

9. Louis MacNeice, “Variation on Heraclitus”

Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and educated in England at the Sherborne Preparatory School for Boys, Marlborough College, and Merton College, Oxford (where he won a “double first” in Classics and Philosophy). He taught Classics at Birmingham University and the Bedford College for Women before becoming a writer and producer of radio dramas for the BBC. He is remembered as a prolific poet who offered what one critic described as “clear-headed depictions of a murky world.” Although he wrote no philosophical essays as such, many of his poems make use of philosophical material. This is true, for example, of his “Variation on Heraclitus”:

Even the walls are flowing, even the ceiling,
 Nor only in terms of physics; the pictures
 Bob on each picture rail like floats on a line
 While the books on the shelves keep reeling
 Their titles out into space and the carpet
 Keeps flying away to Arabia nor can this be where I stood --
 Where I shot the rapids I mean -- when I signed
 On a line that rippled away with a pen that melted
 Nor can this now be the chair -- the chairplane of a chair --
 That I sat in the day that I thought I had made up my mind
 And as for that standard lamp it too keeps waltzing away
 Down an unbridgeable Ganges where nothing is standard
 And lights are but lit to be drowned in honour and spite of some dark
 And vanishing goddess. No, whatever you say,
 Reappearance presumes disappearance, it may not be nice
 Or proper or easily analysed not to be static
 But none of your slide snide rules can catch what is sliding so fast
 And, all you advisers on this by the time it is that,
 I just do not want your advice
 Nor need you be troubled to pin me down in my room
 Since the room and I will escape for I tell you flat:
 One cannot live in the same room twice.¹

The poem’s final line echoes the passage in the *Cratylus* in which Plato attributes

¹ From *Solstices* (2007, 560) in MacNeice, *Collected Poems*. Except where noted, all quotations of MacNeice’s poetry are taken from *Collected Poems*.

“the doctrine of flux or universal change” to the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus:

Heraclitus says somewhere that all things give way and nothing remains, and likening existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you cannot step into the same river twice. (402a)

The references to Heraclitus and his ever-flowing river explain the allusions to “flowing”, “floats,” “rapids,” “rippled,” “Ganges,”² and “drowned.” The two periodic sentences which make up the poem themselves flow on for twenty-two lines with frequent enjambment, while various objects—the walls, ceiling, pictures, books, carpet, pen, chair, and a “standard lamp”—slip away in a dream-like flow.³ The poet appears to be reviewing major events in his life (“Nor only in terms of physics”): books he has written, contracts he has signed, and journeys he has taken.⁴ The jocular references to a “chairplane” of a chair⁵, and a set of “slide snide rules” belie a more serious message: the poet rejects the advice of critics “on this by the time it is that.”⁶

MacNeice’s concluding declaration, “One cannot live in the same room twice,” invites further reflection. What truth did he credit to the doctrine of flux and how did it

² In the first of a series of radio plays based on MacNeice’s trip to India, the goddess India speaks: “I go on with a constant flow like the Ganges.”

³ Edna Longley explains that “The “standard lamp” has an ironic status since the poems “query fixed perceptions, a steady-state universe, and standard English” (1988, 129). She also notes the poem’s dream-like quality (1988, 152).

⁴ Jon Stallworthy (1995) mentions a number of decisions that led to extended stays abroad—in Iceland, India, Spain, France, Norway, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, South Africa, Italy, and the U.S.

⁵ Many of MacNeice’s poems feature real or imagined modes of transportation (see H. Haughton, “MacNeice’s Vehicles” (2012, 182-212).

⁶ In “Going with MacNeice’s Flow” (accessed online) Longley explains that “MacNeice recoiled from procrustean thinkers, be they communist slogan-poets, dogmatic Irish nationalists and unionists, the BBC managers who blighted his last years as a radio producer in London, or poetry critics who thought they had him sussed. His poem “Variation on Heraclitus” defies all such...” In his note on *Solstices* (1961, 60) MacNeice stated: “Poets are always being required—by the critics and by themselves—to “develop.” The phrase “reappearance presumes disappearance” suggests that MacNeice was responding to a reviewer’s reference to his “reappearance.”

find expression in his poetry? To answer to these questions, we will need to revisit the teachings of four ancient thinkers—Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle— and two modern ones—G. W. F. Hegel and MacNeice’s tutor, Professor G. R. G. Mure.

The view of Heraclitus as the author of the doctrine of flux has its origins in remarks attributed to him by three ancient writers (in addition to Plato’s multiple representations⁷):

Upon those who step into the same rivers ever different waters flow. (B 12, from Arius Didymus in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*)

Into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not. (B 49a, from Heraclitus [the first-century grammarian], *Allegories*)

According to Heraclitus, it is not possible to step twice into the same river. (B 91a, from Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi*)

They scatter and come back together...they approach and recede. (B 91b, from Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi*)

Plato’s view of Heraclitus as the champion of flux was taken up by Aristotle, his student Theophrastus, and a series of ancient doxographers or “compilers of opinions.” It may fairly be called “the standard view of Heraclitus.”⁸ In recent years, however, some scholars have argued that Heraclitus’ point was not simply that everything is constantly changing, but rather that what is constantly changing is also remaining the same.⁹ Read in this way, the river fragments support the doctrine of “the unity of opposites”, clearly a

⁷ Plato’s *Theaetetus*, 179d-183c and *Philebus*, 43a.

⁸ There is a second traditional view of Heraclitus, on display in Raphael’s “School of Athens” and many other Renaissance paintings, as “the weeping philosopher”, a tradition built on a misunderstanding of an ancient attribution to Heraclitus of a bad case of *melancholia*. See the discussion in the introduction. Heraclitus the philosopher is also often confused with Heraclitus the Elegiac poet from Halicarnassus, the subject of a famous elegy of Callimachus (“They told me Heraclitus, they told me you were dead...”), best known in the translation by William Johnson Cory. See the concluding essay, “The Other Heraclitus.”

⁹ See Kirk (1962, 366-84); Mackenzie (1988, 6-7); and Colvin (2007, 759-69) and the discussion in chapter 1.

central Heraclitean teaching.¹⁰ The “Heraclitean doctrine of flux” MacNeice came to know, in other words, was probably a Platonic invention.

We know that MacNeice learned of Heraclitus while still a schoolboy¹¹, and that on his first visit to Oxford he encountered the phrase *panta rhei, ouden menei* (“everything flows, nothing remains”) inscribed on a men’s room wall (1965, 231). By the time of his senior year MacNeice had come to regard “the flux” as a matter of some importance in his program of personal self-definition:

Having no sex-life I was building myself an eclectic mythology. Peopled with the Disappointed; Orpheus and Persephone and Lancelot and Picasso’s earlier harlequins. This world was girded with odd pieces from the more heterodox Greek philosophers, especially Heraclitus and Pythagoras. For Heraclitus recognized the flux—and one has to do that in order to be modern—and Pythagoras brought back order with his mathematics and music. (1965, 109)

At this point in his life, however, MacNeice appears to have thought of philosophy primarily as a contest between Plato and Aristotle—the former championing the existence of a world of eternal and unchanging Forms while dismissing the sensible world as mere Becoming, and the latter developing the notion of *energeia* in an attempt to capture the special kind of activity that is fully realized at every moment:

In philosophy I was drawn two ways. I wanted the world to be One, to be permanent, the incarnation of an absolute Idea...At the same time any typical monistic system appeared hopelessly static, discounting Becoming as mere illusion and hamstringing human action. (1965, 124-25)

¹⁰ E. g. “The bow’s name is life (*bios*), but its work is death” (B 48); “The way of writing is straight and crooked” (B 59); “A road up and down is one and the same” (B 60); “Seawater is most pure and most foul—for fish, drinkable and life-sustaining, for people undrinkable and lethal” (B 61); “While changing it rests” (B 84a); “In a circle’s circumference, beginning and end are common” (B 103); “The most beautiful order is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random” (B 124); among many others.

¹¹ In *The Strings Are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1965, 96) MacNeice wrote: “I was reading a book on Greek philosophy in order to prepare for a scholarship examination at Oxford and was swept away by Heraclitus, by the thesis that everything is flux and fire is the primary principle.” MacNeice “went up” to Oxford in the fall of 1926.

MacNeice offered no explanation for the philosophical appeal of permanence but did mention “hamstringing human action” as one objection to Plato’s metaphysics. In fact, as can be seen in poems created in different periods of his life, the contrast between a view of reality as a changeless One and as an ever-changing plurality attracted MacNeice’s attention throughout his adult life.¹² While his representations of specific doctrines are controversial, there can be no doubt that his engagement in philosophy led him to reflect deeply on what the world must be like in order not “to hamstring human action.”

In his well-known early poem, “Snow” (published in 1935 in *An Eclogue for Christmas*), MacNeice affirmed the view of reality as an ever-changing plurality by describing a set of intense and conflicting sensory experiences¹³:

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,
 Incurably 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.¹⁴

¹² By his own account, however, MacNeice ceased reading philosophical texts and writing essays on philosophical topics once he left Oxford. See his autobiography (which covers events in his life up to 1940) and “When I Was Twenty-One: 1928” in A. Heuser (1990, 222-35).

¹³ In his autobiography *Missing Persons* (1977, 117), MacNeice’s mentor and friend E. R. Dodds describes the setting in which he and MacNeice experienced the snow, roses, tangerines, and fire.

¹⁴ I take this to mean that there is a more important relationship between the snow and the roses than mere physical proximity—namely, how both reveal “the drunkenness of things being various.” Perhaps the roses are “huge” because, along with the fire, they appear as reflections on the inside of the window (cf. “collateral”: literally “side by side”). For an informative reading of the poem, see N. Igarashi (2017, 1-28).

But in “Wolves” (also published in 1935), MacNeice appears to discount the value of philosophizing on the contrast between flux and permanence:

The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want
 To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence,
 I do not want to be a tragic or philosophic chorus
 But to keep my eye only on the nearer future
 And after that let the sea flow over us.

In other poems, however, he revisits the topic of change versus fixity, again framed in terms of a contrast between Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics:

And reading Plato talking about his Forms
 To damn the artist touting round his mirror,
 I am glad that I have been left the third best bed¹⁵
 And live in a world of error.
 His world of capital initials, of transcendent
 Ideas is too bleak;
 For me there remain to all intents and purposes
 Seven days in the week
 And no one Tuesday is another and you destroy it
 If you subtract the difference and relate
 It merely to the Form of Tuesday. This is Tuesday
 The 25th of October, 1938.
 Aristotle was better who watched the insect breed,
 The natural world develop,
 Stressing the function, scrapping the Form in Itself,
 Taking the horse from the shelf and letting it gallop.
 (From *Autumn Journal*, 1939)

In “Entirely” (published in 1941 in *Plant and Phantom*) MacNeice returns to his earlier view of reality (although here, as suggested by the title, it is human reality) as mixed and uncertain, “a mad weir of tigerish waters/ a prism of delight and pain”:

And if the world were black or white entirely
 And all the charts were plain
 Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
 A prism of delight and pain,

¹⁵ “The third best bed”, i.e. the bed we sleep in, built by a craftsman based on a physical model which is in turn based on the Platonic Form of the ideal bed (cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book X).

We might be surer where we wished to go
 Or again we might be merely
 Bored but in brute reality there is no
 Road that is right entirely.

Similarly, in “Mutations” (published in *Springboard*, 1945), he revives the image of the rose to highlight the reality of change in spite of all efforts to impose a static framework:

For every static world that you or I impose
 Upon the real one must crack at times and new
 Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
 And old assumptions yield to new sensation;
 The Stranger in the wings is waiting for his cue,
 The fuse is always laid to some annunciation.

In “Prologue” (1958)¹⁶ the flowing stream again symbolizes the human condition:

So the eye
 Can miss the current in a stream, the ear
 Ignore even a waterfall, the mind
 Intent on solid fact, forgets that water
 Which early thinkers thought the source of all things¹⁷,
 Remains the symbol of our life; yet never,
 No more than peat can turn again into forest,
 No more than the die, once cast, can change its spots,
 No more than one’s first love can be forgotten,
 If pressed, could we deny this water flows.

MacNeice’s most extended exploration of the conflict between the life-affirming doctrine of flux and a life-suppressing monism was “Plurality”¹⁸ (also published in *Plant and Phantom*, 1941):

It is patent to the eye that cannot face the sun¹⁹
 The smug philosophers lie who say the world is one;

¹⁶ Written in 1958 but not included in *Collected Poems*. First published in *The Listener* (September, 1971, 360-61), and in Stallworthy 1995 as Appendix B (491-92).

¹⁷ According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A 1), the 6th-century sage Thales of Miletus held that water was the origin and enduring essential nature of all things.

¹⁸ MacNeice wrote “Plurality” in 1940 during his stay in America while recovering from surgery. In a letter to Eleanor Clark (Stallworthy 1995, 279) he wrote: “I have written ELEVEN [poems] since coming here...an 80 line philosophical called Plurality (difficulty of content balanced by an easy, almost slick metre & rhyme scheme).”

¹⁹ I.e., reason, “the eye of the soul.”

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-white 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.
 No, the formula fails that fails to make it clear
 That only change prevails, that the seasons make the year,
 That a thing, a beast, a man is what it is because
 It is something that began and is not what it was,
 Yet is itself throughout, fluttering and unfurled,
 Not to be cancelled out, not to be merged in world,
 Its entity a denial of all that is not it,
 Its every move a trial through chaos and the Pit,
 An absolute and so defiant of the One
 Absolute, the row of noughts where time is done,
 Where nothing goes or comes and is is one with Ought
 And all the possible sums alike resolve to nought.
 World is not like that, world is full of blind
 Gulfs across the flat, jags against the mind,
 Swollen or diminished according to the dice,
 Foaming, never finished, never the same twice.
 You talk of Ultimate Value, Universal Form—
 Visions, let me tell you, that ride upon the storm
 And must be made and sought but cannot be maintained,
 Lost as soon as caught, always to be regained,
 Mainspring of our striving towards perfection, yet
 Would not be worth achieving if the world were set
 Fair, if error and choice did not exist, if dumb
 World should find its voice for good and God become

Incarnate once for all. No, perfection means
 Something but must fall unless there intervenes
 Between that meaning and the matter it should fill
 Time's revolving hand that never can be still.
 Which being so and life a ferment, you and I
 Can only live by strife in that the living die,
 And, if we use the word Eternal, stake a claim
 Only to what a bird can find within the frame
 Of momentary flight (the value will persist
 But as event the night sweeps it away in mist).
 Man is man because he might have been a beast
 And is not what he was and feels himself increased,
 Man is man in as much as he is not god and yet
 Hankers to see and touch the pantheon and forget
 The means within the end and man is truly man
 In that he would transcend and flout the human span:
 A species become rich by seeing things as wrong
 And patching them, to which I am proud that I belong.
 Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
 By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
 Raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux,
 Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux
 And so he must continue, raiding the abyss
 With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,
 Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick
 Ego and the broken past and the clock that goes too quick,
 Conscious of waste of labour, conscious of spite and hate,
 Of dissension with his neighbour, of beggars at the gate,
 But conscious also of love and the joy of things and the power
 Of going beyond and above the limits of the lagging hour,
 Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death's inveigling touch,
 Not completely conscious but partly—and that is much.²⁰

MacNeice inveighs against a static and unitary conception of reality which he attributes, initially, to the ancient Greek thinker Parmenides of Elea, while endorsing a "Heraclitean" insistence on the reality of change and plurality (cf. "the flowing stream," "only change prevails," "Foaming, never finished, never the same twice," and "never-

²⁰ From *Collected Poems*, 204-06. There are brief references to rivers in *Autumn Journal* (1939) and Canto XII of *Autumn Sequel* (1954).

ending flux”).²¹ Here, in connection with Parmenides, as previously with Heraclitus, MacNeice operates on the basis of a familiar but not uncontroversial interpretation.

Parmenides is best remembered for a single, lengthy, and difficult poem in which he undertook to prove that “what-is” or “the existent” (Greek: *to eon*) could neither come into being nor be destroyed, be divided into parts, move about from place to place, or develop new properties. Parmenides’ predecessors, the philosopher-scientists of ancient Ionia, had sought to account for various natural phenomena by linking them with a single basic material substance (water, air, etc.) which took on different forms in accordance with a small number of regular principles or forces. Parmenides appears to have sought to correct, or at least supplement, those earlier accounts by setting out some basic principles governing the nature of “what-is”, and how we must speak and think about it.

Beginning in fragment B 2, Parmenides, or more precisely, the goddess who first welcomes and then instructs an un-named “youth”, carries out a critique of different ways of speaking and thinking which leads ineluctably to the view of what-is as an eternal, unchanging *plenum*. She does so first (in B2) by identifying “the only ways available for speaking and thinking: it is or it is not.” After declaring the it-is way “the path of persuasion” in so far as it closely “attends to reality” or “follows reality as is fitting,” she declares the it-is-not way a path from which no learning can ever come— “for you cannot know what-is-not nor make it known to others.” At the outset of B8 the goddess appears to resume her story by declaring that only one way remains (i.e. for speaking and

²¹ In “Going with MacNeice’s Flow” (accessed online) Longley comments: “The metaphysics of flux influenced MacNeice’s poetic forms, his interior drama and his socio-political critique. His fears or dislikes often take on a stony, static shape. The tombstones behind his father’s Carrickfergus rectory figure as “granite sphinxes”: an image that combines childhood nightmares (after his mother’s illness and death) with the felt oppressiveness of religion.”

thinking)—the it-is way, and this she claims must be the case in light of the very many “signs” that what-is is un-generable and indestructible, whole, stationary, and fully developed, with the “signs” appearing to be the four specific lines of argument that continue on within B8 until she reaches her stopping point at B 8.50. While scholars disagree about how the supporting arguments are best reconstructed, it is clear that they are intended to collectively support the conclusion, stated at B 8, that these are names devised by mortals—“coming to be and perishing, to be and not to be, shifting place, and exchanging bright color” (B 8.40-41), hence that what-is must exist fully in all respects “like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere” (B 8.42-43).

In “Plurality” MacNeice pushes back against what he takes to be Parmenidean repudiations of plurality, birth, death, movement, breath, progress, mistakes, beginnings, endings, loves, fights, friends, foes, days, nights, and pathways. According to MacNeice, the ancient monist conceived of reality as a single, eternal, indivisible, and changeless “One,” an inert “wooden ball,” and in so doing he stifled life.

There is, however, good reason to question whether Parmenides was committed to the thesis that nothing whatsoever can be created, destroyed, divided, moved about, or changed. It is clear that he held that none of these things could happen in connection with what-is, i.e. we cannot consistently believe that reality itself could be fundamentally altered in any of these ways. But it does not follow that we must render the same verdict for the things we encounter through the use of our faculties of sense perception.

Immediately after concluding her account of what-is, the goddess offers the youth a set of opinions (or *doxa*) concerning various complex and changing natural phenomena. On one

recent account²², what Parmenides sought to establish at the outset of his poem was simply the nature of what-is, understood in its entirety, whereas what he sought to do in the *doxa* section was to determine the degree to which the world we encounter in sense experience—the world of light and night (B 9); the destructive works of the sun, the growth of things in the sky, and the wandering works of the moon (B 10); the hot strength of the stars (B 11); the mingling of male and female (B 12 and 18); and the nature of each man’s thought (B 16)—how this world might be understood as approximating to some degree the nature of what-is as we know it must be. On this reading, both the realm of nature and human activity possess some degree of intelligibility and reality.

MacNeice also directs some of his fire in “Plurality” against the “modern monist” who conceives of the world in terms of a life-suppressing completeness and “dumb static identity” where “is is one with ought.” The language here is that of Metaphysical Idealism, a philosophical tradition which extended from MacNeice’s tutor Geoffrey Mure (the last of the Oxford Hegelians²³) back to H. H. Joachim, R. G. Collingwood, and F. H. Bradley, and ultimately to the leading Absolute Idealist, the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Metaphysical Idealism, even the specific variety known as “Absolute Idealism”, took different forms in the hands of different philosophers, but MacNeice appears to have understood it as the view that all that exists is a single rational mind (a.k.a. God) and that the only significance we can claim as individuals derives from bringing our thoughts into

²² See T. Johansen, “Parmenides’ Likely Story,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 50 (2016, 1-29).

²³ In his “*In Memoriam: G. R. G. Mure 1893-1979*” Errol Harris observed that: “...throughout the heyday of the Rylian Empire, Mure remained at Oxford as the Warden of Merton, exerting what influence he could to keep alive the tradition of F. H. Bradley, Harold Joachim, and R. G. Collingwood... The force of the current against which Mure swam can be judged from the story told in the 1950’s that as they walked down the High, students would point him out in incredulous wonder as the sole surviving Hegelian in Oxford.”

alignment with the organized set of universal concepts that is Absolute Knowledge, or the Absolute. As Mure stated this view (1965, 3):

...God creates man's consciousness as an element in his own (God's) self-consciousness, and therefore man's consciousness of God is self-consciousness, consciousness of himself as a constituent element in God's consciousness.

At least in his later writings, Hegel also expressed a view of the world where, as MacNeice put it, "is is one with ought":

The insight to which philosophy ought to lead, therefore...is that the real world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine Reason is also the power capable of actualizing itself.²⁴

As MacNeice understood their teachings, neither the ancient nor the modern monist gives due recognition to the individual human being as the agent of change—the "mainspring of our striving towards perfection"—with all the prospects for success and failure the unfettered exercise of that status entails. No individual, moreover, can possess the requisite potential for effective action unless reality is inherently plural and constantly changing—like the proverbial river of Heraclitus into which one could not step twice.

²⁴ Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History* (1988, 39). In his earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), however, Hegel had described consciousness (or mind or spirit) as evolving toward full self-awareness; and in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1995, 287) he identified Heraclitus as an early champion of the correct view of reality as process. "Here we see land," Hegel declared, "there is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my Logic."