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**‘Ephemeral are gay gulps of laughter’: P. B. Shelley, Louis MacNeice, and the  
Ambivalence of Laughter**

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Ambivalence is the hallmark of Shelley’s poetry, but the ambivalence of Shelley’s often underappreciated wit remains a relatively uncharted area of critical exploration. The characterisation of laughter as ‘heartless fiend’—or ‘heartless friend’—in Shelley’s sonnet ‘To Laughter’ underscores this very ambivalence while also spotlighting the sociality of laughter. Drawing upon the ancient Greek ambiguities of laughter as socially divisive and socially integrative, laughter in Shelley’s poetry vacillates between ostracising bursts and harmonising glee. This essay explores the ambivalence of Shelleyan laughter and its echo in the poetry of Louis MacNeice, prompted by the modern poet’s early interest in ‘a comparison of Shelley & Nietzsche & a deification of laughter’. MacNeice’s realist leanings remain coloured by Romantic predispositions throughout his career. With attention to Shelley and MacNeice’s Classical backgrounds, this essay reveals how Shelleyan laughter echoes throughout MacNeice’s poetry and, in its ambivalence, unveils the extent to which identity is unfixed for both poets.

**‘Ephemeral are gay gulps of laughter’: P. B. Shelley, Louis MacNeice, and the  
Ambivalence of Laughter**

In 1928, Louis MacNeice wrote of being ‘pregnant with a paper to be called “Programme for the New Romantics” involving a comparison of Shelley & Nietzsche & a deification of laughter’.<sup>1</sup> Despite MacNeice’s later renunciation of Romantic hope in favour of realism, the Irish poet’s verse retains traces of Shelley’s influence, and this influence is particularly noticeable in his ambivalent use of laughter. ‘Ambivalence, rather than confusion, [is] the hallmark of Shelley’s art’, Madeleine Callaghan writes, and echoes of Shelleyan ambivalence resonate throughout MacNeice’s verse.<sup>2</sup> Exploration of Shelley’s use of laughter is ongoing, having been prompted by the recovery of the 1816 sonnet ‘To Laughter’ from a Barclay’s bank vault in 1973,<sup>3</sup> a decade after MacNeice’s untimely death. Laughter is multifaceted in MacNeice and Shelley’s poetry, manifesting itself at one moment in the curative peals of social enjoyment, and at the next ringing with a viciousness that enforces exclusion. Not easily consigned to a clear-cut space within the triadic laughter theory of superiority, release, and incongruity,<sup>4</sup> Shelley and MacNeice’s ambivalent use of laughter seems to anticipate Robert R. Provine’s Janus-faced theory of laughter and its rootedness in social relationships.<sup>5</sup> Resisting any easy consignment to a positive and negative dualism, Shelley and MacNeice’s laughter, in its ambivalence, unveils the extent to which identity is unfixed for both poets and aurally embodies the vacillations toward and away from the solitary and social selves that underlie Shelley and MacNeice’s poetic thoughts.

MacNeice, like Shelley, is a poet of scepticism and doubt, of mutability and flux. From as early as 1926 MacNeice displays an awareness of the uncertainties and internal conflict playing out in Shelley’s verse, writing that he ‘realise[d] the great illogicality of “Adonais”’, and found it ‘cheering’ ‘[t]hat Shelley as a Pantheist shld [*sic*] be so disloyal to his Pantheistic theory’, noting that in the elegy Shelley’s theory ‘ends in contradiction’.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than dismissing the poem for its perceived incongruities, MacNeice finds cheer and consolation in its ‘great illogicality’, and the paradoxical glee associated with indeterminacies comes to be key to the Northern Irish poet’s versified visions of flux. Ever the outsider living with ‘a foot in both worlds’,<sup>7</sup> MacNeice adopts and adapts Shelley’s laughter by imbuing his own verse with echoes of his Romantic predecessor’s ambivalence. Contradiction enables a vitality that refuses stasis through indecision, and the contradictions MacNeice delightedly locates in Shelley’s verse permeate his own poetry. Michael Kirkham recognises that ‘[a]t the root of all [MacNeice’s] contradictions is the conflict in his mind between the transient satisfactions of the moment, which were never satisfying enough, and a “metaphysical” nostalgia for some ultimate word, essence, or truth, a permanence he could not believe in’.<sup>8</sup> Shelley’s sceptical Platonism underscores a similar conflict propelled by metaphysical dissatisfaction. Despite his renunciation of Romanticism in favour of realism, MacNeice’s poetry, like Shelley’s, wavers between hope and despair, belief and doubt. ‘[T]he sympathy is there’, Terence Brown writes, ‘Romantic postures, Romantic longing, nostalgia and its imagery are a constant element throughout his poetry’,<sup>9</sup> as is the troubled drive and ceaseless movement toward and away from certainties, and from the craving for sociality and the necessity of isolation. ‘It should never be forgotten that poetry is the Voice of the Solitary Spirit, prose the language of the sociable-minded’, MacNeice writes in his study of Yeats, quoting the poet’s father.<sup>10</sup> But for MacNeice, as for Shelley, for whom ‘[t]he distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error’,<sup>11</sup> the superficiality and simple duality of this division is troubling. Laughter ambivalently vacillates between bonhomie and outpourings of delight and ostracization and cruel taunting in Shelley’s poetry. Indebted to the ‘prevailing Greek ideas about socially integrative and divisive forms of laughter’,<sup>12</sup> laughter for MacNeice and Shelley is intrinsically social, uniting its participants in a shared but fleeting moment of cheer but also initiating spiteful acts of exclusion.

In *Adonais*, Shelley launches an attack against the critics who, through their mockery, drove Keats to his untimely grave, and in so doing affirms his sympathising and self-elegising stance alongside the younger poet. Despite its tones of lamentation, *Adonais* is punctuated by moments of laughter, and these moments underscore the apparent contradiction, or ambivalence, that MacNeice delights in. ‘As often’, Michael O’Neill writes, ‘Shelley is more than half in love with the mutable world whose lack of permanence he seems to deplore’, at once ‘delighted...and elegiac’.<sup>13</sup> Shelley’s vacillations between delight and lamentation in the elegy are compounded by his use of laughter. The poem’s opening cries of loss are offset by the ‘flowers that mock’, where the flowers act as personified extensions of Death who ‘feeds on [Adonais]’ mute voice, and laughs at our despair’ (3.27), a recasting of Milton’s Adam who despairingly asks: ‘Why am I mockt with death’.<sup>14</sup> Adam feels mocked by death as one who overlives, and in a similar vein, death mocks those who outlive Keats: Shelley, via his Dionysian self-figuration—the ‘pardlike Spirit’ (32.280)—and the invoked audience, those who are incited into grief by the speaker’s imperative, ‘O, weep for Adonais!’ (1.2). Grief is underpinned by an unsettling gaiety in the elegy as the poet figures himself as crowned with pansies and violets and bedecked with ivy, the adornments of the ever-dying, ever-revelling Dionysus, and whose powers of joviality and violence are approximated to ‘the withering flower’ on whom ‘The killing sun smiles brightly’ (32.286-287). Death and laughter are compounded in the killing sun’s smile, where the root of the Greek *gelōs*, *gel-*, ‘has an etymological connection with ideas of brightness, lustre, or gleaming light’.<sup>15</sup> Laughter’s approximation to light is not without a troubling ambiguity. Richard Cronin identifies Death’s laughter as ‘a part of the poem’s formal pattern’, venturing a parallel of the third stanza to ‘the smiling stars’ of the poem’s final movement:<sup>16</sup>

He lives, he wakes—’tis Death is dead, not he;

Mourn not for Adonais.—Thou young Dawn

Turn all thy dew to splendour, for from thee  
 The spirit thou lamentest is not gone;  
 Ye caverns and ye forests, cease to moan!  
 Cease ye faint flowers and fountains, and thou Air  
 Which like a mourning veil thy scarf hadst thrown  
 O'er the abandoned Earth, now leave it bare  
 Even to the joyous stars which smile on its despair!

(41.361-369)

The poem's opening lamentation, 'I weep for Adonais—he is dead!', is delusively upturned as 'He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he' (1.1 and 41.361), as the speaker works to undo Death's power through a series of inversions ranging from 'dew to splendour'—tears to smiling light—moaning to laughing, and death to life. The shift from dewy-eyed tears to gelastic 'splendour' marks a process of Neoplatonic ascent, where the soul, in its escape from the dampness of the earthbound body, returns to the fiery brightness of the celestial sphere.<sup>17</sup> The killing sun's smile and the smiling 'joyous stars' offer variant modes of the smiling light, Plotinian in origin,<sup>18</sup> and imaged most explicitly in 'That Light whose smile kindles the Universe' (54.478). Laughter as light reverberates throughout *Adonais* with an unsettling ambivalence that is underscored by Shelley's image of the killing sun's smile. For MacNeice's peer and fellow Romantic successor, W. B. Yeats, the sun is a symbol of 'joy and pride', imbuing gladness through its beatific energy, but Shelley 'saw it with less friendly eyes' as 'the source of all tyrannies'.<sup>19</sup> Laughter lends itself to tyranny through its Hobbesian superiority, or '*Sudden Glory*', which 'is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly

applaud themselves'.<sup>20</sup> In the killing sun's smile, Yeats' attributes of 'joy and pride' are contorted into self-serving superiority as death holds tyrannical sway over the living.

In *Adonais*, Death's laughter is aurally at odds with the gathered mourners' weeping in the first stanza, and its mocking disturbs the poem's pretence of pastoral elegy. Where the elegy's opening stanzas approximate Death to the cruel, personified laughter of Shelley's 1816 sonnet, laughter is invoked later in the poem as luminous, uplifting, and inclusive of its audience's shared experience, testament to the divisive and integrative modes of social laughter. Conjunctive to Cronin's observation of laughter's part in the poem's formal patterning, the speaker's imperative, 'Go thou to Rome', is followed by a description of the Protestant Cemetery 'Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead, / A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread' (49.433 and 49.440-441). These lines invite the poem's audience to share in Shelley's grief, not only for Keats, but also for his son William, interred into the cemetery when he died at the age of three in 1819, while also offering a reworking of Death's laughter and the 'flowers that mock the corpse beneath' earlier in the poem (2.17). The flowers' mouthing of Death's mocking laughter in the poem's opening movement are recast in the 'light of laughing flowers' in this closing segment. This is not an easy reversal of laughter from a negative to a positive force, for the visual echo of Shelley's 'laughing flowers' is the 'laughing company' of Wordsworth's daffodils, gelastic in their sparkling glee but, Matthew Bevis observes, 'yearning for gaiety and sociality, a sociality that is in fact constituted by a sense of separation'.<sup>21</sup> A similar dichotomy between sociality and separation underlies *Adonais* as Shelley's elegy for Keats masks a self-elegising that, despite its narcissistic appearances, bespeaks a sympathetic solidarity between the poets. Laughter as an active, vital force perpetuates the unsettling ambivalence of the flowers, mouthed by death in mockery of the living and defying, or at the very least making light of, death through its collective peals of joy. Shelley's paralleling of the 'flowers that mock the corpse beneath',

where the flowers participate in Death's taunting laughter, and the 'light of laughing flowers' in the cemetery demonstrates an interfused delightedness and despair in life's transience. The ambivalence of laughter perpetuates the contradictions that MacNeice found so 'cheering' in Shelley's elegy.

MacNeice and Shelley's preoccupation with man's divided state between sociability and solitude is emphasised through their uses of laughter. Both poets acknowledge the Aristotelian precept that 'man is naturally a political animal',<sup>22</sup> with MacNeice writing that 'Man *is* a political animal, unfortunately' (author's emphasis) and Shelley asserting that 'Man is... a social being'.<sup>23</sup> On the synonymy of 'political' and 'social', James Matthew Wilson explains, 'Aristotle did not mean that man forms governments, political parties, or gives campaign speeches by his very nature. He meant, rather, that the unique characteristic of the human being without which he would no longer be human is his intrinsic relationship to a human community (or, strictly speaking, the *polis*). He is socially constituted'.<sup>24</sup> Laughter serves a distinctly social purpose in either strengthening the bonds between individuals through their shared jubilation, or through the exclusion or ostracization of an individual or group of individuals. Shelley's struggle with solipsism, his continued effort to cast off the 'self, that burr that will stick to one',<sup>25</sup> finds resonance in MacNeice's lifelong longing for acceptance, gravitating at one moment towards his birthplace, Belfast, and in the next moment struggling to ground himself in London, and in between finding a wavering acceptance and unease in the dystopia of America, with the here-nor-there comforts of Dublin—'She is not an Irish town. / And she is not English'—offering solace through its similarly fractured identity ('The Closing Album', p. 179).<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle's conception of man's social status as being contingent upon a moral purpose resonates in Shelley's philosophical aims, which are intrinsic to his poetic aims. For Shelley, 'The great secret of morals is Love', or, a sympathetic identification with others.

Shelley writes that: ‘A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others’; ultimately, ‘The great instrument of moral good is the imagination’.<sup>27</sup> Timothy Webb notes that, for Shelley, ‘[t]he imagination, working through its main agent poetry, is in opposition to the principle of self and enables us to identify sympathetically’.<sup>28</sup> In Shelley’s poetic corpus, laughter works as a sympathetic and reconstructive force nowhere more than in the final act of his revolutionary lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, itself ‘one of [MacNeice’s] sacred books’.<sup>29</sup> The ultimate act of the drama sees its liberated universe becoming united through love, and this is imaged through the amorous and harmonious duet of the Earth and the Moon. The celestial bodies spiritually interpenetrate one another, with the Earth exclaiming:

The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness!

The boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness!

The vaporous exultation, not to be confined!

Ha! ha! the animation of delight

[...]

Ha! ha! the caverns of my hollow mountains,

My cloven fire-crags, sound-exulting fountains,

Laugh with a vast and inextinguishable laughter.

(4.319-322 and 332-334)

Laughter becomes a force of liberation and sympathy in these lines, suggestive of, as Matthew Ward writes, ‘a collective process of shared experience’,<sup>30</sup> where Shelley views gladness as ‘overflowing’ from the planet. Both ‘inextinguishable’ and ‘not to be confined’, the Earth’s laughter serves as an audible celebration of the tyrannical Jupiter’s fall in Act 3 and Prometheus’ subsequent release from his binds. He is no longer bound to the precipice, and laughter as ‘inextinguishable’ recalls the Titan’s gift of fire to mankind. Shelley’s



likening of laughter to fire anticipates MacNeice's musing on the Heraclitan primacy of fire, where the weeping philosopher gleans a Democritean gaiety in his approximation to 'Laughter [as] the fire rioting & flapping'.<sup>31</sup> The Classicist MacNeice, well-read in the *Greek Anthology*, may be recalling through his Heraclitan laughter the following anonymous epigram:

Τὸν βίον, Ἡράκλειτε, πολὺ πλέον ἤπερ ὅτ' ἔζης  
 δάκρυε· νῦν ὁ βίος ἔστ' ἐλεεινότερος.  
 τὸν βίον ἄρτι γέλα, Δημόκριτε, τὸ πλέον ἢ πρίν·  
 νῦν ὁ βίος πάντων ἐστὶ γελοιότερος.  
 εἰς ὑμέας δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς ὄρων, τὸ μεταξὺ μεριμνῶ  
 πῶς ἅμα σοὶ κλαύσω, πῶς ἅμα σοὶ γελάσω.

Weep more profusely at life, Heraclitus, than you ever did

When alive: life is now more pitiful than ever.

Laugh now at life, Democritus, even more than before:

Now everyone's life is more ludicrous than ever.

Yet when I look at both of you, I ponder with fluctuating

uncertainty

How I am to weep with one of you, laugh with the other.<sup>32</sup>

Stephen Halliwell, in translating these lines from the Greek, notes that the philosophers' positions are 'perplexingly reversible' and are considered by an 'irreducibly ambivalent' speaker who 'purports to sympathize with, and yet wavers over, both the "Heraclitan" and the "Democritean" reactions to the totality of life'.<sup>33</sup>

The ambivalent conflation of laughter and weeping, as traced throughout *Adonais*, is also present in Shelley's 'inextinguishable laughter', and further anticipates MacNeice's association of laughter with Heraclitan fire as laughter unites the cosmos of *Prometheus*

*Unbound* akin to Heraclitus' fire as a harmonising force. The Earth's repeated laughter encourages a harmonising response by eliciting sympathy, not only from the Moon, but from the poem's entire receptive universe, but not without revealing laughter's propensity to shift from sympathetic merriment into violent mockery. The Moon shares in the Earth's delight by sympathetically reciprocating his 'madness' and 'bursting gladness' in her being likened to a maenad. Gazing upon the Earth, she declares:

I, a most enamoured maiden,  
 Whose weak brain is overladen  
 With the pleasure of her love,  
 Maniac-like around thee move,  
 Gazing, an insatiate bride,  
 On thy form from every side,  
 Like a Maenad, round the cup  
 Which Agave lifted up

(4.467-474)

The likening of the Moon to Agave bears violent and tragic associations: a reminder of laughter's propensity to cause harm. But it also demonstrates the sympathetic ability to lose oneself to the Other, to be 'temporarily replaced by another',<sup>34</sup> and to imagine intensely and identify with or as a 'person, not our own'.<sup>35</sup> Even in Shelley's most sympathetic envisioning, laughter retains its ambivalence and refuses to be categorised as exclusively positive or negative. The Earth responds to the Moon's 'voice of...delight' with a recognition of his loss of self in favour of sympathetic intermingling through love through the declaration: 'O gentle Moon, thy crystal accents pierce / The caverns of my pride's deep universe' (4.499-500). The Moon and the Earth's exchange ends with the forging of a sympathetic connection that would dismiss the prideful vanity of the self, but not without the

threat of violence. The ambiguity of ‘pierce’ recalls the ‘quick flames’ of Jupiter’s ‘penetrating presence’—his rape of Thetis—in Act 3 (3.38-39), while also being aurally piercing as in the shrill laughter of the Furies who torment Prometheus in Act 1.

There is a Dionysian thread between Shelley and Nietzsche’s deified laughter, where the ‘contradictions’ MacNeice delightedly locates in *Adonais* face a similar paradox in *The Birth of Tragedy*, wherein:

According to an ancient legend, King Midas had long hunted the forest for the wise *Silenus*, the companion of Dionysus, without catching him. When Silenus finally fell into his hands, the king asked him what is the very best and most preferable of all things for man. The stiff and motionless daemon refused to speak; until, forced by the king, he finally burst into shrill laughter and uttered the following words: ‘Miserable ephemeral race, children of chance and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it is best for you not to hear? The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best thing for you is—to meet an early death’.<sup>36</sup>

Silenus’ ‘shrill laughter’, like Death’s mocking laughter in *Adonais*, voices a divisive glee in the daemon’s knowledge that what is best of all is forever beyond man’s reach. The daemon’s advice seems to echo lines from a choral ode in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which, translated by Thomas Love Peacock and memorised by Shelley, lends a deeper parallel to MacNeice’s comparison of Shelley and Nietzsche’s deification of laughter. Shelley writes to Peacock,

I am always repeating to myself your lines from Sophocles:

Man’s happiest lot is not to be:

And when we tread life’s thorny steep,

Most blest are they, who earliest free,

Descend to death’s eternal sleep.<sup>37</sup>

Shelley's subtle wit develops alongside Peacock's transition from poet to satirist, and in the fragmentary 'A Satire upon Satire', Shelley seems to invoke the existential paradox of Sophocles' lines in questioning if satire

could make the present not to be  
Or charm the dark past never to have been  
Or turn regret to hope

('A Satire upon Satire', 19-21)<sup>38</sup>

Satire's defamatory embers contain the potential to undo past and present—to 'charm the dark past never to have been'—and to provoke happiness through negation. MacNeice courts a similar potential in *Autumn Journal*, where in Spain 'ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin' the poet asks, 'can what is corrupt be cured by laughter?' (pp. 112 and 113). Back in the Belfast of MacNeice's childhood memories, 'the wind blew in from the west', accompanied by 'the noise of the shooting' as Shelley's west wind and its Homeric scattering of leaves are imbued with the rattling of automatic rifles. A grim gaiety courts desperation where 'the voodoo of the Orange bands' casts its enchantment and curse,

Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster,  
Flailing the limbo lands—  
The linen mills, the long wet grass, the ragged hawthorn.  
And one read black where the other read white, his hope  
The other man's damnation:  
Up the Rebels, To Hell with the Pope,  
And God Save—as you prefer—the King or Ireland.

(p. 138)

MacNeice's flippantly blaspheming lines are bolstered by the languid alliteration of 'Flailing the limbo lands— / The linen mills, the long wet grass', where laughter haunts the succession

of ‘I’ sounds until being stopped short by the foreboding marker of ‘the ragged hawthorn’. The Orange bands’ drums exude a ‘voodoo’ replete with violence as the Orangemen’s flailing upon the drumskins becomes a flailing of ‘the limbo lands’, and the aural rhythms of the drumbeats and implied laughter underscore the city’s divisive violence. The easy dichotomies of black and white, hope and damnation, and England and Ireland are unsettled by an ambivalence—‘*Odi atque amo: / Shall we cut this name on trees with a rusty dagger?*’—the posing between love and hate, where an act of love is an act of violence, as Ireland, ‘Passing like a patch of sun on the rainy hill’, gives but ‘a faggot of useless memories’ (pp. 138-141). Still, ‘useless memories’ propel MacNeice’s profoundest poetry, from the melding of the metaphysical with the material and maternal Ireland in ‘Western Landscape’ to the lamentations of loss—of moments, of mothers—in ‘The Sunlight on the Garden’. If Silenus’ ‘shrill laughter’ serves, not to express delight or amusement, but to mark the division between mortals and immortals, Shelley hesitates to evoke laughter from the fear of inciting a similar divisiveness. For MacNeice, ‘pure satire is a low form of writing because it does not admit any sympathy with its subject’,<sup>39</sup> and a similar self-consciousness holds Shelley’s pen from being ‘dipped in flame’ (‘A Satire upon Satire’, 24).

The paralleling of the mocking and laughing flowers in *Adonais* finds an earlier and more sustained instance of parallel reversal in *Prometheus Unbound*, as the Moon and Earth’s laughter of delight in Act 4 positively reworks the debasing laughter in Act 1. The scene of sympathetic union between the Earth and the Moon is the antithesis of the bound and unrelenting Prometheus’ encounter with Jupiter’s Furies in Act 1, where the Titan ‘behold[s]’ the Furies’ ‘execrable shapes’ and comments: ‘Methinks I grow like what I contemplate, / And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy’, later declaring to ‘laugh [the Furies’] power’, to which they tauntingly ask:

Thou thinkest we will rend thee bone from bone,

And nerve from nerve, working like fire within?

[...]

Dost imagine

We will but laugh into thy lidless eyes?

(1.475-476 and 1.478-489)

Here, laughter's piercing power fuels a negative and destructive antipathy, one in which the gazer is in danger of adopting the negative qualities of those he gazes upon. The Furies threaten to intermingle with Prometheus in a perversion of sympathetic union, to 'live through [him]', becoming 'dread thought' in his brain and 'foul desire' in his heart. It is this negative vision of laughter that is addressed by Shelley in 'To Laughter'. The sonnet anticipates the cackling Furies' ability to take hold of and destroy the heart in *Prometheus*

*Unbound:*

Thy friends were never mine thou heartless fiend:

Silence and solitude and calm and storm,

Hope, before whose veiled shrine all spirits bend

In worship, and the rainbow-vested form

Of conscience, that within thy hollow heart

Can find no throne—the love of such great powers

Which has requited mine in many hours

Of loneliness, thou ne'er hast felt; depart!

Thou canst not bear the moon's great eye, thou fearest

A fair child clothed in smiles—aught that is high

Or good or beautiful.—Thy voice is dearest

To those who mock at truth and Innocency.

I, now alone, weep without shame to see

How many broken hearts lie bare to thee.

(‘To Laughter’, 1-14)<sup>40</sup>

The sonneteer, in addressing laughter, ‘weep[s] without shame to see / How many broken hearts lie bare to thee’ (13-14). There is a resolute affirmation that a life of loneliness and solitude, while accompanied by the virtues of ‘Hope’, ‘Truth and Innocency’, (3 and 12) is far preferable to a life spent in laughter’s cruel society: ‘Thy friends were never mine thou heartless fiend’ (1), anticipating the gruesome glibness of the Furies, themselves described as ‘fiends’ in the lyrical drama (1.583). Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett note that ‘fiend’ could possibly be ‘a slip of the pen for “friend”’,<sup>41</sup> in which case the ambivalence of laughter and the volatility of social relationships becomes heightened. Timothy Webb concedes that ‘[c]ynical laughter is the product of so-called civilization; a sophisticated activity which stands in opposition to the fresh and unspoilt impulses of nature’.<sup>42</sup> The sonnet, through its framing of opposed elements of human nature, formally establishes the ambivalence intrinsic to Shelley’s conception of laughter. The essential human actions of laughing and weeping are associated with friendship and loneliness, and their assumed positive and negative qualities are paradoxically inverted so that the speaker concludes the sonnet weeping and alone, but sheltered by goodness, beauty, and truth while laughter and its participating companions are shunned from Hope’s shrine. MacNeice’s begrudging acknowledgement that ‘Man *is* a political animal, unfortunately’ is anticipated by Shelley’s sonnet ‘To Laughter’, where social joviality inflicts pain upon the good and true.<sup>43</sup>

The paradoxical inversions—or ‘contradictions’—underlying Shelley’s verse refuse consignment to a dualistic equilibrium. Instead, the ‘inextinguishable’ laughter of *Prometheus Unbound* recalls Homer’s ‘inextinguishable’ or ‘uncontrollable’—*ἄσβεστος* (*asbestos*)—laughter present in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, covering, as Stephen Halliwell notes, ‘a spectrum of feeling that includes both positive and negative emotions’.<sup>44</sup> *Asbestos* is

attached to laughter when the wine-serving Hephaestus' physical exertion evokes his fellow gods' 'uncontrollable laughter', and this outburst is light-hearted when compared with the sickeningly 'uncontrollable laughter' of Penelope's suitors.<sup>45</sup> The indeterminacies of laughter run from Homer to Plato, where Socrates, in Shelley's translation of the *Symposium*, forces his auditors 'to confess, that the same person is able to compose both tragedy and comedy',<sup>46</sup> anticipating the accolades of MacNeice's ideal poet, 'capable of pity and laughter'.<sup>47</sup> This tragicomic thread is carried through into Plato's *Philebus*, and an echo of its bittersweet intermixing of pleasure and pain seems present in Shelley's 'To a Skylark':

Our sincerest laughter

With some pain is fraught;

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

('To a Skylark', 88-90)

The Greek connotations of Shelley's laughter, particularly in *Prometheus Unbound*, are, Ward notes, 'derived in part from Greek myth and the "inextinguishable" laughter of the gods'.<sup>48</sup> This Greek laughter may also be traced to Shelley's reading of Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Plato's *Symposium* alongside his composition of the lyrical drama in 1818. Aristophanic wit exposes the risks involved in comic mockery, and the *Clouds* is testament to comedy's propensity to cause harm. Rereading a translation of Aristophanes' play in 1819, Shelley considers 'presenting the same subject to the public—without any disrespect to Aristophanes or his learned translator—in a very different point of view',<sup>49</sup> likely seeking to undo the damage done to Socrates and to redeem the philosopher's noble character as he had earlier done with Agathon in his translation of the *Symposium*: 'Agathon, for Shelley, as not for Plato, was deeply serious'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, for MacNeice 'Aristophanes after all was a serious writer',<sup>51</sup> and this 'very different point of view' seems shared by Shelley. The *Symposium*, filled with both convivial laughter and laughter at others' expense, concludes with Socrates



asserting, much to his interlocutors' exasperation, that 'the foundations of the tragic and comic arts [are] essentially the same'.<sup>52</sup> Sympathy between self and other, poet and reader, motivates much of MacNeice and Shelley's poetry, and laughter similarly seems to permeate or pierce the boundaries between self and other. Love, synonymous with sympathy in Shelley's philosophy, is 'that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves',<sup>53</sup> so that fear and hope—tragedy and comedy—become ambivalently interfused into one powerful emotion.

Laughter is volatile, a voicing of flux where, in Shelley's sardonic *The Triumph of Life*, 'Figures ever new / Rise on the bubble' and 'pas[s] away' (248-249 and 251). The frivolous image of figures rising and vanishing like bubbles reduces life to a champagne-like ephemerality that anticipates MacNeice's own vacillations between a world of drunken, delightful transience and the despair of inescapable time and irretrievable moments: 'a bubbling sound for world / Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes' ('Snow', p. 24), recalling Lucian's mirthful Charon for whom men are like 'bubbles in the water', rising and swelling with life before being 'broken and dissolved'.<sup>54</sup> *The Triumph of Life's* ironic bent and Dantean influence finds a Romantic renewal in one of MacNeice's later poems, 'Charon', where Shelley's trampling and trampled crowd is recast in 'a crowd of aggressively vacant / Faces', and 'the ferryman just as Virgil / And Dante had seen him' dryly retorts: 'If you want to die you will have to pay for it' (pp. 592-593). 'Charon', demonstrative of MacNeice's wry wit, is imbued with a Lucianic-cum-Shelleyan humour that recalls Lucian's dialogue between Charon and Mercury, opening in *medias res* with the divine messenger's question: 'What do you laugh at, Charon?'. Charon's ascension to the world of the living, prompted by his curiosity as to why humans arrive in Hades filled with 'tears and lamentations', is motivated by his sympathetic aim to understand humankind. The ferryman's seemingly noble intentions of self-improvement through sympathetic understanding are

undercut mid-way through the dialogue when he admits to Mercury that the reason for his laughter arose from witnessing a human interaction wherein a man, being invited to dinner by his friend and promising to be there shortly, was suddenly crushed to death by a rooftop tile that had slipped loose. ‘I laugh’d to think that the Man cou’d not be as good as his Word, (and yet that he was so silly as to make such a positive promise)’, Charon mirthfully explains.<sup>55</sup> Shelley’s own fine wit, brilliantly displayed in *The Triumph of Life* and in *Adonais*,<sup>56</sup> flourishes in his writings of 1819 onwards, from his satirical portrait of Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third* to his ‘Lucianic essay’, ‘On the Devil, and Devils’.<sup>57</sup> Wit, opposed to humour in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, and differing markedly from William Hazlitt’s assertion that ‘Humour is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting with something else’,<sup>58</sup> is weighted with an uneasy ambivalence that risks shifting the comic into an act of violence.

The buoyancy of the *terza rima* of Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* instils the lines with rhythmic ripples of Lucianic laughter at life’s futility while also according with the passing crowd’s procession. Shelley’s ironic employment of the word ‘triumph’ in his poem’s title also resonates with laughter. Writing of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* wherein ‘we laugh from self-complacency and triumph instead of pleasure’,<sup>59</sup> Timothy Webb explains that ‘[w]hen Shelley uses the word *triumph* he is in accordance with the famous definition of laughter given by Hobbes’.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, much of what causes our laughter, for MacNeice, rises from ‘the Hobbesian feeling of self-glory experienced at others’ discomfiture’.<sup>61</sup>

MacNeice’s *Autumn Sequel* attempts a modern renewal in *terza rima*, imbued with the dialogue and syncretic mythology of *The Triumph of Life*, where the poet’s past—embodied by the lyrical reportage of *Autumn Journal*—is reviewed with dissatisfaction:

And deplore each megrim and moan I scrawled on the sky

In my hand of unformed smoke those fifteen years

A-going, a-going, ago. I to I

[...]

While the cracked voice calls Check, the sandfly stings,

The cage is ungilded, the Parrot is loose on the world

Clapping his trap with gay but meaningless wings.

(p. 373)

MacNeice's parrot is 'loosed upon the world' as *Autumn Sequel* enacts a second coming of the poetic self, and like Yeats' 'parrot swaying on a tree', the self-loathing poet-as-parrot of *Autumn Sequel* 'Rages at his own image in the enamelled sea'.<sup>62</sup> The parrot's 'gay but meaningless' claptrap is scrutinised by the *Autumn Sequel* poet, where the seemingly solipsistic 'I to I' of *Autumn Journal* is redressed with the poet's mind firmly set upon the mechanics of his reception. But the effortless buoyancy of Shelley's *terza rima* in *The Triumph of Life* and 'Ode to the West Wind' falls in MacNeice's hands and their tight grip upon directing his audience.<sup>63</sup> Clair Wills' reading of *Autumn Sequel* alongside John Skelton's 'Speke Parrott' considers the conflict between the poet as inspired 'bird of paradise' and the parroting radio propagandist, likened to the courtly bird of Skelton's satire.<sup>64</sup> To this effect, MacNeice's parrot recalls Archy, the court fool of Shelley's *Charles the First*, who 'lives in his own world' and is likened to 'a parrot / Hung in his gilded prison from the window', who 'Blasphemes with a bird's mind:—his words, like arrows / Which know no aim beyond the archer's wit' (2.100-101; 103-104).<sup>65</sup> Shelley and MacNeice's poet-parrots anticipate and echo Yeats' own self-figuration as courtly bird, gilded 'Of hammered gold and gold enamelling' and 'set upon a golden bough to sing'.<sup>66</sup> The mature craftsmanship—the 'hammered' form and 'gilded' rhymes of the *terza rima*—and its dialogic engagement with the great chain of poets commencing with Dante situates *The Triumph of Life* and *Autumn Sequel* alongside Yeats' single effort in *terza rima*, 'Cuchulain Comforted'.

Madeleine Callaghan notes that, in ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, ‘Shelley’s *terza rima* has been mutated by Yeats’, transitioning away from Shelley’s gleaming rapidity into a form that falters through its use of off-rhyme, evoking fear and hesitant transformations.<sup>67</sup> The sociality afforded by the form’s dialogic tradition is hauntingly curtailed in Yeats’ poem, where convivial communication ceases in the moment when the speaker reveals that Cuchulain’s living-dead interlocutors ‘had changed their throats and had the throats / of birds’.<sup>68</sup> Sociality and solipsism are handled with equal measures of uncertainty in MacNeice’s verse and invoke the scepticism of Yeats and Shelley, for whom, in *Charles the First*, the poet-parrot, despite his caged and solipsistic isolation, inflicts his wit onto others by projecting ‘his words, like arrows’ into the social sphere.

MacNeice’s parrot’s laughter retains its potentially damaging social associations in the sequence of verse epigrams, *Entered in the Minutes*. The sequence begins with ‘Barcelona in Wartime’ where,

In the Paralelo a one-legged  
 Man sat on the ground,  
 His one leg out before him,  
 Smiling. A sudden sound  
  
 Of crazy laughter shivered  
 The sunlight; overhead  
 A parrot in a window of aspidistras  
 Was laughing like the dead.

(p. 202)

The one-legged man’s smile is countered by the parrot’s ‘crazy laughter’, a sound that disrupts the potential sympathetic acknowledgement of the one-legged man by the speaker,

recalling the personified laughter of Shelley's sonnet that, 'in its hollowness, cannot...move beyond the boundaries of the self into sympathetic communion with others'.<sup>69</sup> The parrot's 'sudden sound' causes both scene and syntax to fracture along with the stanza break. Laughter, like the Nationalist airstrikes upon Barcelona, bursts from overhead and the sunlight seems to 'shiver', an optical effect evoking the shuddering movement of earth in the wake of an explosion. Laughter is divisive, emphasising lack, loss, and difference instead of conviviality. Archy's wounding jests, 'his words, like arrows', and the parrot's explosion of 'crazy laughter' reflect the poet's potential to slip into solipsism and shun those that would respond to him with sympathy. The poem sequence teeters between ambiguities as MacNeice, having in his youth imbibed 'the sweet champagne of [Shelley's] wishful thinking',<sup>70</sup> now feels 'The drunkenness of things being various' ('Snow', p. 24). Writing of MacNeice's 'sceptical sensibility', Terence Brown notes that the poet, '[f]aced by the insoluble tragedy of modern life' finds that 'perhaps the only way to try to make sense of it is to be light, frivolous, to laugh. But laughter can express more than humour. Such poetry responds to the collapsing world with the sombre despair of the dark nursery rhyme'.<sup>71</sup>

*Entered in the Minutes* follows this formulation of a dark nursery rhyme. The sequence is laid out in cross rhymed quatrains alternating between the discord of unrhymed and cloyingly end-rhymed lines. These fluctuations in rhyme are intensified by each poem's shift in perspective, where the opening of 'Barcelona in Wartime' onto a scene of the 'one-legged / Man [sitting] on the ground' is jolted by the second stanza jerking the speaker's attention upwards, 'overhead', to the sound of the parrot's 'crazy laughter'. This sense of disorientation and doubling, intensified by the sound of the parrot 'laughing like the dead', carries through the three remaining poems of the sequence, from the distorted and doubled reflection of the passengers on the train in 'Business Men', to 'Night Club' where the maenadic 'Salome comes in, bearing / The head of God knows whom' (p. 203). The final

poem of the sequence, 'Didymus', aptly meaning 'twin', concentrates this sense of doubling and disorientation in its imaging of 'a river / Full of the shadows of swallows' wings' (p. 203), where, Robin Marsack observes, 'MacNeice uses the image of birds' wings associated previously with moments of happiness' to underscore an ambivalence that conflates the certainties of life and death, belief and doubt, into the ephemeral fluttering of wings.<sup>72</sup> There is an echo of Shelleyan laughter here, where Shelley's 'swift thought, / Winging itself with laughter' is accompanied by the water's 'sound like delight' as *Julian and Maddalo's* eponymous pair converse along the Lido (*Julian and Maddalo*, 28-29 and 25). Matthew Ward reads this 'swift thought' as demonstrative of Shelley's 'fondness for Grecian allusion', and certainly there is an anticipatory allusiveness to 'the swift thought' of Shelley's *Hymn to Mercury* (7.51),<sup>73</sup> but 'swift thought' is also, figuratively, imagistic of the swifts that sharply sweep through the sky, trilling with laughter.

Birdsong is a purer means of communication than misinterpreted language, and is at odds with the cynical laughter of human discourse. *Julian and Maddalo's* epigrammatic periods also seem to reveal Grecian allusion through their subtle engagement with the *Greek Anthology*. Michael O'Neill isolates the following epigrammatic sequence in *Julian and Maddalo*, noting how '[t]he fixity of the epigram's form encounters a fluidity in the sense', where there exists 'the possibility of being fixed in an attitude by the very flux of uncontrollable emotion':<sup>74</sup>

And I remember one remark which then  
 Maddalo made. He said: 'Most wretched men  
 Are cradled into poetry by wrong;  
 They learn in suffering what they teach in song.'

(*Julian and Maddalo*, 543-546)

The fixity and flux O'Neill notices in Shelley's handling of the epigrammatic form echo MacNeice's own reluctant attraction to composing 'short—almost Greek Anthologyism—lyrics', where the '4 lines going forward, & 4 lines coming back again' enact a slippage into stasis masquerading as movement.<sup>75</sup> The winged laughter of Shelley's swifts is echoed by the 'shrill delight' of his skylark ('To a Skylark', 20), which in turn anticipates the 'shrill laughter' of Nietzsche's Silenus, as life's gaiety volatily teeters towards an absurdist futility. In addition to Grecian influences, Leopardi's proto-Nietzschean 'Panegyric of Birds' seems present in the background of Shelley and MacNeice's birdsong, where the 'lonely philosopher', Amelio, is disturbed from his studies by the sound of birds singing, a sound which he likens to human laughter. Where birds laugh out of happiness, human laughter, for Leopardi, results from 'the vanity of hope, and the misery of life', where 'the fewer their expectations and pleasures, so much the more do they feel inclined to laugh',<sup>76</sup> as suffering becomes the source of human song.

MacNeice's 'Didymus', alluding to Thomas the Apostle, sees the speaker remarking in the second stanza that 'When he died a swallow seemed to plunge / Into the reflected, the wrong, sky', harnessing the ambivalence of emotion in 'To a Skylark' and the swallow-like swifts winging their laughter in *Julian and Maddalo*. The swallow's seemingly suicidal plunge from river into sky is, depending upon perspective, a freeing action of flight, and this jolting sense of disorientation links back to the 'Barcelona in Wartime' parrot's burst of morbid laughter. As certainties give way to scepticism, the poet fills the falling world with laughter, the vital 'animation of delight' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4.322) that is also the sound of the dead.

The life-in-death flux of the Heraclitan river in 'Didymus' is compounded with laughter in 'A Cataract Conceived as the March of Corpses', revised under the title 'River in Spate', where

The corpses blink in the rush of the river, and out of the water their

chins they tip

And quaff the gush and lip the draught and crook their heads and crow,

Drowned and drunk with the cataract that carries them and buries

them

And silts them over and covers them and lilt and chuckles over their

bones

(p. 2)<sup>77</sup>

As the water ‘chuckles over their / bones’, the living-dead corpses hear the sound of ‘the undertaker’s / laughter’, an echoing resonance that is ‘heard descending, never ending heard’. The poem’s alliterative overflow threatens to drown the reader in sound, its excessive onslaught of action enacting a poignantly Shelleyan sense of sympathy as the reader is made to feel the corpses’ drowning drunkenness. As Madeleine Callaghan notes, ‘MacNeice created in his poetry a Shelleyan sense of communicative energy where the poet and the reader unite in the poem itself as we are pulled into the poetry by MacNeice’s often underappreciated mode’.<sup>78</sup> MacNeice’s measured handling of his verse physically forces the reader to feel the sustained wash of words as the poem alternates between lines that spill across the entire length of the page and lines comprised of a single word or two, allowing the reader to momentarily gasp for air. We feel, like the corpses, at the mercy of an unrelenting force and are taunted by the river and the undertaker’s laughter. The life-in-death gloom of ‘River in Spate’ is paralleled by the uplifting transience of ‘Mayfly’, where the eroticised river is courted by the short-lived, ‘jigging mayflies’ (‘Mayfly’, p. 31). ‘River in Spate’ opens onto a grim, watery procession wherein

The river falls and over the walls the coffins of cold funerals

Slide deep and sleep there in the close tomb of the pool,



And yellow waters lave the grave and pebbles pave its mortuary

And the river horses vault and plunge with their assault and battery

(‘River in Spate’, p. 2)

MacNeice’s heavy-handed internal rhyme in these lines—‘falls’ and ‘walls’, ‘deep’ and ‘sleep’, ‘lave’, ‘grave’, and ‘pave’—aurally mimics the vaulting and plunging of the river horses, evoking the image of a nightmarish merry-go-round that carries through in MacNeice’s discarded lyric, ‘Corpse Carousal’: a punning of ‘carousel’ that features the drunken, rhythmic rising and falling of horses’ hooves. These numbingly repetitive movements and the forcefulness of rhyme lend the poem the quality of a ‘dark nursery rhyme’.<sup>79</sup> ‘Ephemeral are gay gulps of laughter’ in ‘Mayfly’, where the river horses’ rhythmic vaulting and plunging is jovially recast in the mayflies’ buoyant flirtations atop the river.

Barometer of my moods today, mayfly,

Up and down one among a million, one

The same at best as the rest of the jiggling mayflies,

One only day of May alive beneath the sun.

[...]

Gulp of yellow merriment; cackle of ripples;

Lips of the river that pout and whisper round the reeds.

The mayfly flirting and posturing over the water

Goes up and down in the lift so many times for fun.

(‘Mayfly’, p. 31)

The putrefied ‘yellow waters’ of ‘River in Spate’ are recast as ‘yellow merriment’ in ‘Mayfly’ as the river collects and reflects the sun’s golden beams. The monosyllabic pulses in the first stanza—‘Up and down one’, and the candied rhymes of ‘One...day of May’—

emphasise the transient singularity of experience while mimicking the mayflies' bobbing movements atop the water. Where 'River in Spate' resounds with the cruel laughter that taunts the living-dead, recalling Death's laughter as triumphing over the living in *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, laughter in 'Mayfly' makes whoopee at life's ephemerality, relishing 'the existential tingle of the passing moment'.<sup>80</sup> The quaffing of cold eternity in 'River in Spate', where the undertaker's laughter 'blur[s] at length to / quietness', 'heard descending, never ending heard', parallels the jovial 'cackle of ripples' of the river in 'Mayfly', and accompanies the amused recognition of 'The pathetic fallacy of the passing hours' ('River in Spate', p. 2; 'Mayfly', pp. 31 and 32).

The glee of 'Mayfly' is conflated with the haunting rhymes of 'River in Spate' in 'The Taxis' as the early and later MacNeice coalesce with renewed poetic power. The confined quatrains of 'The Taxis' emphasise the sense of claustrophobia experienced by the confused passenger, and reveal how, in his later poems, MacNeice handles poetic structure with increasing dexterity. The repeated line at the start of each quatrain, with its nursery rhyme predictability and flippant 'tra-la' is unsettled by irregularly occurring half-rhymes, such as 'ninepence' and 'askance', 'odd' and 'Cannes', with the seemingly innocuous jingling of 'tra-la' becoming increasingly ominous as the poem progresses, until it disrupts the speaker's syntax in the final quatrain. The disruptive repetition of 'tra-la' heightens the poem's sense of Beckettian absurdity and elicits the reader's guffawing response, but at the distraught speaker's expense. 'Tra-la', in its uncanny echoing of 'ha-ha', becomes a metonym for laughter in 'The Taxis', but it is a self-disruptive and sinister laughter that underscores the frivolity of existence.

Perhaps most poignantly, MacNeice's Romantic indebtedness pours forth in 'Western Landscape' where the poet toes the muddled, quintessentially Shelleyan, line between doubt and hope while the rolling Irish hills merge with the speaker's mental landscape. Shelley's

mutability, especially as it is conveyed through the laughter of his eponymous Cloud, finds an echo in MacNeice's lamentation: 'O relevance of cloud and rock— / If such could be our permanence!' (p. 265). And in the 'emerald passing light' of the Irish landscape the poet images a

loom of wind

Weavingly laughingly leavingly weepingly—

Webs that will last and will not.

(p. 265)

The gelastic transience of light across the landscape chimes with MacNeice's recognition that he 'Can only glean ephemeral' (p. 266). The rushing flux of 'River in Spate' is subdued to tranquil impermanence here, where 'the western climate is Lethe' (p. 265). The repeated intermixture of 'ly' sounds—'Weavingly, laughingly leavingly weepingly'—creates a maternal sing-song, lulling sensation that also echoes the river's name. Laughter and weeping are ambivalently interwoven, recalling the interposed laughter of Shelley's sonnet. Circling back to Shelley's struggle with '*self*, that burr that will stick to one',<sup>81</sup> MacNeice finds himself hovering between the 'Welcoming, abandoning' prospect of oblivion in assuming or refusing his Irish identity (p. 266). The poem's Lethean climate recalls Rousseau's 'touch[ing] with faint lips the cup' offered by the feminine shape all light and feeling his 'brain bec[o]me as sand' (*The Triumph of Life*, 404 and 405). Shelley's 'Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost' are crystallised in a MacNeicean flux (*The Triumph of Life*, 431). Callaghan notes that these '[c]easeless movement[s], shifts, and open-ended interpretive possibilities energise [Shelley and MacNeice's] poetry', 'allowing MacNeice to alter and renew Romantic preoccupations, and imbue them with a distinctly modern sensibility', 'to urge hope despite continuing despair'.<sup>82</sup> Regardless of the modern poet's professed disenchantment with Shelley, in a series of lectures delivered months before his untimely

death, MacNeice granted Shelley his ‘grudging admiration’.<sup>83</sup> Shelley’s influence lingers on in MacNeice’s verse, where the ambivalence of Shelleyan laughter repeatedly winds and echoes with an aural energy that sustains the modern poet’s Romantic struggle with selfhood: ‘Maybe it is just when I am not myself’, MacNeice jestingly chides, ‘—when I am thrown out of gear by circumstances and emotion—that I feel like writing poetry’.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Selected Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Jonathan Allison (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 193, hereafter abbreviated as *MacNeice Letters*. All extracts of MacNeice’s letters, prose, and poems in this article are reprinted with the kind permission of David Higham Associates.

<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Callaghan, ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Idealism’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 64 (2015), 92-104 (p. 95).

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett, ‘The Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find’, *The Review of English Studies*, 29.113 (1978), 36-49 and Neville Rogers, ‘The Scrope Davies “Shelley Find”’, *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 28 (1977), 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> See John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). In brief, superiority theory stems from the suspicion of laughter as an expression of superiority over others; incongruity theory posits that laughter is an effect of witnessing the absurd or ridiculous, or a breaking of anticipated patterns; and relief theory, originating in eighteenth-century medical discourse, posits that laughter relieves pressure on the nervous system.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (London: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *MacNeice Letters*, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> This is MacNeice’s self-reflexive description of W. B. Yeats in Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 22, hereafter abbreviated as *Modern Poetry*.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kirkham, ‘Louis MacNeice’s Poetry of Ambivalence’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 56.4 (1987), 540-556 (p. 541).

<sup>9</sup> Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin and New York, NY: Gill and Macmillan and Barnes & Noble Books, 1975), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* quoted from *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. 2009), 674-701 (p. 679). All of Shelley’s works

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are quoted from this edition unless stated otherwise, with line numbers to appear parenthetically within the main text.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'Adonais and Poetic Power', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 35.2 (2004), 50-57 (p. 50).

<sup>14</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Book 10, 773-775, p. 263.

<sup>15</sup> Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> For an extended analysis of the Neoplatonic opposition of light and moisture in *Adonais*, see Earl R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), pp. 314-316.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Quinney, 'Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism' in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. by Charles Mahoney (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 412-424 (p. 417).

<sup>19</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' in *Essays and Introductions* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1961), 65-95 (pp. 93-94).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' in *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; repr. 2000 and 2008), p. 303. Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth's Fun* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *A Treatise on Government*, trans. by William Ellis (London: T. Payne et al., 1778), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'American Letter' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 74-77 (p. 77) and Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks' in James A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1949), 404-413 (p. 408).

<sup>24</sup> James Matthew Wilson, 'Louis MacNeice's Struggle with Aristotelian Ethics', *New Hibernia Review*, 10.4 (2006), 53-70 (p. 57).

<sup>25</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), II, p. 109. Hereafter abbreviated as *PBS Letters*.

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- <sup>26</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007; repr. 2016), p. 179. All poems are quoted from this edition unless stated otherwise, with page numbers to appear parenthetically in the main text.
- <sup>27</sup> Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682.
- <sup>28</sup> Timothy Webb, 'Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter' in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 43-62 (pp. 52-53).
- <sup>29</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, ed. by E. R. Dodds (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; repr. 1982 and 1996), p. 98. Hereafter abbreviated as *The Strings are False*.
- <sup>30</sup> Matthew Ward, 'Laughter as Sympathy in Percy Shelley's Poetics', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 44.2 (2015), 146-165 (p. 149).
- <sup>31</sup> *MacNeice Letters*, p. 193.
- <sup>32</sup> The Greek epigram 9.148 is quoted from the *Greek Anthology*, trans. by W. R. Paton, 5 vols (London and New York, NY: William Heinemann and G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916-1918), III, pp. 76-77; Stephen Halliwell's English translation is quoted from 'Greek Laughter and the Problem of the Absurd', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 13.2 (2005), 121-146 (p. 124).
- <sup>33</sup> Halliwell, 'Greek Laughter and the Problem of the Absurd', pp. 124-125.
- <sup>34</sup> E. R. Dodds, 'Maenadism in the Bacchae', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 33.3 (1940), 155-176 (p. 157).
- <sup>35</sup> Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682.
- <sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 27.
- <sup>37</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Memoirs of Shelley and other Essays and Reviews*, ed. by Howard Mills (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1970), p. 54.
- <sup>38</sup> 'A Satire upon Satire' is quoted from Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington, founding ed. Geoffrey Matthews, 5 vols to date (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1989-), III, p. 274.
- <sup>39</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 27.
- <sup>40</sup> 'To Laughter' is quoted from *The Poems of Shelley*, I, p. 520.
- <sup>41</sup> Chernaik and Burnett, 'The Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find', p. 40.
- <sup>42</sup> Webb, 'Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter', p. 48.
- <sup>43</sup> MacNeice, 'American Letter' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, p. 77.

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<sup>44</sup> Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1990), Book 1, 721, p. 98.

Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1996), Book 20, 385, p. 421.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Percy Bysshe Shelley as *The Banquet*, quoted in Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley*, 414-460 (p. 460). Shelley's translation is hereafter abbreviated as *The Banquet*.

<sup>47</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 198.

<sup>48</sup> Ward, 'Laughter as Sympathy in Percy Shelley's Poetics', p. 150.

<sup>49</sup> *PBS Letters*, II, p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> See Stephanie Nelson, 'Shelley and Plato's *Symposium*: The Poet's Revenge', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 14.1 (2007), 100-129 (p. 118).

<sup>51</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'The Oxford Book of Light Verse, chosen by W. H. Auden (November 1938)' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 99-100 (p. 99).

<sup>52</sup> Shelley, *The Banquet*, p. 460.

<sup>53</sup> Shelley, 'On Love', p. 631.

<sup>54</sup> Lucian, *Lucian's Charon: or, A Survey of the Follies of Mankind* (London: Loudon Farrow, 1700), p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> *Lucian's Charon*, pp. 1-2 and 15.

<sup>56</sup> See Newell F. Ford, 'The Wit in Shelley's Poetry', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 1.4 (1961), 1-22 (p. 6).

<sup>57</sup> *PBS Letters*, II, p. 259. See Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., 'The Dating of Shelley's "On the Devil, and Devils"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 21/22 (1972/1973), 83-94.

<sup>58</sup> See William Hazlitt, 'On Wit and Humour' in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819), 1-53 (p. 22). Also differing greatly from Shelley's description of laughter as 'sympathetic merriment', for Hazlitt, 'We laugh...because our self-love is stronger than our sympathy'. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 685 and Hazlitt, 'On Wit and Humour', p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 685.

<sup>60</sup> Webb, 'Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter', p. 52.

<sup>61</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' and 'The Indian to his Love' in *The Major Works*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; repr. 2001 and 2008), pp. 91 and 6. All quotations from Yeats' poetry are from this edition.

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- <sup>63</sup> For the relationship between parrot and poet in MacNeice's poems and radio dramas, see Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Clair Wills, "'The Parrot's Lie': *Autumn Sequel* and the BBC' in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), 318-340.
- <sup>64</sup> Wills, "'The Parrot's Lie': *Autumn Sequel* and the BBC', p. 322.
- <sup>65</sup> *Charles the First* is quoted from Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Mary Shelley, 4 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1839), IV, 185-197 (p. 192).
- <sup>66</sup> Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', p. 95.
- <sup>67</sup> Madeleine Callaghan, 'Yeats's Romantic Rhymes', *Romanticism* 23.2 (2017), 155-165 (p. 159).
- <sup>68</sup> Yeats, 'Cuchulain Comforted', p. 170.
- <sup>69</sup> Madeleine Callaghan, *Shelley's Living Artistry: Letters, Poems, Plays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 86.
- <sup>70</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 98.
- <sup>71</sup> Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*, p. 158.
- <sup>72</sup> Robin Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 63.
- <sup>73</sup> *The Hymn to Mercury* is quoted from *The Poems of Shelley*, III, p. 513.
- <sup>74</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'The Fixed and the Fluid: Identity in Byron and Shelley', *The Byron Journal*, 36 (2008), 105-116 (p. 111).
- <sup>75</sup> *MacNeice Letters*, pp. 359 and 369.
- <sup>76</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, 'Panegyric of Birds' in *Essays and Dialogues of Giacomo Leopardi*, trans. by Charles Edwardes (Boston, MA: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1882), 144-150 (p. 146).
- <sup>77</sup> 'River in Spate' is quoted from Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988; repr. 2007), 2.
- <sup>78</sup> Madeleine Callaghan, 'Louis MacNeice and the Struggle for Romantic Identity' in *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*, ed. by Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2012), 149-164 (p. 161).
- <sup>79</sup> Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*, p. 158.
- <sup>80</sup> Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in England and Ireland' in *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), 113-122 (p. 119).
- <sup>81</sup> *PBS Letters*, II, p. 109.



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<sup>82</sup> Callaghan, 'Louis MacNeice and the Struggle for Romantic Identity', p. 161.

<sup>83</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 63.

<sup>84</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p. 146.