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► To cite this version:

Christine Chollier, Françoise Canon-Roger. A Comparison of Several Interpretations of "Snow" by Louis MacNeice. *Imaginaires*, 2009, L'interprétation au pluriel, 13, pp.155-175. hal-02614966

HAL Id: hal-02614966

<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02614966>

Submitted on 21 May 2020

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A Comparison of Several Interpretations of “Snow” by Louis MacNeice

‘Snow’ was written in January 1935 and included in the middle section of *Poems* the third work published by MacNeice in September 1935. In the collection, “Snow” had quite an unobtrusive place; it was merely one of the shorter early poems. But in the *Collected Poems* (1925-1948) published in 1949, it was given a choice position as last poem in the second section. Its importance may have revealed itself to the poet with hindsight¹. Besides, the poem had become one of the best known works by MacNeice and it had started a critical epic that was to last to this day.

We propose here to focus on a series of interpretations spanning thirty five years or so between 1953 and 1988 in order to draw up a comparison. We chose to select the most representative ones but we did not have to carry out long researches to discover the first controversy about the interpretation of the poem. As early as 1954, a series of articles defending diverging views were published in continuation in the review called *Essays in Criticism*². The exchange had a dramatic dimension to it since each critic answered his or her predecessor by name. Thus R.C. Cragg initiated the process in October 1953; M.A.M. Roberts answered in April 1954 (with an answer by Cragg in the same issue); D.J. Enright and S.W. Dawson stepped in in July 1954; Marie Boroff took up the subject matter again in October 1958 and gave a long and detailed study of the poem which was in

¹ Haberer, 1986, vol. 1, p. 475.

² See bibliography.

turn attacked by P.A.W. Collins and R.P. Draper in April 1959, their argument being roughly that the poem was simply not worth going to great pains to interpret. This passionate approach has gone on either surrounding MacNeice's figure as a poet or his work. But with time, the interpretation of the poem has lost some of its urgency. "Snow" has become emblematic of a particular period for the younger poets confronted with rough political realities in Ireland. Other poems by MacNeice are favoured by the younger generation. Nevertheless, it has almost always been included in the anthologies of Irish – or English – poetry. It has been translated in several languages (see the translation by Paul Le Jéloux in French³). It has also been rewritten by MacNeice himself ("Plurality" in 1940) and by younger poets such as Carson (born 1948) and Muldoon (born 1951). Of course, both translations and rewriting can be included as forms of interpretations.

Transition: How can this special fate be accounted for? From the point of view of its interpretation, the poem is mostly easy without being altogether devoid of difficulties when looked at more closely. But precisely, most interpretations ignore the letter of the text.

1. Various interpretative trajectories

The first weakness that can be spotted in other critics' interpretations revolves around "reference". On the one hand, the fictive enunciator constructed in the poem is either called "the poet" or "the man". But why should the "narrator" be a poet, let alone "the poet", that is, Louis MacNeice, the guy who signed the poem with his name? It is true that lyric poetry

³ *Anthologie de la poésie irlandaise du XX^e siècle*, J.Y. Masson éd., Lagrasse : Verdier, 1996, pp. 299-301.

and its speaker have become the standard by which to measure the rest of poetry. But even in lyric poetry, why should the “voice” be that of the poet? In addition, why should the implied enunciator be a “man”? There is nothing in the poem that substantiates either of those two presuppositions. And yet, when the poetical text is considered as the reflection of “reality”, the physical sphere including objects, it is hard not to come upon such paraphrase as the following:

If read simply as the record of a mood – the mood, say, of a dutiful son who has offered to drive his mother to the hairdresser’s and is kept waiting patiently in the living-room for her to turn up, and so catches sight in turn of a bowl of tangerines (he helps himself to one), a vase of huge pink roses, the great bay-window itself, some soft fluffy snow-flakes lazily falling outside, and a log spitefully starting to burn in the fire-place just when they are going out – it might be described as the portrait of a man determined not to be impatient with things as they are. He improves upon the occasion and spits the pips into the fire-place, making the fire bubble, and is grateful to Mother for keeping him waiting (Cragg 426).

This kind of referential reading was encouraged by E. R. Dodds’s autobiography in which he recalls that he had invited the MacNeices for dinner one winter night; it was snowing; on entering the lounge, Louis stopped and remarked the contrast between the snow and a bunch of big red roses. A few days later, Dodds received a poem entitled ‘Snow’. In 1949, MacNeice said this scene was lived at his own home (Haberer 783).

Actually, the critic cited above offers the reasoning as a possibility (*If*) which is downrightly refuted and replaced with a more serious proposal: “it is an intellectual poem presenting a philosophical problem”. However, this new hypothesis is given the same treatment as the first – a *reductio ad*

absurdum. Pretending to be a philosophical reader, the critic proceeds to develop the alternative he is faced with:

one, to hit on some method that will determine whether the statement of a philosophical problem can at the same time be a poetical statement; or two, to trace in a treatise the history of the problem of the One and the Many, beginning with Thales and pushing his way up to and through the Parmenides, the writings of Democritus and Epicurus, with a step-over in the De Rerum Natura for poetical nourishment, and press steadily forward to the Monadology, the 'Antinomies' in The Critique of Pure Reason, Bradley's Appearance and Reality, the writings of Bertrand Russell, and draw breath when he has finished reading Mr. John Wisdom on philosophical worries, only to realize that with the introduction completed the time has now come to tackle the problem (Cragg 427).

The study we have quoted so far recapitulates all the problems found with interpretations prior to that of Marie Barroff (1958) – namely the prevailing influence of reference, leading to paraphrase (Roberts 229) or invention, as well as the overwhelming use of a philosophical intertext which is not directly required by the text's instructions. The latter attitude is still found in 1975:

MacNeice is a philosophical poet, a modern 'Metaphysical', and has certain urges towards a kind of secular mysticism. These attributes must be accepted if we are to appreciate his best poetry aright, for they provide the key to those patterns in accordance with which MacNeice felt obliged to organize his main images and themes: 'I believe that as a human being it is my duty to make patterns and to contribute to order – good patterns and a good order' (Minnis 225).

Although nothing indicates that MacNeice's use of 'pattern' has a philosophical acception, this is how the term is nevertheless interpreted by the critic.

In contrast to the attitude consisting in focusing on one element – for example, snow, roses and glass in between – and disregarding the others, another attitude consists in selecting one element – for example, the variety of things – and in constructing its accumulation: in the snow vs roses opposition, in the pips found at the core of the tangerine, in the bubbling sound of the fire, in the various senses, etc. One of these "cumulative" interpretations was found after a detailed analysis of the chain of signifiers insisting on the structural unity of the poem (Haberer 209). Seizing upon the recurring clause including the comparative (l. 4), the critic argues that the main theme is man's inadequacy to World. So far, so good. But in stanza 2, the "drunkenness of things being various" puts an end to the upsetting quality of World (« La pluralité du monde a cessé d'être irritante [...] elle devient [...] objet de jouissance » 213). Saying that diversity has ceased to be frustrating suggests that it was in the first place. Yet in stanza 3 a new phenomenon (l. 9) reverses the former evolution and reintroduces the poet's inadequacy to World (214). This lack of perfection is also read into the enumeration of four senses only out of five, smelling being the missing one (l. 11). The poem tells us about a failure which is neither tragic, nor dreadful (215) because the tone of the poem remains jocular, half-affectionate and colloquial. But World's otherness makes man's relationships with it impossible. It seems here that all the comparatives have been given a dysphoric value.

To be fair, one must say that the very first critic mentioned cannot choose between the philosophical paraphrase and the record of experience. That is why after his philosophical reader has associated words with concepts ("The literal images have developed suddenly into symbols of thought [...] The relation is not between snow and roses but is a world-relation

of concept, plurality. [...] The universal has swept away the imagery [...] ‘I feel the drunkenness of things being various’ [...] means ‘I am convinced of the truth of the proposition’” (Cragg 428)), the critic concludes: “he has failed to *read* the poem. All he has done is ‘spot’ some familiar philosophical positions and treat them as if they were pre-arranged for the poet, and the poet has acknowledged the prearrangement and paid his regards to the problem” (429). The next thing for him to do is to offer his own reading, a reading centred upon experience, more specifically a philosophy of experience. Starting with the problems raised by the interpretation of ‘it’ (line 2), which he conceives to be ‘the room’ (430), and of the dominating position of ‘spawning’, the critic lays the emphasis on the senses, “a spawning of sensations” (431). This allows him to bring into play Goethe’s *Urphänomen* and Bergson’s *intuition* to claim simultaneously that “a poem is an experience, not a thought” (432) and that this poem is “addressed to the rational mind”.

His conclusion that the poem’s “substance is the whole of cosmology, its glossary the history of philosophy” (433) is fiercely attacked by someone who prefers to offer paraphrase from which we will only quote the beginning: “The room was suddenly rich [snow beginning to fall irradiates the room with diffused light?] and the great bay-window seemed full of floating masses of snow which glided across its surface like spawn across water [...]” (Roberts 229). Which does not prevent him from blaming his rival for paraphrasing “like a fish spawning eggs”: “spawning is something that a sufficient number of different creatures do for us not to need to refer the metaphor to any particular one of them. It’s the spawn itself that counts” (231).

In fact, the two rival critics agree on the record of experience to differ on the type of experience. The refutation suggests instead that “the poem makes the original sense of the diversity between the snow and the roses stand as a symbol for

very much more, namely the whole deep sense of the activeness of that ‘world’ that we normally think of – quite wrongly – as passive” (Roberts 230).

This simple but exclusive experience is also what MacNeice advocated about ‘Snow’ in 1949:

it means exactly what it says; the images here are not voices off, they are bang centre stage, for this is the direct record of a direct experience, the realization of a very obvious fact, that one thing is different from another – a fact which everyone knows but few people perhaps have had it brought home to them in this particular way, i. e. through the sudden violent perception of snow and roses juxtaposed (MacNeice, “Experiences with Images”, 131, quoted in Haberer 205).

These interpretations all tend towards a reduction of the ambiguities of the poem. An interpretation on the contrary should aim at maintaining the variety of interpretations it suggests. What are these hermeneutic difficulties?

2. The difficulties of interpretation

They result from an ambiguity in co-referentiality or rather anaphora, the most obvious being the first occurrence of *it* (2). There are two syntactically possible antecedents for this pronoun: either *The room* (1) or *snow* (2). The first possibility can be retained since *the room* is the only independent noun phrase apart from the subject of the verb: *spawning snow and pink roses against the room*. The noun phrase *the great bay-window* (1) which is the subject of the clause would give a reflexive anaphoric pronoun so it cannot be a serious candidate. Nevertheless, such an option is tempting in the vicinity of *against* which allows a semantic association with such a phrase as, for instance, “the rain was beating against the window”. AGAINST meaning “close to, touching or hitting

somebody/something”. The second possible choice is less fuzzy than the previous one: it is the second of the two coordinated noun phrases which can be isolated from the first: *snow and pink roses against **the** snow*. The meaning of ‘against’ in this case is “as a contrast” already activated by ‘great bay-window’.⁴

The use of ‘spawn’ in this context contributes to the syntactic hesitations⁵. The sememe has the inherent feature /animal/: “to lay eggs for fish or frogs etc.” which can be inhibited in other contexts while retaining the features: /origin/, /reproduction/, /fertility/ and /multiplicity/ most of the time associated with a modal valuation of disapproval when the agent and the patient are inanimate, for ex.: *His masterpiece has spawned a string of minor works*, that is to say, too many. In the poem, the verb has an inanimate subject and inanimate objects (as in the preceding example). But, it excludes disapproval and fertility; on the contrary, it creates a semantic intersection with ‘snow’ with which it shares a certain number of semes: /water/, /small/, /white/, /from above downwards/. A metaphoric connection is thus created, i.e. an incompatibility between one of their generic features and an identity between at least one of their specific features: /animal/ is irrelevant for our context and there is more than one common specific feature. The degree of compatibility is lower with ‘pink roses’ which has no relation with ‘spawn’ whatsoever. The link rests entirely on the coordination which both makes this NP acceptable as object of the verb ‘was spawning’ and creates a series of oppositions with ‘snow’: /elemental/ vs /vegetal/; /white/ vs /pink/; /inside/ vs /outside/; /cold/ vs /warm/. These oppositions are qualified line 3 as *soudlessly collateral*.

⁴ Roberts 229; Barroff 396; Dawson 22; Haberer 209-10.

⁵ Cragg 427, 430-1, 432; Roberts 231; Minnis 235; Barroff 395; Haberer 211.

The other two occurrences of *it* have a lesser impact on the general interpretation of the poem: *it* (4) is an anaphora of 'world'. But *it* (5) is a less straightforward case:

Can the coordination be suppressed?

?? *world is (...) more of it than we think*

Does it mean:

"There is more of world than we think" = "there is more of it than we think" (Qnt/Qlt?); which is different from "there is more to it than we think" since *to* implies "from the outside; conferred to it" whereas *of* means "inherent, constituent of". An agent is presupposed in the first case; a permanent state in the other. This difference in point of view also exists in the two possible interpretations of *the drunkenness of things*⁶ provided we posit an equivalence between 'world' and 'things'. Such an equivalence is prescribed by the critical writings of Louis MacNeice.⁷ This complex noun phrase can be understood either subjectively: "things are/seem drunk because they are various" = for which the textual equivalents would be: *suddener, crazier*; or objectively: "I/we get drunk on things that are various". The interpretation of the orientation and of the present participle are influenced by the superordinated verb 'feel' which ends the preceding line, although the first impulse, because of the run-on line, is to read it absolutely.

Another hesitation is due to the unexpected status of 'flames' (9). On first reading the line, and it lingers as a misconstruction, we tend to associate 'fire' and 'flames' in a nominal compound whereas, of course, further reading identifies it retrospectively as a subject Noun Phrase and a

⁶ Cragg 428; Barroff 401-2; Haberer 213.

⁷ Poetry should be about things.

verb. The high proportion of nouns in the poem prompts this first interpretation.

The end of the same verse also suggests an interpretation which disregards the run-on line: 'for' within the unit of the verse is first read as a preposition: *a bubbling sound for world*: "whose world is a bubbling sound"; but further reading lifts this incongruity and reveals 'for' to be nearer a conjunction akin to "because" or "since".

The overall question of syntactic dependence cannot be solved for the segment line 11 which is explicitly separated from the rest of the stanza by dashes⁸. The line remains as a sort of parenthesis, a self-contained unit because of its regular anapaestic rhythm in a pentameter which makes up for the absence of punctuation:

*On the tongue on the eyes on the ears on the palms of one's
hands –*

(Apart from integration, the other main challenge to interpretation is motivation. Thus, the two adjectives *great bay-window* and *huge roses* may be due to intensity and rhythm.)

But if the syntactic integration of the line proves impossible, on the contrary, its semantic integration is a classical feature in this penultimate position. It amounts to a summary of the preceding isotopy related with the four noble senses and immediately precedes a literal repetition of the first line with the anaphoric determiners *the snow and the huge roses*.

⁸ Roberts 230; Haberer 235.

3. About interpretation

3.1. Transcendent vs empiric realism

The two main trajectories in the interpretation of this text do not rest entirely on syntactic or semantic ambiguities or indeterminacy. The actual semantic components of the poem afford ample material for either interpretation. This conflict may best be dealt with in terms of realism provided we give a particular definition of the word. By “realism” we mean the type of referential impression given rise to by a text⁹. Our approach is not directly referential as was shown in part one. There is no one to one correspondence between words and things. In other words, it is the semantic interpretation that determines the reference, it being understood that the semantic interpretation is itself determined by the linguistic components of the text. The interpretations carried out by our critics can be said to partake either of transcendent realism or of empiric realism. The first one is generally associated with poetry and the second one with prose. But ‘Snow’ and probably a great deal of modern poetry, combine the two. These ways of creating a referential impression may be linked with the distinction of high vs. low register which characterized different genres in Antiquity.

In order to show it is a difference of words and not of reference we may take up an example: ‘world’ and ‘things’ do refer to the same extra-linguistic reality/ may be said to be equivalents in the text. But what matters for the critic is the way this possible reference is built linguistically. In the poem, ‘world’ appears three times (4, 5, 9) with zero determiner and in the singular with an abstract value. It is the subject of an attributive predicate, a partial definition, a gnomic statement or maxim with universal value. A built in equivalent in the poem is ‘things’: plural, concrete. It immediately follows this

⁹ = mental representation constrained by the interpretation of a linguistic sequence – and not the other way round!

part of the poem which switches to empiric realism. Empiric realism is what is most commonly termed “realism”. Transcendent realism is not usually considered as a type of realism.

‘Snow’ is a combination of the two types of realism which may account for the contradictory interpretations that have been propounded for it.

Transcendent realism banishes dates, avoids proper nouns, favours the singular and abstract words and creates a sort of timelessness by the use of the simple present in generic utterances expressing unlimited truths or states. See ‘Plurality,’ a rewriting of ‘Snow’ by MacNeice.

The poem has a high proportion of subjective, that is qualitative adjectives and adverbs. The number of derivatives is noticeable and the use of ‘world’ with zero determiner is quite striking. A majority of utterances express permanent states: we count four attributive clauses (4, 5, 8, 10) – without counting the verbless apposition – and one existential clause (12); in addition to the copulas, the verbs are non dynamic (except three): ‘fancy’, ‘think’, ‘feel’, ‘suppose’. Their subjects are undetermined and inclusive: ‘we’, ‘one’, ‘flames’ cannot be said to be an event verb as it is a mere redundancy of the semantic program of ‘fire’; it amounts to an intensifier.

In this poem in praise of plurality, it is the qualitative value which predominates in the utterances.

Empiric realism, on the contrary, can be identified by the use of dates, of proper nouns, of the plural, concrete words, various tenses with chronological value. See MacNeice’s poem ‘Soap Suds’.

The first two lines conjure up a particular situation: high degree of determination (the room, the great bay-window), the use of Be + -ing with a descriptive value and in the preterit; ‘snow’ coordinated with a Noun Phrase in the plural (pink roses), is given a quantitative value. There are fewer instances of it, but if we consider the order of the semantic elements in

the poem, empiric realism comes first, is at the core at of the poem and closes it.

3.2 ‘the flat model’

There is more than just one way to make sense. One can activate relationships between the signifier and the signifieds of a given sign – as traditional, vertical semiosis has pointed out – but also those relationships between the signifiers of two different signs, or between the signifieds of two different signs as well as those between the signified of one sign and the signifier of another sign – i. e. a flat model of semiosis.

When MacNeice talked about the patterns it was his duty to make, he might very well have simply referred to his poems as bundles of forms submitted to modifications – changes in forms, rhythms, etc. For example, the embedded phonological chiasmus found in another chiasmus on l. 7 (i: [spi ips] i:) cannot fail to suggest a perfect, symmetrical, well-rounded form like that of a tangerine. However, it is combined with exchanges of determiner and number forms between the substantives on l. 7 and 8: (indeterminate singular *a tangerine* / determinate plural *the pips* / determinate singular *the drunkenness* / indeterminate plural *things*). This is just one example of the way ‘Snow’ can be described: as a spawning poem, a self-spawning poem. It is indeed the spawning that counts.

A close reading can highlight the repetitions but even more specifically the expansions and amplifications which go beyond what is already known. A case in point can be found in the rhyming system which has been described by Haberer (208-9):

- in stanza 1, *window*, *snow* and *roses* form a pattern of internal, masculine rhymes irregularly stressed and based on simple assonance (*snow/roses*);
- in stanza 2, *peel* and *feel* are still masculine rhymes with one of them being end rhyme (*feel*).

- in stanza 3, *supposes* and *roses* contribute to a perfect, feminine end rhyme.

This brings Haberer to conclude rightly that the progression is threefold: it is phonological (from imperfect rhyming to perfect rhyming), quantitative (from masculine to feminine rhyming) and metrical (from internal to end rhymes). The pattern found in the last stanza improves on that of the other two, as it were. Then, if the tactical rhyming pattern suggests a process of perfection and amplification, why should this process be blended with the cause of the poet's frustration and why should the exhilaration of *drunkenness* be followed by a renewed feeling of inadequacy?

Just as stanza 3 culminates by lumping together the various senses that were scattered over the whole poem – sight and hearing by default (*soundlessly*) in 1, touch (*peel*) and taste (*spit*) in 2 – it is also the top of the phonological pyramid. Indeed, stanza 1 is dominated by the [s] sound, which stanza 2 combines with [p] and [i] and [i:], while stanza 3 duplicates [s] and [z] but introduces new pairs of [f] (*fire flames*) and of [b] (*bubbling*). This kind of contraction and amplification has often been read in *spit into the fire*, which incidentally is supported by nothing other than mere inference, and which becomes *spiteful* after the reorganization of the sounds [sp] [ai] and [f].

It has also been noted that stanza 2 appears as a sort of inverted stanza 1 insofar as the comment in the gnomic present combined with the comparative is found at the beginning and is followed by an experience whereas in the initial stanza it was the experience which was followed by commentary (Haberer 212). But in stanza 3, the gnomic present combined with the comparative is found in a subordinate clause which gives it secondary status although it is a cause. Of course, this secondary status is eventually reverted by the final, self-contained line in the gnomic present. These declarations

including gnomic present and comparative are submitted to the same process of amplification. Indeed, l. 4 contains one comparative; l. 5 two despite the ellipsis (*crazier and [there is] more of it*); l. 10 two despite the ellipsis (*more spiteful and [more] gay*) but the elaboration of the comparative is longer than in the astonishing *sudden-er* and the normal *crazi-er*. Thus stanza 1 contains one comparative; stanza 2 includes two; stanza 3 has three. Indeed, there is a sixth comparative in stanza 3 which improves quantitatively and qualitatively on the other two because *There is more than glass* is still of a different sort (qualitative).

Consequently, it would be tempting to say that the poem is more spiteful and gay than one supposes, in which clause ‘gay’ inhibits ‘malice’ to activate ‘prankishness’ as Marie Barroff (402) well argued for the first time in the history of the poem’s reception.

3.3 The peel and the core: a reading of semantic components.

The descriptive reading we have offered so far is not a reflexive one: ‘Snow’ may be a self-spawning poem but its theme is neither creation nor writing. Moreover, none of all the opposites that can be actualized through the ‘collateral and incompatible’ features of snow and roses, or snow and fire – such as cold/warm, out/in, sterility/fertility – can be construed as the repetition and transformation of *topoi* like mystic love, romantic spleen or *Carpe Diem*. The elementary oppositions and their possible resolution are disregarded. The ‘incorrigible’, irreducible plurality of diversity holds in stanza 2 (things, various) and in the transformation of ‘snow’ into its opposite ‘fire’ and into its liquid form ‘bubbling’ = /water/ in stanza 3. Only in Marie Barroff’s study did we find close attention to signifieds (Haberer choosing to side with signifiers), as when she enlarges upon ‘spawning’:

'Spawning' carries suggestions of incalculable large number, physical energy and incessant motion [...] it embodies the speaker's sense of the strangeness of the scene, which is bound up with his recognition of the disparity between the objects it contains. [...] its presence inhibits, so to speak, whatever sentimental tendencies may be latent. (395)

The sentimentalizing that could be associated with remembrance (was + (spawn)-ING) is undercut by colloquial (*fancy, crazier, incorrigibly*) or anti-sentimental words (*collateral, incompatible*). Neither can the sentential statements be reduced to philosophical stereotypes. There is a clash between the way things are said and what is actually said. Besides, most critics fail to account for the rhythm and tension in the poem with the run-on lines, ellipsis and sudden accelerations.

This undermining of transcendent realism is carried to an extreme in the second stanza lines 6 and 7. While lines 5 and 8 are in keeping with line 4, like a chorus akin in form and matter, this line and a half delineates a particularly salient semantic form. It can be isolated thanks to an accumulation of semantic ruptures at this point. From a thematic point of view, the semantic class defined by the five sememes: 'peel', 'portion', 'tangerine', 'spit', 'pips' bears no generic relation to the rest of the poem, although of course this thematic parenthesis has specific features in common with the rest of the poem: 'sensuality', 'plurality/unity', 'colour' etc. The sudden acceleration in the rhythm results from the repeated coordinations of shorter words and the ellipsis of the subjects. What sounds like a fit, a paroxysm is in total contrast with the rest. There is also a complete disjunction of tense and aspect: together with 'flames' in the third stanza, the verbs are dynamic full verbs and they are in the simple present with a specific value. They are supposed to refer to the very time of utterance which actualizes the experience for a particular

agent. From a dialogical point of view, the semantic role of the speaker is for the first time personally assumed whereas the subjects are indefinite elsewhere: *we* (1, 5), *one* (10, 11). This role could be further qualified as that of an epicurean prankster. At the core of the poem stands this first person pronoun which is embedded between the collective and the universal as a singularity in a plurality.

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ANNEXE

Snow

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes –
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands –
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

Louis MacNEICE, *Collected Poems*, Faber and
Faber, 1966 and 1979, p. 30.

Neige

Chambre soudain plus riche. Grande baie
Où se multipliaient la neige et les roses collatérales
Incompatibles et silencieuses.
Le monde est plus rapide que dans nos rêves.

Le monde est plus fou. Plus plein que nous le pensons :
Pluriel incorrigiblement. Je pèle et partage
Une mandarine. J'en crache les pépins. Je sens
L'ivresse de la multiplicité des choses.

Et le feu flamboie et pétille du bruit du monde –
Plus vengeurs, plus heureux que tu ne crois.

Sur le bout de la langue, par l'ouï, par la paume ouverte de la main :
Il y a plus que verre entre neige et énorme rose.

Traduction Paul le Jéloux, *Anthologie de la poésie irlandaise du XX^e siècle*, J.Y. Masson éd., Lagrasse :Verdier, 1996, pp. 299-301.

Snow

A white dot flicked back and forth across the bay window: not
A table-tennis ball, but 'ping-pong', since this is happening in another era,
The extended leaves of the dining-table – scratched mahogany veneer-
Suggesting many such encounters, or time passing: the celluloid diminuendo
As it bounces off into a corner and ticks to an incorrigible stop.
I pick it up days later, trying to get that pallor right: it's neither ivory
Nor milk. Chalk is better; and there's a hint of pearl, translucent
Lurking just behind opaque. I broke open the husk so many times
And always found it empty; the pith was a wordless bubble.

Though there's nothing in the thing itself, bits of it come back unbidden,
Playing in the archaic dusk till the white blip became invisible.
Just as, the other day, I felt the tacky pimples of a ping-pong bat
When the bank-clerk counted out my money with her rubber thimble, and knew
The black was bleeding into red. Her face was snow and roses just behind
The bullet-proof glass: I couldn't touch her if I tried. I crumpled up the chit –
No use in keeping what you haven't got – and took a stroll to Ross's auction.

There was this Thirties scuffed leather sofa I wanted to make a bid for.
Gestures, prices: soundlessly collateral in the murmuring room.

I won't say what I paid for it: anything's too much when you have nothing.
But in the dark recesses underneath the cushions I found myself kneeling
As decades of the Rosary dragged by, the slack of years ago hauled up
Bead by bead; and with them, all the haberdashery of loss – cuff buttons,
Broken ball – point pens and fluff, old pennies, pins and needles, and yes,
A ping-pong ball. I cupped it in my hands like a crystal, seeing not
The future, but a shadowed parlour just before the blinds are drawn.

Someone
Has to put up two trestles. Handshakes all round, nods and whispers.
Roses are brought in, and suddenly, white confetti seethes against the window.

Ciaran Carson, from *Belfast Confetti*, Gallery Press, 1989.

History

Where and when exactly did we first have sex?
Do you remember? Was it Fitzroy Avenue,
Or Cromwell Road, or Notting Hill?
Your place or mine? Marseilles or Aix?
Or as long ago as that Thursday evening
When you and I climbed through the bay window
On the ground floor of Aquinas Hall
And into the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow',
Or the room where they say he wrote 'Snow'.

Paul Muldoon, from *Why Brownlee Left*,
Faber & Faber, 1980.

Plurality

It is patent to the eye that cannot face the sun
The smug philosophers lie who say that world is one;
World is other and other, world is here and there,
Parmenides would smother life for lack of air
Precluding birth and death; his crystal never breaks –
No movement and no breath, no progress nor mistakes,
Nothing begins or ends, no one loves or fights,
All your foes are friends and all your days are nights
And all the roads lead round and are not roads at all
And the soul is muscle-bound, the world a wooden ball.
The modern monist too castrates, negates our lives
And nothing that we do, make or become survives,
His terror of confusion freezes the flowing stream
Into mere illusion, his craving for supreme
Completeness means he chokes each orifice with tight
Plaster as he evokes a dead ideal of white
All-Universal, refusing to allow
Division or dispersal – Eternity is now
And Now is therefore numb, a fact he does not see
Postulating a dumb static identity
Of Essence and Existence which could not fuse without

Banishing to a distance belief along with doubt,
Action along with error, growth along with gaps;
If man is a mere mirror of God, the gods collapse.

(...)

Louis MACNEICE, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber,
1966 and 1979, p. 243-44.

Soap suds

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.

And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.
(...)

Ibid., p. 517.