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Article title

‘Countries in the Air’: Travel and Geomodernism in Louis MacNeice’s BBC Features

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Abstract

In the middle stretch of his twenty-two-year BBC career, the poet and producer Louis MacNeice earned a reputation as one of the ‘undisputed masters of creative sound broadcasting’, a reputation derived, in part, from a huge range of radio features that were founded upon his journeys abroad. Through close examination of some of his most significant overseas soundscapes – including *Portrait of Rome* (1947) and *Portrait of Delhi* (1948) – this article will consider the role and function of travel in shaping MacNeice’s engagement with the radio feature as a modernist form at a particular transcultural moment when Britain moved through the end of the Second World War and the eventual disintegration of its empire.

Keywords

BBC Radio, Empire, Features, Geomodernism, Spatiality, Travel; MacNeice.

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Introduction

Writing to T. S. Eliot in 1957, the writer and radio producer Louis MacNeice pitched an idea for a ‘not too usual kind of travel book’,¹ a volume comprised of his BBC Features scripts anchored in travels abroad.² MacNeice’s proposed title, ‘Countries in the Air’, emphasised the twinning of his radio craft with journeying overseas – a crossing of continents via airwaves and air travel – that imprinted a trail across his broadcast output in the 1940s and 1950s.³ Growing out of the transatlantic and European focused programmes on which MacNeice cut his teeth as a wartime writer and producer from 1941, these post-war broadcasts mark a departure in his feature-making through an explicit engagement with the concept of going abroad, drawing directly on time spent on the ground and signposted to the listener often through the use of a central character in the guise of tourist. Heading into the ‘middle stretch’⁴ of his two-decade radio career, from the end of the 1940s to the mid-1950s, MacNeice, one of the leading lights of the BBC’s Features Department, melded travel and the radio feature form to bear witness to nascent independent nationhood against the backdrop of crumbling empire and to reinterpret non-British history for domestic audiences, often utilising the cityscape as recurrent trope.

Through a focus on three of his overseas features – with close analysis of *Portrait of Rome* (1947) and *Portrait of Delhi* (1948), and brief reference to *Portrait of Athens* (1951) - this article explores how travel and geography intersect with conceptualisations of spatiality and the radio feature form in MacNeice's productions to combine into a type of radio 'geomodernism'. As Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel contend, geomodernist texts 'signal[s] a locational approach' to modernity through a heightened awareness of national and geographical boundaries and their mutability, and by an engagement with notions of landscape, terrain and space.⁵ Tracing these strands in MacNeice's post-war travel programmes reveals the contours of a geographically oriented modernism constituted through the radio feature. MacNeice's aesthetics display a reflexive awareness about broadcasting's abilities to cross national borders and to reimagine space and place through the broadcast vernacular. They also serve to highlight how the BBC interpreted a changing global landscape, through the grammar of radio, at a particularly significant transcultural moment when Britain moved through the end of the Second World War and the eventual disintegration of its empire.

Radio's Bi-directionality

Radio's overseas broadcasting had been explicitly embedded in the BBC's strategy at least from 1932 onwards with the launch of its Empire Service. The network sat alongside the Corporation's small but significant foreign-themed domestic programming, which included content intended for those considering emigration, such as *Girls and A Career Overseas* (National Programme, 12 November 1930), produced under the auspices of the Overseas Settlement Department. In addition, British listeners at home were offered output that reflected back imperial projections of Britishness abroad through the Christmas and Empire Day relay broadcasts, begun in the 1920s.⁶ But they also learned of copper in Belgian Congo, coal mining in Western Pennsylvania, and of life in the Amazon rainforest in programmes such as *Travel Talk*, a series that foregrounded journeying to shed light on world cultures from the viewpoint of a British listening public. The series, however, also pointed to possibilities and potentialities -- of cultural exchange, influence and permeation -- that could be set in motion by travel.⁷ In an edition on Warsaw that explored the 'medieval and romantic' nature of the Polish people (8 September 1927), Val Gielgud, later to become Head of the Drama Department,⁸ drew on his Polish background to 'visit the country of his blood' whilst acknowledging its influence on his own creative output.⁹ Gielgud's outwards-inwards programme serves as a reminder of what Michele Hilmes has described as the 'inherent *transnationalism* of broadcasting's cultural economy', in which 'other influences stream into the national space' through the networks and channels of national broadcasting.¹⁰ Hilmes is concerned with the relationship between Britain and America but her conceptualisation of national broadcast organisations as 'circulatory systems',¹¹ reliant on elements of bi-directionality, provides a useful lens for the examination of domestic BBC Radio's engagements with travel, especially at the end of the decade that followed the launch of *Travel Talk* when wartime cemented overseas programming and 'other influences' into the BBC's home schedules.¹²

Features Department in particular -- merged with the Drama Department during wartime -- brought a strong international sensibility to its output for the Home Service and later the Third Programme, through long-running series such as *Window on Europe* (first aired during wartime and continuing into the 1950s).¹³ Features producers Rayner Heppenstall and Geoffrey Bridson recounted in their memoirs the many travels they were encouraged to make to gather programme source material across Europe but also much further afield, and the globe-crossing that was committed to and funded by the BBC in the

postwar period.¹⁴ Of the fifteen scripts chosen for print publication in a special anthology in 1950 by Features head Laurence Gilliam, nine were directly associated with overseas subjects and the potted biographies of the writer-producers responsible revealed an enormously well-travelled and globally-minded team.¹⁵ Leonard Cottrell, for example, had ‘flown many thousands of miles in search of feature material’, including to Kenya, Tanganyika, and the West Indies; Alan Burgess, wrote Gilliam, had wandered and ‘hoboed’ in his pre-BBC life through the South Sea Islands, Tahiti, and elsewhere to return to England just as war was breaking out.¹⁶ Mirroring the growth of travel aspirations amongst middle-class Britons through the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s,¹⁷ the Features Department made recurrent series centered on producers’ travels and their consequent impressions, often with titles formulated as *Portrait Of, Window On, Journey, or Return To or From*.¹⁸

MacNeice himself was no stranger to travel before he began his BBC career in 1941. He was already the author of two well-known travel books: with his friend the poet W. H. Auden, he wrote *Letters from Iceland* (1937), and a year later *I Crossed the Minch* (1938), about a Hebridean sojourn inspired in part by his Celtic roots, was published. He thus joined the rising numbers of interwar novelists and poets turning their hand to the travel book, including high modernists such as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and E. E. Cummings. Travel signified a means to break with convention and tradition, but it also brought into view ‘wrenching perspectives and uncanny displacements’ that underlined modern alienation.¹⁹ Visiting the Hebrides, wrote MacNeice, reminded him that he would ‘always be an outsider’ there as an Anglo-Irishman,²⁰ and yet London too would always remain to him ‘a foreign city’.²¹ The impulse to travel thus ran alongside, or emerged from, this sense of un-belonging and a desire to break down romanticised notions about unknown places and about travel itself.²² A ‘tripper’s book’ was the rather scathing term MacNeice used to describe *I Crossed the Minch* in its Introduction,²³ and, later, recalling his student days at Oxford, he punctured the pomposity with which he had once thought travel must be ‘“experience” at its highest’.²⁴ At the BBC, MacNeice found himself amongst colleagues who, like him, were drawn to travel and yet conscious of the ‘uncanny displacements’ it could produce.²⁵ In his features this generated a suspicion of travel’s claims to authenticity and an aesthetics, to borrow Rebecca Walkowitz’s terms, of ‘estrangement’ and ‘hesitation’.²⁶ Walkowitz identifies such aesthetics as a form of cosmopolitanism that relocates modernism’s internationalism away from traditional ‘static models’ of exile to a more expansive frame in which travel and mobility are key.²⁷ Extending the feature form into its second age,²⁸ MacNeice’s vision of cosmopolitanism, as conjured up by travel, is one that is self-consciously hesitant and estranging not only with regards to the experience of journeying overseas but also in relation to the radio soundscapes that tried to bring it to life on air.

Jigsaws and Patchwork: Geography and Spatiality in the Radio Feature

MacNeice’s first travel ‘portrait’ began life as a suggestion from an Italian BBC colleague, George R. Foa (later to become a well-known television director), who was sent to Rome to produce two of MacNeice’s dramatic features for Radiotelevisione Italiana.²⁹ It was his first trip to the city and in initial discussions he referred to the programme as *Window on Rome*,³⁰ and it remains unclear when or why the title was changed before its broadcast on the Home Service on Sunday 22 June 1947 at 9.30pm. The opening announcement, written by MacNeice to be read by the continuity announcer, may however offer some clues. Framing the feature as ‘the merest adumbration’, the announcement gives a sense of the broadcast ahead as a sonic portrait marked by a sense of its own construction.³¹ Offering apologies to a long list of potential listeners, including scholars and lovers of Rome, MacNeice undercut BBC convention by playing down the authority of the production; *Portrait of Rome* was, he

wrote, neither ‘a lesson or a summary’, but instead a ‘patchwork’ akin to a ‘jigsaw with most of it missing’.³²

Writing later in his poetry about the limits and possibilities of founding a ‘castle on the air’, as he put it in ‘Autumn Sequel’, his long poem of 1954,³³ MacNeice was demonstrably aware of the challenges involved in bringing an overseas landscape and culture to life through audio alone. The introductory strands to all three of his *Portraits* (including opening announcements, billings in the *Radio Times* and his own written introductions), stress their ‘inadequate’ and merely ‘suggestive’ attempts to build portraits of distant places against their geographical or ‘physical background’.³⁴ A sense of distance and closeness, mediated through an emphasis on the geographical and the physical, runs right through MacNeice’s travel portraits which are rich with details of streetscapes, buildings, windows and doorways and to broader, more topographical images, coalescing into a geographical and spatial – or geospatial -- architecture that disorders the boundaries between ‘here’ and ‘there’, between the imagined landscape and the experienced soundscape. As the character of British expat Uncle Robin (played by Ronald Simpson) suggests in *Portrait of Rome* radio’s reimaginings – its ability to shift location with few encumbrances in comparison to visual media -- allow for a new kind of space-time matrix. Following a stop at the Sistine Chapel with his niece and her friend, who are tourists in the city, Uncle Robin suggests to the local tour guide that their view should be demolished and swapped for something free from the boundaries of time and space:

And now let’s take the chapel down again. Yes, and St. Peter’s too. And half of these other churches and nearly all these palaces. Shove the streets closer together, let the balconies overhang more, run up a lot of brick towers anxious to butt one another. Step up the stink and the noise...³⁵

This radiogenic spectacle -- one in which streets can be summoned up and be made to vanish in the space of a few seconds, mountains can be traversed, and the tourist, along with the listener, can ascend into the sky for a better vantage point -- showcases a self-awareness about form and space. It illustrates Ian Whittington’s assertion that MacNeice ‘himself conceived of broadcasting as a medium of imagined spatiality’.³⁶ In self-consciously grappling with the aesthetics of spatial construction, *Portrait of Rome* gestures towards the wider evolution of radio grammar, when early to mid-twentieth-century radio forms wrestled with notions of spatial texture, representation of motion and audio perspective. For some there was a romance to the notion of radio as a limitless spatial imagination: as acclaimed BBC dramatist Donald McWhinnie recollected in his book *The Art of Radio* (1959), ‘The radio performance...makes possible a universe of shape, detail, emotion and idea which is bound by no limitations of space and capacity’.³⁷ For others, a cognisance of the technical and artistic limitations of radio-sound, and of the restrictions imposed by broadcast genres and networks, transmuted into programmes and studio design that bore the spatial hallmarks of their anxieties, as discussed by scholars including Neil Verma and Shundana Yusaf.³⁸

The imbrication of space and geography in *Portrait of Rome*, and its two successor ‘portrait’ features, reveals MacNeice’s exploration of space and form to be one marked above all by self-awareness. His portraits celebrate and complicate the idea of radio-spatiality, whilst also gesturing towards a knotty entanglement with overseas culture in the broadcast travel feature. As Home Service listeners heard, Uncle Robin’s space-warping directions do little to soothe the tourists in *Portrait of Rome* who, like the travellers in the following two features, are full of bewilderment as travel brings in its wake cultural confusion and an acute sense of dislocation. Athens, for example, is a ‘box on the ear, hard as nails’,³⁹ the foreign locales are too hot and bothersome, and the hapless British and American tourists journeying

through them want, periodically, to retreat. ‘Athens gets me down’, laments the nameless visitor in *Portrait of Athens*, whilst the British protagonist in *Portrait of Delhi* is rather pointedly named ‘Ignorance’.

There is a broader, dreamlike but unnerving, quality to the visitors’ experiences as spatial texture serves to both locate and to disorientate. No sound recording survives of *Portrait of Rome* but we can hear in the recording in the BBC’s archive of *Portrait of Delhi* that the overall sound architecture is marked by a lack of signposting.⁴⁰ Voices intercut or emanate apparently from nowhere with little introduction and scenes move location and back and forth through time without conventional pauses and beats, often without the use of actuality to signal change.⁴¹ ‘Stop looking to the north/Look down’,⁴² says one of the guides amidst the confusion, attempting to scaffold the journey time and again through the use of repeated spatial directions. Yet when Ignorance does look down he sees a ‘dreary landscape’, full of ‘flatness and monotony’, prompting him to draw on the clichés of the foreign correspondent’s vernacular with the phrase ‘Sorry, listeners’ breaking the fourth wall.⁴³ Ignorance then declares the plains of northern India to be a ‘featureless mottle of green and brown’, whilst New Delhi is said to resemble a ‘child’s box of bricks’.⁴⁴ Radio-space can therefore expand or even disappear as characters play with the boundaries of their tourist personae, but as it intersects with the concrete geographical and cultural realities of a foreign place it can also become dull and devoid of dimensionality. In this way MacNeice’s travel features showcase a very modernist engagement with the pull-and-push of space and place, through an exploration of the ‘twin spatial visions’ in which the former equates to movement and possibility, and the latter to a sense of stasis.⁴⁵

To return to Uncle Robin and the mutability of land and soundscape in *Portrait of Rome*, it becomes apparent that in MacNeice’s travelogues even firm ground can be elusive. The streets beneath the tourists’ feet remain shaky, and the landscape sometimes literally shape-shifts making them further question their bearings. For Evelyn, Uncle Robin’s niece, a journey to discover the history of Rome leads to being thrown right off balance:

Evelyn: What’s wrong with the ground?

Uncle Robin: It’s sinking.⁴⁶

As the built environment of culture and history disappears, akin to ‘dirty water when you let the plug out’, the travellers sink further into the moulting streetscape until a crash landing unites them with the ‘tessellated pavements’ of third-century Rome.⁴⁷ This lack of firm ground, its porousness and mutability, situates MacNeice’s radio aesthetics in a geomodernist frame,⁴⁸ and is significant in deciphering his interpretations of travel functioning not only as a metaphor for cross-cultural touristic interchange but also, by extension, for the foreign radio feature itself, which grapples with the slippery task of imprinting a lifelike geographical impression in the airwaves not through complete dramatic license nor through straight current affairs retelling.⁴⁹ Indeed, Uncle Robin notes:

[H]istory is like...geology in fact; you get all sorts of unconformities. Faults, as they say. What ought to be horizontal and buried away instead gets cooked up and comes to the surface, side by side with what’s modern.⁵⁰

So the very experience of modern, or modernist, travel is revealed as one that is muddled or ‘cooked up’, but so too is the ‘patchwork’ architecture of the radio travel feature, one that can only be as suggestive, to use MacNeice’s words, as a jigsaw with most of it missing.

MacNeice may have been aware that some listeners, at least, may have expected a more straightforward approach to a foreign affairs feature, akin to ‘a lesson or summary’,⁵¹

rather than a production style that, as it were, pulled the rug from under their feet. In a remarkable self-referential scene in *Portrait of Rome*, Evelyn and her friend Margaret discuss a radio programme with the very same name, anticipating the unfavourable reception these 'portraits' did go on to receive from many listeners:

EVELYN: Really! The BBC!

MARGARET: What is it, Evelyn dear? Where've you been?

EVELYN: Listening to the wireless....

MARGARET: Well, what was it all about?

EVELYN: Here. Rome. *Portrait of Rome* it was called, I only switched on because I was drying my hair – but really, darling, I'm not particularly stupid but I couldn't make out what they were getting at. One moment I thought it was Catholic propaganda and the next they were using bad language. And such a sort of hotch-potch!'.⁵²

The 'hotch-potch' effect on the listenership was tangible. 'I think your *Portrait of Delhi* was drivel', wrote one Mrs Johnson directly to MacNeice after its transmission;⁵³ it was 'vulgar buffoonery' and a 'comic strip' according to Cambridge academic C. H. Dodd who was also moved to write in. Three years later, the Listener Research Report on *Portrait of Athens* gave it an Appreciation Index of 58, 'well below the Sunday night features average of 70', and lower than Laurence Gilliam's recently broadcast feature *Journey into Greece*.⁵⁴ Listeners to *Portrait of Athens* are said to have been critical of the 'ultra-modern impressionist standpoint' that resulted in an 'incoherent mass of local colour' and an 'over-produced, 'precious' programme'.⁵⁵ *The Manchester Guardian's* review of *Portrait of Rome* similarly attacked the lack of a 'clear line' in a broadcast it felt was let down by MacNeice taking the word 'patchwork', it is said mistakenly, 'as a guiding star'.⁵⁶ Yet MacNeice's correspondence in response to personal letters addressing criticisms directly to him reveals an unwavering belief in the validity of features as a hybrid and avowedly modernist genre. Writing to one N. V. L. Rybot he noted: 'A feature programme is not supposed to be like a talk – still less like the 9 o'clock news'.⁵⁷ Replying to C. H. Dodd he insisted, 'It strikes me that your poor opinion of the content of this programme must be due to a misunderstanding of its form', before citing modernist media techniques, namely montage, which were vital to his production artistry.⁵⁸ Overseas radio travel, as composed by MacNeice in the feature form, pushed geography and spatiality to the fore and in so doing transmuted into a bold radio aesthetic. Orientating listeners towards more complicated and experimental features, reliant in this case on the geospatial dimensions of radio 'abroad', was undoubtedly one clear aim of MacNeice's broadcasting work in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Yet another kind of reorientation was equally important -- one that hinged on ideas of territory, conquest and boundaries between nations.

Birds, Planes and End of Empire

As part of the BBC's coverage of the momentous independence of India and its Partition in 1947, MacNeice was asked to gather material for a proposed six-part series, *India and Pakistan*, for the Features Department. Joining BBC colleagues Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, who was largely in a reporting role, and fellow Features producer Francis (Jack) Dillon, he arrived in Delhi only a few days ahead of the historic events of 14 and 15 August. Setting aside the copy of E. M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India* he had been reading in preparation for his trip, he reached instead of for 'an armful of newspapers' in an effort to bring himself up to speed with the latest political developments.⁵⁹ MacNeice's travels had

not, as yet, taken him anywhere as far-flung, nor had the BBC tasked him with such a weighty responsibility before. He, along with his fellow producers, was to interpret for its Home Service and Third Programme listeners the first, pivotal moment in the dismantling of Britain's empire.

The letters he sent home from India to his wife Hedli Anderson began by relaying a sense of social whirl as the BBC staff were entertained by British officials and taken to meet leading Indian politicians. But as August drew to a close, the BBC team set out northwest from Delhi, aiming towards Peshawar, to gather features and news material from the field. Travelling via Punjab, they witnessed first-hand the communal violence and carnage of Partition, most notably in the town of Sheikhpura where they came across 1,500 injured Sikhs and Hindus taking refuge in a school building following a massacre, some 'with their hands cut off', smothered by 'hordes of flies' and with their clothes 'covered with rusty-brown dried blood'.⁶⁰ The incident jolted MacNeice from the pose of aloof onlooker and transformed him, according to Vaughan-Thomas, into a 'man of action' helping the refugees into lorries, ensuring their safe passage out of town, and firmly engaged as an outsider 'deeply and profoundly involved in the human dilemma'.⁶¹ A few weeks later MacNeice referenced Punjab when writing to Laurence Gilliam with an impassioned plea for BBC Features to rethink its proposed coverage, and to tone down any celebration of the Raj's legacy so to avoid connotations of gloating and back-slapping. He urged Gilliam to think carefully about the BBC's responsibility to be 'extra tactful', and to steer clear of the tone of many domestic newspapers that, MacNeice had heard, had 'seized on the Punjab and Delhi as a pretty occasion for an I-told-you-so vindication of the British Raj'. MacNeice urged that 'the BBC should on no account follow suit... To stress at this moment the security, justice, good order or unity bestowed by the Raj would be surely most inopportune'.⁶²

Before sketching out his map for a revised series MacNeice delineated in strenuous terms the topics he felt should not be included, and these encompassed the army, democracy, religion and, above all, 'The Present Communal Trouble', which he argued would unfairly frame the subcontinent as a fractured nation bound in strife and animosity.⁶³ Instead, the proposal outlined in his letter accentuated the intertwining of geography and history so as to 'ram home to the listener from the start the peculiarities of India, physical and spiritual'.⁶⁴ Three of the six suggested features were to be loosely constructed around geographical tropes, including *Portrait of Delhi*, and Gilliam gave his consent for the series to go ahead. The reoriented Home Service productions that came to fruition in 1948 included Francis Dillon's *Indian Village* and *The Khyber Pass*, Nesta Pain's '*Lord, Look at my Field*', MacNeice's *Portrait* and his final, summative examination in *The Road to Independence*: all aimed towards offering an expansive view 'of all the main elements of India'.⁶⁵

Broadcast on the Home Service on Sunday 2 May 1948 (9.30-10.30pm), *Portrait of Delhi* utilises the same geospatial mechanics as first encountered in *Portrait of Rome* a year earlier, but here the guides taking charge are personifications of India. Four figures appear as lead characters, and the first of these voices is 'Topography' (played by Susan Richards), followed by 'History' (Duncan McIntyre) and 'Literature' (Allan McClelland).⁶⁶ But the predominant guiding figure taking the character of Ignorance on his journey is a native bird (Reginald Beckwith). More specifically, it is a bird that periodically changes form, starting off as a carrion crow, turning into a bulbul and then a vulture because, as it asserts, 'my view depends on my mood – on which bird I am at the moment'.⁶⁷ A shape-shifting aerial trajectory affords Ignorance the opportunity to look down on a series of overlapping scenes ranging from key episodes in Hindu and Muslim history to the decisive juncture of the Great Mutiny of 1857 which locked Britain and India into a dichotomous and dialectical relationship, deepening faultlines that recast India and its populace as British subjects who

must know their place as ‘natives’.⁶⁸ The Bird laments how the earthbound restrictions of humans fortify boundaries:

All those months of the siege the English were there on the Ridge and the sepoy were here on the walls – trying to get each other’s range. And they may have got it in gunfire – but they never got it in spirit. Yet the birds could fly freely between...⁶⁹

The sky above, or the air, is thus configured as a place where cultural and national borders can be crossed and transgressed, and where transmogrification allows for divergent vantage points and perspectives. In this respect, the conceit of the Indian Bird typifies modernism’s many engagements with notions of nation-space and aerial activity, echoing the use of aeroplanes in the novels of Virginia Woolf or the sky-views proffered by John Piper in his landscape paintings.⁷⁰

Yet MacNeice’s decision to shift the feature’s topography airwards rather than staying on the ground as with *Portrait of Rome*, and later *Portrait of Athens*, was a curious choice given that India’s unshackling from British rule, and the birth of Pakistan, was manufactured by a splicing -- a very real partition -- of the land of the subcontinent. The sidestepping of the very word ‘partition’ in *Portrait of Delhi* illustrates a sensitivity to the concept, also alluded to earlier in MacNeice’s letter to Gilliam where he stated that a ‘radio partitioning’ of the features series would be an unwise editorial decision.⁷¹ Conceptions of geographical appropriation, spatial expansion and empire building would not, of course, have been alien to MacNeice as an Irishman. As Ashok Bery reveals, Irish echoes resounded loudly on the subcontinent for MacNeice, whose letters from South Asia often cast the two nations in a comparative light.⁷² Writing home, he described the Pathans of the North West Frontier Province as ‘v. Irish in their approach to things’, and in another letter written while on a trip to Sri Lanka in 1955 he noted that the Indian Ocean on a grey day reminded him of Belfast.⁷³ Furthermore, in a 1950 essay on India for Laurence Gilliam’s volume celebrating the work of the Features Department, he argued that ‘educated Indians are as politics-ridden as the Irish’, and went on to note, ‘perhaps this is inevitable with subject or newly liberated peoples’.⁷⁴ Witnessing the partition of the subcontinent ignited memories for MacNeice, with all its attendant complexities, in what Rajeev Patke, in his study of Irish poets, terms ‘partitions of the mind’.⁷⁵ This may illuminate why, when dealing explicitly for the first time with Britain’s disintegrating empire in his radio work, MacNeice retreated from metaphors borne out of ground warfare, occupation, and fissure. Instead there is an embrace of the air (waves) and the space-binding nature of radio, of its links to notions of imagined community, and of its potential to carry a new kind of meaning - a transnational, cosmopolitan post-empire vision of the nation.

This is writ large in another piece of shape-shifting at the feature’s end: it is not bombs, but steel birds, or planes, that shower Delhi’s landscape with roses as Gandhi’s funeral takes place. The Topography guide decides to silence herself, noting that ‘Geography counts no longer; the world is one’, and the Literature guide remarks, ‘Delhi is no longer a long way off’.⁷⁶ Hence, *Portrait of Delhi* registers the post-empire precipice on which Britain finds itself as India gains freedom, and in its orientation inwards and outwards: towards the centre of an imminently crumbling empire where Home Service listeners were clustered, and to a transformed global landscape where travel and redrawn national boundaries reveal glimpses of a world where nowhere is a long way off. In pushing his radio aesthetics, and the BBC, into the transnational sphere, into the liminal spaces between the end-of-empire-nation and the new states to which it gave birth, MacNeice offers a vision of airspace as home to border-crossing birds, planes and sound waves; as an interstitial territory where propaganda

and spatial conquest give way to a reshaped global order and to a reimagined soundscape, and to a new geomodernism on the air.

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Notes

¹ Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC*, 161.

² *Countries in the Air* remained unfinished at the time of MacNeice's death in 1963 but two draft chapters were found amongst his papers at the BBC (letter from E.R. Dodds, MacNeice's literary executor, to Features Department, 9 November 1963, BBC WAC L1/285/1). These were published as one fragment, 'Landscapes of Childhood and Youth', in *The Strings Are False*, 216-38. For a synopsis of the book see Coulton, *ibid.*, 161-2.

³ See the Appendix in Wrigley and Harrison for list of MacNeice's travel-related features.

⁴ As defined by Coulton, 149-173.

⁵ Doyle and Winkiel, *Geomodernisms*, 3-4.

⁶ One of the earliest such broadcasts was *Special Empire Day Programme* on 5XX Daventry (*Radio Times*, 24 May 1926, Issue 138, p.333).

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- ⁷ Aimed at schools and the general listener, *Travel Talk* was broadcast on 2LO London and 5XX Daventry from the end of the 1920s to the mid 1930s, after which it became a regular series on *The Children's Hour* on the Home Service.
- ⁸ Gielgud was a *Radio Times* editorial assistant in 1927, and was billed as a British writer with Polish connections for this programme. He held overall responsibility for radio drama production from 1929 until after the Second World War.
- ⁹ *Radio Times*, 2 September 1927, p.22.
- ¹⁰ Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 2.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² See also Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 80.
- ¹³ 'Home Features', wrote Laurence Gilliam, was 'taking a new shape and intensity...likely to be very much influenced by the growth of Overseas'. Memo to Val Gielgud, 4 February 1941, BBC WAC L2/78/1.
- ¹⁴ Heppenstall, *Portrait of the Artist*: 47-57, and Bridson, *Prospero*: 133-150.
- ¹⁵ Gilliam, *BBC Features*. Scripts included *The End of Mussolini* by D. G. Bridson, *India at First Sight* by MacNeice and *From Anzio to Burgundy* by Wynford Vaughan Thomas.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 97, 149.
- ¹⁷ Wakeman, 'Veblen Redivivus', 427.
- ¹⁸ Examples include *Portrait of Istanbul*, 13 November 1949, and *Return to the U.S.A.*, 18 March 1952, both Home Service, prod. D. G. Bridson; *Return Journey: To Strasbourg*, 12 September 1948, Third Programme, prod. Rayner Heppenstall; *A Journey in Greece*, 6 November 1951, Home Service, prod. Laurence Gilliam.
- ¹⁹ Farley, *Modernist Travel Writing*, 1; Fussell, *Abroad*, 15-23.
- ²⁰ MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 7.
- ²¹ MacNeice to T. S. Eliot, 25 February 1957, printed in Allison, *Letters*, 614-615.
- ²² Ibid. MacNeice writes that 'in foreign travel one is much of the time searching for the implementation of certain myths', but the insinuation is that often reality does not match travellers' expectations.
- ²³ MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 7.
- ²⁴ MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 235.
- ²⁵ See also Ranasinha, 'South Asian Broadcasters in Britain', 2010, on the transcultural atmosphere in the BBC during wartime and exchanges between the BBC's Eastern Service staff, such as M. J. Tambimuttu, and writer-producers who also broadcast on the BBC's domestic services. MacNeice published work in *Poetry London*, a journal founded by Tambimuttu, and was included in Tambimuttu's edited anthology *Poetry in Wartime* (1942).
- ²⁶ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 16-20.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 8. High modernist émigré authors included James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot.
- ²⁸ I refer here to the post-war iteration of Features Department, following its separation from Drama Department in 1945, until its closure in 1964.
- ²⁹ *The Dark Tower* and *The Golden Ass*. George R. Foa memo to Laurence Gilliam and others, 1 June 1947, BBC WAC R19/953.
- ³⁰ Letter from MacNeice to George R. Foa, 31 March 1947, BBC WAC R19/953.
- ³¹ Opening Announcement, Programme Report, *Portrait of Rome*, ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ MacNeice, 'Autumn Sequel', *Collected Poems*, 387.
- ³⁴ Amended billing, *Portrait of Rome*, 4 June, 1947, BBC WAC R19/953.
- ³⁵ *Portrait of Rome* script, p. 20, line 197, BBC WAC.

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- ³⁶ Whittington, 'Archaeologies of Sound', 48.
- ³⁷ McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, 37.
- ³⁸ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 33-72; Yusaf, *Broadcasting Buildings*, 20-27.
- ³⁹ *Portrait of Athens*, 18 November 1951. Time code: 00'30-00'34. Recording accessible in the British Library Sound Archive (BLSA). Script accessible in the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- ⁴⁰ A lack of signposting is notable when compared to earlier features about place, even those produced by MacNeice himself such as *The Stones Cry Out series* (1941, BBC Home Service).
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, time code: 08'16; *Portrait of Delhi* recording also in BLSA, time code: 01'31.
- ⁴² *Portrait of Delhi* script, p.7, line 77.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, line 75.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, line 76.
- ⁴⁵ Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity*, 13.
- ⁴⁶ *Portrait of Rome* script, p.23, line 224-5.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ Doyle and Winkiel, Introduction.
- ⁴⁹ See Introduction to this special issue for discussion of features as a genre.
- ⁵⁰ *Portrait of Rome* script, p.16, line 158.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.23, lines 225-226.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p.15, lines 147-151. See also 'What Now?', part of MacNeice's series *The Four Freedoms*, in which two radio listeners, one of whom is called Evelyn, discuss whether they can detect propaganda in a radio feature (BBC Home Service, 28 March 1943, 8.45pm).
- ⁵³ Letter from Mrs Johnson to MacNeice, 2 May 1948, BBC WAC R19/948.
- ⁵⁴ *Journey Into Greece* scored 69% in the Index; Listener Research Report, *Portrait of Athens*, BBC WAC LR/51/2556, Week 47. On MacNeice and other writers' radio engagements with Greece, ancient and modern, see Wrigley, *Greece on Air*.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 June 1947, p.3.
- ⁵⁷ BBC WAC R19/R53.
- ⁵⁸ Letter from MacNeice to C. H. Dodd, 13 May 1948, BBC WAC R19/948.
- ⁵⁹ Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 354-366.
- ⁶⁰ Quotations from MacNeice's letter to Hedli MacNeice, 31 August 1947, in Allison, *Letters*, 487. For fuller description of the trip, see 470-511.
- ⁶¹ As quoted in Allison, 488, n. 1.
- ⁶² Letter from MacNeice to Laurence Gilliam, 19 September 1947, in Allison, 496-502.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 498.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.* The series was broadcast on Sundays from 9.30pm to 10.30pm between 18 April and 15 August 1948, BBC Home Service. MacNeice also produced *India at First Sight* for BBC Third Programme (13 March 1948, 8.30pm).
- ⁶⁶ *Radio Times*, 30 April 1948, p.8.
- ⁶⁷ *Portrait of Delhi* script, p.2, line 18. BBC WAC. Perhaps MacNeice drew inspiration from Forster's use of a native bird as metonym for India. See *A Passage to India*, 1924, Chapter 8.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.40, line 457.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.40, line 455.
- ⁷⁰ Beer, 'The island and the aeroplane', in Bhabha, 265-290; Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 25-29. See also how MacNeice explores this idea in the passage of his 1946 *Enemy of Cant*

which draws on Aristophanes' *Birds*, as discussed in Wrigley and Harrison, *Louis MacNeice*, 255-260.

⁷¹ Letter, 19 September 1947, in Allison, 498.

⁷² Bery, *Cultural Translation*, 74-100.

⁷³ Letters to Hedli Anderson, 5 September 1947 and 5 November 1955, in Allison, 489, 598.

⁷⁴ Gilliam, *BBC Features*, 61.

⁷⁵ Patke, 'Partition', 5, 17.

⁷⁶ *Portrait of Delhi* script, p.52, lines 569, 570.