

*Selected Poems:*  
From Modernism to Now



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Edited by

Hélène Aji and Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

*Selected Poems: From Modernism to Now*,  
Edited by Hélène Aji and Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec

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## INTRODUCTION: “LET US GO THEN, YOU AND I”

T.S. Eliot, who was elected favorite poet of the nation in Great Britain in 2009, received the posthumous honor of having his selection of his own poems reprinted with the catchy title, which readers will recognize as the opening lines from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Let Us Go Then You and I* (Faber, 2009). This selection is not new, however: it has history. *Selected Poems*, initially prepared by Eliot in 1948, also bore the mark of Ezra Pound, who had first edited Eliot’s *Waste Land*. Earlier, Eliot had chosen the content for Pound’s first volume of *Selected Poems* (1928). In these two cases, and in many more, selecting poems turns out to be the result of poetic reflection, the expression of an intention to remain in memory for at least a few significant texts, the weapons in a battle against oblivion and dilution. At the same time, *Selected Poems* are a way of reaching out to a larger audience. While volumes of selected poetry were hardly new to the Twentieth Century, the advent of the mass-market paperback, especially with Penguin anthologies in the 1930s, and the increased marketing techniques used to distribute all kinds of books contributed to the increase of selections and anthologies of all kinds.

Who decides what poems are the important for inclusion in a volume of selected poems? When the selection occurs during the author’s lifetime, may one assume that the author was involved? What motivates the choice of one poem over another? How do readers’ preferences influence this choice? How does the selection allow both familiar readers to approach a poetic corpus with new insights and new readers to become initiates of the work? How do new readers and familiar readers of a poet negotiate the poems that are left out of the selection? How does a specific selection reveal or obfuscate an author’s overall writing style or thematic choices?

What methods are used to structure the selection? Is there an advantage to chronological or thematic structuring? Many authors, such as Denise Levertov in *Selected Poems* (1986) or Philip Levine in *New Selected Poems* (1991), list poems under their respective volumes

in chronological order, with Mary Oliver preferring a reverse chronology. Yet some poets prefer to avoid chronological order altogether and group their poems thematically. What advantages or disadvantages does such structuring offer?

Are *Selected Poems* the ideal pedagogical tool or would *Collected Poems* be more effective? Robert Lowell's *Selected Poems* (1976) was lauded by Marjorie Perloff as "the best possible entry into the imaginative universe of Robert Lowell" (in a *Washington Post* review). More recently, what makes Charles Bernstein's choice of Louis Zukofsky in *Selected Poems* (2006) the perfect introduction to a poet many have found difficult, as well as the key into the editor's own poetics? What are the differences for the reader between volumes of collected and selected poems? The question might be examined using the case of Stevie Smith, whose *Selected Poems* (Penguin 1978), chosen by James MacGibbon, were already available in *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (1975).

To what extent does a volume of selected poems guarantee a poet a place in the canon of received contemporary poetry? When is the best time for a poet to make a selection of his or her work? The *Selected Poems* of Gwendolyn Brooks appeared in 1963, well after the Pulitzer Prize she received in 1950, and long before she stopped writing poetry. Adrienne Rich's *Poems: Selected and New 1950-1974* was published in 1975 when she was forty-six. Jeffrey Wainwright's *Selected Poems* (1985) firmly established his poetic reputation. Jon Silkin's *Selected Poems* were issued in 1980, when he was fifty. C.H. Sisson's *Selected Poems* were published in 1995, when he was eighty-one years old and had been writing poetry for some fifty years. How does a living poet deal with the expansion of creativity, as she or he outlives a first selection? Tony Harrison's *Selected Poems* (1984) was expanded as soon as 1987 to include "V." But T.S. Eliot allowed his 1948 selection to be re-issued without adding his later work.

\* \* \*

The essays in this volume address such questions in a variety of ways, and also provide an overview of poetic writing from modernist poets to the present day, from *Selected Poems* published in 1940 to selections published in the last few years. An International Conference held at the University of Caen in Spring of 2008, "Selected Poems from Modernism to Now," was the starting point for this volume. The

coherence that arises from addressing this topic, while considering the works of a variety of poets, should offer new insights into the uses and riches of volumes of selected poems, and perhaps offer new critical angles as well.

The essays have been organized chronologically, by the date of publication of the first volume of *Selected Poems* they discuss, and then by alphabetical order according to author. The volume begins with 1940, when three selections of note were made. Susan Ang discusses selections of Louis MacNeice, David Ten Eyck and Alex Pestell explore selections of *The Cantos* made by Ezra Pound. Then Fiona McMahon examines selections of Dorothy Livesay in 1957 and 1986, followed by Helen May Dennis's consideration of selections of Adrienne Rich beginning in 1967. Philip Christensen addresses selections of John Hollander from 1972 and following and is keen to note the poems that Hollander did not include. Daniel Szabo looks at selections of poems by R.S. Thomas from 1973. Shona Allan compares selected poetries by Edwin Morgan from 1985 and following, with special attention to the 15,000 free anthologies by Morgan distributed in 2008. Jennifer Carol Cook highlights a selection of Mary Oliver's work (1992). 2006 is where the volume ends: Sara D'Orazio and Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec consider different aspects of Geoffrey Hill's *Selected Poems*, and H       Aji examines Charles Bernstein's selection of Louis Zukofsky's poetry (2006).



## CHAPTER ONE

### “DEAR SHADE”: LOUIS MACNEICE SELECTED AND RECOLLECTED

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Robert Crawford, in “Poetry, Memory and Nation,” speaks about poetry as being, metaphorically speaking, “mediumistic,” making it “akin to memory,” a “means of going back and drawing something forward as much as it is a way of discovery.” Poetry, he says, “re-calls” (Crawford 2000, 194). What he says about poetry as “mediumistic” and mnemonic, properties which he extrapolates to anthologies, is potentially illuminating to a consideration of both the nature and function of a *Selected Poems* and, as it happens, strangely apt; MacNeice writes, “I am collecting not because I am dead, but because my past life is” (MacNeice 1941, 791). In similar vein, Day Lewis says that the “selves who wrote those poems are strangers to [him]” and he cannot resume their identities; they are “dead selves” (Day Lewis 1954, 9). While the dead selves or lives cannot be brought back to life, the selection, as medium, allows the poet to communicate with, and recall, them.

This paper considers the *Selected Poems* of Louis MacNeice of which there are effectively five volumes,<sup>1</sup> though, because of spatial

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constraints, I will only be looking at three of these volumes—the first *Selected Poems* put together in 1940 by MacNeice himself, the one put together by Auden after MacNeice's death (1964), and the 1988 version done by the Irish poet Michael Longley. What I will be arguing is that the selections, in their individual and different ways, constitute ways of recalling MacNeice, and that the selecting is also a re-collecting of the poet, a re-collection which to an extent conditions, and has conditioned, his critical reputation.

A few general thoughts on selection and collection might usefully preface the discussion. "Collected," "Selected," "Complete," and their various possible refinements (e.g. *Collected Poems Year X to Year Y*, *Poems ditto*, *Uncollected Poems*, *Later Poems*, *Collected Shorter Poems*, *Collected Longer Poems*—the topography of the compilation allows infinite recalibration) are not—as one might have thought—simple generic titles but are in fact fairly complex and nuanced formulations both constituting, and in turn requiring, acts of critical engagement. This understanding is implicit in Day Lewis's observation to the effect that in making any selection, criticism is involved, (Day Lewis, 1954, 9) and also in Robin Skelton's comment that, "[t]his anthology [*Poetry of the Thirties*]... must be regarded as a kind of critical essay, for the act of selection and arrangement is also an act of judgment" (Skelton 1964, 13). What Day Lewis means is that to select and arrange is also to constellate, the new "syntax" in which the parts are placed in relation to each other giving a different meaning to the whole as well as to the parts that compose it. A *Collected Poems*, *Selected Poems* or any other compilation is, then, not a mere tranche of material but an interpretive or epistemological mechanism, in the sense that its arrangement of poetic information organizes that information as meaning, allowing us to relate to it and "know" it in particular ways.

A *Collected Poems* might be understood to offer a definitive view and/or conspectus of a poet's work, a kind of poetic "Last Word." As Auden suggested, the word "Collected" suggests finality,<sup>2</sup> and as MacNeice wrote in the "Foreword" to *Poems 1925-1940*, "When a man collects his poems, people think he is dead" (MacNeice 1941, 791). This did not stop him putting together two editions of a *Collected*

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<sup>1</sup> The two omitted are *Eighty Five poems selected by the Author* (1959) and the abbreviated version of Longley's selection brought out for the Faber Poet to Poet series in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted without mention of source in Editor's Preface to W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. xviii.

*Poems* at a relatively early age, nor does the *Collected Poems* as poetic Last Word always quite work as it should—Robert Graves kept producing different editions of a *Collected Poems* throughout his life, thus managing to have many Last Words, "final" thus being, in his case, a relative, rather than absolute, term, a continual irony in the present. An edition of *Collected Poems* can be, and often is, intended to provide a sense of the trajectory a poet's work has taken and may be taking, thus enabling the reader to get a view of what MacNeice, reviewing Eliot's *Collected Poems*, called a "poet's progress" (MacNeice 1936, 56).

The *Selected Poems*, however, is a more complicated beast. The difficulty of selecting for a *Selected Poems* derives from the multiplicity of its possible textual intentions and consequent uncertainty of its generic aims; the problem is accentuated by the degree of subjectivity involved, not just in evaluating the poems in themselves and in evaluating the poems in terms of their relevance to an agenda but also in the interpretation both of an agenda and of the very remit of a *Selected Poems*. The notion of "flower picking" employed by anthologists appears to inform a *Selected Poems*, made obvious in those selections eschewing the more formal and generic title in favour of catchier names like *The Best of Betjeman*. However, this only highlights the real problem—what do we mean by "best"? Whose "best"? "Best" according to what criteria, what textual intention or agenda? Richard Wilbur describes the *Selected* as one "sternly winnowed" (Wilbur 2004, xv), a metaphor half-recalling Hopkins's image of [his] chaff flying that [his] "grain [might] lie, sheer and clear." Does Wilbur's metaphor split the to-be-selected and the to-be-excluded along lines of the lightweight and the heavily and worthily substantial, (keep *The Waste Land*, discard "Macavity")? Or does he mean, more simply (but more crudely) that we should keep the digestible and dispense with the non-digestible? (keep "Spring and Fall" and lose "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" or keep "Lady of Shallott" and junk "In Memoriam"?) Or—yet more crudely—keep the good stuff and ditch the rubbish, which merely brings us full circle to the question—what is the good stuff and how do we define it?

A question perhaps worth asking is whether a selection is not, figuratively speaking, both a synecdoche or a fragment. MacNeice's "Snow" argues the world as "various," a word which could describe most poets as well; the poet is crazier and more of him than we think. To select, then, risks impoverishing the "richness of the room," attenuating the sense of the poet's "incurably plural" self by

detracting or subtracting from that plurality. Rather than the snow-*and-roses* which, as it were, constitute the poet and his work, a selection may succeed in only coming up roses. A *Selected Poems* thus represents the poet, but also fragments him. MacNeice's Harlequin describes himself thus:

... sifted and splintered in broken facets,  
 Tentative pencillings, endless liabilities, no assets,  
 Abstractions scalpelled with a palette-knife  
 Without reference to this particular life.  
 And so it has gone on; I have not been allowed to be  
 Myself in flesh or face, but abstracting and dissecting me  
 They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,  
 Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh...  
 (MacNeice 1940, 10)

This is from "An Eclogue for Christmas" which, incidentally, opens MacNeice's own first *Selected Poems* (1940), and whose form, the eclogue, derives from the Greek *eklegein*—"to choose" and which originally denoted a selection—a serendipity which is perhaps not a serendipity at all but a deliberateness on MacNeice's part; MacNeice was, after all, as we are so often reminded, a first-class classicist, and it may have amused him to begin a selection with a selection, and, in that scanty first *Selected Poems*, to include three eclogues—"An Eclogue for Christmas," "Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate" and "Eclogue from Iceland." There are further lovely ironies to be pointed up here, not least that "Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate" depicts what is effectively a poetry competition instituted by Death and held between two shepherds, Death in the end allocating *both* the prize, in effect refusing to choose, or select, between their offerings.

MacNeice's Harlequin may be seen as an emblem of the selected poet. "Posed" by the selector, he is simplified, "sifted and splintered in broken facets," reduced, in selection, to an abstraction, a stylized profile. The point is that *Selecteds* represent less than they refract, each new selection constructing not the same poet—in this case, the same MacNeice—but a newly refracted—and therefore differently inflected—one. As Auden Heracliteanly writes:

We never look at two people  
 or one person twice  
 in the same way.

(1991, 840)



MacNeice's observation—that "any contemporary poet is a mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist, but, as mouthpieces alter what you put into them, it is helpful to consider the shape of the mouthpiece itself" (MacNeice 1938, 89)—may be usefully invoked here. As the mouthpiece shapes the words that are spoken, so too, analogously, the selector articulates the "poet," this true even when that selector is the poet himself.

\* \* \*

Earlier, I mentioned five different *Selected Poems* or their moral equivalent, and in them it is possible to observe not only very different logics of selection and arrangement at work, but therefore also differently refracted and inflected MacNeices. Here, I return to, and also extend, Robert Crawford's notion of poetry as outlined earlier, arguing that not just poetry, but the vehicle of the *Selected Poems* itself is "mediumistic," prosthetic in the sense of constituting an artificial memory, but also in sense 2b given by the *O.E.D.*—"of, relating to, or designating an object or procedure designed to alter a person's physical appearance temporarily." "Prosthesis" is also suggestive in its earlier, now almost defunct, grammatical meaning of being an "addition of a letter or syllable to the beginning of a word" which the paratextual material surrounding the production of a *Selected Poems*, and thus shaping the recollection that it constitutes, could be said, in some sense, to be.

Yeats contended that "[t]he friends that have it I do wrong/ Whenever I remake a song/ Should know what issue is at stake/ It is myself that I remake," and one might argue that a *Selected Poems* is, likewise, a "remaking" of the poetic self. MacNeice's first such "self-remaking" was in 1940 during the war (although there was also MacNeice's earlier incarnation as the novelist "Louis Malone"—or, as Kerrigan suggests, "Louis M. Alone.") (Kerrigan 2008, 16). The 1940 selection refracts or recollects MacNeice-the-documenter, a MacNeice who, in the form of his own *Selected Poems*, becomes the camera, the prosthetic memory recording for posterity what might otherwise be lost. While the *Selected Poems* thus records the poet recording the times, however, what it "forgets" as opposed to what it "recollects," is in fact an earlier poetic incarnation: MacNeice's juvenilia, his apprentice volume *Blind Fireworks* where his voice is most Eliotesque, is forgotten, the *Selected Poems* thus springing forth the poet, like Athena, fully-grown.

Given that four volumes of verse (if one doesn't count the *Letters from Iceland* and *I Crossed the Minch*) had by then come out, this first *Selected Poems* is surprisingly pinch-fisted, containing only twenty poems. It is possible that the mood of austerity, present even in the early days of the war, might have had something to do with this. (Though the Book Production War Economy Agreement only properly went into effect in 1942,<sup>3</sup> the Ministry of Supply had inaugurated an official rationing system for paper in March 1940, the same month the volume went into print.)

While Faber may not have issued an actual fiat to the effect of "Keep it short," it is certainly possible that an increasingly conservative attitude towards the use of paper was already in the air, and that either Faber or MacNeice, in the spirit of belt-tightening, might have been inclined to keep things telegraphic—in fact, selective. (In "Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate," there is a prophetic irony in the metaphor used by Death to the shepherds: "All time is not a tear-off jotter/You cannot afford to scribble so many false answers.") But the point, I feel, revolves less around actual paper shortages than a more abstract and not necessarily clearly or consciously articulated sense of abstinence, of unease about the place of poetry in a time of war. Did poetry serve any function (hence justifying its use of material resources)? Wasn't it, after all, only the year before that Auden had written that "poetry ma[de] nothing happen?" Samuel Hynes notes that even in 1939, "a sort of war-year before the war," in the English literary world, it had been "a time of endings," *Criterion* suspending publication in January, the *London Mercury* in April, *New Verse* in May and *Twentieth-Century Verse* and *Fact* in June; Hynes comments that "it was as though the time itself recognized that a literary period—the years *entre deux guerres*—was over, and that henceforth the minds of men would be preoccupied with other things." (Hynes 1976, 340) And a sense of this also permeates the final sentence of MacNeice's *Modern Poetry*, published the year before the war broke out:

When the crisis comes, poetry may for a time be degraded or even silenced, but it will reappear, as one of the chief embodiments of

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<sup>3</sup> See generally, Amy E. Flanders, "'Walking on the Ceiling': British Book Publishers and the Second World War," (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2004). 2 volumes.

human dignity, when people once more have time for play and criticism. (MacNeice 1938, 205)

Peter Robinson has asserted, apropos of the sentence above:

Yet, in the event, poetry was neither silenced nor degraded. Nor did it need to wait until people had "time for play and criticism"—itself a phrase which faintly and haplessly degrades the place poetry can and does have in life, whether there is a crisis going on or not. (Robinson 2005, 50)

But while Robinson's affirmation of the power and importance of poetry is interesting, he misses MacNeice's point. a little. Does "degrade" as MacNeice uses it and as Robinson hears it in fact carry the same meaning? "Degraded" has a commonly available sense which we are all familiar with, i.e. debased, and, in that sense, is used metaphorically. But in the context of the sentence, it may mean something more spare and literal, i.e. downgraded in importance. One might even suggest that the substitution of the literal for the metaphorical is an argument in small for this, the metaphorical itself a metaphorical indulgence, which, along with poetry—and the poet—are, in a time of war, figurative casualties, expendables, unaffordable luxuries. (The earth compels, upon it/ sonnets and birds descend.) The "daytime madrigals" of MacNeice's shepherd-poets are belittled, their war-dreams of "territorials [...] out on melting asphalt under [...] howitzers" preferred. Poetry, hitherto a "free lance," is conscripted into the service of recollecting, documenting, bearing witness. It is no coincidence that of the skimpy twenty poems selected, one is "Museums," or, that another (uncollected) poem of 1940 vintage, "Picture Galleries," speaks of art's function in reminding us of what "we always would rather forget."

This then brings us back to what this first *Selected Poems* refracts: MacNeice in his role as documenter, and here it may perhaps be worth remembering not just the dual function taken on by poets in the 1930s—Auden in particular taking the role of poet-documenter—*vide* his poems on the Spanish Civil War and the *Sonnets from China*—but we might also recall MacNeice's job with the BBC which he was shortly after to embark upon. The 1940 selection begins with the "Eclogue for Christmas" and the "evil time" it anatomizes, "Sunday Morning" and "Sunlight on the Garden" accreting the sense of constriction, inescapability and slow darkening. We move from "April Manifesto," where MacNeice muses upon "how we never come full

circle, never remember/ Self behind self years without number," through "Ode," with its repeated puns on May:

Let us turn to homeliness,  
Born in the middle of May  
Let him accumulate, corroborate while he may  
The blessedness of fact  
Which lives in the dancing atom and the breathing trees  
And everywhere except in the fancy of man  
Who daubs his slush on the hawthorn and the may.

(1940, 32)

This leads to the "catharsis" of "June Thunder," and we end with selections from the Septembrine *Autumn Journal*, written during the Munich crisis. The idea of memory is prevalent throughout. Through its selections and the "syntax" of its arrangements and positionings, the selection rearticulates the whole as an extended *Autumn Journal* which is what this first *Selected Poems* really is, *Autumn Journal* being the nostalgic collection and recollection of the disappearing days—"they are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill." B, in "Eclogue for Christmas" desires that "... all these so ephemeral things/Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings;" as Grettir, in "Eclogue from Iceland" suggests, that desired permanence is lodged in memory, and memory in language:

Memory is words; we remember what others  
Say and record of ourselves...

(1940, 45)

The times are recollected; what may somewhat have got lost in selection is the poet himself.

For the sake of brevity, the next selection *Eighty-Five Poems selected by the Poet*, cannot be treated in great detail, even though there would be some point in dissecting it a little, given its unusual arrangement of the eighty-five poems into eight sections, MacNeice, in his Foreword saying that "The order of this Selection, divided into eight groups is meant to be more or less significant." (MacNeice 1959, 7) But this selection of 1959 was to be swiftly superseded by the 1964 selection made by Auden, and for that reason whatever it recollects of the poet was rapidly overwritten.

Auden, whose critical stock is currently high and still rising, had, from the 1930s on, been seen as a major and defining literary figure.

This, and his position as one of MacNeice's friends, would have conferred upon his selection a certain authority, and Faber would appear to have to some extent traded upon this: the blurb on the back cover reads: "This full and varied selection, made by his friend and contemporary W.H. Auden, is a perfect introduction to MacNeice's work as a whole."

It was not, however, just that Auden was Auden which gave his *Selected MacNeice* the influence that Michael Allen ascribes to it (Allen 1998, 105); it was also the moment of its coming into being. The selection came out in 1964, the year after MacNeice's death from pneumonia (caught while recording sound effects for his radio play *Persons from Porlock* in Yorkshire), and there is a sense in which its timing invests it with the authority and solemnity of a Last Word.

Auden had earlier given the Memorial Address for MacNeice and now he was to write the elegy "The Cave of Making." The *Selected Poems* represents another struggling attempt at Memorial and elegy, the originals having both failed quite to come off. The Address damns with faint praise; there is nothing resounding about it, MacNeice emerging less defined by what he is/was, than what he is/was not: "I should be very surprised were I to learn that Louis had any real enemies" (Auden 1963, 8), says Auden; and, again, "he sponged on no one, he cheated no one, he provided for his family and he paid his bills, these facts, I consider, deserve to be recorded." (Auden, 1963, 13) And ironically, the only poem of MacNeice's that he quotes begins: "*He was not Tom or Dick or Harry...*"

The Address ends on a description of MacNeice: "The man with the shy smile has left behind /Something that was intact" (Auden, 1963, 14), and again, there is a sense only of a dimming outline, rather like the Cheshire cat fading out and leaving only his smile behind. Qua tribute or memorial, this whimpers rather than bangs, and Jon Stallworthy's biography notes that while John Boyd thought "Auden's praise 'precise and generous,'" others thought it a "curiously muted performance" (Stallworthy, 481). The elegy, like the Address, is a strange unsatisfactory affair, and its oft-quoted postscript has been heard by an indignant many as Auden failing to observe the proprieties tying elegy to eulogy and taking an ungenerous and uncricket-like swipe at someone no longer able to defend himself:

God may reduce you  
 on Judgment Day  
 to tears of shame,  
 reciting by heart  
 the poems you would  
 have written, had  
 your life been good.

(Auden, 1991, 696)

However, arguably unsuccessful as the elegy is, failing even to “sing of human unsuccess/ in a rapture of distress,” there are a few things which may be elicited from it.

... dear Shade, for your elegy  
 I should have been able to manage  
 Something more like you than this egocentric monologue...

(694)

It is a thought-provoking line—not something “more *for* you” as we would instinctively assume, but “more *like* you.” The implication is that the elegy ought not to reflect the poet but its subject; that the poet should not just, as in Yeats’s case, “become his admirers,” but the admirer become the poet. The poet attempts to recall the “dear Shade” by writing him back into being, but the elegy, like the Address, fails fully to ventriloquize, fails to evoke and invoke MacNeice, except perhaps fleetingly, in the already-quoted controversial final stanzas with their syncopated rhythms, these lines being where Auden is most MacNeician, mostly successfully mediumistic. As a whole, however, the elegy is compromised by Auden’s self-confessed inability to escape his own egocentricity, mute his own, over-strong, voice.

The *Selected Poems*, then, is an attempt to remake the elegy and Memorial Address, re-calling and recollecting the dead poet. Again, it fails. And again, “egocentricity” may be the ascribable cause. Derek Mahon has complained of Auden’s selection as both “parsimonious and idiosyncratic” (Mahon 1996, 47), and while there is some justice in this, one could interpret the eccentricity as tied to that inescapable egocentricity. Anyone reading “Auden and MacNeice: their last will and testament,” will find the poem a mass of in-jokes, a testimony to a relationship whose textures are dimly glimpsed but never fully grasped. The same is true of Auden’s *Selected Poems* of MacNeice. Auden does try to do his duty by MacNeice—MacNeice the classicist is remembered through his eclogues, his translations of the *Agamemnon*

and "Solvitur Acris Hiems" and extracts from "Memoranda to Horace," the phases of his life are sketched in with "Carrickfergus," "Birmingham," "The Hebrides," one Iceland poem, "Evening in Connecticut," and "Mahabalipuram" etc. and the anthologisable MacNeice is there in "Sunday Morning," "Sunlight on the Garden," and of course "Snow", etc.

There are, however, oddnesses. The presence of poems for instance, like "Elephant Trunk," "Circe," or "Troll's Courtship" is puzzling, and annoying because it teases, "Elephant Trunk" having the feel of an in-joke and "Circe" an allusion going somewhat over one's head. "Troll's Courtship," a Blitz poem replacing the better-known "The Streets of Laredo" and "Brother Fire," has been interpreted by McDonald as referencing Auden's "Now the leaves are falling fast" where "Starving through the leafless wood/ Trolls run scolding for their food" (McDonald 1991, 121), and if McDonald is right, the choice here is probably again informed by private significance, though the dialogue of which this is a fragment is inaudible except to the two poets. (The trolls are likely souvenirs or mementoes of their joint Iceland trip.) "Flight of the Heart," previously unselected, is a particularly Audenesque choice in its use of the loosely balladic form, in which form Auden also excelled, as with "Lady, weeping at the crossroads," or "As I walked out one evening." The resulting selection is an oddly mixed bag within which one hears not just MacNeice, but also a weirdly echoed Auden. If less of an "egocentric monologue," perhaps, than the elegy, Auden's *Selected Poems* is nonetheless a slightly egocentric dialogue.

There is no space here to anatomize and dissect the selection in further detail, but the broad point is the way that Auden's selection is fractured by the multiplicity of its agendas. In it, the agenda of memorialising is sabotaged by the egocentric impulse, and the result wars between the MacNeice that Auden has implicitly taken upon himself to recollect for the reader, and the MacNeice which privately exists in relation to himself and whose evocation in turn strengthens that in himself which was defined or elicited by MacNeice. This last is an intuition which requires, perhaps, some explaining—C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, quotes Charles Lamb to the effect that

... if, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but "A's part in C," while C loses not only A but "A's part in B." In each of my friends [says Lewis] there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the

whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. (Lewis 1963, 58)

The general idea—that a death is a loss not just of that person, but of all that that person brought out in other people, including oneself, is what is behind my suggestion that behind the selection of certain poems lies perhaps a desire on Auden's part to regain not just MacNeice but also that part of the self brought out by the resonance with MacNeice.

The reception of Auden's selection points us towards the next phase of MacNeice Renarrativized which we could perhaps call MacNeice *Redux*. Michael Longley's essay "A Misrepresented Poet" had listed, as one of eight "damaging prejudices," that "[MacNeice] [was] a poor man's Auden (or, to quote Cyril Connolly, 'The tortoise to Auden's hare'" (Longley, M. 1967, 68) this indeed being a narrative in need of revision. However, despite MacNeice's ascerbic one-liner on the *Oedipus Complex*—"This won't explain everything nor even the *Oedipus*" (MacNeice 1948, 146)—it might be argued that in Longley's selection, and in the responses to his and Auden's selections, we may discern a rather over-enthusiastic killing of the (symbolic) father (Auden, England) in order that MacNeice might be, as it were, re-matriated.<sup>4</sup>

In this "postcolonial" narrative, then, of Irish resistance to English domination, Auden's selection comes under attack. Thus Mahon:

The *Collected Poems*, edited by the late E.R. Dodds, was, surprisingly (considering Dodds' renowned scholarship), a bit of a shambles; and Auden's twenty-year-old *Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice* was both

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<sup>4</sup> This is even more interesting, given that the narrative of MacNeice and his reclamation of/by Ireland tends to interweave itself with the iterated story of MacNeice's relations with his own father and the deeply felt death of his mother. Apropos of this it may be worth considering Peter McDonald's comment in the chapter "The 'Ould Antinomies': Ireland": "There is a deep connection in 'Carrickfergus' between losing a mother and losing access to Ireland's feminine aspect..." (McDonald 1991, 210). And in "Valediction," Belfast is the "mother-city," MacNeice unable to be "anyone else than what this land engendered [him]"; a few lines on, Ireland has become not just the engendering motherland but the "past to which my self is wed" and which he "cannot deny." It might also be noted that Edna Longley's study quotes selectively from "Valedictions" to emphasise MacNeice's ineradicable attachment to Ireland while ignoring the fact that the poem is, after all, a valediction, and what is being valedicted is Ireland...



parsimonious and idiosyncratic. Its replacement by Michael Longley's new selection is long overdue and should add greatly to MacNeice's still rather uncertain stature. It is, for a start, twice as long and twice as thoughtful. One had the curious impression that Auden had somehow not really read his friend's poems with great care; whereas Longley knows the stuff like the back of his hand, and scarcely puts a foot wrong. (Mahon 1996, 1947)

Or, as Edna Longley observes:

Auden's ... selection shows taste (in recognising that the late 1940s to the late 1950s was a dull stretch for MacNeice), but not always insight (in largely overlooking the Irish dimension). (Longley, E. 1998, 60)

This is not totally inaccurate—Auden *does* leave out most of the Irish poems that Longley's selection recalls. However, so do MacNeice's own two selections (1940, 1959), and he escapes censure (after all, you can't really slate a poet you're trying to claim is obsessed with Ireland for a lack of insight in largely overlooking the Irish dimension in *his* selections—or at least not without seriously damaging your own case.)

Longley's selection is a generous one, and is accompanied by a detailed reading of MacNeice, betokening Longley's intimate understanding of and sense of affiliation with the older poet; the Faber blurb calls it an "essay of meticulous advocacy." But as a selection it is not without its biases—he states, for example, that his "selection favours the lyrical MacNeice"—earlier selections having favoured the "documentary MacNeice" or MacNeice-Athena or MacAuden (a smaller version of what Stallworthy calls the "MacSpaunday pantomime horse," Stallworthy, 483)—and this "lyrical" MacNeice resonates with Longley's own tendency to lyricism. It also, as perhaps might have been anticipated, accentuates the Irish connection. In addition to "Carrickfergus" and "Soap Suds," are included "Belfast," "Train to Dublin," "Turf Stacks" and "The Strand" all of which had been dropped by Auden and "Western Landscape" which MacNeice himself had omitted. Also included are section XVI of *Autumn Journal*, "Round the Corner," "Carrick Revisited," "Trains in the Distance" and "Valediction," omitted in all previous selections. "The Closing Album," only partially present as "Dublin" in *Eighty-Five Poems*, and altogether absent in Auden's selection, is, in Longley's selection, restored in full.

The point is an uncomplicated one: these selections refract MacNeice not just as a lyrical, but also an Irish, poet. Mahon remarks that “[r]eading through the *Collected Poems* of Louis MacNeice one notices that, in purely quantitative terms, there is not a great deal specifically about Ireland” (Mahon 1996, 21). Yet Longley’s selection delicately suggests otherwise, emphasizing MacNeice’s Irishness, in part through the increased proportion of poems associated with Ireland or MacNeice’s Irish background, while discarding two the three “Iceland” poems that make it into earlier selections, “Evening in Connecticut,” “Mahabalipuram,” “Wessex Guidebook” and “Streets of Laredo,” poems recalling the affiliation to Auden, England, etc.

The *Selected Poems* of a poet work differently not only because of their selections but as a result of the different introductory material framing them. The earlier-mentioned selections had either been innocent of introductory material or scant of it, but Longley’s introductory essay focuses the reader’s attention in particular ways, notably on the “obsession” which he claims MacNeice had with Ireland. “Obsessed” is a strong word and conditions the perception of MacNeice which the selection promotes; it is echoed by McDonald (another Ulsterman): “Hedged around with ambitions such as these, MacNeice’s Ireland resembles in its exemplary importance the Ireland constructed by Yeats, concentrating the obsessions of his whole work into one physical location” (McDonald 1991, 222). The same word is deployed by Dodds (yet another Ulsterman) in his preface to MacNeice’s unfinished autobiography *The Strings are False*: “His continuing preoccupation with his own past . . . amounted almost to an obsession.” (Dodds 1982, 15) The quote above, is ellipsed and abstracted, when reproduced in Edna Longley’s study of MacNeice in the context of her discussion of MacNeice’s “Ireland of the unconscious.” (Longley, E. 1988, 3) Dodd’s original observation in full does not define “past” wholly in terms of Ireland—MacNeice’s undergraduate years at Oxford are also mentioned; as it is reproduced in its truncated form in Longley’s study, however, “obsession” transfers its allegiance wholly to Ireland, the context of discussion. Two things may be observed. First, that the kinds of transference illustrated by this small example are not dissimilar to what happens with anthologized poems, literary opinions and taste, which have a tendency to self-propagate, becoming “truths” in the process. And next: that just as Longley in his introductory essay avers that “In applauding Shakespeare’s catholic receptivity MacNeice reveals his own ambition,” (Longley, M. 1988, xx) so too we may hypothesize that

in the emphasis on MacNeice's Irish "obsessions," his selector and critics reveal their own. Longley's selection, while being a generous and sensitive one, is nonetheless politically inflected, its construction of the poet co-opting MacNeice into a narrative of Irish poets and poetics, and our sense of this agenda is heightened if one considers that most of the critical attention invested in Longley's selection has in fact come from the contingent of poets and critics interested in MacNeice's relation to an Irish poetic tradition and to the work of the Ulster poets, Mahon, Muldoon and Longley himself.<sup>5</sup>

Standing back from the detail, we may see how much more complex the issues opened up by a selection are, as against those raised by the more compendious format of a *Collected Poems*. Selections done by the poet and by someone else will evidence a different agenda. A selection can be an opportunity for a poet, as selector, to reincarnate or reinvent himself. But it can also reinterpret him in a way that, while raising his general profile, also, arguably, goes against his own grain; in MacNeice's case the explicit pro-Irish agenda pulling against his self-wrought Englishness. In the end, then, a selection may end by "ghosting" the poet more than "hosting" him.

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<sup>5</sup> See Derek Mahon's Derek Mahon, 'Incorrigibly Plural', Edna Longley's *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, Heather Clark's 'Revising MacNeice' and also Clark's *The Ulster Renaissance*.

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