akin to the medieval accentual line: "The norm to which the verse constantly returns is the four-stress line, with strong medial pause, with which *Burnt Norton* opens" (*The Art* 29). These opening lines also set up a grammatical parallelism, which is immediately complicated by the use of repetition:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future […]
>
> (*BN* I, 1–2)

"Time present" and "time past", introduced as two distinct parallel terms in the first line, are in the second line conflated. The challenge this presents to conventional logic is compounded by the re-purposing of "present": first apparently used in its commonplace sense to

distinguish “the present” from “the past” – indeed, we more commonly use these words as nouns than as adjectives – it is then applied to describe the situation of both (implying the awkward phrase “time present is present”, which doubtless contributes to the uncertainty of “perhaps”). If both are present in it, “time future” cannot be introduced either logically or grammatically as a parallel term – though the fact that Eliot insists on the established formulation “time future” rather than “future time” or “the future” points up the tension between words and experience that is a major theme of the poem.

Two four-stress lines are highly suitable for accommodating the ABBA terms of a chiasmus, though Eliot also incorporates the figure into longer, six-stress lines. But the medial pause in the four-stress line provides a natural division between the A and B elements that accentuates the figure’s effectiveness. It also manages to suggest an essential chiastic structure underlying certain couplets, even when only some of the elements of a chiasmus are present. For instance, the entrance into the garden in *Burnt Norton* I is prompted by the song of a thrush:

> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> **Into our first world**, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? **Into our first world.**
>
> (*BN* I, 19–22, my emphasis)

The repetition of “Into our first world” takes the form of question-and-answer, and this call-and-response (perhaps echoing the bird’s call) is emphasised by the words’ physical situation at opposite extremes of the ‘X’. The question–answer relationship between the repeated phrase further strengthens the relationship on the other axis, between following and deception – calling to mind the reason for the exile from Eden, and the impossibility of re-entering “our first world”.

One further example from *Burnt Norton* I may serve to illustrate some subtle implications of the pervasive presence of chiasmus. Once in the garden,

> […] the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
> Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
> There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
> (*BN* I, 28–30)

William Penny describes the imagery of the crossed eyebeam as a "cruciate-like form", and the crossing of two different viewpoints is echoed in the words that are repeated with morphological change: the flowers both "had the look" and "are looked at", the guests are "accepted and accepting". These pairs make a chiasmus of sorts, as an ABBA is formed by their respective grammatical change from active to passive, and from passive to active. This subtle pattern reinforces the garden's idyllic imagery of reciprocity, hinting at the simplicity and reconciliation at which *Little Gidding* will ultimately arrive.

In the second movement of *Burnt Norton* II, the verse modulates into six-stress lines whose virtuosic handling of rhythm and repetition, as in the example from *The Dry Salvages* discussed above, takes off from the chiasm of the first two lines:

> **At the still point** of the turning world. **Neither flesh nor fleshless**;
> **Neither from nor towards**; **at the still point**, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
> Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
> I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.
> And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
> (*BN* II, 16–23, my emphasis)

In this longer line, however, the organisation is looser, and the chiasmus slightly staggered to accommodate "of the turning world" and "there the dance is" within its two lines. This allows the opening lines to set up three terms – "the still point", "neither…nor…" and "there the dance is" – that are to recur with variations in the following lines. In the fourth line, Eliot

eschews the more logical word order "Movement neither from nor towards", to emphasise the parallelism of syntax with the lines above and below. Further down, as the line reduces to four stresses, the "neither…nor…" repetend morphs into a dance between the words "no" and "only", making a tight chiasmus that is then extended into a coda, which arrives back at the problem of time:

> There would be **no** dance, and there is **only** the dance.
> I can **only** say, *there* we have been: but I **cannot** say where.
> And I **cannot** say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
> (*BN* II, 21–23, my emphasis)

This chiasmic dance drives the logic of the whole passage, from the "still point" back to "time"; but it is also a dance for its own sake, whose fluid movements and repetitive vocabulary become somewhat hypnotic. As Eliot later wrote, "the purpose of the dance is the dance itself. Similarly with poetry: the poem is for its own sake" (qtd. in Eliot et al. 917).

In *Burnt Norton* IV, the line "St**ray** down, b**end** to us; t**end**ril and s**pray**" (4) provides a brief but beautiful example of phonological chiasmus, appropriate to the lyric mode of this section, which ends by reprising the vocabulary and repeating the opening line of the second movement of part II:

> After the kingfisher's wing
> Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
> At the still point of the turning world.
> (*BN* IV, 8–10)

In each *Quartet*, part V addresses the role and the problems of poetry. Elisabeth Schneider sums up how, in *Burnt Norton*,

> […] poetry and music are conceived as an analogue of the spiritual still point. Their medium – language or musical tone – exists in time; but the essence of art is form and pattern, for through these it is that art and the timeless moment of mystical vision intersect. The work of art gives us the moving world yet the world detached from the claims of before and after. (184)

This intersection of the timeless with time – more explicitly stated in the two later poems – here prompts a return to figures approximating classical chiasmus:

> Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The **stillness**, as a Chinese jar **still**
> **Moves** perpetually in its **stillness**.
> Not the stillness of the violin […]
>
> (*BN* V, 4–8, my emphasis)

The chiasmic pairing of the repeated 'A' term "stillness" heightens the 'B' pairing of "still" and "moves". If we remember that chiasmus is defined as inverted parallelism between *synonymously or antithetically corresponding* words, its use here also underlines the paradoxical relationship between the 'B' terms: the expression "still / moves", joined grammatically but separated by enjambment, is ambiguous in meaning. Again, the chiasmus is modified so that it continues with repetition of the 'A' term on the line below, giving the impression of the continuing free movement of thought, from art to music.

The possibility of intersection is subsequently figured in more abstract terms which point towards the theme and macro-chiasmic structure of *East Coker*:

> Or say that the **end** precedes the **beginning**,
> And the **end and the beginning** were **always** there.
> Before the **beginning** and after the **end**.
>
> (*BN* V, 10–12, my emphasis)

Although it is expressed tentatively ("Or say that…"), this figure represents an attempt at reconciling the divine and the temporal, and Eliot employs chiasmus in an attempt to 'square the circle'. Significantly, what could have been an ABBA couplet has made room for a central line that brings the end and the beginning into contact with eternity.

This chiasm shows Eliot going beyond inverted parallelism (familiar from classical rhetoric) to explore chiasmus with a central component (characteristic of biblical literature). McCoy illustrates the difference by expanding the contemporary antimetabole, "Winners never quit and quitters never win":

> "Winners [A] never quit [B], and therefore perseverance is an important key to success [C], because quitters [B'] never win [A']" – illustrates chiasmus in this full technical sense. Worded in this way, the statement clearly revolves around the axis of the central component [C]. The chiasm, thus, explicitly states what the previous example of inverted parallelism only implied. This is accomplished by means of the corresponding components of the inverted parallelism of the chiasm (A/A' and B/B') building to and then moving away from the central affirmation, "perseverance is an important key to success," as the emphatically placed, pivotal [C] proposition of the chiasm. (20)

In *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, Lund gives illustrations from both Old and New Testaments, mostly of extended chiasmic structures too long to quote here. A shorter example (Isa. 60:1–3) has a central component consisting of two lines:

Arise,
  Shine,
    For thy light is come,
      And the glory
        Of Yahweh
          Upon thee is risen.

            { For, behold, darkness shall cover the earth
              And gross darkness the peoples.

          But upon thee will arise
        Yahweh,
      And his glory upon thee be seen,
    And nations shall come to thy light,
  And kings to the brightness
Of thy rising. (44)

Compared to McCoy's simplified example, the relationship of the central component to the lines that bracket it is more ambiguous, though it is evident that the passage as a whole "revolves around the axis of the central component" and that "the corresponding components

[are] building to and then moving away from the central affirmation" (McCoy 20). The lines from Isaiah further illustrate parallelism of ideas rather than just words ("shine" allied with "brightness"); and the way that terms, although paralleled, change their grammatical identity as the lines effect a change in sense ("Yahweh" changes from possessive to nominative, and it becomes Yahweh himself rather than his glory that rises).

Although Eliot's chiasmi rarely include figures with such a clear central focus, his use of chiasmus demonstrates the features highlighted in the biblical example. While I am not suggesting that Eliot deliberately employed biblical verse forms in *Four Quartets* in any programmatic way (Lund's seminal work only appeared in 1942, the year in which *Little Gidding* was published, although there had been earlier studies of Old Testament chiasmus), he was of course familiar with biblical prosody and rhetoric. As the poems' religious content becomes more explicit from *East Coker* onwards, allusions to biblical language naturally evoke certain cadences and structures, and it is perhaps unsurprising that aspects of Eliot's form should be reminiscent of centre-focused biblical chiasmus. Coupled with *Burnt Norton's* epigraph from Heraclitus ("The way up and the way down are one and the same"), which may provide a key to the poem's interpretation, what McCoy calls "active recognition" (33) of such underlying patterns can help the reader to unlock meaning.

East Coker famously announces its overall chiastic structure with its "In my beginning is my end" opening line, and "In my beginning" also serves as the 'envelope' phrase that begins and ends part I. This part contains another description of dance, much more earthly and earthy than that evoked in *Burnt Norton*:

> […] Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter,
> Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
> Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
> Mirth of those long since under earth
> Nourishing the corn.
>
> (*EC* I, 35–39)

The antithetical relationship between "earth" and "mirth" (representing death and life respectively) is sharpened as they are brought into proximity by the dance imagery, by their perfect rhyme, and by their placement at the line ends to form a clear chiasm. The verbal reversal, together with the reference to "those long since under earth", presages the ending of *The Dry Salvages*:

> […] We, content at the last
> If our temporal reversion nourish
> (Not too far from the yew-tree)
> The life of significant soil.
>
> (*DS* V, 47–50)

Penny also draws attention to the lines that end *East Coker*'s dance passage (*EC* I, 45–46), with their "antithetical pairing of 'Feet rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death'" (110).

The discursive second movement of part II critiques the "pattern" that had been identified in *Burnt Norton*, the hope poetry had seemed to represent now perceived as merely "A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (19–21). The ensuing discussion uses a form of extended chiasmus to enact its critique of manmade "pattern" – as Penny puts it, it is the problem of "how a contrived system itself can represent notions intrinsically elusive and ephemeral" (98):

> There is, it seems to us,
> At best, only a limited **value**
> In the **knowledge** derived from experience.
> The **knowledge** imposes a **pattern**, and falsifies,
> For the **pattern** is new in every **moment**
> And every **moment** is a new and shocking
> **Valuation** of all we have been.
>
> (*EC* II, 31–37, my emphasis)

The logic moves from the “value” of “knowledge” to the “pattern” imposed by knowledge. But the falseness of imposing a pattern then propels the poem’s logic to look to the changing “pattern” of the “moment”, and from this direct observation (as opposed to established knowledge derived from past experience) the “moment” offers a new “valuation” of the entirety of existence. The chiasmus’ central component is the dynamic contradiction between the false, imposed pattern and the ever-new pattern. What McCoy notes of biblical chiasmus has relevance here: “an appreciation of chiastic structuring also encourages the interpreter to take special note of the corresponding thought units on the outer extremities of the overall discourse (A/A’), which also tend to be highlighted, albeit to a lesser degree than the pivotal component (X), in the employment of chiasm” (31). The pivotal component (X) is the conflict between the false and the new pattern, and it is this conflict, arising from the initial recognition of limited value, that ultimately leads to a new “valuation” – appropriately, an assessed estimate rather than an absolute “value”. Along the way, the chiasmic structure encourages the reader to contrast the “corresponding thought units” of “the knowledge” and “every moment”. The liberating progress from value to valuation is incrementally assisted by the key terms’ general tendency, when repeated, to undergo grammatical change from object to subject.

The central part of *East Coker* is replete with religious allusions, including reference to 1 Corinthians 13, and a paraphrase of St John of the Cross. The repeated phrase “I said to my soul, be still” (12, 23) calls to mind verses from the Old and New Testaments: Psalm 46:10 (“Be still and know that I am God”) and Mark 4:39 (“And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still”). The line “I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope” (23) introduces a passage that engages with Corinthians’ hope, love and faith, and also adds “thought”. This meditation culminates in the line “So the darkness shall be the

light, and the stillness the dancing" (28), whose use of parallel structure and ellipsis are reminiscent of Jesus' words "the last shall be first, and the first last" (Mat. 20:16).

The passage paraphrasing St John of the Cross is preceded by a rather defensive and tentative introduction:

> You say I am repeating
> Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
> Shall I say it again?
>
> (*EC* III, 33–35)

The transformation of statement into question, enjambed this time so as to occupy the 'B' positions of an imagined chiasmus, reverses the question-to-answer 'A' axis of the repeated "Into our first world" from *Burnt Norton*, perhaps highlighting the inferiority of words compared to the thrush's natural ability to communicate through song. The question also suggests Whitman's *Song of Myself*: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself" (Eliot et al. 944), though this allusion again highlights Eliot's hesitancy in posing rather than answering the question.

With its evocative description of river and sea, Eliot's handling of the longer line in the opening of *The Dry Salvages* is, in Gardner's view, "the most delightful variation of this six-stress line" in *Four Quartets* (*The Art* 34). In this passage, Eliot is unafraid to use repetition and rhyme for obvious musical effect: The "strong brown god" (2) of the river is "ever, however, implacable […] waiting, watching and waiting" (7, 10), whereas the sea is more playful: "the granite / Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses / Its hints of earlier and other creation […] / It tosses up our losses […] The sea has many voices, / Many gods and many voices" (16–24). As Penny notes, "The power of mediation appears to reside with the inanimate objects and their communicative functionality rather than with the human agent in such instances" (111), and this power is conveyed through subtle but insistent repetition:

The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers […]

(*DS* I, 35–38)

This passage ends with a gesture towards a mirrored structure: the order of the "ground swell" and "bell" elements is reversed, even as "time" beats its insistent rhythm:

[…] Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell.

(*DS* I, 43–48)

Part II of *The Dry Salvages* pursues parallelism and repetition, both for musical effect ("the soundless wailing, / The silent withering") and to advance the poem's argument:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?

(*DS* II, 1–6)

This is the beginning of a simplified sestina, a form whose first stanza establishes the pattern of repeated terminal words that is followed through to the end of the poem. As Federico Italiano explains,

> The inscription of the end in the beginning is a famously formal, structural feature of the sestina. […] Most striking about the sestina is its teleological directionality. Having read the first stanza, the reader already knows the words with which the poem will end. […] the sestina engages its own ending from the very beginning. (6)

The effect is somewhat similar to the more flexible ‘envelope’ format beloved of Louis MacNeice, which I discuss in detail later. Eliot’s choice of form here serves, like the opening of *East Coker*, to announce “In my end is my beginning”, though the sestina opens with a questioning tone which the final stanza answers by negation:

> There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
> No end to the withering of withered flowers,
> To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
> To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
> The bone’s prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely prayable
> Prayer of the one Annunciation.
>
> (*DS* II, 32–36)

Further, Eliot’s six-stanza sestina omits the final stanza, which traditionally compresses the repeated words into only three lines. Instead, his final verse mimics more exactly the form of the first, apparently refusing an opportunity for formal development that might offer some sort of epiphany: “There is no end” here, but only a return to the same bleak prayer. Yet, some hard-won development has resulted from this endless wailing and withering, as the “unprayable” prayer is now “barely prayable”, and the unspecified but “calamitous annunciation” now assumes a more explicitly Christian interpretation, so that the sestina’s real “end” is the Magnificat, the “Prayer of the one Annunciation”.

Part III opens with philosophical speculation on Krishna and Heraclitus, but swiftly lightens this serious mood with wordplay and the imagery of embarking on a journey:

> […] the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.
> You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
> That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.
> When the train starts, and the passengers are settled
> to fruit, periodicals and business letters
> (And those who saw them off have left the platform)
> Their faces relax from grief into relief,
> To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.
> Fare forward, travellers!
>
> (*DS* III, 6–14)

Eliot brings Heraclitus's cryptic fragment down to earth and into the present with the colloquial "face it steadily", and goes on to negate the commonplace that "time is a great healer" as well as to invert it through a technique approaching spoonerism or *verlan*:

time is no **h**ea**l**e**r**: the patient is no **l**onge**r** **h**ere.

The consonantal juggling act is performed over the top of the grammatically parallel construction – a sonic game poking fun at the sententiousness of the aphorism to undermine its authority. A few lines further on, Eliot takes the opposite approach, assuming a flippant tone to convey a serious observation of the transition "from grief into relief". The word pairing practises a double-bluff on the reader: the obvious rhyme seems at first to be prioritising sound over sense, but on reflection expresses a common, recognisable experience whose rhyme chimes with its "rightness".

Eliot transitions from the prosaic world of train travel to the romantic imagery of seafaring in his critique of the notion of time. As Gardner summarizes it, "In the present moment, 'between the hither and the farther shore', the past is not finished, the future is not 'before us'. The present, the actual moment, is the moment in which past and future exist" (*The Composition* 56–57). The passage in which the mind's eye travels from railway carriage to ocean liner provides a particularly clear example of a biblical-style chiasmus with a central component (X), which can be analysed using the programmatic approach suggested by Lund or McCoy:

A	PRESENT (DESCRIBES PAST)	{ You are not the same people who left that station
	FUTURE	Or who will arrive at any terminus,
B	PRESENT (DESCRIBES PAST)	While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
X	PRESENT	And on the deck of the drumming liner
B'	PRESENT (DESCRIBES PAST)	Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
A'	FUTURE (DESCRIBES PAST)	{ You shall not think 'the past is finished'
	PRESENT (DESCRIBES FUTURE)	Or 'the future is before us'.

(*DS* III, 16–22, my indentations)

The parallels, convergences and divergences conjured by the imagery are brought into a complex interplay with those created by lineation and grammatical tense. The A/A' couplets, with their "You…not… / Or…" construction, seem to mimic parallel railway lines. But this parallelism is an illusion, belied by the way that reversal of tense in these lines creates a mirroring effect, just as the "narrowing rails" mirror the "furrow that widens". The shapes evoked by this imagery (Λ and V), not only chiasmically paired but even evoking a letter Chi when combined, in fact contradict each other: to figure the past using converging linear perspective is as arbitrary as to visualise it as the dissipating wake of a ship. The central image directs the attention instead to the present, "on the deck of the drumming liner". Yet within this symmetrical structure there is some leeway in the use of tense, if only to gesture towards a conception of the future even as it is being denied. This movement is somewhat like the incremental change allowed in the ending of Eliot's sestina, even as the repetition inherent in its form seems to deny any sense of an ending. Again, Louis MacNeice achieves an analogous effect through repetition-with-difference in poems such as "Leaving Barra" and "Meeting Point".

A similar progress-by-degrees is evident in the final part of *The Dry Salvages*, where words are repeated to be corrected or qualified:

> For most of us, there is only the unattended
> **Moment**, the **moment** in and out of time,
> The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
> The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
> Or the waterfall, or **music heard** so deeply
> That it is not **heard** at all, but you are the **music**
> While the **music** lasts. These are only **hints and guesses**,
> **Hints followed by guesses**; and the rest
> Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
> **The hint half guessed**, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
> (*DS* V, 23–32, my emphasis)

The sestina's formal repetitions in part II arrived, through the difficult exercise of prayer, at the Annunciation. Here, through spiritual exercises of repetition ("prayer, observance, discipline"), we finally approach the mystery of the Incarnation, "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (18–19).

Continuing to stress the practice of prayer, *Little Gidding* explores its definition by means of repetition, seeking this "point of intersection" in a specifically English setting:

> You are here to kneel
> Where **prayer** has been valid. And **prayer** is more
> Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
> Of the **praying** mind, or the sound of the voice **praying**.
> And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
> They can tell you, being dead: the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
> Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
> Is England and nowhere. Never and always.
>
> (*LG* I, 45–53, my emphasis)

Schneider sees this emphasis on attaining "the point" through spiritual practice as being the major shift achieved by the final poem: "The center of *Burnt Norton* had been the timeless moment, the moment of full consciousness that comes briefly, unsought and unforeseen, in a place entered by chance. In *Little Gidding* the experience occurs not by gift or chance but is to be won through a pilgrimage" (198–199). The final line of part I underscores the significance of its geographical specificity, using phonological mirroring across its caesura:

England and **n**owhere. **N**ever and **a**lways.

Sonically, place is paired with time: "nowhere" with "Never", "England" with "always", the local with eternity.

The second part of *Little Gidding* is "a making new of Dante that is the most emphatically accented passage of iambic pentameter in *Four Quartets*" (O'Neill 38). However, Eliot's use of feminine endings results in a pattern of alternating ten- and eleven-syllable lines that mitigates the finality of pentameter:

> Eliot replaces the rhyme scheme of terza rima with a pattern of alternating masculine and feminine endings. In conjunction with a fluid syntax, this pattern turns from a device into perfect medium. Setting the poem "In the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending", […] Eliot is able to convey the co-existence of the "interminable," "the unending," and a sense of "the recurrent end." Each line advances towards such a paradoxically circular "end." (O'Neill 37)

This paradox is enhanced by Eliot's use of effects approximating classical antimetabole. The "interminable" night is equated with "the recurrent end", and "ending" is balanced against "unending" on the arms of this X:

> […] Near the **ending** of **interminable** night
> At the **recurrent end** of the **unending** […]
>
> (*LG* II, 26–27, my emphasis)

The effect is even more marked since Eliot sought to avoid repetition as a general principle of the Dantesque form:

> The simplicity of language at which one must aim, in this kind of verse, requires the avoidance of repetition of words (even *of*s and *and*s and *but*s have to be carefully watched) and even the avoidance of words of similar formation too near together. (Qtd. in Eliot et al. 1024)

A similar deliberate departure from this rule occurs in the chiasmus the narrator addresses to the "familiar compound ghost" he encounters in the "urban dawn":

> I said: 'The **wonder** that I feel is **easy**,
> Yet **ease** is cause of **wonder**. Therefore speak:
> I may not comprehend, may not remember.'
>
> (*LG* II, 55–57, my emphasis)

The almost-exact repetition of words recalls aphoristic chiasmus, familiar from Shakespeare and Donne, which Dunya I'Jam and Zahraa Fadhil describe as "the use of a chiastic structure to bring a section of poetry to an end. In other words, it marks the closure of a stanza echoing

the sequence of the elements that are presented in the previous line or lines in inverse order" (45). An example is the final couplet of Donne's Holy Sonnet XV:

> 'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
> But, that God should be made like man, much more. (Donne and Patrides 444)

In Eliot's Dantesque verse, however, the poem continues; the imperative "speak", though corresponding chiastically with "I said", leads the new sentence on to a third line that is equivocal and pessimistic. If the effect of aphoristic chiasmus comes from the fact that "the surface crossover of linguistic content implies a dovetailing of ideas at a deeper level" (I'Jam and Fadhil 46), this sense is undercut by Eliot's modification of the figure, though somewhat ameliorated by the addition of a feminine slant rhyme ("wonder / remember").

Eliot brings his own words more explicitly into conversation with mystics such as, in part III, Julian of Norwich ("All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well") and, in part V, the anonymous author of the 14th-century *The Cloud of Unknowing* ("With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling"). Part III opens with a discussion of "attachment" reminiscent of St John of the Cross (Eliot et al. 1028), featuring verbal chiasmus as well as imagery that is concerned with the centre and the extremes:

> There are three conditions which often look alike
> Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
> Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
> From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
> Which resembles the others as **death** resembles **life**,
> Being between two **lives** – unflowering, between
> The **live** and the **dead** nettle. This is the use of memory:
> For liberation – not less of love but expanding
> Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
> From the future as well as the past.
>
> (*LG* III, 1–10, my emphasis)

Like that of his mystical models, Eliot's imagery requires meditation and interpretation but might be paraphrased thus: Indifference is a kind of death, between the old life of worldly

attachment and the new spiritual life of detachment. The old life stings like a live nettle; the new life blooms like a dead-nettle, and indifference is an unflowering plant growing between them. Some confusion is created by Eliot's refusal to use a hyphen to make clearer the distinction between a dead nettle and the flowering dead-nettle plant – the latter being Eliot's intended meaning (Gardner, *The Composition* 200). The temptation to read the line in the sense of "the live nettle and the dead" is only encouraged by the way the chiastic arrangement emphasises the extremes of death and life. However, interrogating the imagery of the nettles reveals a more profound difficulty – of which Eliot was aware – inherent in its reliance on parallels and opposites. As he wrote in a letter to the critic Desmond MacCarthy,

> I do not mean that Attachment resembles Indifference; but that Attachment *can* resemble Detachment, and that Detachment *can* be mistaken for Indifference. You will not agree about the first; but surely, on a more familiar plane, a selfish love of a person and an unselfish love of a person can easily be mistaken for each other, or at least the first can be mistaken for the second? But the image of the nettle is not happy, because it assumes the existence of a third kind of plant, which does not exist, which might be mistaken for both. (Qtd. in Eliot et al. 1028)

In his struggle to express an esoteric philosophy in worldly terms, Eliot reaches for imagery derived from humble hedgerow plants. Yet his emphasis on botanical categorisation, on the difficulty of distinguishing differences amid resemblances, serves, like his resort to organising around the polar extremes and the centre of the chiasmus, to point up the ultimate impossibility of verbalising ineffable experience. By contrast, the meditative repetition of Julian's assurance represents a release and, as it ends this section, a simple grounding of faith once again in prayer:

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of thing shall be well
> By the purification of the motive
> In the ground of our beseeching.
>
> (*LG* III, 47–50)

The opening of part IV's short lyric, "The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror", harks back to part II's evocation of the wartime all-clear ("After the dark dove with the flickering tongue / Had passed below the horizon of his homing"). But what Eliot called "my Pentecost poem" (qtd. in Eliot et al. 1037) stresses the redemptive power of love, which purifies like fire:

> The only hope, or else despair
> Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
> To be redeemed from fire by fire.
>
> Who then devised the torment? Love.
> Love is the unfamiliar Name […]
>
> (*LG* IV, 5–9)

The lyric relies on rhyme, symmetry and centre-focus for its power, with the pause effected by "Love. Love […]" giving the impression of having worked inwards to the question and then logically outwards from its answer, Love.

The final part of *Little Gidding* opens with a couplet which now offers the ring of familiarity as well as the pleasing effect of inverted parallelism:

> What we call the beginning is often the end
> And to make an end is to make a beginning.
>
> (*LG* V, 1–2)

The simple chiasmus offers both a re-statement and a simplification of the major theme that was worked through in *East Coker* and explored throughout the *Quartets.* Gardner sums up how this "restoration" results in a change in tone: "The refusal to speak of 'beginning' and the consequent denial of 'end' in *The Dry Salvages* make the restoration of both words to us in the last poem particularly moving. The tentative paradoxes of *Burnt Norton* return with confident certainty" (*The Art* 53). Gardner also points to a key line from the end of *Burnt Norton* which reappears in the closing passage of *Little Gidding*:

Quick now, here, now, always –

(*BN* V, 37; *LG* V, 39)

Recurring word-for-word, though after a long interval, the phrase has not been subject to the incessant repetitions and variations practised on other lines throughout the poem, so it is easy to miss its unassuming re-statement. Though Gardner calls it relatively "meaningless and unpoetic by itself" (53) she argues that it provides an intense experience for "a mind alert to recognize recurrences": it consists entirely of ordinary adverbs and prepositions which – just like weightier terms such as "time", "end" and "beginning" – have now become charged with special power, like an ordinary needle that becomes magnetised.

Eliot's ending to *Four Quartets*, however, is no simple return to the beginning, but rather the ending of a pilgrimage from which one returns changed – the experience being ultimately more important than the journey. As Steve Ellis has it,

> Readers are constantly being invited to return to earlier parts of the poem – the meaning of which now becomes modified, just as *Burnt Norton*, originally an end in itself, later became a beginning – through the recapitulation of these themes, so that the meaning of the whole lies not in a sequential narrative, but in "the pattern," the ever-present totality of all the parts in synchronic dialogue, the "co-existence" in which "all is always now." (111)

There is a striking similarity between such descriptions of *Four Quartets* and descriptions of how chiasmus has been "understood to be a device that involved the sense of reciprocation, or re-turning or re-versing" (Nishikawa 55). Eliot himself observed in an early essay,

> The token that a philosophy is true is, I think, the fact that it brings us to the exact point from which we started. We shall be enriched, I trust, by our experience of the Grand Tour, but we shall not have been allowed to convey any material treasures through the Custom House. And the wisdom which we shall have acquired will not be part of the argument which brings us to the conclusion; it is not part of the book, but it is written in pencil on the fly-leaf. For the point to which we return should be the same, but somehow is not, but is a higher stage of reality. (Qtd. in Eliot et al. 1042)

The transformation undergone by the returning pilgrim is akin to the experience of poetic epiphany. Paul Friedrich discusses the role of chiasmus in his essay on lyric epiphany, observing that "a small or brief mini-chiasmus may create a subtle epiphany" (240). Friedrich goes on to explore the paradoxical workings of "chiasmic epiphany":

> Chiasmus, like the sestina form, tightens and closes; there is an element of inevitability as exit replays introitus. Epiphany, on the contrary, breaks out of structure, whether verbal or temporal, into a more open, dynamic, vivid, and audible universe. Epiphany by means of chiasmus, when it does occur, is more cognitive than phenomenological: as the deeper levels of the mind recur through a structural series, there is a sense of realization with reinforcement that both locks the images in place and creates an experience of rebirth or reawakening that may be more profound than [other] sorts of epiphany […] The internal organization of a chiasmic epiphany […] is thus more of a breaking-into than a breaking-out-of. (241)

Friedrich writes in the context of analysing Homeric macro-chiasmic structures, but his description of how "realization with reinforcement" offers a profound "experience of rebirth or reawakening" is applicable to *Four Quartets* on both macro and micro levels. Further, Friedrich characterises traditional "breaking-out" epiphanies as "linear" (241), which suggests that the "breaking-into" associated with chiasmic epiphany may be well-suited to Eliot's preoccupation with how linear time can intersect with non-linear timelessness.

Lyric epiphany is a small-scale, secular imitation of epiphany's more profound religious meaning, just as *Burnt Norton*'s "not quite mystical moment in the garden" only gestures towards "the true mystical experience" (Schneider 182). And although the theme of poetry's inadequacy runs throughout the *Quartets*, once *Little Gidding* acknowledges that "The end is where we start from", Eliot immediately applies this lesson not only to life but specifically to poetry:

> What we call the beginning is often the end
> And to make an end is to make a beginning.
> The end is where we start from. And every phrase
> And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,

The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph.

(*LG* V, 1–12)

Eliot finally accepts at least the hypothetical possibility of a poetry that can reconcile contradictions by embracing them, and it is fitting that this meditation on “right” phrases and sentences is anchored in an initial chiasmus.

Voice and Verse in Early Auden

In discussing the variety and virtuosity of Auden's early poetry, scholars often draw attention to its wide range of tones of voice – and not always in complimentary terms. Writing on Auden's "uncertainty of tone", Richard Hoggart describes the poet as vacillating between ironic and assertive modes: he "wobbles from the ironic to the portentous […] from the pally to the patronising, from the intellectual to the over-obvious, from the consciously rhetorical to the flatly idiomatic" (98–99). Critics have disagreed, however, about the rhetorical effect of this early verse; Barbara Hardy, for instance, interprets Auden's "obscurity" as "reticence" and his "vagueness" as "over-specification", for "nothing is so vague in its effect as the highly particularised reference which we do not happen to understand" (106). These critiques hinge on the interpretive role of the reader, since meaning and emotion depend on the reader's ability to recognise contextual allusions in the form of a subtle kind of sonic intertextuality: meaning is inscribed in echoes, rhythms and cadences of the language. Auden's allusions to song and 'light' verse forms, his use of repetition and ritualised rhetoric, and his propensity for setting off perfect rhymes against pararhymes, show him appropriating conventions at the same time as reversing expectations. Moreover, his attitude towards the repetitive elements of metre changed during the 1930s, becoming less unambiguously ironic and showing more sympathy and humour. Auden's habit of incorporating such textual and sonic allusions into his lyrics has the effect of complicating the reader's understanding of authorial or narrative 'voice'.

In the 1928 lyric, "We made all possible preparations", for instance, Edward Mendelson describes how "truncated versions of regular meter suggest a formal order just beyond the speaker's grasp" (*Early Auden* 175). The identity of the speaker, and therefore the relationship between speaker and reader, are immediately rendered uncertain by Auden's use of the first-person plural, which seems to assume the voice of repressive authority:

We made all possible preparations,
Drew up a list of firms,
Constantly revised our calculations
And allotted the farms,

Issued all the orders expedient
In this kind of case:
Most, as was expected, were obedient,
Though there were rumours, of course […]

The poem's dry, bureaucratic language belies its sinister, self-justifying argument and bleak conclusion. This sense of underlying menace is reinforced by the rhyme scheme, which opposes the first and third lines' perfect but unimaginative rhymes ("preparations" / "calculations", "expedient" / "obedient") with the second and fourth lines' consonance ("firms" / "farms", "case" / "course"). These pararhymes become more tenuous towards the middle of the poem, pairing words that barely rhyme 'on paper': "abuse" with "boys" and "excuse" with "cause". In the fourth stanza, syntax becomes tortuously inverted and line length and rhythm irregular, as if reflecting the struggle between youth and authority:

For never serious misgiving
Occurred to anyone,
Since there could be no question of living
If we did not win.

By the final stanza, however, the slipperiness of the pararhymes has been brought under control, as the plural authoritarian voice contemplates what this ostensible victory has really achieved:

As for ourselves there is left remaining
Our honour at least,
And a reasonable chance of retaining
Our faculties to the last.

Another example of the first-person plural, used to quite different effect, is found in "Not father, further do prolong" (1931), the Sixth Ode from *The Orators:*

> Not, Father, further do prolong
> Our necessary defeat;
> Spare us the numbing zero-hour,
> The desert-long retreat.
>
> Against your direct light, displayed,
> Regardant, absolute,
> In person stubborn and oblique
> Our maddened set we foot […]

Randall Jarrell identifies this poem as exemplifying a particular "extended device", which he describes as being characteristic of Auden's late work, but which is also found throughout his early poems:

> It is what might be called the *set piece*: a poem conscientiously restricted to some appropriated convention. This may even arrive at its limit, the parody; in any case, the interplay between prototype and 'copy' is consistently and consciously effective – if the reader does not realize that the poem depends upon the relations to a norm of deviations from a norm, the poem will be badly misunderstood. The poem exists on two levels, like counter-point – that is, like a counter-point in which one of the levels has to be supplied by the hearer. (346)

Here, Auden wittily replicates the syntax of Scottish metrical psalms for comedic effect – an effect that relies upon the reader recognising the syntax in order to supply this 'level' of meaning. Justin Replogle demonstrates the confusion that results when the reader fails at this task. Oblivious of the poem's model (identified by both Mendelson and John Fuller), he assumes the poem is spoken by a singular voice, asking:

> how is the poet related to this speaker? If the poet stands apart […] all flaws in the poetry – bad lines, pompous diction, exaggerated hysteria, farcical behaviour – reflect appropriately on the sick speaker. But if the poet approves of the speaker, or if speaker and poet are identical, all such lapses are either breaches of decorum or failure of craft. I think that this particular poem begins with Auden speaking as Poet, soberly petitioning for health. But in trying to manoeuvre his grave formal speech

> through some extremely involuted Anglo-Saxon syntax he stumbles into unintentional comedy. (114)

In fact, the comedic element is clear from the first line where, rather than soberly intoning, the lyric puns on “Father” and “further”, quickly progressing in the second stanza to the amusingly convoluted – but still, in context, just intelligible – line “Our maddened set we foot”. Auden illustrated what might be called the unintentional comedy of the original metrical psalm syntax by quoting an example: “Henceforth thy goings out and in / God keep for ever shall” (Fuller 121), illustrating that Jarrell’s “relations to a norm of deviations from a norm” in this parody is a relationship of exaggeration of the model’s already convoluted syntax for comic effect. This lends an overall tragicomic tone to the poem, since the tortured syntax voices a desperately earnest plea. Moreover, the allusion suggests something about the speakers, since the Scottish context connotes the school where Auden taught at this time, and the speakers – or rather, singers – become another example of the unhealthy group life explored throughout *The Orators*.

Hoggart suggests that Auden’s attempts at popular verse were technical decisions made in an effort to resolve his “dubious relationship to his audience” (98), and the relationship between poet and audience is indeed central to Auden’s theory of light verse. In his 1938 introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse,* he argued that an ideal society would naturally give rise to a more harmonious writer–reader relationship; he also seemed to suggest that in the poetry of such a society, the voices of poet and speaker would be synonymous:

> When the things in which a poet is interested, the things which he sees about him, are much the same as those of his audience, and that audience is a fairly general one, he will not be conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language will be straightforward and close to ordinary speech […] his poetry will be ‘light’ in the sense in which it is used in this anthology. (*The English Auden* 363)

However, the lightness of folk poetry cannot be Auden's lightness, both because societal changes have led to a degeneration of the form, and because the modern poet and his audience do not enjoy the ideal relationship which can give birth to such straightforward poetry (367). Auden cannot borrow this lightness, but can only reference it, "for poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free" (368). Light verse in the modern world is thus doomed to be either trivial or ironic. Therefore, although Auden's verse cannot be 'light' in the sense he would like, it can achieve an uneasy synthesis between adult concerns and the 'light' forms of folk songs, music-hall, and nursery rhymes. Once this is understood, the inability of the poet successfully to write light verse in the true sense serves to remind the reader of the gulf between poet and audience and of the state of contemporary society: neither integrated nor free.

The Epilogue to *The Orators*, "'O where are you going?' said reader to rider" (1931) qualifies formally as light verse according to Auden's definition, since it models itself on a folk song ("The Cutty Wren"). The allusion to this ballad of uncertain meaning but with connotations of ritual sacrifice serves to deepen the mystery of the poem's ritualised conversation:

> 'O where are you going?' said reader to rider,
> 'That valley is fatal where furnaces burn,
> Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
> That gap is the grave where the tall return.' […]

Auden adapts the folk song's three-line form to incorporate subtle variations of rhythm, feminine rhyme, an internal near-rhyme scheme of consonance and assonance, and an alliterative scheme reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon verse. He also adopts a fairly consistent amphibrachic rhythm but manages – through word choice and the emphasis on subtle alliteration – to avoid the humorous connotations of the limerick with which this rhythm is often associated. The reader is perhaps reminded instead of Byron's "The Destruction of

Sennacherib". Whether strictly amphibrachic or varied – as some lines are – with dactyls and anapaests, such a rhythm is hard to sustain. This gives the short poem a feel of gathering doom and impending catastrophe. Mendelson comments that it reaches "a memorable ending, but an empty one. It leaves behind a host of unresolved contradictions" (*Early Auden* 115), and this paradoxical incompleteness contributes to the poem's mysterious tone. The last line resists offering interpretation or explanation; instead there is only repetition: "As he left them there, as he left them there". There is ambiguity in the pronoun; the singular "he" suggests rider, farer and hearer are the same person – but the doubling of this phrase leaves the reader expecting a third repetition, signifying the riding-away of rider, farer and hearer. In this interpretation, the third departure (that of hearer) is never enacted, leaving a "hearer" perhaps to link with the reader, returning him or her to the "reader" at the beginning of the poem.

Angela Leighton explores how the poem's use of consonance – beginning with the punning way in which reader and rider are linked – develops the deeper psychological dimension of its folk model:

> Auden's anonymous "rider" […] is the natural companion and respondent to the "reader," not only because of the easy chime of their names but also because, at some level, reading is a looking to ride – to go somewhere on the back of the rhythms of words […] Auden's dactylic pace not only echoes the four legs, heard as three, of the horse's gallop (and of the very word "galloping"), but also suggests that "reader" and "rider" are bound together. (100)

A similar treatment is undergone by "fearer to farer" and "horror to hearer", as the poem "twins each pair into an aurally inextricable bind, without giving any real answers to the questions" (100). Leighton further draws attention to "how the sound 'er' points up the instability of measure in English" (239), so that the "ubiquitous 'er' sounds make for an erring, wandering movement at the heart of language" (235).

If the Epilogue adapts a traditional song, “It’s no use raising a shout” (1929) draws on contemporary slang, making its diction closer to that of American-influenced popular song lyrics:

> It’s no use raising a shout.
> No, Honey, you can cut that right out.
> I don’t want any more hugs;
> Make me some fresh tea, fetch me some rugs.
> Here am I, here are you:
> But what does it mean? What are we going to do? […]

The Epilogue’s rhythmic, folkloric question-and-answer pattern is inverted in this poem: the speaker’s petulant statements are concluded, in each stanza, by the hopelessly rhetorical questions of the refrain. The mysterious timelessness of the Epilogue’s conversation has become a bitterly one-sided, repetitive complaint that takes place in a modern domestic setting. In the line “Here am I, here are you”, Fuller hears an echo of a line from the song “I only have eyes for you” (79), and Mendelson highlights the ironic tone of the speaker’s sing-song appeals to his “Honey”: “the gawky doggerel verse is entirely functional […] To express Auden’s most painful sense of isolation it borrows the shopworn styles of the popular lyric” (*Early Auden* 80). The third stanza contains another rhetorical question, whose couplet form gives it the quality of an absurd aphorism: “Put the car away; when life fails, / What’s the good of going to Wales?” The perfectness of what Jarrell calls “Auden’s *love-dove* rhymes” (343) reinforces the speaker’s cynical attitude towards domestic rituals like family holidays.

Auden returned to the question-and-answer format in his 1932 poem, “O what is that sound”, which Mendelson describes as “a quietly terrifying dialogue between two lovers, a ritual exchange of anxious questions in long lines of verse and calm cold answers in shorter ones” (*Early Auden* 145). No speech marks are necessary in this conversation, as the

relationship between the speakers is signalled by the increasingly condescending and insincere "dear" in the third line of almost every stanza:

> O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
>   Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
> Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
>   The soldiers coming. […]

This "pastiche Jacobite ballad" (Fuller 154) with its rhythmic treatment of death at the hands of redcoats calls to mind Alfred Noyes' popular narrative poem "The Highwayman", whose rhythmic "riding – / Riding – riding –" in the opening stanza is echoed in Auden's "drumming, drumming […] coming". But whereas Noyes' heroine sacrifices herself in a vain attempt to save her betrayed lover, the lover in Auden's poem sacrifices his beloved as he selfishly makes his getaway. In the absence of a narrator's voice in his poem, it seems that Auden – as Replogle has it – "stands apart" (114) from the voice of the untrustworthy lover who gives misleading answers in a falsely reassuring tone.

Mendelson relates how, on a summer evening in 1933, the 26-year-old Auden experienced an extraordinary "*vision of agape* […] in which, for the first time, he knew what it meant to love his neighbor as himself" (*Early Auden* 159). Mendelson argues that after this transformative experience, Auden conceived a new sense of continuity with history, allowing him to overcome the romantic concept that "The cost of originality is a solitary and incommunicable sense of time" (173). Whereas the legacy of Romanticism had previously linked formal repetition with anxiety (173),

> [Auden's] newly explicit sense of continuity would also find expression in the form and texture of his poems, whose eager acceptance of received metres paid homage to the unbroken patterns that persist in human time […] Repetition now became the ground of memory, the medium of love. (172)

For the modernists, formal verse could have an ironic and limited role "to rebuke the formless disorder of the present" (174), but Auden's attraction to metre showed that his "movement toward independence would lead him eventually into a larger tradition of community and obligation" (176). However, while it is true that Auden seems to find what Mendelson calls his "real home" (176) in regular metres, this turn towards a sense of belonging in the form is not immediately observable, and it is complicated by Auden's attitude towards 'light' verse forms.

Discussing the 19th-century "degeneration" of folk poetry, Auden wrote that "the Border ballad could be tragic; the music-hall song cannot" (*The English Auden* 367). He seems to demonstrate this assertion in "The soldier loves his rifle" (1936), whose doggerel – reminiscent of music-hall monologue – has the effect of undermining any expression of genuine feeling on the part of the speaker. The fifth line, in particular, seems a nod to the closing verse of the bathetic "She was poor but she was honest", and as a result its upbeat sentiment rings an insincere note:

> The soldier loves his rifle,
>   The scholar loves his books,
> The farmer loves his horses,
>   The film star loves her looks.
> There's love the whole world over
>   Wherever you may be;
> Some lose their rest for gay Mae West,
>   But you're my cup of tea. […]

From the outset, the comparisons resort to conventional imagery and generalisations, which have the effect of trivialising the speaker's purported feelings; his declaration is rendered even more underwhelming by the colloquial turn of phrase "my cup of tea". As if these hollow assertions were not bad enough, he moves on to other comparisons – to animals, plants, and illnesses – that seem increasingly absurd, irrelevant or insulting:

[…] There are patients in asylums
Who think that they're a tree;
I had an aunt who loved a plant,
But you're my cup of tea. […]

The least flattering comparisons are reserved for the line before the refrain, culminating in the closing lines:

[…] And dogs love most an old lamp-post,
But you're my cup of tea.

Stan Smith claims that "the closing analogy […] is all the more demeaning because the speaker apparently does not realise what it reveals about his attitude to his beloved" (108), but it is hard to determine just how self-aware the speaker is. By the final lines, the pretence that this is a love poem is barely propped up by the jaunty rhythm and sing-song rhymes, groaning as they are under the weight of incongruous imagery. Perhaps the speaker's attitude here is similar to that of the speaker in "It's no use raising a shout" – but rather than complain about tea and ask existential questions, he adopts a faux-cheerful tone and decides to settle for a "cup of tea" who is at least preferable to a tree or a plant.

A similar use of sing-song rhythm and repetitively perfect rhyme is found in "The sun shines down on the ships at sea" (1932), originally titled "To a Young Man on his 21st Birthday". The opening tercets have the innocence and optimism of a nursery rhyme:

The sun shines down on the ships at sea,
It shines on you and it shines on me
Whatever we are or are going to be.

To-morrow if everything goes to plan,
To-morrow morning you'll be a man:
Let wishes be horses as fast as they can. […]

However, a note of anxiety enters with the conditional in the fourth line, and the sixth undermines the poem's initial optimism by expressing a necessarily forlorn hope:

proverbially, wishes cannot be horses. The poem then moves into a passage in quatrains which reveals that many 'adult' occupations are pointless and destructive:

> […] The poet reciting to Lady Diana
> While the footmen whisper 'Have a banana',
> The judge enforcing the obsolete law,
> The banker making the loan for the war,
>
> The expert designing the long-range gun
> To exterminate everything under the sun,
> Would like to get out but can only mutter: –
> 'What can I do? It's my bread and butter.' […]

Auden again employs anapaestic and amphibrachic meters, this time to lend an ironically humorous tone to serious subject matter. The 'light' treatment is reinforced with colloquialisms; in the first quatrain, human endeavours are described in breezily self-deprecating slang:

> […] Gosh, to look at we're no great catch;
> History seems to have struck a bad patch. […]

Once again, Auden borrows from music-hall to reinforce his speaker's faux-humorous tone, with the allusion to the superfluous refrain "Have a banana". Clearly the occupation of poet is "no great catch", since this throwaway music-hall phrase is given more importance than the unknown words recited by the poet. The line describing the ultimate human ambition "to exterminate everything under the sun" expertly and disturbingly juxtaposes an appalling sentiment with jaunty anapaestic rhythm, with "under the sun" perhaps contributing something of the sombre mood of Ecclesiastes.

Clearly, much of adult activity is useless, immoral and dangerous, rendering congratulations on 'becoming a man' problematic – hence the tone of forced cheerfulness in the opening and closing tercets. The poem ends:

[…] If we can’t love, though miles apart,
If we can’t trust with all our heart,
If we can’t do that, then we’re in the cart.

This unambiguous endorsement of love and trust should provide an optimistic ending, but by once again resorting to conditional constructions, the speaker imbues his discussion of the future with doubt. Based on the examples given in the body of the poem, love and trust seem to be lacking, so we are probably already “in the cart”. The speaker’s use of this hackneyed, readymade expression – meaning “in the wrong” – produces an anticlimactic effect, deflating what could have been an uplifting moral. However, the phrase also calls to mind the proverbial “to go to hell in a handcart”. The much higher stakes suggested by this allusion, contained within the casual diction of “in the cart”, create an unsettling juxtaposition of the catastrophic and the colloquial that is distinctly Audenesque.

As well as borrowing from popular and folk sources, both formally and in terms of diction and tone, Auden also addressed the topic of popular song directly. “Simple like all dream wishes, they employ” is a sonnet from the sequence *In Time of War* (1939) and is, as Fuller explains, “about popular tunes and the way in which they appear to ignore political events” (240). This description suggests that such songs are therefore always hollow or inherently ironic, since they are at odds with real-world problems. However, the speaker’s attitude is more charitable: these songs “employ / The elementary language of the heart, / And speak to muscles of the need for joy”. They only *appear* to ignore current affairs; in reality, their tendency towards escapism and frivolity is directly proportional to the seriousness of the geopolitical situation:

[…] Always new,
They mirror every change in our position;
They are our evidence of what we do;
They speak directly to our lost condition. […]

At the start of the sestet the speaker addresses the reader directly, with an imperative incitement to engage intellectually with this paradox:

> […] Think in this year what pleased the dancers best:
> When Austria died and China was forsaken,
> Shanghai in flames and Teruel re-taken,
>
> France put her case before the world: 'Partout
> Il y a de la joie.' America addressed
> The earth: 'Do you love me as I love you?'

Ending the poem with a question, albeit one excerpted from a Cole Porter song, also allows the speaker to address the reader directly, so the poem ends on a poignant note as this unanswered question hangs in the air.

Auden's choice of the sonnet form prepares the reader to expect a serious tone, and indeed the ironic or comedic tone so familiar from other poems is largely absent here. The main irony in the poem is not due to the speaker's tone of voice but consists in the contrast between the description of military defeats and the quotations from popular songs. One feels the voice of the speaker is close to Auden's own voice, even though it never uses the word 'I'. By eschewing the first person except in the plural ("our position […] what we do […] our lost condition"), the speaker identifies with the majority of humanity or with his compatriots, perhaps reflecting Auden's struggles to work out the relationship between his poetry and his politics during the Spanish civil war and the Sino-Japanese war. The only 'I' in the poem appears in the line from Cole Porter, though in its new context this quotation gives voice to a personified America. The question in this context becomes loaded with irony, as isolationist America, having failed to support the Spanish Republic, now offers and asks for love from the rest of the world. Given Auden's impending move to the USA, however, the question also has personal overtones, so that this weird fusion of the personal and the political suggests a close identification between voice in the poem and the voice of the poet.

Auden looked to American culture to find ‘light verse’ in its truest sense, the 20th-century equivalent of the border ballads. “Only in America”, he claimed, “under the conditions of frontier expansion and prospecting and railway development, have the last hundred years been able to produce a folk-poetry which can equal similar productions of pre-industrial Europe, and in America, too, this period is ending” (*The English Auden* 367). His belief in the unusual authenticity of this voice explains his unironic use of the blues form in “Say this city has ten million souls”, also known as “Refugee Blues” (1939). James Held enumerates the many features of this poem that are typical of the blues songs on which it is modelled. These include its first-person point of view; its omission of the personal pronoun; its understanding of political events through a personal lens; its adherence to the theme of suffering without any prospect of justice; its secular outlook, with no hope of spiritual deliverance; and its wealth of powerful but not directly connected images. Held draws a parallel between Auden’s ‘blues’ and one of the genre’s seminal songs: “The message of the last stanza,

> Stood on a great plain in the falling snow,
> Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
> Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me,

seems hardly different in concept, tone, and imagery from Robert Johnson’s ‘Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail’” (141). And even though Auden’s stanzas depart formally from the classic blues model, wherein the second line is a slightly varied repetition of the first, “the stanzas of ‘Refugee Blues’ retain […] ‘blues logic’: the last line of each stanza answers the first two” (140). Thus the poem’s overall tone is the same as that of the earliest blues songs: a resigned, hopeless lament, relying on repetition and a ritualised statement-and-answer format.

“Refugee Blues” approximates the form, themes, and tone of blues in general, without name-checking a specific model. But several of Auden’s other ‘songs’ and ‘ballads’ reference particular folk songs, thus inviting comparisons that influence the reader’s understanding of the poetry. This is the case with three of what Fuller calls Auden’s “case histories” (297), written in 1937. “Miss Gee” is supposed to be sung to the tune of “St James Infirmary”, “Victor” to the tune of “Frankie and Johnny”, and “James Honeyman” to the tune of “Stagolee”. John Irwin, however, interprets the suggested tunes not as literal instructions but as intertextual references:

> The usual understanding is that these notes indicate the melodies to which the respective ballads are to be sung. However, there are objections to this belief. First of all, ‘Miss Edith Gee’ is twenty-five stanzas long and in musical performance would try both the individual vocal cords and the general patience. Second, the tune of ‘Frankie and Johnny’ requires a short two-line refrain after each stanza, and in Auden’s ballad ‘Victor was a little baby’ such a refrain does not appear. It seems more likely that these references to the earlier ballads are indications of the general allusive background for each of Auden’s poems. (74–75)

In “Miss Gee”, Irwin characterises the tone of the narrator as “coldly clinical” but also as taking “an obvious relish in dwelling on the cruel facts of [Miss Gee’s] life” (75). The narrator certainly exhibits no obvious sympathy for the terminally ill protagonist, describing her dispassionately as an object of study for amused medical students and anatomists. Musing on Miss Gee’s cancer diagnosis, the doctor tells his wife,

> […] ‘Nobody knows what the cause is,
> Though some pretend they do;
> It’s like some hidden assassin
> Waiting to strike at you.
>
> ‘Childless women get it,
> And men when they retire;
> It’s as if there had to be some outlet
> For their foiled creative fire.’ […]

Though Fuller points out that "the tone of these poems is deliberately exaggerated and distancing" (279), he also notes that Auden himself, in a private letter, made a pseudoscientific connection between childlessness and cancer (277), thus reducing the distance between his own views and those of the doctor.

It is by comparison with the original words of its putative tune, however, that Irwin judges the relative tone of the poem, and specifically by comparing the attitude of the respective narrators. "The folk ballad, 'St James Infirmary,'" he points out, "is a lament sung for a dead woman by her lover. Since Miss Gee with her Puritan background has never given herself to anyone, there is no lover to lament her passing; instead there is the coldly clinical narrator" (75). Further, there is no declared intention to lament or eulogise Miss Gee in Auden's "little story". By contrast the original, as famously recorded by Louis Armstrong, is titled "St James Infirmary Blues", making it by definition a hopeless lament (Held 141). Auden thus opts for a radically different narrator, intent, and tone, than that found in the model to which he draws attention.

Irwin similarly highlights differences between the plot of "Frankie and Johnny" and that of "Victor": Frankie shoots Johnny in a jealous rage at his unfaithfulness, but Victor kills his wife because he "feels he has been made a fool of […] The meanness of Victor's motives, hidden beneath a Puritanism which transforms him into an avenging angel, [are] contrasted with the more natural, humanly understandable impulse of jealousy over an unfaithful lover found in the folk-ballad model" (77). Irwin sums up the powerful effect, to the alert reader, of these intertextual comparisons:

> As with the other Auden ballad [Miss Gee], the irony of the shabby-genteel, Puritanical Victor with his middle-class respectability being memorialized in a poem whose details suggest the ballad story of a pimp murdered by a jealous whore is part of the poem's thematic effect [….] in each case a sophisticated 'art' poem has been written on top of a preexisting folk ballad with part of the meaning of the art poem depending on the reader's knowledge of the meaning and tone of the folk-ballad model. The life-view of the ballad in each case is an older naïve romanticism against

which the modern ironic tone of the art poem is played off, and in each case this contrast is part of the meaning of the modern poem. (78)

Certain versions of "St James Infirmary" and of "Stagolee" (the tune to which "James Honeyman" is supposed to be set) begin in the voice of a narrator who then disappears, leaving only the voices of the characters he has introduced. This is also the case in the traditional English song "Lovely on the Water", which begins

As I walked out one morning in the spring time of the year,
I overheard a sailor bold likewise a lady fair.

This song is one likely source for what Auden called his "pastiche of folk song" (qtd in Fuller 271), "As I walked out one evening" (1937). A great deal of this poem's effect derives from Auden's knowingly subverting the conventions of the genre. This is evident from the first lines:

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat. […]

Typically, in the folk song tradition, the time is morning, the setting rural, and the season Spring or midsummer. In Auden's version, it is evening, the setting is urban, and harvest time is suggested. The folk song's narrator only appears to set the scene and introduce the lovers, whose dialogue comprises the rest of the song; In Auden's version, the voice of the beloved is not heard, and the narrator's voice returns to deliver the final stanza.

Under a railway bridge, Auden's lover declares his undying love in hyperbolic terms reminiscent of Burns's "till a' the seas gang dry":

[…] 'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet
And the river jumps over the mountain

And the salmon sing in the street.

'I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky. […]

"The lover's vow is magnificent", judges Fuller, "but the railway arch may be intended to signify a comparatively sordid rendezvous" (271). Yet despite this context, the tone of the declaration itself is sincere, if overblown. However, the lover's is an "ironical idealism" (272) because love cannot ultimately defeat death. He is answered not by his beloved but by a personified voice:

[…] But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time […]

If the lover's histrionics employed magnificent imagery, the images and allusions found in Time's admonitions are altogether more subtle and surprising:

[…] 'The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

'Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer
And Jill goes down on her back.

'O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

'O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.' […]

Most striking is Auden's juxtaposition of the mundane (cupboard, bed, tea-cup) and the dreadful (glacier, desert, land of the dead). The speed with which the crack leads to the land of the dead induces a feeling of vertigo, but at the same time these extremes are subtly knitted together with "knocks" and "sighs" – understated verbs suggestive of quietly restless human activity. Similarly, the choice of a "lane", as well as creating music in the line through alliteration, has quaint, rural connotations that somewhat temper the sense of dread and imminent catastrophe in these lines.

The allusions to twisted versions of nursery rhymes and "Green Grow the Rushes, O" evoke "a world where nursery-rhyme morality has been thrown to the wind" (Fuller 272). There is a dark humour in this subversive imagery, but the tone in the next stanza becomes much more serious, as the lover – and the reader – are addressed directly with the repeated imperative "O look, look […] O look". In "Life remains a blessing / Although you cannot bless" there is perhaps an echo of the moment in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" when, having been unable to pray, the Mariner finally blesses the sea-creatures and is freed from the albatross. The tone here is to some extent comforting, with "Life remains a blessing" stated as an inarguable fact. Formally, the stanza performs a pleasing balancing act with its repetitions of "look" and "bless" and with words opposed in meaning – "distress" and "bless" – echoing each other thanks to the rhyme scheme.

Having looked at himself in the mirror, the lover must now look out of the window at his neighbour. Again, the tone is comforting to a degree: the voice eschews the imperative of "you must love" and opts instead for "you shall love", which could be read, like "life remains a blessing" as a reassuring statement of fact. The allusion to a nursery rhyme, though once again twisted, has none of the smuttiness of the earlier references, instead conveying a realistic, forgiving attitude to human frailty and fallibility.

In the folk song, the lovers part because the man must go to war, and his future death in battle is implied. In Auden's poem, the death of both lovers is implied, as the narrator now concludes the poem:

> […] It was late, late in the evening,
> The lovers they were gone;
> The clocks had ceased their chiming
> And the deep river ran on.

Ultimately, the clocks (the human conception of time) give way to the unceasing river. Appropriately, the voice of Time carries the most authority in this poem, thanks to Auden's skilful use of imagery, allusion, and repetition to build a tone that is doom-laden yet admits the necessity for love. Time's voice therefore manages to offer more solace than the narrator who five years earlier had opined "If we can't love […] then we're in the cart". Auden grouped "As I walked out one evening" not in the 'Lighter Poems' section of *Another Time* but in the 'People and Places' section. Perhaps this reflects his acknowledgement of it as a 'pastiche' rather than an attempt at 'true' light verse such as "Refugee Blues". It may also reflect the fact that he used the conventions of folk song as a springboard, to provide a context for an authoritative voice.

Iterativity in Louis MacNeice

Explicitly and implicitly, Louis MacNeice's poetry is in constant conversation with Heraclitus' dictum that "one cannot step into the same river twice". There is a fundamental irony in MacNeice's use of repetition, since it recognises that "repetition is impossible: the simple fact of temporal discontinuity between repeated elements leads to a difference in their functions, via the accumulation of significance and recontextualisation" (Mazur 1169). Therefore despite – or in fact because of – its ultimate impossibility, repetition is an important thematic concern for MacNeice, in poems that address the attraction of cliché and the human desire to recapture lost time. Repetition is also a significant formal means, and MacNeice frequently employs what he termed "repetition-devices" (164) – repetend, refrain, rhyme, cliché and formulaic diction – as key structural motifs. Marc Porée uses the umbrella term "itérabilité" ("iterativity") to encompass this formal and thematic tendency towards "the same again" in MacNeice's work.

Both early and late MacNeice makes frequent use of the 'envelope' structure, whereby a stanza or an entire poem is bracketed by first and last lines that are identical or near-identical. "The Sunlight on the Garden" (1937) illustrates the effectiveness of this technique, as the repeated line that "contains" the poem ironically and poignantly underscores the speaker's failure to "cage the minute":

> The sunlight on the garden
> Hardens and grows cold,
> We cannot cage the minute
> Within its nets of gold […]

"We are dying, Egypt, dying" the speaker concludes, as he approaches the closure of the fourth stanza,

> And not expecting pardon,
> Hardened in heart anew,

> But glad to have sat under
> Thunder and rain with you,
> And grateful too
> For sunlight on the garden.

Echoing the overarching envelope pattern, each stanza is contained in a smaller envelope created by the terminal rhyme of its first and last lines ("garden" / "pardon", "lances" / "dances", "flying" / "dying", "pardon" / "garden"). Peter McDonald articulates this structure's thematic significance:

> the first and last lines of each stanza serve to contain each phase of this change, reversing the emphasis in the final stanza (so that it is 'pardon' which now rhymes with 'garden', rather than vice versa). Effectively, MacNeice uses the structure of his poem to supply the closure against which, in fact, the argument runs. (*Louis MacNeice: the Poet in His Contexts* 75)

Characteristically, a personal relationship enters more explicitly into the poem at its ending (77), connoting positive associations, even though the time spent with the "you" seems to be left irrecoverably in the past. This paradoxical effect is enhanced by another typically MacNeician technique, the skilful orchestration of masculine and feminine rhymes. On the one hand, a sense of "closure" is suggested by the use of perfect rhymes, and balance is supplied by the way the terminal rhymes are divided equally between masculine and feminine. On the other hand, the finality of the masculine rhyme in the fifth line is undermined by the line's brevity, suggesting a pregnant pause, and the fact that the 'envelopes' are constructed exclusively from feminine rhymes imbues the poem with a lingering sense of loss – an impression that the envelope, though beautifully constructed, is left open. As Neil Corcoran puts it, the poem creates "a gorgeously memorable music in which irony becomes virtually a principle of form" (216).

In this context, repetition cannot help but take on ironic significance. The poem moves in the course of stanzas 2 and 3 from the present tense ("sonnets and birds descend")

to an ominously impending future ("soon, my friend, / We shall have no time for dances") to a nostalgically remembered past ("the sky was good for flying"). The meaning of the repeated phrase "The earth compels" seems to conform to this general sobering of tone, as its connotations change with its changed context. At first appearance, it could be taken very literally, as a description of gravity, but "The earth compels, upon it / Sonnets and birds descend" also suggests an appreciation of the urgent beauty of both art and nature, the earth inspiring two types of song. The third stanza, however, introduces more troubling imagery, including the bells which recur as a fearful symbol throughout MacNeice's poetry (Brown 112–113), and which here suggest invasion or funeral bells:

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

In its new context, the line implies death and burial, a descent *under* the earth. This mood is modulated in the final stanza, however, as the poem shifts once again from the dying present ("not expecting pardon, / Hardened in heart anew") to a conciliatory and appreciative attitude towards the vanished past ("But glad to have sat under / Thunder and rain with you"). The poem's general movement, then, is from loss to acceptance, and this is reflected in the way that "the sunlight on the garden" undergoes grammatical change between beginning and end of the poem, from disappearing subject to remembered object, for which the speaker is "grateful".

The movement in "Autobiography" (1940) is from childhood innocence through loss to an adult acceptance. The perfectly rhymed couplets have an ultimately ironic sing-song feel, conjuring "the buried violence of the nursery and the nursery rhyme" (Longley 83). Repetition in this poem takes the form of the refrain, "*Come back early or never come.*" The

use of a refrain "implies a distinction (of speaker, tone, subject, or audience) between repeated and nonrepeated parts" (Burt 1152), and it is true that, as Corcoran points out, "the refrain remains eerily detached […] from the details being evoked. They are all in the first person singular, the pained autobiographical 'I'; the refrain is neutral, objective, directive, imperative – and judgemental" (218).

Nevertheless, the refrain is in conversation with the evoked details, which subtly influence its interpretation each time it alternates with their gradually darkening content. After the optimistic opening couplet ("In my childhood trees were green / And there was plenty to be seen") there is possibly some humour in the first instance of the refrain, which seems to playfully reverse the familiar expression "better late than never". After its third occurrence, though, the gentle figure of the mother has disappeared and "the black dreams came; / Nothing after was quite the same". The "come" / "came" rhyme echoes the "*come*" of the refrain and starts to draw attention to the second of the two alternatives presented there: "*never come*". The mother will never return; instead, there will only be nightmares. This emphasis on the negative alternative continues towards the end of the poem:

> When I awoke they did not care;
> Nobody, nobody was there.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> When my silent terror cried,
> Nobody, nobody replied.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*
>
> I got up; the chilly sun
> Saw me walk away alone.
>
> *Come back early or never come.*

The "not" and the repeated "Nobody, nobody" draw attention to the refrain's "*never*", until at last, in the final couplet, the speaker reaches an adult acceptance of solitude and isolation.

This is shown both thematically (as he walks away alone) and formally, as the 'nursery rhyme' couplets give way to more sophisticated non-perfect rhyming: "sun" / "alone", with an additional near-rhyme provided by the final "*come*". The speaker has learned to accommodate his newfound awareness of mortality within an adult outlook on life.

The refrain, then, although itself an unchanging form of words, both undergoes and effects change over the course of the poem: as the couplets cause the refrain to shift its emphasis, it in turn influences the poem's overall tenor. Porée sees the refrain's recurrence almost literally as a way of summoning a revenant:

> Revenant en lieu et place de la mère morte, le refrain la fait quand même revenir, de manière aussi performative que spectrale. (Returning in place of and instead of the dead mother, the refrain nonetheless causes her to return, in a way that is as performative as it is ghostly). (117–118)

"Leaving Barra" (1937) is another 'envelope' poem which, between its opening "The dazzle on the sea, my darling" and closing "Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling" progresses from stanza to stanza by means of repetition-with-difference:

> […] If only I could wake in the morning
> And find I had learned the solution,
> Wake with the knack of knowledge
> Who as yet have only an inkling.
>
> Though some facts foster the inkling –
> The beauty of the moon and music,
> The routine courage of the worker,
> The gay endurance of women,
>
> And you who to me among women
> Stand for so much that I wish for,
> I thank you, my dear, for the example
> Of living like a fugue and moving. […]

The movement from the last line of each stanza to the first line of the next, linked by a repeated word, is curiously reminiscent of those 'word-ladder' puzzles, where one letter of a

word must be changed at each step to transform, for example, HATE to HAVE and ultimately to LOVE. MacNeice makes a significant change to the context and hence the emphasis of the repeated word each time, often transforming a negative to a positive in this way, as in "[…] not giving a damn for existence! // But I would cherish existence […]". So "only an inkling" alters to the more positive "foster the inkling". The change into the penultimate stanza ("[…] The gay endurance of women, // And you who to me among women […]") performs a kind of conjuring trick by implying a change from "women" to a singular woman, focusing on the singular "you" even as the plural "women" is repeated.

Corcoran describes the effect of repetition in this poem as "sensitively mimetic of the mind in progress – self-scrutinising, self-corrective, advancing hesitantly but keeping moving" (214). The chain of changes brings us back logically to where we began, "the dazzle on the sea, my darling", yet – as in a love affair – so much has changed en route. The sense of continuous movement is abetted by the use of exclusively feminine line endings, a cadence which, as Corcoran points out (215), is inherent in the poem's title. The lines also employ frequent alliteration and three strong stresses; this is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon verse, but differs from it in lacking the standard fourth stress and (usually) the third instance of alliteration, so that the reader feels an impetus to keep moving to the next line. Although there is little enjambment over lines, and none over stanzas, the discreteness of each stanza is overridden by the sense of continuity-with-change created by repetition.

In "Entirely" (1940), the type of change engendered by repetition is somewhat similar, but this time the significant change occurs not between but within each stanza. The effect focuses on the one word "entirely", its repetition serving to direct an inordinate amount of attention to an adverb often used casually for greater or lesser emphasis in conversation – as in the phrase "I'm not entirely sure". It begins with a colloquial expression to strike this deceptively casual tone:

> If we could get the hang of it entirely
>   It would take too long;
> All we know is the splash of words in passing
>   And falling twigs of song,
> And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
>   Presences it is rarely
> That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
>   Even a phrase entirely. […]

The poem ultimately rejects the possibility, or even the desirability, of "get[ting] the hang of it entirely", of finding "happiness entirely / In somebody else's arms", and of reality's being "black or white entirely". This argument is reflected formally in the organisation of the stanzas: grammatically, there is a shift within each stanza from the conditional to the indicative, reflecting the speaker's recalibration from a wistful attitude to one that accepts the world as it is. The repetitions of "entirely" in the first and last lines of each stanza help to create the contrast between these two states: in stanza one, the aspiration to entire mastery of poetry gives way to an admission that the poet will be lucky to capture an entire phrase; in stanza two, the ideal of experiencing entire happiness gives way to the reality ("as it is") of Love's being almost entirely banished; and in stanza three, the desire for entire comprehension gives way to an admission that "there is no / Road that is right entirely". This pattern – an initial proposition that is subsequently relinquished – is echoed in the rhyme scheme, as the first half of each stanza emphasises the perfect masculine rhymes of the second and fourth lines ("long" / "song"), only for this aural finality to be rejected in the second half with its hauntingly consolatory feminine half-rhymes at lines six and eight ("entirely" rhymed with "rarely", "hourly", and "merely"). At the same time, each stanza's ending on the recurrent "entirely" creates a comfortingly familiar pattern which comes to have its own inevitability. In the final stanza, the reference to the "delight" as well as the "pain" of reality and the potential "boredom" of the ideal suggests that the speaker has come to terms with the world "as it is":

> […] And if the world were black or white entirely
>   And all the charts were plain
> Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
>   A prism of delight and pain,
> We might be surer where we wished to go
>   Or again we might be merely
> Bored but in brute reality there is no
>   Road that is right entirely.

The poem as a whole moves from wishing, through wistfulness, to acceptance of "brute reality". Despite its excursion into the elevated diction of "the spears of the spring" and "a mad weir of tigerish waters, / A prism of delight and pain", the poem's ending returns it to a colloquial register more suited to the reality of daily life. The "merely bored" in the final lines admits a prosaic element which, combined with the cadence of the final "entirely" creates a slightly underwhelming ending to the poem that seems appropriate. In keeping with this tone is MacNeice's use of the commonplace turn of phrase "Or again", which reads as a verbal shrugging of the shoulders, a way of saying, "Since this is all hypothetical, it makes no odds". It also, however, nicely encapsulates MacNeice's ability to use repetition to create significant difference: "or again" in fact means "or alternatively".

In "Meeting Point" (1939), MacNeice's sustained use of the 'envelope' format emphasises each stanza's symmetry:

> Time was away and somewhere else,
> There were two glasses and two chairs
> And two people with the one pulse
> (Somebody stopped the moving stairs):
> Time was away and somewhere else. […]

Edna Longley describes how this poem "brilliantly combines stanza and syntax into a formal unit which reproduces love's suspension of temporal laws" (112). The central line of the first stanza appropriately centres the lovers, with the last line somewhat defiantly repeating the illogic of the first (how can time be "away"?). The paradox expressed in these 'bookending'

lines is sonically connected to the lovers thanks to the ABABA rhyme scheme. "Meeting Point", like "Leaving Barra" has consistently discrete stanzas, each ending with a full stop. But the use of exact repetition to create a symmetrical pattern makes the stanzas of "Meeting Point" very self-contained: they could conceivably be re-ordered without spoiling the poem. It is only in the final two stanzas that the language, freed from punctuation, acquires a certain momentum or flow:

> […] God or whatever means the Good
> Be praised that time can stop like this,
> That what the heart has understood
> Can verify in the body's peace
> God or whatever means the Good.
>
> Time was away and she was here
> And life no longer what it was,
> The bell was silent in the air
> And all the room one glow because
> Time was away and she was here.

The "because" in the penultimate line gestures to the poem's argument, that "Love, indeed, can only exist outside time" (Montague 125). However, it threatens the stanza's symmetry as it attaches itself semantically to the repeated line, and ultimately this movement towards logic breaks the spell and ends the poem: by attributing the suspension of time to his beloved, the speaker introduces an element of causality that necessitates temporal processes.

By contrast, the short poem "The Brandy Glass" (1937) evokes a failed attempt to recapture a lost moment. Here the 'envelope' frames the poem ironically, since it provides none of the "unity and closure" (Fogle and Brogan 436) traditionally associated with this form:

> Only let it form within his hands once more –
> The moment cradled like a brandy glass.
> Sitting alone in the empty dining hall…
> From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall
> Piling around carafes and table legs

> And chokes the passage of the revolving door.
> The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll
> Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:
> 'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

McDonald writes that "There appears to be a wariness of the caged minute here as leading to repetition and absurd isolation" (*Louis MacNeice: the Poet in His Contexts* 76), but the more the poem is read (and a short 'envelope' poem by its very nature invites re-reading) the more it communicates not merely wariness but the sense of having actually become trapped in a nightmare. The futility of the protagonist's attempt once more to cradle "the moment" is reflected in the fact that the second line is the only one that finds no line to rhyme with it. The imagery expresses blocked repetitive motion (the revolving door choked with snow), and mindless repetition (the ventriloquist's doll is a hollow copy of a real person). The poem's central argument and nightmarish image, though, depends on its almost-exact repetition of the first line in order to resist closure at the poem's end. The diner has managed to project himself back in time into the dining hall, but there he can only wish again "Only let it form within my hands once more", thus beginning the poem all over again. It is as if he is a character in a horror film, his time machine broken so that he is condemned to infinitely regress, attempting to capture the moment but never succeeding. Although the voice has tantalisingly changed from third to first person, its mood is still frozen in a pleading imperative.

Another exploration of the impossibility of repetition is "Variation on Heraclitus" (1961), which references the philosopher's famous sayings: "Everything flows", and "No man ever steps in the same river twice", perhaps also calling to mind his dictum "The way up and the way down are one and the same", one of Eliot's epigraphs to *Burnt Norton*. The tone of this poem – though not without a strong undercurrent of anxiety – is witty, colloquial, punning and argumentative. The flowing syntax and variable line length eschew a regular

rhyme scheme, so that the most noticeable instances of repetition take the form of punning and word play: “slide snide rules” and the “standard lamp” that is not “standard”. Undoubtedly, as McDonald writes,

> The stability, or rather persistence, of the ‘I’ who observes all this is at issue in the poem, and is put in a problematic relation to the writing in which the first-person voice engages […] The permanence of writing is in no way a settled matter here, and the poem’s long lines, with all the twists and turns in their continued acceleration, build towards a conclusion in which the idea of the ‘static’ is rejected most emphatically when (ironically) the verse’s movement comes to a dead halt. (*Serious Poetry* 175)

However, the resort to punning humour, and the petulance of “No, whatever you say […] I just do not want your advice […] for I tell you flat” suggests an interpersonal rather than a philosophical dialogue. What document did the speaker sign? Why are the advisers trying to “pin [him] down”? This might be a pseudo-intellectual speaker, using classical scholarship to escape “the redundancy of a culture dominated by deadening bureaucracy” (Gillis 110).

Another important “repetition-device” found in MacNeice’s work is identical (or tautological) rhyme, where a rhyming pair consists of a word that rhymes with an identical word – “cat” for example rhyming with “cat”. Identical rhyme has traditionally been prohibited in English versification because it is “confusing and fatiguing” (J I Wimsatt 41), and because, unlike rich rhyme – where “bat” the animal rhymes with a cricket “bat” – it does not respect rhyme’s dependence on a “harmony of sound and distinction of sense” (W K Wimsatt 337). Poets have defied this traditional view, however, demonstrating that in practice a pair of identical words *can* be considered to rhyme (326).

This technicality is deployed somewhat mischievously in MacNeice’s “Reflections” (1961), which interrogates “the changing slots to which relativistic perception assigns phenomena: ‘The fire in the mirror… / The fire in the window’” (Longley 128). “Reflections” appears on the facing page to “Variation on Heraclitus”, and purports to deny

its assertion that “One cannot live in the same room twice”, as the speaker sees the room in which he is standing replicated not just twice but three times, thanks to the combined reflective effect of both the mirror and the window. This complicated set-up is from the outset disorientating. The first line itself appears tautologous in meaning, before the second line reveals a more complicated picture:

> The mirror above my fireplace reflects the reflected
> Room in my window; I look in the mirror at night
> And see two rooms, the first where left is right
> And the second, beyond the reflected window, corrected
> But there I am standing back to my back. The standard
> Lamp comes thrice in my mirror, twice in my window,
> The fire in the mirror lies two rooms away through the window,
> The fire in the window lies one room away down the terrace […]

The painstaking description of the scene becomes rather exasperating for both speaker and reader, and this effect is exacerbated by the rapid breakdown of the expected ABBA rhyme scheme – but not before it has been further confused by MacNeice’s use of identical rhyme. He almost seems to be playing on the definitional argument concerning the rhyme’s permissibility by tautologically rhyming “window” with “window” in lines 6 and 7. Is he in fact rhyming like with like? Is the “window” he sees reflected in the mirror at line 6 the same (reflected) “window” he looks in at line 7, or has he at some point turned away from the mirror to look directly “through the window” behind him? The final line of the poem gives the lie to the claim that a mirror image is identical to the original:

> […] At home outdoors where my inside rooms lie stranded,
> Where a taxi perhaps will drive in through the bookcase
> Whose books are not for reading and past the fire
> Which gives no warmth and pull up by my desk
> At which I cannot write since I am not lefthanded.

The distant and rather stranded rhyme of “lefthanded” with “stranded” should provide some sort of closure, but it is undermined by the pun on “write”.

Whereas "confusing and fatiguing" identical rhyme is used to anxiety-inducing effect in "Reflections", it belies this characterisation when it acts to almost exactly the opposite effect in "Apple Blossom" (1960). Moreover, MacNeice employs identical rhyme in a more thematically significant way in this poem. A beautifully constructed meditation on innocence and experience, it "heretically implies that eating the apple was not a Fall but a flowering" (Longley 140):

> The first blossom was the best blossom
> For the child who never had seen an orchard;
> For the youth whom whisky had led astray
> The morning after was the first day.
>
> The first apple was the best apple
> For Adam before he heard the sentence;
> When the flaming sword endorsed the Fall
> The trees were his to plant for all.
>
> The first ocean was the best ocean
> For the child from streets of doubt and litter;
> For the youth for whom the skies unfurled
> His first love was his first world.
>
> But the first verdict seemed the worst verdict
> When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden;
> Yet when the bitter gates clanged to
> The sky beyond was just as blue. […]

A thematic pattern, established in the first verse, is essentially followed throughout the poem: a statement concerning innocence (line 1); an enlargement or complication (line 2); an incidence of the loss of innocence (line 3); and finally a statement of consolation (line 4). Formally, the quatrains follow a pattern of two unrhymed feminine endings, followed by two masculine rhymes, but this binary rhyme scheme is rhythmically counterpointed by contrasting metrical treatments: lines 1 and 4 contain four strong stresses, whereas lines 2 and 3 conform to accentual-syllabic scansion, modulating between anapaestic and iambic feet. A subtle music results from this overlapping arrangement of pairs and opposites.

When MacNeice disrupts the pattern, then, by introducing the closest of harmonies – not just rhyme but identical rhyme – into the first couplet of the quatrain, he makes a startling equivalence between the statement and its complication, thus reconciling a paradox:

> […] For the next ocean is the first ocean
> And the last ocean is the first ocean
> And, however often the sun may rise,
> A new thing dawns upon our eyes.
>
> For the last blossom is the first blossom
> And the first blossom is the best blossom
> And when from Eden we take our way
> the morning after is the first day.

If "ocean" can rhyme with "ocean" and "blossom" with "blossom", the logic of the rhyme seems to say, then first can be equal to last, and last equal to best: the Fall can be a flowering. Further, the structure of the whole poem enacts this equivalence of last and first, as the last line of the poem calls back to the last line of the first stanza. In its repetition, however, it changes from past to present tense ("the morning after is the first day"). A kind of resolution has been achieved – as it was not achieved in the broken repetition of "The Brandy Glass" – and, by being transformed into the present tense, the final line's sentiment is also made more relevant to the contemporary reader.

Certain of MacNeice's poems display an acute self-consciousness of the speaker-as-writer. In "Variation on Heraclitus" the speaker "signed / On a line that rippled away with a pen that melted", and in "Reflection", he observes a reflected "desk / At which I cannot write since I am not lefthanded". In the love poem "Déjà Vu" (1962), by contrast, the speaker is in control of the act of writing. It is the pretext for the repeated line, as the speaker explicitly writes the closing line of the 'envelope', in a way that succeeds where the speech of the diner in "the Brandy Glass" failed. Instead of trying to project himself back into the past, the speaker of "Déjà Vu" imagines a moment that seems magically suspended in the future:

> It does not come round in hundreds of thousands of years,
> It comes round in the split of a wink, you will be sitting exactly
> Where you are now and scratching your elbow, the train
> Will be passing exactly as now and saying It does not come round,
> It does not come round, It does not come round, and compactly
> the wheels will mark time on the rails and the bird in the air
> Sit tight in its box […]

The speaker's identity as a writer, however, only becomes clear in the penultimate line. Before this, the partial repetition "It does not come round" is attributed to the apparently eternally passing train. The image of the train, a familiar trope in MacNeice's poetry,

> has a peculiar ambiguity which is part of its potency, for in life, as in a train, it is impossible to tell whether it is we who are moving, or whether it is the outside world of experience and objects […] Are we stationary or are they? (Brown 106)

The repetition of the train's phrase here suggests the optical illusion known as the 'wagon-wheel effect', giving the impression that the train is stationary ("mark[ing] time"); however, the train is clearly moving at the same speed as the bird in the air, which consequently appears to "sit tight in its box". Evidently, as in "Meeting Point", love is able to suspend the laws of physics, "So that, whatever the rules we are supposed to obey, / Our love must extend beyond time because time is itself in arrears". Finally, the speaker reveals his identity as poet, and brings the poem full circle by imagining a present tense in the future: "And now, as you watch, I will take this selfsame pencil and write / It does not come round for hundreds of thousands of years." MacNeice's use of a negative sentence construction to complete a poem that is an affirmative statement about love is pleasingly paradoxical.

"Déjà Vu", in Longley's words, "urges that 'Our love must extend beyond time' by consisting of a sentence which returns to its starting-point and remains in perpetual motion" (130). Since love tampers with the laws of physics, MacNeice's love poem can become a perpetual motion machine. This calls to mind Don Paterson's definition of a poem as "a little

machine for remembering itself" (11). Porée also draws a parallel between poems and popular music, claiming that both are inherently self-referential. It is no accident, he suggests, that *The Burning Perch*'s tendency towards refrain coincides with the early Sixties pop hits which Szendy dubbed "machines à repetition" ("repetition machines") (117).

As Auden did in "Simple like all dream wishes", MacNeice uses poetry to address the topic of popular music directly. Its clichéd nature is the subject of "Off the Peg" (1962), whose title introduces an extended metaphor:

> The same tunes hang on pegs in the cloakrooms of the mind
> That fitted us ten or twenty or thirty years ago
> On occasions of love or grief; tin pan alley or folk
> Or Lieder or nursery rhyme, when we open the door we find
> The same tunes hanging in wait as when the weather broke
> In our veins or the golden bowl in our hands; they show
> Frayed edges here and there or loss of nap but like
> Chameleons can adapt to whatever sunlight leaks
> Or thunderstorms impend or ghosts of long love strike. […]

Adolphe Haberer, in his essay "A Defence of the Cliché", employs a similar analogy: "In the great store of language, the cliché is the most readily available item, ready-to-wear, fitting everybody, always second-hand and always as good as new" (150). MacNeice's poem, however, develops the idea that while hackneyed melodies indeed "fit everybody" well enough, they appear to fit startlingly well when they coincide with life's "occasions of love or grief". Although the tune itself is the same, the hearer has undergone one of life's profound changes, making the "same old" seem newly imbued with power to communicate feelings of deep personal significance. On those occasions,

> […] we reach
> For one of those wellworn tunes; be it purgatory or hell
> Or paradise even, circumstances allow
> This chain of simple notes the power of speech,
> Each tune, each cloak, if matched to weather and mood, wears well
> And off the peg means made to measure now.

Longley writes that in these later poems, "the revitalized cliché […] is fundamental to MacNeice's poetic recovery" (132), and "Off the Peg" makes a similar argument about the potential for the renewed significance of clichéd songs. Through its extended metaphor, the poem cleverly reanimates some dead metaphors: the songs are threadbare (showing "frayed edges"), but their "wellworn" appearance becomes transformed once they are back in style and can be seen to "wear well". MacNeice thus rejuvenates the very language with which he is arguing for the relevance of the stock expression, once again using a poem's form to enact its content.

Cliché is a recurring concern for MacNeice, most obviously in "Homage to Clichés" (1935). Longley summarises this poem as "a linguistic metaphor for our addiction to habit, to 'the automatic, the reflex'[, which] partly indulges the addiction, partly probes the fears that underlie it" (130). The poem's alternately indulgent and wary attitude towards cliché accounts for the way its mood modulates between comfort and threat, as "finality encroaches inexorably on temporality" (Corcoran 217). The speaker has an avowed preference for the predictable, for

> […] the automatic, the reflex, the cliché of velvet.
> The foreseen smile, sexual, maternal, or hail-fellow-met,
> The cat's fur sparking under your hand
> And the indolent delicacy of your hand […]

This attraction to the familiar and predictable is reinforced by the speaker's friendly relationship with the addressee – and, by extension, the reader – whose behaviour at the bar is closely observed, "The way that you answer, the way that you dangle your foot", and by the term of endearment in the recurring question, "What will you have my dear? The same again?" The first line sets up this attitude of familiarity, as the speaker seems to take the reader into his confidence, assuming a shared view of the superficiality of progress:

> With all this clamour for progress
> This hammering out of new phases and gadgets, new trinkets and phrases
> I prefer the automatic, the reflex […]

By means of what Terence Brown calls “cross-fading of imagery” (135), MacNeice blurs the ‘literal’ pub scene, which gives rise to the use of clichéd language, with the metaphor that figures clichés as fish:

> […] These fish coming in to the net
> I can see them coming for yards
> The way that you answer, the way that you dangle your foot
> These fish that are rainbow and fat
> One can catch in the hand and caress and return to the pool.
> So five minutes spent at a bar
> watching the fish coming in, as you parry and shrug
> this is on me or this is on me […]

However, the speaker knows perfectly well that reality – and mortality – cannot ultimately be postponed by this quotidian resort to ‘wellworn’ phrases, “that everything is not true to type like these / That the pattern and the patina of these / Are superseded in the end”. As Corcoran puts it,

> In the delightful world of cliché and refrain, having the same again seems both an avoidance of the knowledge of death and a confrontation with it: both at once, the same again. Cliché and refrain are where we must live, what we cannot live without; but woven into their very fabric is the knowledge of termination. (217)

The poem’s tonal ambiguity is paralleled by its ambiguous commitment to traditional form. The widely varying line lengths suggest free verse, making it easy to miss the subtly half-rhymed couplets with which the poem opens: “progress” / “phrases”, “velvet” / “hail-fellow-met”. In fact, it is only the exact repetition of “your hand” / “your hand” that clunkily points up the presence of this rhyme scheme – a scheme swiftly disrupted by the absence of rhyme in the next couplet, and the “foot” / “fat” pararhyme that follows, before terminal rhyme seems to disappear altogether. It reasserts itself towards the middle of the poem, with

"like these" / "like these", "door" / "stair", "stone" / "alone". Once again, MacNeice seems to be using repetition and rhyme to formally accompany and counterpoint the thematic concerns of the poem. The proximity in which the exact duplication of phrases occurs means that it is almost as "foreseen" and "expected" as a cliché, making the terminal repetition seem like a crashing parody of 'real' rhyme, which – like reality itself – is much more complex and subtle. Echoing this effect is the exact repetition of "This is on me or this is on me", which operates somewhat similarly to the deceptive expression "Or again" of "Entirely": although the phrase is repeated word-for-word, two different transactions are implied, meanings which could be clarified by italicising "this" or "me" to signal a different round of drinks or a different buyer.

As the poem approaches its end, another couplet rings the changes on exact repetition by employing homonyms, further demonstrating the deceptive nature of the "same again":

> […] our glasses
> Make two new rings of wet upon the counter
> Somewhere behind us stands a man, a counter
> A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol
> Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy
> This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain –
> What will you have, my dear? The same again?

McDonald summarises the *rime riche* effect thus: "The 'counter', semantically transformed in its repetition from the mundane to the ominous, undermines the static nature of 'cliché and refrain'" (*Louis MacNeice* 81). The sense of unease is compounded by the closing couplet, whose "refrain" / "again" pairing could be either a full or half rhyme, depending on pronunciation. This destabilises the reassuring effect of the classical iambic pentameter in the final line, while ending on the rhetorical question – insistently repeated here for a third time – seems to demand whether the reader really shares the speaker's addiction to cliché.

This is not the only poem in which MacNeice links drinking with repetition. What Corcoran writes of "Homage to Clichés" is perhaps even more applicable to "Alcohol" (1942):

> Repetition is the realization of death, and it seems wholly characteristic of MacNeice that his figure for this should be the invitation to have another drink, that artificially intimate jocularity which may hide an abyss – a figure inspired, possibly, by the seasoned drinker's (alcoholic's?) knowledge that where drinking is concerned repetition may lead all too literally to death. (217)

In "Alcohol", the association between alcohol and repetitive use of language becomes rapidly and unambiguously negative, as we see the drinkers

> […] Ordering time-and-again the same-as-before:
>
> Those Haves who cannot bear making a choice,
> Those Have-nots who are bored with having nothing to choose,
> Call for their drinks in the same tone of voice,
> Find a factitious popular front in booze. […]

In "Déjà Vu", the repetition of "It does not come round" appeared to make time stand still. Here, the repetition of "Another drink" initially transports the reader back in time to restore an Edenic innocence, before inexorably setting off the chain of events that follow the Fall:

> […] Another drink: Adam is back in the Garden.
> Another drink: the snake is back on the tree.
> Let your brain go soft, your arteries will harden;
> If God's a peeping tom he'll see what he shall see.
>
> Another drink: Cain has slain his brother.
> Another drink: Cain, they say, is cursed.
> Another and another and another –
> The beautiful ideologies have burst.
>
> A bottle swings on a string. The matt-grey iron ship,
> Which ought to have been the Future, sidles by
> And with due auspices descends the slip
> Into an ocean where no auspices apply. […]

The cynical, self-destructive addiction to repetition condemns the drinker to "The last way out that leads not out but in", with the ill-fated ship of the future described using the past conditional, the awkwardness of the syntax ("Which ought to have been the Future") emphasising the ugliness and magnitude of the loss.

A much more positive exploration of cliché is "Idle Talk" (1961) which, like "Apple Blossom", combines Edenic imagery with a focus on repetition. Like "Apple Blossom", it transforms the conventional religious view of the Fall, suggesting the possibility of recovering a more profound and meaningful innocence than that which was lost. MacNeice does this by transforming the biblical garden into an earthily real garden, whose seasons argue for a cyclical renewal that confounds the once-and-for-all nature of the Fall. The vegetal imagery is analogous to the cyclical way in which hackneyed language can, like "wellworn tunes", become new and deeply meaningful:

> […] And yet we continue, frivolous, garrulous,
> Plotting our chatter, planting our annuals –
> Anecdote, limerick, tittle-tattle, chestnut –
> but, come full circle, the leaves are green.
>
> And, come full circle, the chestnut candles
> Abide the spark of tapered wit,
> While the rotten compost of hackneyed phrase
> Reprieves the captive, feeds the future. […]

Indeed, it is naïve to denigrate so-called "idle talk", since

> […] The little words that get in the way
> can also pave the way for a wish,
>
> Shop-talk, club-talk, cliché, slang –
> The wind that makes the dead leaf fall
> Can also make the live leaf dance,
> Though the green of this was the green of that
>
> And all our gems have been worn before
> And what we intend as new was never

not used by someone centuries back
Or by ourselves some weeks before. […]

The wellworn can become revitalised in a recurrent, even seasonal way, which the speaker conveys by making an equivalence between "the green of this" and "the green of that". The parallel draws attention to the deictic function of the demonstratives: it is only the perspective of linear time that prevents "this" being equal to "that". The speaker in "Variation on Heraclitus" plays a similar linguistic game when he dismisses "you advisers on this by the time it is that" where, in context, "this" seems to rapidly become "that" by means of Heraclitean "flow". The stanza that follows this observation in "Idle Talk" also has a Heraclitean feel to it, though it subverts the philosopher's assertion that reality is never "the same"; in fact, everything is "the same" because "what we intend as new was never / not used by someone". Here, emphasising the renewable, recyclable nature of speech is freeing because it suggests that – contrary to the threat expressed in "Homage to Clichés" – there is no "final music" to be faced. Moreover, since "Idle Talk", in Longley's words, "sees in linguistic behaviour a metaphor for human behaviour in general" (132), the acknowledgement of cyclical flow in this stanza argues against the biblical notion of an original irrecoverable state of innocence. This leads up to the final three stanzas, which "restore the cliché 'I love you' to its primal freshness" (132), even as they emphasise the familiar repetition of the "same three words". Recovering Eden is not the point, since it is Adam's loss of innocence that gives the clichéd words a new, profounder meaning.

Repetition is very much to the fore in MacNeice's later poetry, where it "becomes a pivotal means of exploring emptiness and destabilization" (Gillis 111). Porée notes that about a third of the poems in *The Burning Perch* completely eschew rhyme, while formal repetition, by contrast, increases in significance over the course of the collection (117–118). McDonald links MacNeice's tendency towards "nightmare logic" with his use of repetition, pointing out

that “the logic of repetition within poems is what fuels the nightmare” (*Louis MacNeice* 197). “Château Jackson” (1961) is a prime example of this. The poem parodies the nursery rhyme “The House that Jack Built”, a cumulative tale that usually begins something like this:

> This is the house that Jack built.
>
> This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
>
> This is the rat that ate the malt
> That lay in the house that Jack built.
>
> This is the cat
> That killed the rat that ate the malt
> That lay in the house that Jack built. […]

The model is declarative and moves by accumulating relative clauses to the original statement. MacNeice’s poem subverts the statement by turning it into a question, by focusing on “the Jack” (perhaps a jack-of-all-trades, or jack-the-lad) instead of the house, and by the title’s pretentious transformation of Jack’s house into “Château Jackson”. Repetition in the nursery rhyme works somewhat like a memory game, consolidating what has already been recited before adding an additional line each time. In “Château Jackson”, the repetitive “That” beginning each new line gives the poem the headlong momentum of an inescapable nightmare, whose logic moves so swiftly there is no chance for consolidation or even to pause for breath:

> Where is the Jack that built the house
> That housed the folk that tilled the field
> That filled the bags that brimmed the mill
> That ground the flour that browned the bread
> That fed the serfs that scrubbed the floors
> That wore the mats that kissed the feet […]

This relentless question continues for twenty lines in total, its word choice increasingly concerned with brokenness and failure, until it finally reaches its question mark in the middle of the poem:

> […] the wind that skinned the flocks
> That raised the rocks that sunk the ship
> That rode the tide that washed the bank
> That grew the flowers that brewed the red
> That stained the page that drowned the loan
> That built the house that Jack built? […]

The 'envelope' that frames this tortuous query mirrors itself, suggesting a tautologous question that can ultimately expect no meaningful answer: "Where is the Jack that built the house […] That built the house that Jack built?" The second half of the poem does supply an answer of a kind, in details that point to Jack's resting-place:

> […] the yew that chills the ground
> That grows the grass that chokes the flowers
> That brewed the red that decked the bank
> That bears the slab that wears the words
> That tell the truth that ends the quest:
> Where is the Jack that built the house?

However, what purports to be an answer in fact ends by repeating the initial question, forming the 'envelope' that frames the entire poem and sends the reader back to the beginning, making this a recurring nightmare. As Longley puts it, the poem "returns to its original metaphysical question, and so its 'quest' does not end but teasingly circles (like 'There's a hole in my bucket') without solution" (165).

In the similarly nightmarish "The Taxis" (1961), MacNeice refuses the traditional fairytale logic of repetition, employing a thwarted and partial refrain to further confound the expectations set up by the repetition's ostensible pattern:

> In the first taxi he was alone tra-la,
> No extras on the clock. He tipped ninepence
> But the cabby, while he thanked him, looked askance
> As though to suggest someone had bummed a ride.
>
> In the second taxi he was alone tra-la
> But the clock showed sixpence extra; he tipped according
> And the cabby from out his muffler said: 'Make sure
> You have left nothing behind tra-la between you.'
>
> In the third taxi he was alone tra-la
> But the tip-up seats were down and there was an extra
> Charge of one-and-sixpence and an odd
> Scent that reminded him of a trip to Cannes.
>
> As for the fourth taxi, he was alone
> Tra-la when he hailed it but the cabby looked
> Through him and said: 'I can't tra-la well take
> So many people, not to speak of the dog.'

The formulaic beginning of each stanza suggests the three-part logic of a joke or a fairytale, but the pattern is dragged out to a fourth stanza, and even this fails to supply the expected surprise or punchline, as the protagonist is still said to be "alone" in the fourth taxi. At the same time, it is evident that throughout the poem he has been accompanied by an increasing number of passengers who are invisible to him. Porée pinpoints the irony of the recurring "tra-la" which, if it is to be taken as a chorus or refrain, suggests communal singing. The "he", however, is – as far as he can see – without an accompanying choir. The phrase "alone tra-la" is therefore an oxymoron (121).

In fact, as Corcoran points out, "tra-la" is more in the nature of a "repetend" than a refrain, since it occurs irregularly. Furthermore, at only two syllables it sounds like a truncated refrain, its "musical inertia" contributing to the "black comedy" of the man's frustrated travels (219). For Porée, however, the poem's formal repetitiveness suggests a continuing momentum – even as the poem's thematic iterativity is interrupted by death, when the protagonist himself finally becomes invisible (120).

Dream logic is also at work in "Soaps Suds" (1961), as the world it describes "moves between ordinary consciousness and a nightmare croquet game (shades of *Alice*)" (Longley 153). "Soap Suds" is somewhat reminiscent of "Autobiography" in the way it regresses to a child's-eye view to explore its protagonist's early life:

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

There is something theatrical or perhaps filmic in the way the walls open, the poem's point of view following the ball backwards in time to the man's childhood. The second stanza describes the "joys" of the remembered house, including a "stuffed black dog in the hall", and in the third stanza he "has now returned" to his childhood to play croquet in the garden, where "a grown-up voice cries Play!" At this point, however, the mood of the poem suddenly darkens, as the movement of the croquet mallet propels the poem's point of view forward once again into an uncertain future where "Play!" is ironically associated with anger:

> […] The mallet slowly swings,
> Then crack, a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall and the ball
> Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and then
>
> Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn
> And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play!
> But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands
> Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child.

The "crack" and "boom" transform the dinner gong into one of MacNeice's menacingly symbolic bells, and the dog in the hallway – which was introduced as one item in the catalogue of "joys" – has now become ominously significant, singled out for repetition at the same time as being subsumed into an adjective associated with darkness. Interestingly, the

word “dog” was the example MacNeice used in a letter, to illustrate a point about the inevitable loss of the descriptive power of language due to the deadening effect of familiarity:

> Language is at first a help but at last a hindrance. When you first name a dog a “dog”, it helps you get at its entity but in a little time the word “dog” becomes a cliché and helps little towards the visualization of dog. The essence of dog is lost while the symbol remains. (Qtd. in Gillis 111)

It seems significant that the dog in the hall is first introduced as a stuffed dog, placing it already at one remove from the live animal. It only requires one instance of repetition for this dog to become largely symbolic, “dog-dark” now connoting the proverbial “black dog” of depression.

Set against the “great yellow ball”, the “black dog” calls to mind a similar opposition of colours in “Autobiography”. There, the “black dreams” contrasted with the “gentle” mother’s yellow dress – a colour whose positive associations recur in the initially pleasant memory of the yellow ball rolling through the croquet hoop. By the third stanza, though, the ball has lost its colour, and in its final repetition in the fourth stanza, the ball itself is lost.

The remaining significant instance of iterativity in the poem consists in the image of the hoops which, thanks to the sense of vertigo that builds at the end of the third stanza, assisted by the enjambment over the stanza break, seem to form an endless procession that leads out of the dreamlike state and into the present as “each dissolves in turn”. Porée admires the ability of the hoops – themselves static – to propel an emotional journey, as the yellow ball travels through them and through the protagonist’s childhood, contrasting this with the repetitive arrival of the taxis which, though mobile, seem to trap the man in a nightmarish stasis (120).

Finally returning to the present, the last line of “Soap Suds” ends the poem on a similar note to “Autobiography”, with the protagonist acknowledging that his childhood is

behind him. In the image of the running water from the tap can perhaps be discerned another nod to Heraclitus, injecting a note of consolation and liberation.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have selected from each poet's oeuvre to illustrate the chapters' respective formal concerns. To compare the selections themselves, however, would not be to compare like with like: *Four Quartets* is a unified longer work from Eliot's later career, whereas I have chosen a variety of short poems by the young Auden, and a range of poems from both early and late MacNeice. Nevertheless, these disparate works exhibit similarities that I have only touched on, and which deserve some attention.

Most obviously, Eliot and MacNeice – who both namecheck Heraclitus – are united by their focus on repetition and specifically on finding the end of a poem, or smaller unit, in its beginning. This is clearest in MacNeice's penchant for the envelope form (the term could also be applied to *East Coker*), and in Eliot's use of chiasmus. Both poets, moreover, use these formal aspects as means to explore thematic concerns with endings, with escaping from the time-bound state (Eliot) or suspending time (MacNeice).

A commonality between Auden and MacNeice is the use of forms derived from popular sources, 'light' verse and nursery rhymes, and clichéd or formulaic language. Both poets move freely between sympathetic and ironic use of their sources, the latter treatment doubtless drawing on early Eliot – for instance the slang and 'ragtime' of *The Waste Land*, or nursery rhyme in *The Hollow Men*. By *Four Quartets*, Eliot has left such experiments in formal irony behind him, adopting a sincere, coherent approach to form by assimilating tonal influences such as the Bible and St John of the Cross into his free verse line. In the metrical passages, he eschews song forms for sophisticated literary forms such as sestina and *terza rima*, and when he references other voices they are directly quoted (Julian of Norwich, The Cloud of Unknowing) or – as in the 'Elizabethan' passage in *East Coker* I – a relatively straightforward stylistic borrowing, which does not attempt to either subvert or assimilate the stylistic peculiarities of its model.

Another formal link between MacNeice and Auden is rhyme used for both aesthetic and intellectual effect; specifically, MacNeice's skilful patterning of masculine and feminine rhyme is comparable to Auden's modulation between strict rhyme and consonance. By contrast, Eliot rhymes sparingly but strikingly in the free verse passages of *Four Quartets*, and consistently in each poem's lyric sections (the first passage of part II, and part IV). Though he uses little humorous wordplay, Eliot is not above playfulness, especially in *The Dry Salvages*. In particular, the chiasmic equivalence that *East Coker* I makes between "earth" and "mirth" (37–38) or, in *The Dry Salvages*, the change "from grief into relief" (III, 12) and the equivalence of "the womb, or tomb" (V, 11), call to mind MacNeice's homonyms or Auden's "reader to rider" consonance. In each case, thought-provoking associations are made by pairing words that play on rhyme's definition as a similarity of sound but distinction of sense. Eliot's apparent punning on "still" in "still / Moves" (*BN* V, 6–7) prompts one to wonder about a possible pun on "time" in the "wild thyme unseen" (*EC* III, 30; *DS* V, 26).

This pun might seem unlikely, were it not that time is a major concern of the *Quartets*; indeed, the problem of existence in the temporal world is the theme that links all three poets. *Burnt Norton* evocatively describes commuters on the London tube – figures emblematic of temporal existence – as "time-ridden" (III, 11): a more aggressive image than "time-bound", conveying the extreme difficulty we necessarily have in escaping temporality or even in comprehending a state of timelessness. *Four Quartets*' consistent focus is on answering this predicament through religious – often, specifically Christian – faith, seeking to transcend temporality by attaining "the point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (*DS* V, 18–19).

In early Auden, however, both problem and solution are less clearly defined, and they are mediated through constant formal and stylistic experimentation. This restlessness can be partly attributed to the young poet's own changing sense of identity, resulting, by 1940, in his

permanent move to the United States, where he fell in love, as well as becoming a churchgoing Episcopalian. Having accepted Christianity only later, in his early poetry Auden prefers socio-political concerns – such as the rise of fascism – and emphasises diagnosing society's sickness rather than proposing solutions. He subsequently disavowed his overtly political poems, such as "Spain 1937" and "September I, 1939", claiming their rhetoric seduced him into making dishonest statements. Although my focus on Auden's shorter verse has precluded discussion of these works, his change of position is relevant to the poems I have discussed, which convincingly demonstrate the potential of a move away from the poet's public role and towards interpersonal human connection. As Mendelson puts it, "Auden became the most universal of modern poets by being the most individual" ("A Note on Auden" xvii). The shorter poems show Auden, despite repudiating a political role for poetry, advocating love as a course of action. This is true in the ironic, slangy voice of "The sun shines down on the ships at sea" –

> […] If we can't love, though miles apart,
> If we can't trust with all our heart,
> If we can't do that, then we're in the cart

– and in the strangely moving combination of biblical and nursery rhyme language in "As I walked out one evening": "You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart". Clearly motivated by Christian teachings, such lines evoke the difficult personal work involved in putting *agape* into practice.

By contrast, Eliot draws heavily on Christian tradition and writes within a clearly Christian context during a sustained meditation that consistently identifies love as the solution – but it is rather an abstract concept of universal love, heavily influenced by Eastern thought. The word itself is used sparingly in *Four Quartets*, and when he does meditate on its meaning, Eliot resorts to a somewhat academic tone:

> […] This is the use of memory:
> For liberation – not less of love but expanding
> Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
> From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
> Begins as an attachment to our own field of action
> And comes to find that action of little importance
> Though never indifferent. […]
>
> (*LG* III, 7–13)

Eliot, a philosopher by training, is at home in the intellectual company of mystics and visionaries, and with solitary prayer and contemplation, even in the context of the religious community referenced in *Little Gidding*. Although he was writing immediately before and during the war, this context is not indispensable to an essential understanding of the poetry. As a backdrop, wartime is most clearly felt in part II of *Little Gidding*, but even Eliot's most direct references to the blitz are veiled: "Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended […] After the dark dove with the flickering tongue / Had passed below the horizon of his homing […]" (28–29). This evocation is strikingly different from the specificity of Auden's "Shanghai in flames and Teruel re-taken" in "Simple like all dream wishes", or the references to Hitler, German Jews, a committee and passports in "Refugee Blues". Contemporary events, like contemporary song lyrics, are the raw materials for Auden, who is motivated by the unfolding of history in specific human societies, whereas Eliot seems concerned with the human condition of temporality per se. In short, Auden's early poems are very much of their time; by contrast, Eliot in *Four Quartets* is concerned with transcending time.

MacNeice also addresses the problem of temporality and proposes love as the answer, but in a fundamentally secular context and with an attitude that tends towards the sceptical. Like Eliot, MacNeice makes repeated – in fact, more explicit – use of Edenic imagery, in poems such as "Apple Blossom", "Alcohol" and "Idle Talk". Unlike Eliot and Auden, however, MacNeice (the son of a Protestant minister) explicitly rejects religion as a solution:

"I would cherish existence […] For all the religions are alien / That allege that life is a fiction" ("Leaving Barra"). Therefore, despite the close connection I have made between Eliot's chiasmic tendency and MacNeice's use of the 'envelope', there is an important difference between the two in terms of temperament and intention. Where the closing passage of Eliot's *Little Gidding* returns to *Burnt Norton*'s garden, "Apple Blossom" chooses to walk away from Eden, finding hope and a surprisingly positive new beginning in this rejection of the very terms of Christianity.

Instead, MacNeice gravitates towards human love, but he aspires for it to attain a state of endlessness. This wilful or wishful suspension of time is experienced in "Déjà Vu" and "Meeting Point", where love itself appears to overrule temporality. MacNeice has to admit, however, that this transcendence is temporary and ultimately illusory. An ideal state conjured through poetry, it suggests the existence of an equally hypothetical flipside in the recurring nightmare of "The Brandy Glass" or, at best, the poignant sense of loss created by ironic repetition in "The Sunlight on the Garden". Furthermore, although MacNeice rejects the spiritual, identity in the physical dimension often seems fluid, uncertain or threatened (in "Variation on Heraclitus", "Reflections", "Taxis" and "Homage to Clichés"). His poetry therefore occupies a ground between these two alternatives: a dream-like state of love that acknowledges its own impermanence, and a nightmare that seems all too real.

MacNeice's general attitude as revealed by these poems – partly hopeful, partly sceptical – is reflected in the role they allow for the act of writing: the writer is sometimes in control, as in "Déjà Vu", but at other times books are unreadable and writing impossible ("Variation on Heraclitus", "Reflections"). There is an acknowledgement of entropy in his belief that all utterances inevitably degrade to cliché – and yet his equivocal attitude to language sees him paradoxically attracted to clichés, driven to rehabilitate their reputation in "Homage to Clichés" and "Idle Talk".

In somewhat similar fashion, Eliot insists throughout *Four Quartets* on the inadequacy of language, so much so that the final description of "every phrase / And sentence that is right" (*LG* V, 3–4) contributes to the sensation of "restoration" (Gardner, *The Art* 53) the reader experiences in the work's closing passages. Earlier in *Little Gidding*, the ghostly figure from the Dantesque passage declares that "last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice" (II, 65–66), and it is perhaps through "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action" (*DS* V, 31) that Eliot's poetry has come to terms with its own ability to be understood only through analogous practices of reading as meditation, as Gardner recommends:

> It is better in reading poetry of this kind to trouble too little about the 'meaning' than to trouble too much. If there are passages where meaning seems elusive, where we feel we 'are missing the point', we should read on, preferably aloud; for the music and the meaning arise at 'a point of intersection', in the changes and movement of the whole. We must find meaning in the reading. (*The Art* 54)

Auden, too, is often sceptical about language's potential and about the role of the poet. I have suggested that his early experiments serve to evade or complicate the question of the writer–reader relationship, often by mediating the poem's argument through other, borrowed tones and voices. Through parody and satire, Auden pokes fun at the pretensions of literature. The critique of intellectual pursuits in "The sun shines down on the ships at sea" targets first those concerned with writing ("The teacher setting examinations, / The journalist writing his falsifications"), and poems such as "We made all possible preparations" and "Refugee Blues" show the faceless brutality of bureaucracy. Mendelson notes that even Auden's "poems on impersonal-seeming subjects […] tend to modulate into love poetry near the end" ("A Note on Auden" xviii), and in "Refugee Blues" it is the "you and me" with which the poem ends that seems to hold out some hope against officialdom's implacable language. In such poems, which

end with gestures or outright declarations of love's importance, Auden seems to be writing despite himself, modulating into sincerity, finally taking on the mantle of the serious poet.

Ultimately, the prevailing tone of each poet emerges as a result of his attempts to answer the problem of our temporal existence, through formal choices that draw on the context of his time and his personal beliefs. These choices both create and reflect each poet's unique voice.

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