



HAL
open science

‘P(o)et Shop’: Louis MacNeice’s allegorical poetics in The Burning Perch

Yann Tholoniati

► **To cite this version:**

Yann Tholoniati. ‘P(o)et Shop’: Louis MacNeice’s allegorical poetics in The Burning Perch. *Memoranda to MacNeice. New Readings*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, pp.153-165, 2019, 978-2-7535-5488-7. hal-02900263

HAL Id: hal-02900263

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02900263>

Submitted on 15 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“P(o)et shop”: Louis MacNeice’s Allegorical Poetics in *The Burning Perch*

Yann Tholoniati

Université de Lorraine-Metz

It is generally agreed that *The Burning Perch*¹ sounds like MacNeice’s swan song, although it was by no means intended as such by the author. *The Burning Perch* was intended as MacNeice’s latest volume of poetry, but certainly not as his last one. While critics declare that *The Burning Perch* is probably MacNeice’s best volume, they very seldom go beyond this statement and they do not offer or proffer more detailed arguments in order to support the view that *The Burning Perch* reveals much about MacNeice’s perspective on poetry. As he composed *The Burning Perch*, he stated quite clearly his poetic goals in *Varieties of Parable*². There, he developed and explained his interest in writing allegories. He defined allegory as “any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else, [...] any kind of enigmatical or dark saying”, and he called that type of writing a “double-level writing” where imagery contributes to “reinforce the latent content³”. Disregarding MacNeice’s clear invitation, critics tend to discourage any endeavour to formulate the latent meaning of MacNeice’s allegories. For instance, Peter MacDonald believes that MacNeice makes use of an “indeterminate” parable⁴. It is true that MacNeice himself acknowledged that there was a “constitutional ambiguity⁵” in parable writing but this does not entail that MacNeice’s allegorical poetics should be described, in the words of Joanny Moulin, as: “*une poésie parabolique qui [...] vise à mettre en échec toute tentative d’interprétation discursive. Plus qu’une parabole, c’est une asymptote qui tend vers le zéro ou l’infini du non-sens*”⁶. Therefore, contrary to the suggestion that MacNeice’s allegories are to remain unsolved or cryptic, this contribution would like to call attention to a central aspect of MacNeice’s last volume. The reason why *The Burning Perch* still appears to many critical eyes and ears nowadays as MacNeice’s poetic legacy is that it reveals a lot—albeit indirectly, albeit allegorically—about MacNeice’s conception of poets and poetry and about his belief in the powers of poetry, and sometimes also about his doubts about them in a world at the mercy of an atomic war.

Beyond the mere remembrance of things past, “Soap Suds”, the first poem of the collection, is a spring from which most of the other poems in the volume flow⁷. The poem can be seen as a poetic programme of sorts, like the first movements of a symphony with “muted strings” (“Spring Cleaning”, l. 3): not only does it foreshadow poems associated with childhood and games (“Sports Page”, “Children’s Games”), it also paves the way for the dog in “Charon” and in “The Taxis”, the hoop in “As in Their Time” (vi), the sea in “Round the Corner”, the stars in “Star-Gazer”; the telescope in “Budgie”, the grass in “After the Crash”, the tower in “Spring Cleaning” and “New Jerusalem”, as well as the question of perspective which is addressed in “Perspectives”.

¹ Louis Macneice, *The Burning Perch*, London, Faber, 1963.

² Louis Macneice, *Varieties of Parable*, London, Faber, 1965.

³ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, *op.cit.*, pp. 2, 3, 5.

⁴ Peter MacDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 171.

⁵ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

⁶ Joanny Moulin, *Louis MacNeice – The Burning Perch*, Neuilly, Atlande, 2016, p. 13.

⁷ Xavier Kalck, *Muted Strings: Louis MacNeice’s The Burning Perch*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015, p. 127 ; Peter MacDonald, “Louis MacNeice: *The Burning Perch*” in Neil Roberts (ed.), *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2001, p. 495.

In the poem, introspection takes the form of retrospection. This game of digression which is also progression may sound like an echo of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*—but it is a serious game, much like the game of croquet described here, as the admonitory, even peremptory tone of the anonymous voice on lines 10 and 14 suggests. In the setting of the poem, the croquet game and the gong are closely associated, for the gesture consisting of hitting a gong is very similar to that of hitting a croquet ball. As they both undergo a process of aesthetization⁸, I argue that they stand as a metaphor for poetry, all the more so as the phrase “great gong booms” (l. 11) exaggerates and stages the effect of the beats in a poem. Here poetry seems to be conceived as a serious game which tries to capture the essence of time⁹. Working alongside the polysyndeton (“and”) connecting various moments, time markers (“once”, l. 1; “long since”, l. 15) underline the passage of time, dramatized by the forceful onomatopoeias and alliterations (l. 11) which signal a shift in the consciousness of the speaker. MacNeice roots a temporal experience in a twofold moment: that of the adult washing his hands and that of the child playing croquet. The central metaphor of the “hoops” indirectly refers to an endeavour towards what we might call with Proust “*les anneaux d'un beau style*”, something all poets endeavour to develop:

On peut faire se succéder indéfiniment dans une description les objets qui figuraient dans le lieu décrit, la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport, analogue dans le monde de l'art à celui qu'est le rapport unique de la loi causale dans le monde de la science, et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style, ou même, ainsi que la vie, quand, en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence en les réunissant l'une et l'autre, pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore, et les enchaînera par le lien indescriptible d'une alliance de mots¹⁰.

Like Proust, who believed that “*Une heure n'est pas une heure, c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats*¹¹”, the speaker in “*Soap Suds*” listens to and accesses (“tap”, l. 16) the continuous flow of childhood memories and sensations to write the poem. In doing so he demonstrates the poet's ability to come back to the world of childhood. According to Baudelaire, this is a quality that signals genius: “*Le génie n'est que l'enfance retrouvée à volonté, l'enfance douée maintenant, pour s'exprimer, d'organes virils et de l'esprit analytique qui lui permet d'ordonner la somme des matériaux involontairement amassée*¹²”, and in “*Soap Suds*”, the phenomenon is certainly dramatized in the relation between the child speaker and the adult speaker.

Now, like “*Soap Suds*”, a number of poems in *The Burning Perch* are connected with the exploration of time, like “*After the Crash*”, or “*The Habits*” for instance. But I would like to dwell on “*Déjà Vu*”, as this phenomenon is again associated with an assertion of the powers of poetry. The “round” structure of the poem is clearly to be seen in the epanadiplosis

⁸ The aesthetic process borrows from the field of cinema with such words as “forward” (l. 12), “dissolves” (l. 13) and the image suggestive of a rewind in “a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop / To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child” (ll. 3-4). MacNeice was very much aware of cinema techniques; he explains in *Modern Poetry*: “Much of the obscurity of modern poetry is to be referred to its ‘cutting’—to borrow a term from the cinema” (*Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1938, p.160).

⁹ From this perspective, MacNeice lends his own personal twist to an age-old topic in poetry. Within the field of British poetry, Blake famously asserted that: “Eternity is in love with the production of time” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793); no less famously, Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote that “a sonnet is a moment's monument” in “*The Sonnet*” (1880), to quote only two instances of this pervasive theme.

¹⁰ Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 196.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 690.

forming the frame of the poem. It is reinforced by the circular motifs of the wheels of the train (l. 6), of the mill (l. 8-9), or by the repetition of “round” (ll. 1-2-4-5, also heard in “ground”, l. 7). All these circular patterns point to a self-reflexive poem that embodies a performative utterance at the same as it is a performance. More specifically, it takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy: “I know what you’re going to say” (l. 8).

At the moment of utterance, the speaker experiences a “double vision” (l. 14) which is dramatized in a twofold perception of time. The poet “mark[s] time” (l. 6), but enjoys “extending beyond time” (l. 13). In other terms “whatever the rules we might be supposed to obey” (l. 12), the poet adds extra beats. Indeed, the poem is made of an irregular alternation of pentameters and hexameters, and of iambs and anapaests. It achieves what it says—particularly line 13, as it is possible to scan between six and eight stresses on the syllables “love”, “-tend”, “-yond”, “time”, “-cause”, “time”, “-self” and “-rears”. If the reader decides that the metric pattern is an anapaestic one, “-yond” and “-cause” are not to be stressed.

Poets draw on tradition, but they endeavour to create something new. Although they have been “through the mill [...] of [their] *Magnus Annus*—a Latin expression designating a year of great (poetic) achievement—they do not want to “call it a day” (l.10), and provided they have an aesthetic enticement (“you are too lovely by half” l.11, beauty or “love” l.13), they create again poems and “take a pencil” (l.16). Therefore, “Déjà Vu” presents itself as a subtle device, a “contraption” (“Memoranda to Horace”, l. 81) based on a particular strategy. It is a paradoxical poem, a “déjà vu” (perhaps a déjà vu in dreams, as evoked in *Varieties of Parable*¹³) which has never been read before, staging a déjà vu in the future (“I know what you’re going to say”, l. 8).

If “Déjà Vu” elaborates an extension beyond time, it is because MacNeice supports a wilder type of poetry which is alluded to and advocated more specifically in “Pet Shop” and in the following poem, “Flower Show”. “Pet Shop” is a poem made of five-line stanzas, where lines two and five rhyme together. The speaker depicts a huge variety of animals. He mentions wild and tame animals, with a variety of habitats (“Cold blood or warm”, l. 1): indeed, they come from four continents. The myna lives in Asia, the macaw is more specifically to be found in Brazil, the potto comes from Africa, while the ferret is found in Europe. This variety conveys a sense of exoticism and surprise which is reinforced by the way the animals are evoked. They are obviously dramatized by sounds (plosives in [b] and [p]), and the impetus of the run-on-lines is suggestive of their energy. The uncanny quality of some of the more exotic ones is dramatized through their cries (“Purr then or chirp”, l. 21), their attitudes (“noisy or silent”, l. 3) and their movements (“crawling or fluttering”, l. 1), itself suggestive of various morphologies, and of various habitats again: animals of the water, of the ground and of the air, associated with feathers, scales or furs of various colours. The juxtaposition suggests chaos or “[b]ric-a-brac” (l. 2).

These descriptions are developed by means of pathetic fallacies which draw the reader’s attention to the human element in the poem. The animals in the shop are not merely personified: they parody certain human types. Fish are compared to “dowagers” (l. 4), and the “monkeys lost to thought” (l. 5) suggests a caricature of meditating types—even monks perhaps, as the word can be heard in “monkeys” or pseudo-philosophers. In the second stanza, “small birds” are described as a “crowd” of human beings “elbow[ing] each other and bicker[ing]”, offering their opinions (“Find that macaw too loud”). The following stanza extends the human metaphor. The animals are compared to neighbours (“next door”), to tourists polluting a place (“The sand littered with rumpled gauze”) and to film stars (“lizards /

¹³ L. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, op.cit., p. 137.

Stand in a pose”). The list turns literally into a satire, that is to say, etymologically, a mish-mash or “bric-a-brac”.

Moreover, the shop unfolds under the gaze of an implied spectator, who is present though the deixis of the “here” (ll. 2, 11, 21, 22) and “now” (l. 23). His eye settles on a place and moves on to the next (“beyond”, l. 9 and “next”, l. 14). The poem ends on an imaginary dialogue between the (collective) speaker (“we”, l. 24) and animals. In this dialogue, there is a condemnation of human beings. The speaker accuses customers of entertaining a relation of prostitution or slavery with the animals: “all are here to be bought” (l. 2), “for our pleasure” (l. 21), “our whim and purse” (l. 22). This relation goes against the grain of the deep nature of animals: in the process of captivity they have been deprived of their sexual organs (“neutered”) and of their spirit (as suggested by the word “succubus”). *In cauda venenum*, the final lines are particularly accusing for the customers. “But we can offer you a home, a haven, / That might prove even worse”, worse than the pet shop itself: customers pervert the implicit rules of hospitality that should prevail.

When the speaker addresses the animals by means of the deixis (“you”), he sides with the customers, only to dissociate himself immediately from them in the bitter irony of the final lines. It creates an unstable position for the readers of the poem who are invited to side either with the customers or with the poet. In this context, it is possible to investigate further this parallelism between customers and readers, all the more so as the title “pet shop” is but a slight acoustic variation away from the phrase “poet shop”. For what are words but a poet’s pets? In this perspective, the animals stand for words that are cared for and looked after by the poet: the world of encyclopaedias from which the animals come is mirrored in the encyclopaedia of words that evoke them; in a sense, the poem is also in itself a bric-a-brac of rare and exotic words. Throughout the poem, there is a sense of a wilderness of language: in the run-on-lines, in the lines that cannot contain the syntax that runs over and escapes. The stanzas of a poem might be described as cages or tanks which hold the words / animals only if the poet wishes to “neuter” them. But in “Pet Shop” the wilderness is palpable in the unusual metric pattern (each stanza consists in three tetrameters followed by a pentameter and a trimeter), several lines contain a number of extra syllables and bristle with sound and visual effects such as, for instance in “fossilized lizards” (l. 14). In this poem, a stanza barely contains the untamed words from all over the world. This reading offers a radical reassessment of the meaning of the poem which takes into account MacNeice’s allegorical poetics. What a close scrutiny of “Pet Shop” reveals is that bad poetry is a “worse” home for words. Readers, like the customers, tend to expect something “comfy” (16), a “make believe” that “will return affection” (l. 19) in a narcissistic way. Now for a poet, words have a life of their own, they are like wild animals: “life for the poet is always a life of words, and in words”¹⁴, and the poet’s job is to provide them with a “home”, or a room—after all, a *stanza* is but the Italian name for a room. Therefore, seen in an allegorical light, “Pet Shop” might be read as a satire of a certain type of reader in search of an easy entertainment in poetry. But it seems that for MacNeice, a poet’s job should not be to “neuter” language, but rather to preserve its rough, surprising and uncanny concreteness. If words are a poet’s pets, then this poem is a plea for wild poetry.

A similar perspective on language is probably adumbrated in “Flower Show”. The speaker of the poem, in a sleepwalking trance, undergoes a nightmarish vision of a variety of

¹⁴ P. MacDonald, “Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility”, in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 66. MacNeice is very close to Mallarmé’s famous rejoinder to Degas: “*Mais, Degas, ce n’est point avec des idées que l’on fait des vers... C’est avec des mots*” (Paul Valéry, “Poésie et Pensée abstraite”, *Œuvres*, t. I, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 1208).

monstrously fake flowers (“not to pluck”, “paper, glass, all manner of textile and plastic”, ll. 3-4). The last lines wish for a more natural and untamed language: “Some nettled orchard, tousled hedge, some garden even / Where flowers, whether they boast or insinuate, whisper or shout, / Still speak a living language” (ll. 16-18). The convoluted syntax in the first stanza advocates for an art of reading with “inturned eyes” (l. 15), allowing the reader to grasp the “living language” of poetry. The collection of flowers is analogous to an “anthology”, which literally means a collection of flowers—the flowers also standing, for the classicist that MacNeice is, for rhetorical tropes, flowers of rhetoric¹⁵. The poem again suggests that a poet derives his inspiration from the wild quality of language.

By now, it has become clear that MacNeice’s art of allegory which pervades *The Burning Perch* is a very efficient way, albeit an indirect one, to convey his sense of an *ars poetica*. This occurs even in the most intriguing poems, such as “The Taxis”. Throughout the poem, there is an opposition between the word “alone” and the growing number of extras – characters and objects (“Make sure / You have left nothing behind tra-la between you”, l. 8). The accompanying ghosts, visible to the cabby but not to the main character, tend to increase in numbers in each stanza. How can the reader construe the mystery residing in the poem? It is this sense of mystery that I would like to tackle first, before considering the possible *ars poetica* lying at its very core.

A tension arises in the opposition between a poem that deals with ghosts and the form of the poem which is evocative of a song. The “tra-la” is a strange “throwaway refrain¹⁶”, in part because it refrains from recurring regularly and begins moving out of order. It sounds like the kind of filler phrase found in ballads. Suddenly the cabby (or cabbies) is using it in the middle of his sentences: the jingle starts to come “tra-la between” words (l. 8), and not just in the ends of the lines. There is also the “tra” that can be heard in “extra”. Throughout the poem, there is a very dense pattern of repeated sounds and signs which reinforces the uncanny effect. Moreover, the poem revolves around a disquieting rhythm, energetically leaping from line to line by means of run-on-lines and sudden trochees (“Charge of”, l. 11; “Scent that”, l. 12), combined to the demotion of “But” (ll. 3, 6, 10). All this points to a dream world with a deeper story or a latent one beyond the manifest content.

Now, according to the *OED* (sense 4), the etymology of the word “taxi” connotes an “order or arrangement of words”. “Taxi” can be found in such words as syntax, or hypotaxis and parataxis—“a trick called parataxis”, as MacNeice calls it in *Modern Poetry*¹⁷. “Taxis” also designates a figure of speech which associates one noun with a complement, while “isotaxis” and “endotaxis” designate isolated clauses of equal lengths and the nesting of clauses respectively. Playing around these terms about the poem, the four stanzas are isotaxis which stand in a row like four taxis, which are organised paratactically. Further to the point, a taxi is a *vehicle*, and in the context of the poem, it evokes the Greek meaning of a *metaphor*, which is similar to the verb *to translate*: both, etymologically, mean “to displace¹⁸.” In the epigraph, “To Mary”, MacNeice uses the same idea of transport as metaphor and vice versa:

¹⁵ In a poem saturated with tropes like Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) [London, Penguin, 1971], Guido denounces Caponsacchi’s “florid prose”, which is as “smooth” as his is “rough” (5. 1694-5). Later on, Bottinius complains: “If I might read instead of print my speech, – / Ay, and enliven speech with many a flower / Refuses obstinately blow in print / As wildings planted in a prim parterre” (9. 2-5). See Yann Tholoniati, *‘Tongue’s Imperial Fiat’ : les polyphonies dans l’œuvre poétique de Robert Browning*, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, Strasbourg, 2009, p. 245-325.

¹⁶ P. MacDonald in Campbell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁷ L. MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁸ Translation, indeed, comes from the Latin *translatio*, and literally designates the process by which something is carried (*latum*) across (*trans*). It is itself a translation: of the Greek word *metaphora*, which means the same thing, and from which the word “metaphor” comes.

“We must use what transport we can” (l. 3). The poem keeps calling on the reader to translate its surface meaning.

Consequently, I suggest that the taxis of the poem are a metaphor for language. Indeed, like a taxi, language is an “omnibus”, from the Latin dative which means “for every one”. Figuratively, each stanza is like a taxi, and each taxi in the poem is like a stanza: its inner organisation contains an “extra”, that is to say an extra-meaning, as is the case for “tra-la” lines 8 and 15, which stands for another word—“fucking” being a most probable candidate line 15. “Tra-la” is a linguistic remainder, an opaque or open signifier: “un reste” as Jean-Jacques Lecercle would say¹⁹. The “tip” that is mentioned lines 2 and 6 is not only the small amount of money that the customer of a taxi gives to the driver, nor is it a kind of Jack-in-the-box device as in line 10, but it is also, interestingly enough, a piece of private or secret information, if it does not remain on the tip of the tongue. This tip is probably a tip-off: an obvious indication, a way MacNeice has found to tip one’s hand, that is to say to reveal his hand... The extra or parabolic dimension of the poem is therefore self-referential; it reminds the reader of what Mallarmé said about verse: verse “makes up for language’s deficiencies, as a superior supplement²⁰.” The “extra” or allegorical dimension of the poem stands for this superior supplement brought about by such a metapoetic use of language. Consequently, the reader is probably invited to understand the ghosts haunting the poem as intertextual allusions, memories and shades of meanings.

I would like to come to another aspect of MacNeice’s poetics, which is that of the presence of the poet in a post-atomic world. MacNeice wrote the poems of *The Burning Perch* during the Cold War: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 embodies the apex of the tensions between the USA and the USSR. I think that his poetics expresses his doubts about the use and the need of poetry and poets in such a threatened world; in other words, as Joanny Moulin puts it, the volume is about “*la survie même de la poésie*”²¹. These doubts are staged allegorically in the poem where the title of the whole volume can be found: “Budgie”. Adolphe Haberer offers the following intuition about the importance of this choice: “The Burning Perch, *en position de titre, ne fonctionne-t-il pas, en revanche, comme métaphore du recueil et de ce que l’écriture y dramatise? L’oiseau du poème, alors, serait-il métaphore du poète?*”²²— and this intuition is worth considering. First, literary allusions abound in the poem. In addition to its connexion with “Pet Shop”, “Budgie” very much sounds like MacNeice’s personal version of such famous poems as Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” (1798), Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1820), and closer to MacNeice, Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” (1900) and Yeats’s “golden bird” in “Byzantium” (1933). All these poems dramatise the poetic speaker’s sense of doubt about his poetic powers, a motif which can be heard in “Budgie” as well. The poem mixes microcosm and macrocosm and the tiny budgerigar appears to be lost in the convulsions of the universe. I shall argue that he stands for an image of the artist in a world which can very easily be wiped out by an atomic bomb. MacNeice wrote in *Varieties of Parable*: “In fact the one really peculiar thing in our world is the Bomb²³”, and it is supported by a number of allusions in *The Burning Perch* in such phrases as “fall out from the sky” (“This is the Life”, l. 9), “the final switch” (“Greyness is All”, l. 16), while a sense of apocalypse pervades poems such as “In Lieu”, “Spring Cleaning”, “New

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *La violence du langage*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, p. 6.

²⁰ Famously, in *Crise de vers*, Mallarmé writes : “le vers: lui, philosophiquement rémunère le défaut des langues, complément supérieur” (in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 364).

²¹ J. Moulin, *Louis MacNeice – The Burning Perch*, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

²² Adolphe Haberer, *Louis MacNeice, 1907-1963 : l’homme et la poésie*, Bordeaux, ANRP, 1981, p. 700.

²³ L. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

Jerusalem". This is also what "The Pale Panther" suggests, according to Adolphe Haberer's analysis of the poem²⁴.

The poem starts by blurring the frontiers between (absent) mankind and (humanised) animals. Indeed, the pronoun designating the budgerigar shifts from "its" (l. 2) to "he/his" (l. 32), and the wild animals tend to parody or satirize human beings and human language ("cackle", l. 29; "twitter", "peeps", l. 33). The foregrounding of language is also made manifest in a twofold allusion line 15: not only is "all the world is a stage is a cage" an allusion to Jaques' famous speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (2.7.139), but the phrase also draws upon Gertrude Stein's famous "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" in its syntactic construction. It draws the readers' attention to the idea of the poem as a stage, where the budgerigar is a performing actor who indulges in hammering (l. 34).

As MacNeice wrote in *Modern Poetry*, "a mirror is a symbol of nihilism via solipsism²⁵". Budgie asks himself questions, but he "attitudinizes", that is to say that he assumes an affected, slightly exaggerated attitude. But in MacNeice's eyes, the aesthetic pose is not deprived of some sort of legitimacy: "An obvious contemporary example of the vain poet is Yeats, who admits that poetry is a pose. But it is, he insists, a stock pose, approved by history and permanently valid²⁶". MacNeice points out something similar in the Horatian speaker: "the *attitude* in Horace, as in many Latin poets, is something consciously applied—one more convention within which the poet has to work²⁷". The proximity of "attitude" and "attitudinize" (ll. 13-14) needs not be further stressed. Therefore, MacNeice redeems the poets as inevitable "poseurs²⁸" or "the poet's advertising himself²⁹" as behaviours which are not condemnable in that historical context.

Thus, while on the one hand the budgerigar might symbolise vanity, from MacNeice's perspective it is also first and foremost a manifestation of self-assertion in the face of impending destruction. The question that the poem seems to be asking is: what is the role of a poet in a world on the verge of destruction? And the answer which is allegorically provided seems to be: to play his part of a poet until the last moment, even "on the burning perch" (l. 32)—an obviously important line as it provides the title of the volume. The poet is someone who "stands at his post" despite the multiple dangers that the world runs. Indeed, MacNeice wrote in the review *New Verse* in 1938 that the poet is "not the loudspeaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice. At the highest it can be its conscience, its critical faculty, its grievous instinct³⁰", and in this statement one can hear line 6 of the poem: "Its voice a small I am". This is also what Peter MacDonald feels when he concludes in the following terms about the poem: "The bird's persistence in the face of destruction sounds a central theme in *The Burning Perch's* recurring concerns. The budgerigar's self-regard is refigured as its duty, and its repetitive attitudinizing becomes a kind of heroic perseverance in the face of the future's impossible odds³¹". "I twitter am" (l. 30) might be understood as "I sing therefore I am", the poet's equivalent to René Descartes's famous assertion of the self.

The same uncertainties about the role of the poet in a Cold War world can be heard in the poem "In Lieu". In a mechanical age of processing plankton and human babies, what role can the poet play? What remains for him to do might just be death by suicide. This is what the

²⁴ A. Haberer, *Louis MacNeice, 1907-1963 : l'homme et la poésie, op.cit.*, pp. 358-375.

²⁵ L. MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay, op.cit.*, p. 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³⁰ L. MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, in Alan Heuser (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 98.

³¹ P. MacDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts, op.cit.*, p. 389.

final image of the poem suggests, given that an orator is someone who believes in the power of language like the poet, and the orator “hangs himself from the flagpost”. But nowhere are MacNeice’s doubts better heard than in his obvious *ars poetica*, “Memoranda to Horace”. In the dialogue that he engages with the Roman poet, the speaker explores the modalities of creation: Horace’s circumstances are compared to his own. In the first section, Horace’s most famous statement, “*exegi monumentum aere perennius*”, is questioned and reasserted (“your image / [...] will do”, ll. 20-21). The gap between MacNeice and Horace being “reducible only by language”, there is some sense of confidence which remains in the poet, in the *auctor*, in both senses of the Latin word: someone who stands for the legitimacy of the poetic task (having “*auctoritas*”), and someone who increases (from *augere*) effects. In the act of conveying meaning (through *metaphors*), of building bridges (“pontifex”, l. 14) through voice, sounds and tradition, the poet endeavours to resist the feelings of “fear and resentment” that he expressed in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* issued a few days after his death³². He achieves this in a mood of “intense levity³³”. This is MacNeice’s way of coming to terms with his poetic nemesis: doubts about the legitimacy and power of poetry.

The fragility of the poet in a universe which is at the same time threatening and threatened can also be read in “Star-Gazer”. In this poem, MacNeice stages his persona so as to convey this point. I noticed a possible echo, at least a definite affinity of “Star Gazer” with a poem by Victor Hugo, in *Les Feuilles d’automne* (1831). The poem is entitled “*Parfois, lorsque tout dort*”:

*Parfois, lorsque tout dort, je m’assieds plein de joie
Sous le dôme étoilé qui sur nos fronts flamboie;
J’écoute si d’en haut il tombe quelque bruit;
Et l’heure vainement me frappe de son aile
Quand je contemple, ému, cette fête éternelle
Que le ciel rayonnant donne au monde la nuit!*

*Souvent alors j’ai cru que ces soleils de flamme
Dans ce monde endormi n’échauffaient que mon âme ;
Qu’à les comprendre seul j’étais prédestiné;
Que j’étais, moi, vaine ombre obscure et taciturne,
Le roi mystérieux de la pompe nocturne;
Que le ciel pour moi seul s’était illuminé!³⁴*

This could be seen as a romantic topos (William Wordsworth also wrote a poem entitled “Star Gazers”) describing a *locus amoenus* associated with *Kairos* (the right moment) and a self inclined to believe in his poetic predestination. The title of MacNeice’s poem is an obvious clue. The stars are seen as aesthetic objects, and a star-gazer is a straightforward description of a poet, albeit a somewhat derogatory one. In his title MacNeice probably alludes to the story of the astrologer who fell into a well, or to a similar story, that of Thales falling into a well while gazing at the stars, as it was originally recorded in Plato’s *Theaetetus* and told by Socrates:

³² L. MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, op.cit.*, p. 247.

³³ To take up T. S. Eliot’s words about Catullus in his essay on Andrew Marvell (in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London, Faber, 1951, p. 295) – a phrase also quoted by MacNeice in the third section of “Memoranda to Horace” (l. 54).

³⁴ Victor Hugo, *Les Orientales : Les Feuilles d’automne*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

“I will illustrate my meaning by the jest of the witty maid-servant, who saw Thales tumbling into a well, and said of him, that he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven, that he could not see what was before his feet. This is applicable to all philosophers. The philosopher is unacquainted with the world; he hardly knows whether his neighbour is a man or an animal. For he is always searching into the essence of man, and enquiring what such a nature ought to do or suffer different from any other. [...] But when he tries to draw the quick-witted lawyer out of his pleas and rejoinders to the contemplation of absolute justice or injustice in their own nature, [...] then the situation is reversed; [...] the philosopher and gentleman [...] may be excused for not having learned how to make a bed, or cook up flatteries³⁵.”

Like a poet, Thales is interested in “the essence of man” and things. The question raised by the maid-servant’s reaction: is Thales just an absent-minded man, or is he, according to Socrates, a brilliant thinker too? Henri Bergson, in his brilliant study of laughter, naturally supports the view of Socrates: “*Sans doute une chute est toujours une chute, mais autre chose est de se laisser choir dans un puits parce qu’on regardait n’importe où ailleurs, autre chose y tomber parce qu’on visait une étoile*³⁶”. Gazing at the stars is therefore not as preposterous as one might think at first glance. In MacNeice’s “Star-Gazer” the dark reverie reveals “a mystical sense of man’s position in the universe³⁷”. MacNeice is then very close to Saint-John Perse when, in his Nobel Prize speech, the latter describes how science and poetry follow the same pattern of exploration of the unknown, and how they complement each other: “*et c’est la poésie, alors, non la philosophie, qui se révèle la vraie ‘fille de l’étonnement’*³⁸”. In “Star Gazer” the poet pessimistically entertains sombre thoughts, “adding noughts” instead of thoughts, “in vain,” because the future in the age of the nuclear bomb looks gloomy and uncertain enough.

There are several connecting points between Louis MacNeice and his French contemporary Saint-John Perse. Their lives as travellers made them share this deep feeling of the poet as a lifelong exile. Louis MacNeice felt that he was an exile everywhere, even in Ireland, his “far-near country” as he calls it in “Memoranda to Horace” (l. 25). He felt an Irishman in New York as well as in London (“Good-bye to London”). When he evokes Constantinople in “Constant”, he casts a sidelong glance to a fellow exile and fellow poet Ovid, who was sent to Constantia (Tomis, mentioned l. 9) by the Roman emperor August.

In the course of the poem, the city is perceived as an artefact, where everything is “accidental” (l. 19). Constantinople was thought of as a new Rome (it was actually called the second Rome), and it became the capital of the Roman Empire after Rome had been taken by the invaders. It has been imagined by Yeats as Byzantium (mentioned in “Ravenna”, l. 14, and associated to Rome), at the apex of its civilization, and MacNeice offers here his personal vision about the city as a poetic subject.

Constant is not only a historical construct. It is also, here on the page, “Constant”, a literary construct fostered by inspiration and work which emerges under the eyes of the reader: “a dream takes shape / And becomes Constant” (ll. 16-17). The poem is a syntactic *tour de force* built on only two sentences. It is a “halfway house” thriving on syncretism (Tomis or Kiev, Roman and Turks), scum or reprehensible persons (l. 14). This “bric à brac” (to quote from “Pet Shop” again) which triggers the poet’s inspiration is perhaps a remote echo of Yeats’s third stanza of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (1938):

³⁵ Platon, *Théétète, Parménide*, Paris, Flammarion, 1967, 174a-175a.

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire, essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, p.10.

³⁷ L. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable, op. cit.*, p. 15.

³⁸ Saint-John Perse, *Amers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 168.

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. (ll. 33-38)

Would it be far-fetched to read in the “subsiding strata” (l. 5) an indirect reference to the palimpsest of the various versions of the poem? Be that as it may the final image emerging gradually from the poem focuses on the Church of Holy Wisdom, which refers to Santa Sophia. The building was first a Christian orthodox basilica until 1453, then a mosque until 1931, then a museum from 1935 onwards. Now, in the religious perspective of the Eastern Orthodox Church, “Holy Wisdom” is understood as the Divine Logos become incarnate as Jesus Christ: in other terms, it suggests an allegorical, even transcendental conception of language. The “palm” may refer to the hands of the poet, “one / Who calmly, having other things in mind” (ll. 20-21) than the actual city, but inspired by it, has given “a shape” to “a dream” (ll. 16-17). In other terms, if Constant as a city, is “accidental”, “Constant” as a poem, is certainly “designed” (l. 19) and designed to last and remain “constant” thanks to the architectural brilliance of its syntax and its confidence in the transcendental power of language.

Several other poems in *The Burning Perch* deal with MacNeice’s latest poetics and poetic issues in a parabolic way. As Haberer has noted about MacNeice’s parabolic writing, “la vérité n’est pas dans le récit, mais dans l’écoute³⁹”. MacNeice’s on-going effort to engage with a modern poetics had deep connections with the status of the poet in a modern world threatened by annihilation. MacNeice’s poetics is embedded, but by no means hidden, in the parabolic way he appreciated at the moment of his untimely death. A Latin tag, “*ars est celare artem*” (art conceals art)—sometimes attributed to Horace, sometimes to Ovid, but actually a medieval phrase—is a nice way of describing MacNeice’s achievement in this respect. What surfaces from the scrutiny of these poems is the variety of emotions that accompany his poetic meditations on the role of the poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

³⁹ A. Haberer, *Louis MacNeice, 1907-1963 : l’homme et la poésie, op.cit.*, p. 692.