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# HARLEQUIN'S TAILORS: *LETTERS FROM ICELAND* BY W. H. AUDEN AND LOUIS MACNEICE

Écrire le voyage à deux – Travel Writing in Partnership

Sara GREAVES

Writing for four hands or more is gaining ground in contemporary academia, including in the humanities where it is still far less the norm than in the sciences, and with the current interest in cross-discipline research, chalk-and-cheese partnerships of all kinds are appearing. In the creative arts and in particular literature, the special status of the singular (in both senses of the word) author continues to command respect – and nowhere more so than in poetry – despite being under attack from textual practices derived from intertextuality, translation theory and creative writing, as well as from writers actually joining forces and writing in tandem. As Lafon and Peeters noted in their 2006 enquiry into four-handed literary writing, *Nous est un autre*<sup>1</sup>, literary partnerships are not a recent phenomenon, but literary history has tended to brush aside their specificities – worse, their literary productions are often attributed to the better-known author, the other being simply overlooked. This is unfair to the other author, while also depriving readers and critics of valuable insights into the complex dynamics of collective creation.

*Letters from Iceland* (1937) by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice<sup>2</sup>, a travel book in prose and verse, is an intriguing, paradoxical work, all the more so when we look at it from the point of view of four-handed writing. The two authors are major Thirties poets, if not *the* major Thirties poets, MacNeice in some cases being given precedence over Auden<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless *Letters from Iceland* is often seen as part of Auden's oeuvre, with MacNeice's contributions tending to be neglected<sup>4</sup>. In the course of their careers both poets collaborated with other artists (Benjamin Britten for Auden and MacNeice, Stravinsky for Auden, writers Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood for Auden), and both would go on to undertake other travel book commissions (Auden and Isherwood's celebrated *Journey to a War* [1939]<sup>5</sup>, MacNeice's *I Crossed the Minch* [1938], with illustrations by Nancy Coldstream). Although the presentation of the French translation states that a contract with Faber & Faber for a travel book was signed by both poets<sup>5</sup>, Humphrey Carpenter in his well-researched biography of Auden writes that it began as a one-author commission, proposed to the publisher by Auden after he learnt that a group of schoolboys and their schoolmaster, Michael Yates, from the school he had formerly taught at, Bryanston School, were planning a hiking trip to Iceland in the following summer holidays (1936)<sup>6</sup>. At some point – Auden had forgotten when – MacNeice was invited to join Auden there and collaborate on the book. Auden would spend three months in Iceland, MacNeice joining him on 9<sup>th</sup> August until they took the passage back together on 10<sup>th</sup> September. The following year the book was published under a joint authorship. What, we may ask, was the nature of the writing partnership behind those two names?

## ***Less than the sum of its parts***

If *Letters from Iceland* has received less attention from critics than it seems to deserve<sup>7</sup>, this is probably (paradoxically) due to the greatness of the two poets as individuals, their other works overshadowing this one, and to the fact that the poems it contains were rapidly published in other collections (“Epilogue For W. H. Auden”, for instance, signed Louis MacNeice, was published in *The Earth Compels* in 1938). The book is a literary anomaly whose disconcerting combination of quirkiness, apparent formlessness and in-jokes has led to critics giving it a rather wide berth. Running the risk of becoming a “hodge-podge”<sup>8</sup>, it subverts whatever it purports to be: as a travel narrative, although going through some of the paces, providing a large quantity of facts and observations, it falls short of expectations because the “connection” between travellers and “travelled” doesn’t really take place. As a modernist collage, it fails to deliver for various reasons: because its “democratic” tone is inconsistent with high modernism, because it doesn’t appear to be an autonomous, autotelic artefact but on the contrary to be composed of a miscellany ranging from poetry to private letters to pages of facts and figures, not to mention a camp exercise in transgendered comic fiction, and also because both poets have plundered it and published discrete parts elsewhere. As J. M. Wilson notes:

Auden and MacNeice [...] seem to insist that we embrace their book precisely because it is *less* than the sum of its parts, and to speak of it as an artistic whole risks taking seriously what was not seriously intended, risks promoting to high art what was meant as an idyll for the casual tripper awaiting his passage – or, rather, as an in-joke for the Oxbridge aesthete<sup>9</sup>.

The implication is that their collaboration as such was merely contingent on circumstance and that what mattered were the individual achievements and the poets’ personal trajectories. This reading is reinforced by such works as John Fuller’s *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*<sup>10</sup>, which elucidates the more obscure references only in Auden’s contributions to *Letters from Iceland*.

Interestingly, not all of these pieces are individually ascribed, possibly precisely because the poets did not consider some of the unsigned ones worthy of separate publication (they include the prose sections “For Tourists” and “Sheaves from Sagaland” and the hilarious epistolary fiction entitled “Hetty to Nancy”); however, another reason for the absence of authorial designation may be that they in fact arose from the poets’ inter-personal dynamics and exchanges during the trip. Certainly, these unsigned pieces are consistent with the hypothesis of an intellectual and personal congeniality, if not an actual writing partnership as came about in the final chapter of the book, “Their Last Will and Testament”, in which double authorship is at last proclaimed.

Double authorship, however, is a beleaguered concept, as Lafon and Peeters have shown. Marguerite Duras, for instance, maintains that solitude is a necessary pre-requisite for writing and asserts: “Personne n’a jamais écrit à deux voix. On a pu chanter à deux voix, faire de la musique aussi, et du tennis, mais écrire, non. Jamais<sup>11</sup>.” Auden and MacNeice clearly disagreed with this, and yet, as we have seen, publishing elsewhere poems from the book could only detract from any sense of unity. We seem to be faced with a book that is a paradoxical book, and a writing partnership that is equally paradoxical. What seems certain is that there was no plan to write a joint book at the outset, and that the travel book on Iceland was very much Auden’s project – or rather his pretext. For it should be noted that his motives for going to Iceland were not the ambition to throw himself into the experience of another country and confront the exotic Other; indeed, as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter writes:

Auden had several motives for the journey. One was sheer curiosity to see Iceland, which had been, as he put it, ‘holy ground’ in his imagination since childhood, thanks to his father’s enthusiasm for all things Icelandic. But he seems also to have hoped that by distancing himself a little, both geographically and culturally, from his own life and from European society and its crises he might obtain a better view of himself and his environment. There was, too, an element of sheer fun in the project; it was to be a holiday, a temporary escape<sup>12</sup>.

The reasons Carpenter gives are all personal and “endotic”, the Other’s space representing at best a personal, perhaps psychoanalytical quest to visit the “holy ground” marked out by his father’s saga-telling, at worst a temporary escape from European politics<sup>13</sup>. Certainly, joint authorship as a project *per se* does not come into the picture; all we know is that the two poets respected each other’s poetry: “MacNeice had admired Auden’s poetry for many years, and often reviewed it very enthusiastically. Auden in his turn greatly valued what he described as MacNeice’s resistance in his own poetry to ‘fake feelings’

14.” Mutual respect is of course necessary for such a collaboration, as Auden subsequently observed, but does little to explain what brought it about, why Auden asked his former fellow Oxonian to join him. Whether he did so before he left or once in Iceland, we may wonder whether the prospect of having to write a travel book – something Auden felt singularly ill-equipped for – was so daunting that he wrote to MacNeice for help. Did he feel threatened by the existential anxieties attendant on Iceland’s arid, empty solitudes, did he fear that the G.O. (Great Open) Spaces of Iceland would prove to be what Maisie, Auden’s alias in “Hetty to Nancy<sup>15</sup>”, humorously calls “a closed book<sup>16</sup>”? Or, more prosaically, did he simply think it would be more fun to travel and write the book together?

## From how to why

We do not know why Auden sought MacNeice’s collaboration, but perhaps if, paradoxically, we reverse the logical order and look at how the book was written, the answer will become apparent. First, let us look at who wrote what. In the 1967 Faber & Faber edition, with an added preface by Auden (1965, MacNeice having died of pneumonia two years previously), Auden’s contributions include the following: the celebrated “Letters to Lord Byron” parts I-IV, the poem “Journey to Iceland” followed by a letter to Christopher Isherwood, an informative prose section entitled “For Tourists” and another entitled “Sheaves from Sagaland” (addressed to John Betjeman) composed of disparate, highly entertaining extracts about Iceland from other authors dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, two letters to Erika Mann Auden<sup>17</sup> (Thomas Mann’s daughter, married to Auden), one to R. H. S. Crossman, a friend from Oxford (later a politician), a free-verse letter to William Coldstream (a painter) and lastly a letter written *not from* *but to* Iceland, addressed to Kristjan Andresson. Several poems to be published later, among which “Detective Story” and “O who can ever praise enough”, are included in the letters. MacNeice contributed: a letter in verse to friends Graham and Anne Shepard, a piece of comic fiction based on the poets’ trip across the Langjökull in the company of the group of schoolboys and their schoolmaster mentioned above, framed as letters from “Hetty to Nancy”, and several poems including “Eclogue from Iceland” (a one-act drama in rhyming tetrameters) and “Epilogue For W. H. Auden” (written once back in London). Both poets collaborated on the final chapter, the “Last Will and Testament”, in verse.

This brief description of the book’s component chapters gives an insight into the generic variety it includes, with letters written in verse or free verse as well as prose, sometimes containing poems or such things as a (stolen) postcard showing a diagram of Iceland’s mountains in which they look like oil derricks, or extracts from Viking law, an informative prose section with chapters on food, language, buses etc., as well as a verse drama featuring a ghost. Behind or beneath this wealth of multifarious textuality, however, lies the proverbial blank page, with the experience of visiting Iceland presented as somehow failing to inspire. This paradox, concerning the inability to write a travelogue about Iceland, returns several times throughout the book – for the book is nothing if not self-reflexive. Indulging in ironic self-disparagement, Auden writes of his total lack of credentials as a traveller (“I know I’ve not the least chance of survival / Beside the major travellers of the day<sup>18</sup>”), is perfectly candid about the fact that as travel-writing his book is a fraud (“[...] humbly begging everybody’s pardon / [...] from the critics lest they should be hard on / The author when he leads them up the garden<sup>19</sup>”), and ironises about his past aesthetic enthusiasms (“We’d scrapped Significant Form, and voted for Subject<sup>20</sup>”), insofar as they have failed to pass the test of travel-writing, which *should*, to all intents and purposes, solve the problem of inspira

I’m bringing a problem.  
Call it as Henry James might have done in a preface  
The Presentation of the Given Subject  
The problem of every writer of travels;  
For Life and his publisher hand him his theme on a plate:  
‘You went to such and such places with so-and-so  
And such and such things occurred.  
Now do what you can.’  
But I can’t<sup>21</sup>.

Reinforcing the impression that this book on Iceland has become a burden, a chore, to Auden, the flash of inspiration that will give shape to the book is also self-derisively staged. In one of the letters to E.M.A. (Erika Mann Auden), he relates how, while on a bus journey, he has at last found a way of solving the problem of how to fulfill his contract with Faber & Faber. Auden announces a plan to write a letter to Byron (he happened to have taken *Don Juan* with him to read on the way...) in light verse about “anything I could think of, Europe, literature, myself”, and about “an effect of travelling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one’s past and one’s culture from the outside”. Other letters “to different

people” would focus “more directly” on Iceland, with the addressees specially chosen “so that each letter deals with its subject in a different and significant way<sup>22</sup>”. We note that the format he chooses has huge potential for plurality, whether of voice, tone, style etc. Indeed, the epistolary form has the advantage of opening a distinct dialogue with each addressee, their character and shared experiences providing a specific frame of reference and register. The letter to William Coldstream, for instance, begins “This letter’s for you<sup>23</sup>” and refers back to the two friends’ discussions about art and poetry when employed on a film as artist and verse script-writer. Letters also have the particularity of injecting a dose of naturalness and functionality into the book, as in sea-captains’ log-books, for instance<sup>24</sup>, thereby anchoring the book in a reality that, incidentally, would seem to undermine any claim to modernist artistry. However, there is still no mention of MacNeice and it seems that, at this stage (MacNeice has not yet arrived in Iceland), Auden still does not contemplate a writing partnership as far as the overall plan of the book is concerned.

What can be affirmed is that the double authorship chimes with this plurality, relativising the authorial absolute along with the numerous authors cited in the “Sheaves”, the addressees of the letters etc. In the “Letter to William Coldstream”, the Iceland project is envisaged as a film (“Let me pretend that I am the impersonal eye of the camera / Sent out by God to shoot on location<sup>25</sup>”), with a list of rushes provided in cinematographic jargon (“Now a pan round a typical sitting-room”, “Cut to saddling ponies – close up of farmer’s hands at a girth-strap / Dissolve to long shot of Reykholt school<sup>26</sup>”...), and in certain passages of “Hetty to Nancy” Auden (as Maisie) does rather resemble a film director hopping from rock to rock with his camera – indeed the original edition contained a number of his “art photographs”, thus increasing the plural character of the book through the use of mixed media. There is much talk of film in this letter, and both men do indeed seem to be cast as characters in a documentary film on location, along with the walk-on parts attributed to Icelanders and other travellers.

If we focus on MacNeice as author/character, we see that he allows for a secondary or complementary plot echoing the main plot based on Auden and his self-conscious work-in-progress – reminiscent of Fellini’s film *Otto e mezzo*, in which the director/character spends the entire film promising he will soon start making the film we are in the process of watching – enriching the book’s socio-historical spectrum with his Irish roots, and his criticisms thereof: “My die-hard countrymen, like drayhorses, / Drag their ruin behind them<sup>27</sup>.” While Auden’s link with Iceland and the sagas was through his father, cultivated at Oxford through the lectures of J. R. R. Tolkien (he liked to believe his name was derived from that of the Norse god, Odin the Wanderer [Woden in Old English]), and while this harmless, purely personal quest is echoed in a darker key by the allusions to Nazi officials met on their way through Iceland<sup>28</sup>, which the Nazis championed as a romantic homeland<sup>29</sup>, MacNeice’s Irishness is brought into resonance by the island geography and the presence in Iceland of early Irish saints. Thus he writes, in the “Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard” (Chapter 3), stating one of the reasons for his “hereness” in Iceland, while at the same time demonstrating the powerful sway that the preoccupation with the society left behind holds over the two poets’ minds:

And certain unknown  
 Old Irish hermits, holy skin and bone,  
 Camped on these crags in order to forget  
 Their blue-black cows in the Kerry pastures wet.  
 Those Latin-chattering margin-illuminating monks  
 Fled here from home without kit-bags or trunks  
 To mortify their flesh – but we must mortify  
 Our blowsy intellects before we die,  
 Who feed our brains on backchat and self-pity  
 And always need a noise, the radio or the city,  
 Traffic and changing lights, crashing the amber,  
     Always on the move and so do not remember  
     The necessity of the silence of the islands, [...] <sup>30</sup>

This preoccupation with Europe recurs throughout the travelogue, with the poets learning of the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain while they were in Iceland and the text closes with MacNeice back in London, the anxiety about the imminent threat more acute than ever: “Still I drink your health before / The gun-butt raps upon the door<sup>31</sup>.”

MacNeice also enhances the comedy of this ironic travelogue with its unlikely travellers: having arrived entirely unequipped, with no tent, no sleeping bag, no knife and fork, much comic mileage is derived from the two poets’ having to share a small cone-shaped tent during the 8-day trek across the Langjökull. At other times he is pictured indoors, winning at

yet another game of rummy (“And though the luck was almost all MacNeice’s<sup>32</sup>”), or sleeping, and both poets humorously portray the other butting in on each other’s letter-writing, or correcting what the other has just written. In narratological terms, MacNeice oscillates between occupying the positions of autodiegetic protagonist in his poems, playwright and character in “Eclogue” in which the poets become characters in a short verse drama along with the ghost of a figure from the sagas, and homodiegetic narrator turning the camera on Auden as indefatigable protagonist of his own film, in “Hetty to Nancy”, with its elements of farce and slapstick:

Maisie [Auden] was looking odder than ever to-day as she had for the first time put on her yellow oilskin leggings. She began by wearing them inside her gumboots but after half-an-hour or so realised that the water was collecting round her feet so she put them on over her boots which no doubt served a purpose but no one could call it very chic. She looked as if she had webbed feet<sup>33</sup>.

The two poets portray themselves as very amateurish travellers (they are ill-equipped, Auden’s stove falls to pieces, neither poet is able to ride a horse or speak Icelandic, etc.), and there are no grounds for positing that MacNeice was invited for his proficiency as a camper in the Great Outdoors... However, just as the trip through Iceland was a highly improvised affair (from which much fun is derived), so the double authorship seems also to have been an improvisation for two authors on an elusive theme.

## ***Harlequin’s tailors***

Indeed, travelling in Iceland as a poetic object somehow seems to defy the attempts of the two poets – in part, no doubt, because of their concern with the situation in Europe – and *Letters from Iceland* is, as it were, the result of two major poets improvising together on a baffling theme. Both men are animated by a “social passion”, as W. B. Yeats put it<sup>34</sup>, and in Iceland there are few social problems; the country is, Auden writes in the 1965 Foreword, “still the only really classless society I have ever encountered<sup>35</sup>”. The people seem contented and the main danger is the rare threat of volcanic eruptions – one of which is dramatically narrated in *Letters from Iceland*<sup>36</sup> – which a Marxist can do little about. Auden gives suggestions to Andresson on how to improve literacy and culture, but *in fine* Iceland doesn’t need these English poets, and they don’t need Iceland. Auden’s choice of writing to Byron is partly guided by the fact that like himself, Byron did not appreciate Wordsworth and romantic nature poetry. Here the two poets unite to face together this would-be failure of poetic inspiration, armed with their vast culture, and the book comes to life as a self-conscious improvisation in which diverse kinds of text are experimented with. These writings are contrastingly juxtaposed – the sophisticated humour of the first “Letter to Byron” being followed by the startling prose “Anthology of Icelandic Travel” beginning: “Iceland is not a myth, it is a solid portion of the earth’s surface<sup>37</sup>,” for instance – with an outlandish glee redolent of the parti-coloured patches on Harlequin’s costume. It seems relevant that those patches are triangles, as it is this improvisational quality in *Letters from Iceland* that can be compared with the “third man” as defined by Lafon and Peeters: not a “stylistic domination” or “vaguely monstrous creature”<sup>38</sup> that takes over the writing and that seems to threaten the identity of the individual writers, but a shared willingness to explore together not only the country, but the literary responses that can be found by them playing as it were their own roles, consciously and unconsciously. The third angle of the triangular patches is what has transpired from the confrontation between two powerful writers and, especially, of their respective desires to write, and it is this that stands in for the elusive Icelandic inspiration and which ultimately writes the book.

Although they wrote separately (even the “Last Will and Testament” is divided into sections signed by one or the other), and although one was moving from Marx and Freud towards a Catholic conversion and the other towards Aristotelian philosophy, the two poets were clearly writing out of the same intellectual ferment. Despite the fun and the appreciative comments scattered throughout the book, Iceland is used as the butt of a great joke; its food, for instance, is a recurrent source of merriment (for the reader, not the travellers!), as in this entry in “For Tourists”: “*Soups*: Many of these are sweet and very unfortunate. I remember three with particular horror, one of sweet milk and hard macaroni, one tasting of hot marzipan, and one of scented hair oil<sup>39</sup>”, or when, for instance, it is described by Hetty as a country full of stones<sup>40</sup> and geysers letting off steam – just as the two poets were relaxing and letting off steam as an interlude from the serious business of European civilisation. “Iceland is real<sup>41</sup>”, reads the comic epigram, but despite all the geology, sociology, history, culture, facts and figures, tables and diagrams, it barely becomes real for the poets who pursue undeterred the flow of their thoughts, a little as if they had transported their writing desks with them, and indeed: “And Michael said ‘You [Auden] like nothing / But smoking, drinking coffee and writing<sup>42</sup>.’”

This impression of thought uninterrupted by the Iceland experience is particularly well conveyed by the “Letters to Lord Byron”, whose four parts frame the chronological sequence of events, beginning with the voyage out and ending on the passage back to England, thereby symbolically encompassing the trip within Auden’s witty, intelligent conversation with a dead poet, that is within an intellectual discourse largely extraneous to Iceland. The other letters (most of the book) also contribute to this impression; although they are informative about Iceland, their very form as letters – sometimes including replies as with the letter to Christopher Isherwood (“Journey to Iceland”) – implies continuity with the world back home. The use of rhyme royal in the letters to Byron instances once again the improvisational mood<sup>43</sup>, while reinforcing this cultural ethnocentricity; indeed metrically speaking, only MacNeice’s poem “Iceland” engages formally with the mineral, raw quality of the Icelandic landscape and language and experiments with unpolished dimeters and consonantal clanging. Its seriousness of tone and its subject (the brief passage of the human species in contrast with the life-span of the earth) are not specifically Icelandic, but they at least derive through logical association from the natural scene.

MacNeice is also seen to be experimenting in response to Auden’s writing. MacNeice’s light verse letter to the Shepards is a new departure for a poet accustomed hitherto to the modernist short lyric, and paves the way for his *Autumn Journal* (1939). Taking up the challenge of Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron”, of which he presumably read extracts as it was being written, MacNeice’s successful experimentation encouraged him to pursue discursive poetry further:

It is rare to see a poet form his mature style in such direct and intimate conversation with one of his contemporaries, but this is what MacNeice has done in appropriating Auden’s “Byron” to his more classical yet relativistic sensibility. Far from thinking MacNeice a modernist lyric poet who occasionally dabbled in epistolary verse, we find that the interest of his maturity was to experiment with poetic form in search of that most serviceable for discursive poetry. These labors would yield many accomplished failures, of which, I think, “To Graham and Anne”’s adaptation of the Augustan couplet is the most impressive<sup>44</sup>.

Here, then, is writing in the making, through the agency not so much of a “third man” as a third term, or third corner in the triangles on Harlequin’s costume... This experimental, improvisational attitude seems the result of humility on the part of the poets, but it also requires a degree of defensiveness, and in the “Last Will and Testament” we notice that although the poets signed it together, their initials are used to indicate who wrote what. It is as if, even in this apotheosis of their writing partnership – which is an experimental tour de force in Dante’s *sterza rima* and a grand finale in which, we may imagine, the poets were also saying their farewell to their partnership – it was important to symbolize their distinctness.

Finally, the choice of light verse seems worthy of note, particularly given Auden’s conception of the genre. He favours it because it is less class-bound and more democratic or inclusive. In his preface to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* he stressed its importance:

even more than serious poetry, [it] demonstrates clearly the differences between the sensibilities of different ages of civilisation, since it usually reflects not one man's taste so much as the taste of his audience<sup>45</sup>.

Light verse thus fulfills a function of art as phrased approvingly in a letter to E.M.A., in connection with the collection of Icelandic paintings in Reykjavik: "They may not be very wonderful, but at least they are of interest to the Icelanders. / The artists are trying to amuse their friends, and their friends are not only artists<sup>46</sup>." When Auden and MacNeice went to Iceland, moreover, they took with them a huge crowd of their contemporaries, friends and also enemies, as is apparent in the "Last Will and Testament" with its long lists of names<sup>47</sup>. In a sense, Iceland is thus not so much the work of a writing partnership as of a generation, the Auden generation as it was known, or the Thirties generation<sup>48</sup>. With this book the two poets speak to a cultural community from within the bounds of that community, the geographical and cultural distance only serving to increase their sense of belonging there and of being entrusted by their talent with a role to play in troubled times. Here is Auden in the 1965 preface:

Though writing in a 'holiday' spirit, its authors were all the time conscious of a threatening horizon to their picnic – world-wide unemployment, Hitler growing every day more powerful and a world-war more inevitable<sup>49</sup>.

In the light of this comment, *Letters from Iceland* can be read as a manifesto for resistance through comedy and light verse, for the uniting power of intelligent laughter. This is the thread the two poets use to stitch together the brightly-coloured, apparently sharply contrasting patches of Harlequin's Icelandic costume. The paradox of this near "hodge-podge" is that it illustrates an essential aspect of all great writing, which is that the writer, or writers, do not know where it is going before it gets there, as Duras expresses so well:

Si on savait quelque chose de ce qu'on va écrire, avant de le faire, avant d'écrire, on n'écrirait jamais. Ce ne serait pas la peine. Écrire c'est tenter de savoir ce qu'on écrirait si on écrivait – on ne le sait qu'après – avant, c'est la question la plus dangereuse que l'on puisse se poser. Mais c'est la plus courante aussi<sup>50</sup>.

Behind the apparent formlessness and diversity, which covers a vast range of experience and types of discourse, these writings – in keeping with MacNeice's notion of "impure poetry", poetry that could range over high and low subjects, casually crossing the personal and public divide and registering serious or anecdotal thoughts as they bounce across the mind – are threaded together by the numerous recurring leitmotifs that ripple through the book, and especially by the shimmering thread of the writing itself.

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1 Michel Lafon et Benoît Peeters, *Nous est un autre : enquête sur les duos d'écrivains*, Paris, Flammarion, 2006. Lafon and Peeters's study also discusses travel literature, with chapters devoted to Flaubert and Du Camp's *Par les champs et par les grèves* (1881) and Cortázar and Dunlop's *Les Autonautes de la cosmoroute* (1983).

2 London, Faber & Faber, (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1937), 1985.

3 « [E. R.] Dodds aimait parler de MacNeice et de ses poèmes. Il estimait que c'était lui le meilleur poète de sa génération », Adolphe Haberer (trad.), in Louis MacNeice, *Journal d'automne*, Orthez, Anagrammes, 2013, p. 14.

4 "If *Iceland* is often overlooked, MacNeice's slight but significant contribution to its swollen page count is frequently eclipsed by Auden's 'Byron'", James Matthew Wilson, "Explaining the Modernist Joke: W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and *Letters from Iceland*", *Contemporary Poetry Review On Line*, "Louis MacNeice Special Issue", posted 1/10/2007, <http://www.cprw.com/explaining-the-modernist-joke-w-h-auden-louis-macneice-and-letters-from-iceland>



5 «Au cours de l'été 1936, les deux jeunes poètes ont réussi à convaincre leur éditeur londonien Faber de les envoyer en Islande en vue d'écrire un guide de voyage », Béatrice Dunner (trad.), *Lettres d'Islande*, Monaco, Éditions du Rocher, 2006. This presentation is repeated *verbatim* on numerous French websites.

6 *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 195.

7 See J. M. Wilson, art. cit.

8 As J. M. Wilson writes, “MacNeice contributed eighty-one pages out of the first edition’s two hundred forty. That makes him a minority, but substantial, contributor; and his “Hetty to Nancy” serves a central role in giving those pages the formal identity of a travel book rather than a hodge-podge” (*ibid.*).

9 *Ibid.*

10 London, Faber & Faber, 1998.

11 *Écrire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 26.

12 H. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden, op. cit.*, p. 196.

13 Auden announced that summer his intention to go to Spain to support the Left.

14 H. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden, op. cit.*, p. 200.

15 Nancy, the fictional addressee of these letters, is based on Anthony Blunt, the famous spy, a friend of MacNeice’s from his student days at Marlborough College.

16 *Letters from Iceland, op. cit.*, p. 155.

17 Erika had written two humoristic travel narratives with her brother, Klaus Mann, which may possibly have inspired Auden and MacNeice: *Rundherum. Ein heiteres Reisebuch* (Berlin, S. Fischer, 1929) and *Das Buch von der Riviera oder was nicht im Baedeker steht. Reisebuch* (Munich, Piper, 1931).

18 *Letters from Iceland, op. cit.*, p. 21.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, p. 139-40.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

24 Cf. James Fenton's description of the kind of reporting he aimed to write: "By reporting I mean something that predates journalism – the fundamental activity. Those "narratives" of previous centuries, which found publication as pamphlets or in magazines, often had their origin in some natural, functional activity. An English merchant in Lisbon writes to his mother to tell her of his experiences in the earthquake. A member of a missionary society reports to his London office with an account of the macabre and piteous deaths of two of his fellows. A ship's captain gives an account of a remarkable, hazardous voyage." *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim*, New York, The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988, p. xv.

25 *Letters from Iceland, op. cit.*, p. 219.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

28 "Great excitement here because Goering's brother and a party are expected this evening. Rosenberg is coming too", *ibid.*, p. 117.

29 "I have just been staying in the Njäl country. I gather the Nazis look on that sort of life as the cradle of all the virtues", *ibid.*, p. 92.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

34 W. B. Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, London, Oxford University Press, 1936, p. xli; cited in Adolphe Haberer, "Yeats and MacNeice", *La Lyre du larynx*, Paris, Didier, 1998, p. 36.

35 *Letters from Iceland, op. cit.*, p. 10.

36 "Eruption of the Öraefajökull, 1727", *ibid.*, p. 81-85.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

38 *Nous est un autre, op. cit.*, p. 254 (our translation).

39 *Letters from Iceland, op. cit.*, p. 40.

40 "In the centre of Iceland there are only three kinds of scenery – Stones, More Stones, and All Stones", *ibid.*, p. 175.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

43 “Auden’s civilised, ironic distance of style was a daring but appropriate accompaniment to his geographical distance, and the poem made its effect as a masterly innovation” (J. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, *op. cit.*, p. 203).

44 J. M. Wilson, *art. cit.*

45 H. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

46 *Letters from Iceland*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

47 For a closer analysis of this particular passage, see Sara Greaves, “Auden and MacNeice, their ‘Last Will and Testament’: Thirties classic or Existential Pause?”, *E-rea*, 12 : 2, 2015.

48 British poets Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell formed a similar partnership sixty years later to write a contemporary counterpart to *Letters from Iceland* entitled *Moon Country: Further Reports from Iceland* (London, Faber & Faber, 1996).

49 *Letters from Iceland*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

50 Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

## Pour citer cet article

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### Référence électronique

Sara GREAVES, « Harlequin’s Tailors *Letters from Iceland* by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice », *Viatica* [En ligne], *Écrire le voyage à deux – Travel Writing in Partnership*, mis en ligne le 16/02/2016, URL : <http://viatica.univ-bpclermont.fr/ecrire-le-voyage-deux-travel-writing-partnership/dossier/harlequin-s-tailors-letters-iceland-w-h-auden-and-louis-macneice>

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