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Vol. IV, No. 2: The Black Clock: The Poetic Achievement of Louis MacNeice

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The Hollins Critic

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The Black Clock: The Poetic Achievement Of Louis MacNeice

Louis MacNeice's last volume of poems, *The Burning Perch*, went to press in January 1963; he died suddenly in September of the same year at the age of 56. Critics since have generally acknowledged that he was a poet of genius, and that much of his finest work was produced in the three years immediately preceding his death. While granting him his place in the front rank among the poets who came to prominence in the thirties—W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis—they have had considerable difficulty in assessing the nature of his achievement. On his death, T. S. Eliot commented that he "had the Irishman's unfailing ear for the music of verse." During his lifetime, however, many readers felt that his ear did indeed fail him, that his rhythms were frequently too easy, and his parodies and imitations of jazz lyrics too flat and mechanical in nature to hold one's interest for long. While he had much in common with his contemporaries, he was, in many ways, totally unlike them. His poems are easy to understand on the surface (seemingly far

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less complicated than those of Auden or Dylan Thomas), but they present deeper, less obvious, difficulties. They appear to be the open, easy expression of an engaging and intelligent personality, but basically that personality, and the poems through which it manifests itself, is not easy to grasp.

Stephen Spender, who knew him at Oxford, has spoken of him, as have many of his contemporaries, as one who was brilliant but aloof. "He had a way," Mr. Spender writes, "of leaning back and gazing at one through half-closed eyes which scarcely covered a mocking glance. Secrets he surmised about oneself he did not intend to share, the glance said . . . That this detachment of MacNeice's was noticeable enough is notorious. A famous occasion at which I happened to be present was when, late in the war, Archibald Clerk-Kerr (later Lord Inverchapel), the British Ambassador at Moscow, returning to London for a visit attended a party given by John Lehmann for the young English poets of the thirties and forties. Throughout the party MacNeice, holding a glass in his hand, leaned against a piece of furniture, and gazed around him disdainfully, without addressing a word to anyone. Finally Clerk-Kerr went up to him and told him there was a matter about which he would like to be informed. Did MacNeice come from the Northern coast of Ireland? MacNeice acknowledged that he did. 'Ah,' said Clerk-Kerr, 'well that corroborates a legend I heard in my youth that a school of seals had landed on that part of the coast, cohabited with the natives, and produced a special race, half-seal, half-human.' MacNeice did look a bit taken aback, as Clerk-Kerr left the room." (*The New Republic*, Jan. 28, 1967)

MacNeice's friend John Hilton, in an appendix to *The Strings are False*, an unfinished autobiography now published, speaks of him in similar, if more sympathetic terms: "On the whole at that time he preferred to study mankind indirectly. He liked—or perhaps this came on a bit later—to read the 'small ads' in the papers. Meeting people face to face he was apt to make too clear that he was treating them—head thrown slightly back, eyes quizzically narrowed—as specimens, bearers of the potentialities of the race, concrete universals perhaps. A remark ventured by the specimen would be visibly rolled around his mental palate and mental ear; and the response if any would be less than whole-hearted. He practised in this way a certain spiritual economy that I take to have been necessary to the protection of his inner world. He was afraid — as in the *Prayer before Birth*—of being spilled. He did not mind at times appearing sly; and he did not always choose to recognize people he had met before (though his increasing shortsightedness was probably responsible for many imagined offenses of the kind)." I felt when I met MacNeice myself several times in London in the spring of 1948 that he was treating me, through his narrowed eyes, as a specimen of the sort of poet America produced, for whom he appeared to feel only disdain. I discovered from his friends Reggie Smith and Ernest Stahl, whom I saw often, that this was not true. I did not meet him again until a year or so before his death: he came in out of the rain in Greenwich Village to a party at Howard Moss's apartment looking literally like the half-seal that Clerk-Kerr had encountered in London. Soon dry and warmed by liquor, he appeared far more human than I had remembered him, the brilliant and engaging person one expected from his poems.

There is in everything that Louis MacNeice wrote a surface brilliance, an extraordinary verbal dexterity, a poise that shows itself in a command of complicated verse forms. There is a distance maintained, even when he is being most personal, that gives his poetry, at its best, a cold classical power, and, at its worst, the casualness of an uncommitted poetic journalist. MacNeice during his career engaged in many literary pursuits which took him away from the writing of poetry. But he was never deceived, no matter how well he succeeded in journalism, criticism, translation or radio work, that these were anything but diversions from his main course. Of the prose books for which he accepted commissions from publishers during the late thirties he writes: "It flattered me that publishers should ask me to do something unsuitable. The more unsuitable, the more it was a sign of power. Many of us were still reacting overmuch against Art for Art's Sake, against the concept of the solitary pure-minded genius saving his soul in a tower without doors. Our reaction drove us to compete with the Next Man. But once you come up against the Next Man you begin to lose sight of the sky. The Next Man swells to a giant, you find your face buried in his paunch and on his paunch is a watch ticking louder and louder, urging you to hurry, get on with the job—when the job is finished there will always be another. In commercial writing, in 'book-making,' one comes to think of carelessness and speed as virtues." His extensive work for the BBC served to accentuate his desire for the use of direct and colloquial speech, but for the trained classicist that he was, the virtues of harmony and measure were ingrained.

It was important for MacNeice to look at the world from a certain distance in order to view it, and himself as part of it, with honesty and without self-pity. MacNeice was interested in the concrete, as true lyric poets always are; he wanted to get things straight. (He believed that a critic should not speak of poetry in the abstract, but should point out specific qualities, merits in individual poems.) Dr. Johnson was wrong, he remarks at one point, when he said that the poet is not concerned with minute particulars, with "the streaks on the tulip." MacNeice was passionate about particulars; in "Autumn Sequel" he writes:

> Everydayness is good; particular-dayness
> Is better, a holiday thrives on single days.
> Thus Wales with her moodiness, madness, shrewdness,
> lewdness, feyness,
> Daily demands a different color of praise.

Absorbed in the dailiness of life, he could not tolerate lofty rhetoric, the grand gesture: he was not to be taken in. His last poems in *The Burning Perch* showed that he could "let commonplace be novelty," and that he had the power, with the lightness of his touch and the bite of his wit, to create a lasting resonance.

John Hilton describes a speech that MacNeice made at the Marlborough School in November 1925: "It really was simply astounding; an amazing and magnificent conglomeration of dreams, fables, parables, allegories, theories, quotations from Edward Lear and Edith Sitwell, the sort of thing that you want to howl with laughter at, but are afraid to for fear of missing a word. He spoke in a loud, clear, fast matter-of-fact voice going straight on without a pause from a long story about two ants who fell into a river and went floating down in company with two old sticks and a dead dog, until they met a fish to whom they said 'stuff and nonsense; it's contrary to common sense to swim upstream; we won't believe it' and went on and were drowned in a whirlpool, while the fish swam on upstream until he met St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the fishes and gained eternal happiness." Mr. Hilton concludes, in a letter, that MacNeice was undoubtedly "a great genius," even though he "stands for nonsense."

MacNeice's gift for nonsense was given full play at Oxford. He describes his verbal collaboration at Oxford with his friend Graham Shepard, "not that we had ever heard of Joyce or surrealism or automatic writing; we just liked to play about with words." Their experiments took such forms as this: "Mr. Little Short of Extraordinary was little short of extraordinary. He went to bed with his wife and dislocated his jaw. And that was the Night the Isms came to Auntie. General Useless MacNess was always in a mess. The Boy stood in the Burning Bush. 'What are ye doin' the day?' Quoth the cat. I'm minding my pees and peeing my queues. Oh the Harp that Once and never got over it!" He was especially fond, he said, of parodying hymns: "every little blasphemy a blow for the better Life." He could look at the grotesques who typified Oxford with the eye of a Lewis Carroll: "When I think of Oxford dons I see a *Walspurgisnacht*, a zoo—scraggy-necked baldheads in gown and hood looking like marabou storks, giant turtles reaching for a glass of port with infinitely weary flippers, sad chimpanzees, codfish, washing blown out on a line. Timid with pipes or boisterous with triple chins. Their wit and themselves had been kept too long, the squibs were damp, the cigars were dust, the champagne was flat." The verbal play was a way of keeping his distance.

MacNeice made technical use of nonsense right up to the end. In *The Burning Perch*, the poem "Children's Games," written in 1962, is a playful handling of children's nonsense phrases, but even the simplest one, such as "Keep your fingers crossed when Tom Tiddler's ground is over you," takes on a deeper significance. In "Sports Page" he observes his Doppelgänger as a participant in games.

Nostalgia, incantation, escape,
Courts and fields of the Ever Young:
On your Marks! En garde! Scrum Down! Over!
On the ropes, on the ice, breasting the tape,
Our Doppelgänger is bounced and flung
While the ball squats in the air like a spider
Threading the horizon round the goalposts
And we, though never there, give tongue.
Yet our Doppelgänger rides once more
Over the five-barred gates and flames
In metaphors filched from magic and music
With a new witch broom and a rattling score
And the names we read seem more than names,
Potions or amulets, till we remember
The lines of print are always sidelines
And all our games funeral games.

Louis MacNeice

Louis MacNeice was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, September 12, 1907. When he was still a child, his father, who later became a Bishop, was named rector of Carrickfergus. MacNeice was educated at Marlborough School and Merton College, Oxford. He was Lecturer in Classics at the University of Birmingham, 1930-36, and Lecturer in Greek at Bedford College, London, 1936-40. At the outbreak of World War II he was teaching at Cornell, but returned to England in 1940. Soon afterwards he began to work for the B.B.C., and continued in its service until his death. He was Director of the British Institute in Athens in 1950, and held other temporary posts in South Africa and India. Belfast awarded him an honorary D. Litt. degree in 1957. Recording a feature program he had written for the B.B.C. in 1963, he contracted a cold when he insisted on accompanying the engineers down a hole, developed pneumonia and died soon afterwards on September 3, 1963.

The "metaphors filched from magic and music" in *The Burning Perch* build up a nightmare world from which there is no escape; and distance—the objectivity of the artist—is of no help. The iceberg is a favorite figure in MacNeice's poetry (he always remembered seeing the Titanic as a child in Belfast on her maiden voyage) but in these later poems he explores the iceberg's underside. The nonsense world of childhood has become the real world, the grotesque figures that could once be laughed at are now omnipresent in a packaged and plastic, dehumanized world:

On the podium in lieu of a man
With fallible hands is ensconced
A metal lobster with built-in tempi;
The deep-sea fishermen in lieu of
Battling with tunny and cod
Are signing their contracts for processing plankton.

On roof after roof the prongs
Are baited with faces, in saltpan and brainpan
The savour is lost, in deep
Freeze after freeze in lieu of a joint
Are piled the shrunken heads of the past
And the offals of unborn children.

In lieu therefore of choice
Thy Will be undone just as flowers
Fugues, vows and hopes are undone
While the weather is packaged and the spacemen
In endless orbit and in lieu of a flag
The orator hangs himself from the flagpost.

The poems depict a world in which "Greyness is all":

But, as it is, we needs must wait
Not for some demon but some fate
Contrived by men and never known
Until the final switch is thrown
To black out all the worlds of men
And demons too but even then
Whether that black will not prove grey
No one may wait around to say.

"Budgie" presents a final grotesque vision of existence:

The budgerigar is baby blue,
Its mirror is rimmed with baby pink,
Its cage is a stage, its perks are props,
Its eyes black pins in a cushionette,

Books by Louis MacNeice

BLIND FIREWORKS
London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1929. 6/

ROUNDABOUT WAY
London: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932. 7/6
London: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1933. 3/6

POEMS
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1935. 6/
New York: Random House, Inc., 1937. $2.50

OUT OF THE PICTURE, A PLAY IN TWO ACTS
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1937. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938. $1.75
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938. $1.75

AGAMEMNON *(Aeschylus's Agamemnon, trans. by MacNeice)*
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1936. 5/
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1937. $1.75
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937. $1.75
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1951. 8/6
Toronto: British Book Service, 1951. $2
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1951. $2.50

LETTERS FROM ICELAND *(with W. H. Auden)*
New York: Random House, 1937. $3
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937. $3
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1937. 9/

EARTH COMPELS
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1938. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938. $2

I CROSSED THE MINCH
London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938. 10/6
London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939. 5/

MODERN POETRY, A PERSONAL ESSAY
London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1938. 7/6
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939. $3

ZOO
London: Michael Joseph, Ltd., 1938. 10/6
Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders & Co., 1938. $3.50

AUTUMN JOURNAL
New York: Random House, 1939. $1.50
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1939. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1939. $1.75

POEMS, 1925-1940
New York: Random House, 1940. $2.50

LAST DITCH *(Limited Edition)*
Dublin: Cuala Press, Ltd., 1940. 12/6 autog. ed. 21/

SELECTED POEMS
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1940. 2/6
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1940. $1 *(pa)*

PLANT AND PHANTOM
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1941. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1941. $2

POETRY OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS
London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941. 8/6
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941. $2.50
Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941. $2.75

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, A RADIO PLAY
London: Faber & Faber, 1944. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1944. $2

SPRINGBOARD POEMS 1941-1944
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1944. 6/
Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1944. $2
New York: Random House, 1941. $1.75
Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1945. $2.25

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London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1947. 8/6

HOLES IN THE SKY; POEMS, 1944-1947
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1948. 7/6
New York: Random House, 1948. $2.50
Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1949. $3.25

COLLECTED POEMS, 1925-1948
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1949. 12/6
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963. $6

FAUST *(Goethe's Faust, Parts I & II, abbreviated version)*
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1951. 15/
Toronto: British Book Service, 1951. $3
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952. $4
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New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961. $1.25 *(pa)*
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1965. 10/6 *(pa)*

TEN BURNT OFFERINGS
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1952. 10/6
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953. $2.50
Toronto: British Book Service, 1953. $2.50

AUTUMN SEQUEL
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1954. 12/6

PENNY THAT ROLLED AWAY
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1954. $2.25
Toronto: Thomas Allen, Ltd., 1954. $2.50

SIXPENCE THAT ROLLED AWAY
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1956. 10/6

VISITATIONS
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958. $3
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1957. 10/6

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London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1963. 12/6
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963. $3.75

ASTROLOGY
New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1964. $9.95
Toronto: Doubleday, Canada, Ltd., 1964. $11.50

ASTROLOGY *(ed. by Douglas Hill)*
London: W. H. Allen & Co., Ltd., 1964. 63/

THE MAD ISLANDS; THE ADMINISTRATOR
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964. $4.25
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1964. 18/

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London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1964. 6/16 *(pa)*

THE STRINGS ARE FALSE; AN UNFINISHED BIOGRAPHY
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1965. 30/
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966. $6

VARIETIES OF PARABLE
London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965. 22/6 $4.50

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF LOUIS MACNEICE *(ed. by E. R. Dodds)*
London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1967. 63/
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967. $9.75

—M. B. B.

Its tail a needle on a missing disc,
Its voice a small I Am. Beyond
These wires there might be something different—
Galaxy on galaxy, star on star,
Planet on planet, asteroid on asteroid,
Or even those four far walls of the sitting room—
But for all this small blue bundle could bother
Its beak, there is only itself and the universe,
The small blue universe, so *Let me attitudinize,*
Let me attitudinize, let me attitudinize,
For all the world is a stage is a cage
A hermitage a fashion show a crèche an auditorium
Or possibly a space ship. *Earth, can you hear me?*
Blue for Budgie calling Me for Mirror:
Budgie, can you hear me? The long tail oscillates,
The mirror jerks in the weightless cage:
Budgie, can you see me? The radio telescope
Picks up a quite different signal, the human
Race recedes and dwindles, the giant
Reptiles cackle in their graves, the mountain
Gorillas exchange their final messages,
But the budgerigar was not born for nothing,
He stands at his post on the burning perch—
I twitter Am—and peeps like a television
Actor admiring himself in the monitor.

In *The Strings are False* MacNeice writes about the break-up of his first marriage: "Sometimes in the nights I woke and wondered where we were going, but most of the time I was doped and happy, most of the time except when I thought about time that most of the time is waste but whose is not? When I started again to write poems they were all about time. We had an old record of 'The Blue Room,' one of the most out-and-out jazz sentimentalizations of domestic felicity—far away upstairs but the blue began to suffocate. I wrote a novel which was basically dishonest and ended in a blue room as if that solved everything." After his wife had left him, he writes of not being able to sleep. In a large room with a ten-foot skylight he "felt the skylight encroaching, tried to dodge it; sometimes it was a falling tent and sometimes it was the gap that cannot be closed." In this room he had "two precise visions, both by electric light, both solidly planted in the air about five foot up from the floor. The first was a human eye a yard or so long; the rest of the face was invisible but on both the upper and the under eyelid there were worms instead of eyelashes, transparent worms curling and wriggling. The second vision was of a sky-blue little beast like a jackal but with horns; he sat there pat on the air, his front feet firmly together."

In "Budgie" he confronts the same "sky-blue little beast," the same "small blue bundle," the same suffocating blue of "The Blue Room," but now in broad daylight, close-up and with an honesty that is terrifying. Life, reflecting upon itself, is reduced to a blue and pink baby-like vision, utterly nonsensical; but its nonsense parroting of its own parroting echoes through an expanding universe. "Budgie," in its mad vision and its alliterative and obsessive *b*'s, reminds one of "The Hunting of the Snark" by Lewis Carroll: Budgie is a space-age Boojum, and its twittering "I am" comes from every TV screen.

The image of the bird on the burning perch calls to mind also an earlier poem by MacNeice, one of the finest of his war poems, "The Springboard," in which the poet contemplates man, called upon to sacrifice himself:

Schooling the Walrus

Making the world over, one comes upon a danger sign.
The walrus, who manages to look both fat and wizened,
will not move over—
He has been obdurate since that day he pushed his face
into a porcupine.

He will not move over in your expansive dream,
He must be fed oysters unless you expect to kill him,
Unless you are prepared to go to some inexorable extreme.

Otherwise there is nothing left but ingenuity and technique:
Try to turn those flippers into cushioned wheels and let the slow
poke ride
Unless you are ready to immolate and let him burn for a week.

Back to actual cases since he would not make an omnibus:
You will have learned to crowd, to be brutal and yet kind,
If you can persuade him he never was, and never will be,
what was known as walrus.

But take care, trying to remove those quills of sorrow on his
face
The Neanderthal wrinkles, the tusks like stalactites of drool:
Mutatis mutandis—It is far better to revise and not erase.

Making the world over, one must save up monstrous parts—
Part whale, part mutilated horse, a roadblock on your way,
The walrus *is*. You feed him oysters, embrocate your dream,
the damage done in fits and starts.

—Charles Edward Eaton

He never made the dive—not while I watched.
High above London, naked in the night
Perched on a board. I peered up through the bars
Made by his fear and mine but it was more than fright
That kept him crucified among the budding stars.

and concludes:

And yet we know he knows what he must do.
There above London where the gargoyles grin
He will dive like a bomber past the broken steeple,
One man wiping out his own original sin
And, like ten million others, dying for the people.

In "Budgie" the poet again looks through the bars, but sees not a human perched on a board ready to spring, but the "sky-blue beast" on its burning perch, sailing totally without meaning through a meaningless universe while the gargoyles—now real beasts—cackle and grin, and the human race "recedes and dwindles."

MacNeice speaks at one point of the importance that his generation atttached to personal relationships. "It is better," he says, agreeing with his friend E. R. Dodds, the editor of both his poems and his unfinished autobiography, "to be like Rilke and

capitalize your own loneliness and neuroses, regard Death as the mainspring. Or it is better—if you can do it—to become the servant of an idea. But if you take either of these courses, you have got to commit yourself utterly; if you give yourself to Loneliness or Otherness it must not be a negative thing—a mere avoiding of other troubles, mere sublimation—but it must be positive, an End. Thus people have become monks sometimes in order to avoid the trouble of sex, sometimes out of perverse sexuality, but that is not how people become saints. Not real saints. In spite of analytical researches into the pathology of sainthood, the saint, like the mathematician, has got hold of something positive. And so have the real hero and the real artist."

Beneath the bright and lively surface of his poems death seems to have haunted MacNeice throughout his work. He tells of dreaming of a house that was a skeleton, the walls and floors of which were gone. (He speaks elsewhere of having enjoyed climbing over ruined houses, of fearing blindness, long corridors, and light glancing off a mirror.) The dream ends with a vision of Dr. Mabuse, from the film that he had just seen, with a "great bush of orange-red hair," cackling and leering at him. The war poems of the forties present a panoramic vision of death and destruction, as in the masterful "Brother Fire:"

> O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,
> O enemy and image of ourselves,
> Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,
> When you were looting shops in elemental joy
> And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,
> Echo your thought in ours? 'Destroy! Destroy!'

At the same time he wrote a far more personal poem, "Prayer in Mid-passage," which addresses death, in its "fierce impersonality" ("O Thou my monster, Thou my guide"), as the mainspring of his work:

> Take therefore, though Thou disregard,
> This prayer, this hymn, this feckless word,
> O Thou my silence, Thou my song,
> To whom all focal doubts belong
> And but for whom this breath were breath—
> Thou my meaning, Thou my death.

In a later poem "A Hand of Snapshops: The Left-Behind" the poet asks, peering into his glass of stout, a series of riddles:

> Where can you find a fire that burns and gives no warmth?
> Where is the tall ship that chose to run on a rock?
> Where are there more fish than ever filled the ocean?
> Where can you find a clock that strikes when it has stopped?
>
> Oh, poverty is the fire that burns and gives no warmth.
> My youth is the tall ship that chose to run on a rock.
> Men yet unborn could more than fill the ocean,
> And death is the black clock that strikes when it has stopped.

In much of his work his obsession with his past, with memories that "flitter and champ in a dark cupboard," seems to predominate. Often he tries to regain the bright particularity, the sensuous awareness, of childhood; and to do so he uses child-like playful rhythms and metrical devices. With sparkling nonsense and satiric savagery he

The Incantation

> Night. No stars. Let hellgramites emerge
> From the pale satin skull. Let lacewings cling
> To the latticed cage of ribs while chigoes sing
> Along the spine a spinal dirge.
> Let gadflies or emmets dye the white pelvis black
> As aphids outline all the limbs in green.
> Scarabs, go rim the eyeballs till they look serene;
> Sear all mortality away, spiders, with your poison-sac
> And you, ephemerids, hang up a pall of cloud.
> But let my love kneel down, denying I am dead
> And, staring at these busy bones much comforted,
> Reject the sycophantic shroud;
> And let her say in accents only slightly strange
> "Dear friend, I see no change, I see no change"

—Carl Bode

hacks away at the deadness of language and of life; and many of his poems are verbal triumphs. But often, as he expresses it in the dedicatory poem to his first (1948) *Collected Poems,* he "is content if things would image/Themselves in their own dazzle, if the answers came quick and smooth . . ." It is not until the poems in *The Burning Perch* that he listens with full attention to "the black clock that strikes when it has stopped," and confronts his Loneliness and Otherness head-on. The poems in *The Burning Perch* are more direct and terrifying than any he had written. He goes over the same ground, treating the same subjects and frequently in the same manner, but with greater honesty and intensity. He uses the "same tunes that hang on pegs in the cloakrooms of the mind," but "off the peg seems made to measure now." And in the direct confrontation of loneliness and death, he became, with greater dimension than one would have thought possible, not only a real, but also a great, artist:

THE INTRODUCTION

> They were introduced in a grave glade
> And she frightened him because she was young
> And thus too late. Crawly crawly
> Went the twigs above their heads and beneath
> The grass beneath their feet the larvae
> Split themselves laughing. Crawly crawly
> Went the cloud above the treetops reaching
> For a sun that lacked the nerve to set
> And he frightened her because he was old
> And thus too early. Crawly crawly
> Went the string quartet that was tuning up
> In the back of the mind. You two should have met
> Long since, he said, or else not now.
> The string quartet in the back of the mind
> Was all tuned up with nowhere to go.
> They were introduced in a green grave.

—William Jay Smith

January: the Island

No wonder the body hugs its chill
and asks, "What bad year begins like this?"
Sun is uncreated nor day made day.
"What bad year begins?" the body asks.
"The same bad year," answers the climate
and pains and permeates and wreaks despair.
The body comes upon the knowledge
of its own hazards. The body hates.
It names its foe: The Same. The Same.

While the body curses god and dies,
prompt as morphine Fancy takes command:
a great blue equatorial disc,
then reef, lagoon, wide *O* of white sand
(its center looped with green redundancies)
where body could cure its bad luck
under devised immortal sun.
That sane sun hangs in a coward brain.

But body neither dies nor has escaped
and, when it wakes once more, regards its wits—
weakened by dread of the definite.
"Poor wits," it says, "every year the same:
whereas every day must be admired
for the dayhood of its peculiar date."
The body holds the hand of its wits
while the solar mechanism turns—
mass, distance, time, force, speed and how they stay,
those constants Newton left the simplest man.
Underneath all the body's months, they stay.
"It does not help to be afraid,"
comforts the body, who's for a while brave
but the waked wits, made sane, stay afraid.

—Bink Noll

SECOND CLASS
POSTAGE
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