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THE ETHICS OF GOING NORTH: MORAL GEOGRAPHY IN LOUIS MACNEICE AND WYSTAN HUGH AUDEN'S *LETTERS FROM ICELAND*

Ladislav Vít

ABSTRACT: Louis MacNeice and Wystan Hugh Auden travelled to Iceland in the summer of 1936. This paper features an analysis of their *Letters from Iceland* (1937), one of the most innovative and contentious travel books of the interwar period, in terms of the popularity of travelling and travel writing between the wars. I argue that Louis MacNeice and Wystan Hugh Auden's portrayal of Iceland, its culture, and landscape can be read as a product of the poets' conscious "tactic of resistance" to the prevalent fascination of the 1930s public and intelligentsia with the "open-air" ethos and travelling south. Besides identifying mutual analogies in the authors' poetic treatment of Iceland, I also place Auden and MacNeice's sense of the island within the broader context of their "moral geography," views on insularity, and approach to escapism.

KEYWORDS: Louis MacNeice, Wystan Hugh Auden, Iceland, North, place, insularity, islandness

1. THE "OPEN-AIR ETHOS" AND THE "SOUTHERN GAZE"

Among the profound and complex consequences of the 1930s economic crisis, Britain saw an unprecedented growth of mobility and expansion of leisure culture spurred by the desire shared across classes to find at least a temporary relief from the political and economic malaise. MacNeice provides an authentic commentary on the pervasive presence of the travel urge and tourist industry in his play *Out of the Picture* (1937), bidding the audience to "Look at these tourist agencies where money will buy you distance, / Miles and miles of distance for your money."¹ The Holiday with Pay Act was passed in 1938 and local as well as national governmental institutions invested into infrastructure to make inland and coastal regions more accessible and enticing.

¹ Qtd. in Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 349.

Moreover, interwar social tourism policy empowered lower social ranks hitherto excluded from tourist activities,² and encouraged their mobility through subsidized public transport. There were the four main rail operators whose revenue reflected their ability to lure the public to indulgences in leisure excursions and holidays.³ In addition, inexpensive bicycles, charabancs, and coaches had expanded the possibilities of transport for more than 40 million passengers by 1939. The travellers also found assistance in the boom of non-profit organizations institutionalizing free-time activities and bringing diverse members of the public together for the first time. Besides the 3,500 cycling clubs, the Ramblers' Association (1935), and the Workers' Travel Association (1921–1966),⁴ there was Youth Hostel Association offering accommodation to more than 80,000 lower-end-market members.

Rural spaces now proved irresistible for the urban masses. Founder of the Scout Movement Robert Baden-Powell observed in 1933 how city dwellers were able to escape to the countryside “from the depressing conditions of work in the squalid surroundings of bricks and mortar.”⁵ Three years later Clive Rouse began to doubt his focus in *The Old Towns of England* (1936) on urban spaces, asking “why one should write on the subject of towns at all, when every weekend sees an ever increasing rush away from them into the country.”⁶ The popularity of the countryside was also reflected in the public acknowledgement of the benefits of rural rides for the relaxation, acculturation and education of the public across classes.⁷ The “open-air ethos”⁸ also penetrated

² John. K. Walton, “‘Social Tourism’ in Britain: History and Prospects,” *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 5, 1 (2013): 47.

³ V. T. C. Middleton and L. J. Lickorish, *British Tourism: Remarkable Story of Growth* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007), 2.

⁴ Christine, Collette, “‘Friendly Spirit, Comradeship, and Good-Natured Fun’: Adventures in Socialist Internationalism,” *International Review of Social History* 48, 2 (August 2003): 225–244.

⁵ Robert Baden-Powell, *Lessons from the Varsity of Life* (London: C. Arthur and Pearson Ltd., 1933), 273.

⁶ Quoted in John Stevenson, “The Countryside, Planning, and Civil Society in Britain, 1926–1947,” in *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, ed. Jose Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 193.

⁷ Middleton and Lickorish, *British Tourism*, 5–9.

interwar political discourse. Numerous politicians such as Stanley Baldwin in “What England Means to Me” equated the countryside to identification with the nation. Prose writers also participated in promoting the association of one’s familiarity with the English countryside with citizenship and Englishness. H. V. Morton in *In Search of England* (published more than twenty times between 1927 and 1937), C. H. Warren in *England is a Village* (1940) as well as Harry Batsford aligned their work with this tendency to forge what David Matless calls a “moral geography” of the English countryside.⁹

Moreover, the coastline resorts in Brighton, Blackpool, and Weymouth lured the interwar public mainly through railway posters offering sunny breaks. Naturally, the radius of travels reflected the economic situation of the participants. Besides the local coastline and the countryside, more remote destinations attracted the more affluent segments of society. As Louis MacNeice mockingly comments in *Out of the Picture*: “Schedules of the White Star Blue Star Green Star Red Star Black Star lines, / This way for the belles of Andalusia and the garlands of Tahiti / And the steam of Victoria Falls.”¹⁰ Although travelling through Africa, China, and Mexico was possible, the majority of the upper and upper-middle classes opted for the less exotic but more easily accessible southern fringes of Continental Europe. The Mediterranean proved irresistible for many interwar writers. Norman Douglas and D. H. Lawrence journeyed to Italy. Somerset Maugham bought a villa in Cap Ferrat, and Roy Campbell lived for a while in Toledo. Cyril Connolly, Evelyn Waugh, and Anthony Powell chose Toulon and Sainte Maxime, while Rex Warner travelled to Cairo and Wyndham Lewis to Morocco. In 1926 Robert Graves settled in Deià, Mallorca, and in March 1935 Lawrence Durrell and his wife moved to Corfu. While some of these journeys to southern European and other “exotic” destinations were brief sojourns, others resulted in long-term and even permanent changes of residence. The fascination with the south, which

⁸ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1998), 74.

⁹ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* 14, 169.

¹⁰ Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 349.

Tony Sharpe refers to as the interwar “hegemonic southern gaze,”¹¹ finds a reflection in the vast amount of fiction and travel writing produced at the time. Following Norman Douglas, who explored the Italian south in *South Wind* (1917), D. H. Lawrence transformed his travels into *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). In the 1930s, publishers grew willing to cover travel expenses in return for manuscripts. Hence, Evelyn Waugh related his travels through Cyprus, Egypt, Spain and other places in *Labels: A Mediterranean Journey* (1930). Despite his calls for attention to the English landscape, H. V. Morton recorded his travels through Greece, Italy and Israel in *In the Steps of St Paul* (1936).

The impulse to escape from England relates to the desire for compensation and relief from the distressing social and political situation. In his fittingly titled *Goodbye to All that* (1929), Robert Graves explains his determination to turn his back on England, “resolved never to make England [his] home again.”¹² Osbert Sitwell enticed the readers of his *Escape With Me! An Oriental Sketch-Book* (1939) into an imaginative journey through Asia, especially Peking. Valentine Cunningham sums up the feeling of disenchantment as a sign “an extraordinary craving to achieve escapist interludes. Shangri-La, peaceful parentheses within the extremely unpeaceful interwar parenthesis,” adding that anywhere seemed better than England for an intelligentsia “leery of patriotism” and convinced that “almost everything they cared about seemed to be done better somewhere else.”¹³ To them, travelling through Asia or to the sunny south offered a welcome alternative to the stifling regulatory laws and pervasive presence of poverty, unemployment and the rise of fascism. As Paul Fussell sums up, after 1918 England and its climate became almost “uninhabitable to the imaginative and sensitive” intellectuals who echoed the sentiment “I hate it here.”¹⁴ Especially the southern European periphery offered a desirable alternative through its promise

¹¹ Tony Sharpe, “‘The North, My World’: W. H. Auden’s Pennine Ways,” in *The Literary North*, ed. Katharine Cockin (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 114.

¹² Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929; London: Penguin, 1960), 279.

¹³ Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 377, 341–342.

¹⁴ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 21, 16.

of good weather, freedom, leisurely *otium* atmosphere, and an escapist interlude – a desire for a relief that found its way even to the title of Cedric Belfrage’s *Away from it All: An Escapologist’s Notebook* (1937).

The infusion of the south with such positive meanings illustrates the position of contemporary cultural geographers such as Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, for whom space is “a representational strategy” inseparable from social practice.¹⁵ The “southern gaze” of the English interwar travellers, along with the positive connotations they associated with it, are to some extent mirror reflections of the ways in which northern regions were imagined and mapped. Katharine Cockin provides a summation of the ways in which the north, especially northern England, was defined through flawed negations of the affluent and abundant South: abject, lacking, static, polluted, dehumanizing and degraded.¹⁶ The “identification of the North with the strange and primitive,” she explains, “often implies that it is culturally bereft in order to preserve for the South not simply cultural prestige and dominance but indeed the natural possession of civilization and humanity as a matter of evolutionary fact.”¹⁷

2. IN THE CROW’S NEST OF THE EARTH

Clearly, the contrasting moral connotations of the North-South divide were reified by writers. It is in this context that on 9th August 1936 MacNeice joined Auden in Iceland, the European epitome of a northern region. Their *Letters from Iceland* (1937) has become one of the contentious literary products of the decade. Stacy Burton has recently examined the desire of interwar travel writers to shed off “rigid conventions,” including narrative authority in a strategy to lend a veracious feel to the text. The new trend was to find new ways of representing travel experiences with an emphasis on the “subjectivity,

¹⁵ Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, *Thinking Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

¹⁶ Katharine Cockin, “Locating the Literary North,” in *The Literary North*, ed. Katharine Cockin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6, 245.

¹⁷ Cockin, “Locating the Literary North,” 7–9.

fluidity and contingency of points of view.”¹⁸ MacNeice and Auden appropriated such trends through the voice of subjective correspondents, combining photos, poetry and prose into an assemblage which continues to aggravate many critics by the discontinuity and putative rawness of the text.¹⁹

The book can also be approached as a conscious opposition to the cultural trends privileging the south as outlined above. Michael A. Moir has recently suggested that *Letters from Iceland* was intended to be a pastoral idyll, yet it only succeeds in recording the poets’ search for “freedom from worry and responsibility”²⁰ before “fail[ing] to find” it. Moir assumes that Auden in particular was “disappointed by his inability to truly escape from Europe, and, by extension, from responsibility,”²¹ as realizing the Icelandic trip was merely “an insufficient balm for the pain that the decade had already given them.”²² Moir reads MacNeice’s contributions as “more somber” pieces which provide a “counterweight”²³ to Auden’s “flippant optimism,” display of “optimistic escapism,” and insistence on “pastoral detachment.”²⁴ While acknowledging differences in Auden’s and MacNeice’s poetics, in what follows *Letters from Iceland* is approached not as a volume of “counter-songs”²⁵ suggesting disharmony and disunity. Rather than divergences, this paper seeks analogies in the poets’ engagement with Iceland. It shows that *Letters from Iceland* can be examined through what Tony Sharpe, in connection with Auden’s “northerliness” (his preference for the northern climate), calls “consistent and deeply felt tactic of

¹⁸ Stacy Burton, *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30–31.

¹⁹ See Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 391; Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, 219–20; Jeffrey Hart, “How Good Was Auden?” *New Criterion* 15, 6 (February 1997): 59–60.

²⁰ Michael A. Moir, Jr., “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls’: MacNeice, Auden, and the Travel Book as Idyll,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 39, 2 (2016): 162–171.

²¹ Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls,’” 168.

²² Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls,’” 165.

²³ Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls,’” 169.

²⁴ Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls,’” 162, 169, 171.

²⁵ Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls,’” 162.

resistance”²⁶ to the prevalent literary tradition and the “hegemonic southern gaze.” I will trace the overlaps in Auden’s and MacNeice’s poetics, but not as results of their disillusionment in Iceland stemming from their feeling that escapism and search of the rural idyll are unethical, irrelevant and inconsequential. Their sober approach to Iceland is shown to be consistent with their more general effort in the 1930s to assume a critical position *vis a vis* the interwar fascination with the open-air ethos, escapism, insularity, and the southern gaze.

In drawing the Icelandic landscape, MacNeice and Auden rely on essential attributes of the island topos and treat it as a self-enclosed otherness preserving its unmatched *genius loci*.²⁷ MacNeice calls Iceland a “vertiginous” “Crow’s-nest of the earth,”²⁸ turning its remoteness and insularity into barriers that quarantine the local landscape and culture from external influences. Unlike most other Continental regions, especially in its southern parts, Iceland is a land “the Romans missed;” a place offering neither trains nor awe-inspiring architectural marvels “like Stonehenge” (*Lfi* 191) as mementoes of former civilizations. Instead, in line with Cockin’s assertion that the north is often imagined as “underdeveloped and distant from the main action,”²⁹ MacNeice reinforces the sense of Iceland’s backwardness by collating a series of rural features associated with islands even today. Besides the “silicate stream,” lakes “full of trout,” “unpolluted hills,” and glaciers (*Lfi* 268–70), there are “volcanic rocks,” (*Lfi* 191) and basins from which “Loops of steam uncoil and coil” (*Lfi* 375). In “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard,” the “scarcity of population” (*Lfi*

²⁶ Tony Sharpe, ‘Auden’s Northerliness,’ in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.

²⁷ See Godfrey Baldacchino, “Islands: Objects of Representation,” *Geografiska Annaler* 87, 4 (2005): 247– 251; Philip Conkling, “On Islanders and Islandness,” *Geographical Review* 97, 2 (2007): 191–201; Pete Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands,” *Island Studies Journal* 1, 1 (2006): 19–42.

²⁸ Wystan Hugh Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (1937), in Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Vol. I: 1926–1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 195. Hereafter cited in text as *Lfi*.

²⁹ Cockin, “Locating the Literary North,” 10.

191) and absence of man-made structures in the landscape obfuscate the sense of a linear historical time, helping MacNeice fashion Iceland as an isolated, pre-modern, rural and tranquil sanctuary of constancy. Auden relies on the same pastoral attributes of the insular trope. In “Journey to Iceland,” positioned right before MacNeice’s “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard,” Auden lets a traveller arriving in Iceland hope for “the glitter / Of glaciers, the sterile immature mountains,” “waterfalls brushing the / Rocks,” and “the issue of steam from a cleft” (*Lfi* 185).

Such images emphasizing purity and cleanliness provide a setting for an unhurried, unintrusive, and ponderous otium. Auden’s traveller, “the lover / Of islands,” is brought to Iceland by the desire to find there “natural marvels” and tranquilizing immutability in a place where “for ever” and “everywhere” “the cold fish is hunted” while “birds flicker and flaunt” (*Lfi* 185). In “Eclogue from Iceland” MacNeice contributes to this therapeutic atmosphere and allows Auden and himself, disguised as Craven and Ryan, to ride horses, “explore the country” and fish. Elsewhere the travellers rejoice in the possibility of “sleep[ing] in sheepskin” by a brook that feeds a lake abounding in fish. They relish the prospect of rusticity when, like “placid brute[s],” they expect not having to shave (*Lfi* 268–69). In “Epilogue” MacNeice depicts a similar experience in a retrospective manner. He recalls how Auden and himself “rode and joked and smoked,” unobtrusively watching the rural scenery, which made them “happy” because no “happenings at all” (*Lfi* 375) disturbed the peace. The emphasis in “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard” on the “the necessity of the silence of the islands” (*Lfi* 192) aligns with Edna Longley’s observation that MacNeice was supremely attentive to sound.³⁰ In *Letters from Iceland*, this shows particularly when the aural qualities of his description of life in England and in the south are considered. MacNeice contrasts the tranquillity and slow-motion existence of Iceland with the hectic and throbbing world he has left behind. Iceland offers a break from an England treated as “this desert in disguise” (*Lfi* 376), epitomizing the materially abundant yet excessively strenuous life in

³⁰ Edna Longley, “Louis MacNeice: Aspects of his Aesthetic Theory and Practice,” in *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc’h (Caen: Caen University Press, 1988), 51.

Continental Europe. Because of its austerity, the north offers a relief from the “noise, the radio or the city,” “grinding gears,” “cruel clock,” and “newsboys’ yells.” In addition, the preindustrial and scarcely populated landscape shields the traveller from the “Traffic and changing lights” as well as people “Always on the move” (*Lfi* 192–94) whose mechanical life consists in “Clocking in as a wage-slave.” Iceland is an antidote to such pulverizing familiarity and repetitiveness dictated by the “sour alarum clock” (sic) and bills to be paid (*Lfi* 269). Auden’s travellers, “pale” from “too much passion of kissing,” look to the Icelandic desert as a place to “feel pure” (*Lfi* 185) and find a remedy for excessive bodily indulgence. In Auden’s letters, distance and insularity also give Iceland the status of what MacNeice calls a “vertiginous” nest, a remote sanctuary with the potential to purify, heal, and appease as it allows the observer to slow down and to remain “far from any / Physician” as the damaged body and soul finds solace. Both poets structure their ethical stances along the North-South divide. For Auden’s traveller, “North” means “‘Reject!’,” with Iceland offering therapeutic relief from “the abnormal day of this world” since “Europe is absent” (*Lfi* 185). MacNeice treats the northern-most European country in equally privileging terms as a superior alternative, one not only to England, which is “the usual mess” (*Lfi* 191), and Ireland, where “Things are bad” because “nothing stands at all” (*Lfi* 270). The austere, rural and unpopulated Icelandic landscape beneath the “northern skies” is “Better” not only because its insularity and remoteness save it from the fate of the more complex, progressive and materialist parts of Europe, but also because it frees the arrivals from the strains and pressures of life in such a “desert in disguise” (*Lfi* 376).

The treatment of Iceland as a rural, privileged and liberating place recalls the escapist and “open-air ethos” characterization of the interwar period. It also echoes the tone of many a travel book which emerged from what Paul Fussell calls the interwar “British Literary Diaspora”³¹ of writers praising foreign destinations as therapeutic hideaways from an England both monotonous and distraught. In “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard” MacNeice also states how he came north “gaily running away” (*Lfi* 194), while in “Eclogue from Iceland” he

³¹ Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, 11.

calls their trip “Our latest joyride” as he has Auden’s persona Craven call themselves “exiles” who “Gad the world for comfort” (*Lfi* 270–71). At the same time, MacNeice remembers Auden saying that their “ascetic guts require / Breathers from the Latin fire” (*Lfi* 375). Besides Auden’s life-long predilection for the northern climate and his pronounced hatred of the south, this citation gestures towards their coordinated “tactic of resistance” to the interwar fascination with the “nearer,” sunnier, and more civilized south epitomized in *Letters* by “Cyprus and Madeira” (*Lfi* 191).

3. THE NEST ON THE GROUND, THE FABULOUS COUNTRY IMPARTIALLY FAR

MacNeice and Auden’s similar indulgence in the otium and pastoral motifs, however, is tongue in cheek. They create such an idyll in order to deflate it through a down-to-earth realism and sincerity, which reflects Auden’s claim that every author should be “a reporting journalist.”³² One of their overlapping strategies is to dispel the romanticized notion of Iceland as a flawless insular otherness. In clear contrast to the plentiful sunshine and cuisine of the Mediterranean, they fashion the island as deficient. Iceland offers murky “grey air” and an “insufficient” diet (*Lfi* 191). Besides the fish and birds, recalling an Arcadian landscape, there are in MacNeice’s version of Iceland echoes of *Et in Arcadia Ego* as ravens hover above rotting whales as reminders of the “Judgement day” (*Lfi* 375). Similarly, Auden dispels any romantic atmosphere as he recollects a long, tedious “scramble in gumboots” (*Lfi* 345) to watch whales only to find fishermen dismembering their dead bodies, the experience of which gave him a “vision of the cold controlled ferocity of the human species” (*Lfi* 288). The motif of *memento mori* reappears in the second of the two poems which make up Auden’s “Letter to William Coldstream, Esq.” There a local fisherman and farmer draw reassurance regarding the transgenerational sustenance of their livelihood made from the “native shore and local hill.” Nevertheless, life brings “Empty catch” and

³² Auden, *The Complete Works, Vol. I*, 132.

“harvest loss,” while Death mocks their wishful imaginings and advises them to “dance while [they] can” (*Lfi* 350–51).

Moreover, in “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard” MacNeice deems local narratives to be “all about revenge” (*Lfi* 191), which in fact matches the tone of his “Eclogue from Iceland,” in which Ireland is also said to have been “Built upon violence and morose vendettas” (*Lfi* 270). Auden blemishes the sense of purity, as Iceland’s “sterile” and “immature” landscape becomes a setting for the “jealousies of a province,” a place where jazz is played in local huts and the blood of an “indigenous” horse rider “moves *also* by crooked and furtive inches” (*Lfi* 186, emphasis added). Moreover, MacNeice makes several references to the historical presence in Iceland of Christianity and “Latin-chattering margin-illuminating monks” (*Lfi* 192). Both also remark on the presence of Nazis in Iceland. When Auden, who had married Erika Mann in 1935 to help her flee from Germany, recalls encountering Nazis on the bus looking for the uncontaminated Aryan type, “Ein echt Germanischer Typus” (*Lfi* 277), it is obvious that any sense of Icelandic insularity and superiority has been erased. “Tears fall in *all* the rivers” and the local horse rider “Asks *all* your questions” (*Lfi* 186), Auden assumes, including Icelanders in the general *condition humaine*. Iceland is no island of bliss, nor a sanctuary. Perhaps hinting at Plato’s view of imitation, for MacNeice the place becomes a mere “surface,” another “copy” (*Lfi* 271), simply an example of what Auden calls “the world with its mendicant shadow” (*Lfi* 186).

Time does not enter *Letters from Iceland* merely through the *memento mori* images of dismembered whales. The travel book shows a full awareness of holiday transitoriness and the inevitability of returning home, back to “the world with its mendicant shadow.” MacNeice has the persona Craven call the travellers “exiles” in response to the assumption of the ghost of the Icelandic outlaw Grettir Asmundson; like this fugitive, they are also “on the run” (*Lfi* 269). In MacNeice’s “Eclogue,” Craven and Ryan rejoice in the prospect of happy moments of fishing, hunting, and sleeping in sheepskin without the dictate of the “clock.” At the same time, MacNeice uses the conditional mood “That would be life” (*Lfi* 269), implying full recognition of the fact that such moments of simplicity and freedom are but a mere temporary “fancy turn” “Sandwiched in a graver show” (*Lfi* 374). MacNeice may write of their rustic situation in Iceland as an “enviable terminus” (*Lfi* 268), but

he also reminds readers: *memento temporis*! He calls holidays in the northern regions “Breathers from the Latin fire,” yet their indelible rootedness in Continental culture(s) transpires from their passages in Latin, references to Blake, Aristotle, Florence, the Spanish Civil War, Nazism and the whole of Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron.” In “Letter to Christopher Isherwood, Esq.” Auden mocks the attempts of travellers to evade the pressures of their quotidian existence, perhaps because he too feels “too deeply involved with Europe to be able, or even to wish to escape” (*LJI* 190). The transience of the holiday and the inevitability of return is echoed in MacNeice’s “Eclogue from Iceland” when Craven informs Grettir’s ghost that “We shall be back there soon,” immersed in the cycle of “queues / For entertainment,” “work at desks,” and “Soho menus” (*LJI* 272). All such anti-escapist proclamations are summed up by Grettir, who because he remains in Iceland although he is a “hounded” fugitive, bids Auden and MacNeice “Go back to where [they] belong.” Instead of trying to “keep crossing the road to escape,” the two should return home, as the “assertion of human values” is their “only duty” (*LJI* 275–77).

Geographically, Iceland might be a “vertiginous” and disconnected “Crow’s-nest of the earth,” yet both poets bring it down on a par with the “world below” (*LJI* 195). Iceland does not emerge from the travel book as an isolated preserve of unmatched authenticity. Auden may assert that “Europe is absent,” but MacNeice and himself level out differences between the island and the Continent, consequently rendering both Iceland and themselves as irreducibly enmeshed in the history and culture of the Old Continent. Auden frames their unromantic attitude to insularity when he asserts that Iceland “is an island and therefore / Unreal” because “fabulous” places are “impartially far” and the present “has no favourite suburb” (*LJI* 185–86) in which to find relief.

4. THE ETHICS OF INSULARITY

Like William Morris, who came to Iceland and wondered “What came we forth for to see[?],”³³ in *Letters from Iceland* MacNeice asks: “what am I doing here?” To sidestep reader misinterpretations of their trip as an act of escapism, he assures them that Auden and himself are “not changing ground to escape from facts.” MacNeice strives to justify “reasons for hereness” and explain them in moral terms by outlining the “ethics of Going North” (*Lfi* 191–92). As a result, *Letters from Iceland* displays more than the desire to probe the fluidity of the travel-book genre. The book also reflects the determination of its authors to deflate the myth of insularity in its scorn for the tendency to idealize distant places. The travellers use the image of an island to assess the ethical ramifications of cosy withdrawals from the unpleasant interwar situation.

Such sobriety about escapism, insularity, and spatial myths can also arguably be detected in Auden and MacNeice’s other interwar works. Christina Britzolakis describes one of the hallmarks of MacNeice’s sensibility as his “scrupulous realism” and “fastidious reluctance” to form judgments in an absence of “reflection on the extent to which the observer’s prejudices affect the status of his observations.” She illustrates MacNeice’s insistence on empiricism as exemplified by his restrained and unromantic sense of insularity. As a child of a Church of Ireland Bishop in Northern Ireland, she suggests that MacNeice learned to be well aware of the “constrictions” of “sectarian bigotry” and “dour insularity.”³⁴ Eamon Grennan goes further, describing a concomitance in MacNeice’s sense of insularity of “grime,” and “negative visions” in parts dealing with the “social and political realities” offset by “paradise versions” of Ireland in passages set in rural landscape offering “a pastoral refuge from the unpleasant aspects of the world of history.”³⁵ A similar approach can be found in MacNeice’s

³³ William Morris, *Poems by the Way* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1891), 37. Morris visited Iceland in 1871 and 1873.

³⁴ Christina Britzolakis, review of *The Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice, Notes and Queries* 39, 2 (1992): 239.

³⁵ Eamon Grennan, “In a Topographical Frame: Ireland in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice,” *An Irish Quarterly Review* 70, 278/279 (1981): 147–153.

Icelandic letters, in which escapist and pastoral motives coexist with a temperate outline of flaws and calls for social commitment.

For Auden, Iceland served as a life-long source of topophilic sentiment and a rare epitome of his idea of “holy ground,” one imbued with “the most magical light of anywhere on earth.”³⁶ Should he ever be forced to exile, Auden admitted, Iceland would be his flawless site of “idyllic life.”³⁷ Nevertheless, in the Icelandic letters Auden follows MacNeice in replacing such a spatial myth with equally abstemious poetics. Islandness, as a set of values associated with islands, received extensive attention from him both in critical prose and in poetry. Auden later asserted that islands provide only a “temporary refreshment for the exhausted hero;” they represent a place of “an illusion caused by black magic to tempt the hero to abandon his quest.”³⁸ Although he later voiced such views in lectures in 1949, the transitoriness and futility of escapism, together with the danger of the “black magic” in the form of the illusory and enticing spatial myths about islands, had occupied his mind already in Iceland and in his other earlier works. Moir argues that MacNeice is satirizing escapism, locating “weak spots” in the rural idyll while Auden displays “carefree optimism”³⁹ and indulgence in holiday otium. The starkest dose of satire of the pastoral idyll in *Letters from Iceland*, however, comes in *Part III* of “Letter to Lord Byron,” in which Auden mockingly derides rural rides. Here the pastoralization of the countryside becomes merely a construct fashioned by the urban masses escaping the city, who are treated as the offspring of William Wordsworth, the “old potato,” a group thriving on pretence in taking pleasure in spurious rusticity, unshaven faces, torn clothes, and uncomfortable accommodation (*LfI* 251). Auden wrote several other poems in the 1930s in which the human figures have “separate sorrows”

³⁶ Auden, *The Complete Works, Vol. I*, 801.

³⁷ Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose 1939–1948, Vol. II*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 336.

³⁸ Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 18–19.

³⁹ Moir, “‘The Pause before the Sufflé Falls’,” 175.

but “a single hope”⁴⁰ uniting them in a quest for a better place, especially in the rural space and on islands. In “O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless heaven” (1932), a group of children leave the urban space to picnic on the top of Moel Famau. Yet Auden dismantles their hope of finding a rural respite and idyll. Instead, he places them sitting in the shade of the Jubilee Tower, a reminder of the humanized landscape they had wanted to leave behind. Similar intimations of the inseparability from the urban lifespace and futility of temporary escapism appear in his denigrating commentaries on Scouting⁴¹ and in “The third week in December frost came at last” (1932). In the latter work, the first-person speaker leaves Helensburgh to find solitude atop a hill. The tranquillity of the rural space is soon disturbed, however, and the speaker’s attention is drawn to a surreal gathering in the prospect below. Feeling anxious and insecure, people amass like an “army” to be entertained and to receive deliverance from their leaders. To their dismay, the venue turns into a “vanity fair” as the politicians deliver speeches but no relief to their misfortunes. The public return to their usual lives, leaving the speaker reflect upon the “dingy and difficult life of our generation.”⁴² Examples of Auden’s effort to deflate spatial myths, especially those romanticizing the countryside and islands as sites of quarantined innocence and bliss, are plentiful in his interwar writings. In “I have a handsome profile” (1932), “The month was April” (1933), and the canonical “Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys” (1933), Auden traces the imaginings forged by travellers escaping a “world that has had its day.” They set out to sea in order to find a better place and innocent love on islands of “Milk and Honey” where trees perennially blossom. All three poems, however, intimate the unattainability of solace in such destinations and the ultimate inconsequentiality of seeking escapism. A poignant image of the island also appears in “Dover” (1937), a work in which groups of placid

⁴⁰ Wystan Hugh Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 118.

⁴¹ See Auden’s reviews “Life’s Old Boy” (1934) and “A Good Scout” (1937) commenting on the works and ideas of Robert Baden-Powell and F. Haydn Dimmock.

⁴² Auden, *The English Auden*, 451.

holiday makers and soldiers idle on the beach and lay about in pubs. Confident about the protective power of insularity, they ignore the aeroplanes above their heads, possibly reminders of recent bombing of Guernica and premonitions of an oncoming war. When Auden recalls the presence in Dover of a Norman castle and Roman lighthouse as mementoes of England's historical enmeshment in external processes, the protective power of insularity becomes, as in the case of Iceland, an empty spatial myth.

5. ESCAPING CANNOT TRY

In *Letters from Iceland*, Auden and MacNeice exemplify one of the most widely accepted attributes of the pastoral. From William Empson through Paul Alpers to Ken Hiltner, the pastoral has been regarded as a mode of "veiled" writing that uses the pleasant atmosphere of a simple life in a pristine landscape to cast critical commentaries on the structure and values of more developed societies.⁴³ Auden and MacNeice do toy with pastoral images and escapism, but the letters cannot be taken as regretful dirges reflecting the poets' ultimately disappointing revelation of the inability to attain freedom in the rural idyll. For slightly different reasons, MacNeice and Auden assume a critical position to insularity, subverting it into an image of the interwar ethos of withdrawal, especially in relation to the southern regions and rural spaces. Corresponding with their broader interwar strategy to deflate spatial myths along with the potential of these illusory images to entice citizens away from social commitment, the authors finally deem escapism a naïve strategy due to the transitory, ineffective, and socially irresponsible nature of such avoidance of responsibility. Through their focus on the negative connotations of insularity and detachment, both writers illustrate the shibboleth of social commitment associated with the 1930s writers. MacNeice puts it well in his Preface to *Modern Poetry* (1938), in which he argues that poets of his generation are

⁴³ Ken Hiltner, *What else is pastoral?: Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 1.

“working back from luxury writing and trying once more to be functional” since, in Auden’s words, “Escaping cannot try.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1938, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 197; Auden, *The English Auden*, 451.

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