Louis MacNeice (1907-1963), in contrast with the other radical-liberals of the thirties, was considered to have maintained an above the struggle kind of stance in the poetry of involvement, characteristic of the decade. Unlike, Stephen Spender and C.Day Lewis, who had explicit political associations with the communist party, MacNeice was thought of as a neutral poet. But it did not mean that he was unconcerned with contemporary crisis. He was as much concerned with the developments of the period as other poets of his times. Infact, his commitment was of a different nature. He did not share the group consciousness which the other radical-liberals shared on political front. Walter Allen suggests that whereas other radical-liberals were, if not optimistic, certainly militant, MacNeice, by contrast, is doubtful and pessimistic.\(^1\) We may largely endorse Allen's viewpoint regarding MacNeice's scepticism but we do not feel that he was pessimistic altogether. His poetry is a constant reflection of a wide awake mind struggling to resolve the contemporary crisis. What MacNeice suggests about his contemporary poets may appropriately be applied to him also. He observes:
None of these poets are unrealistically anarchist. They do not hanker for an unconditioned existence. Freedom for them is not freedom from conditions but freedom to see one's own conditions clearly and to work upon that basis towards an end which is seen necessary... They cannot be called optimists, for they see that there are always brute facts in opposition to their progress. But they should not be called pessimists for they see that, while on all sides there is a vast waste of efforts among human beings, to be able to waste efforts like this implies an astonishing fund of energy, and to be able to choose wrong so often implies a capacity for choosing right. So, when, as often their poems are gloomy, the gloom is tragic rather than defeatist.2

MacNeice attempts to project contemporary situation from historical viewpoint and avoids imposing philosophical thrusts on his genuine view of the thirties. Moreover, unlike Auden and others he was more concerned with the aesthetic character of his poetry than with an extension of any message. When others showed militancy in their approach to the crisis, MacNeice's was a balanced response. Unlike Spender, his feelings were controlled. He did not feel the necessity to repudiate his stance of the thirties in his later days as the other poets like W.H. Auden had to do. No dramatic somersaults were perceptible in his case as were seen in the poetry of Auden.

MacNeice rose to meet the unusual challenge of existing conditions in his own peculiar manner. But it would be an exaggeration to assume that the differences which MacNeice's
poetry reflected with regard to the other poets of the decade were more pronounced than his identification with them. His visit to Birmingham brought him in contact with the abrasive realities of the time and awakened his consciousness to common misery. Whereas Auden, Spender and C.Day Lewis championed the proletarian cause during the decade, MacNeice shared with them common humanitarian feelings. His humanitarian concern prompted him to evoke genuine emotions in a spontaneous manner without any imposition of rhetoricism and exhortations.

MacNeice's poetry is a reflection of something pragmatic and democratic - a kind of poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him. It is a poetry committed to the cause of humanity, without any ideological or religious overtones. He makes it clear that Marxism was attractive to him and his contemporaries because it ignores the transcendent realities and is, therefore, a good creed for the artist who must move in a concrete world. Hence, his poetry also reflects his avoidance of ideological and religious impositions in dealing with issues of common man. It shows persistent emphasis on the dynamic character of life. James Reeves correctly appreciates MacNeice when he remarks that whatever his faults, MacNeice is on the side of life. He has not turned himself into a martyr, a spiritualist,
a professor or a Bloomsbury Atlas bowed beneath the collective conscience of ex-communists. The attitudes he expresses are those of his time, not of himself.4

MacNeice's poetry is the product of the poet's identification with ordinary aspects of mankind and compassion for the common masses. Bernard Bergonzi considers his Autumn Journal to be the work of a man who is well aware of the society he lives in, and sees himself as inescapably involved with history at a time of public crisis and threatening war. And unlike later poets of committed subjectivity, MacNeice does not assume that one must abandon one's intelligence in order to write personally.5

MacNeice himself makes his own position very clear:

The poet is primarily a spokesman, making statements or incantations on behalf of himself or others - usually for both, for it is difficult to speak for oneself without speaking for others or speak for others without speaking for oneself. The poet, therefore, in a sense, is man at his most self-conscious, but this means consciousness of himself as man, not consciousness of himself as a poet.6

MacNeice, we know, was a careerist and had a comfortable middle class background. He enjoyed all the material pleasures of his class and accepted his snobbery in his writings. He is very forthright when he observes:
I would vote left any day, sign manifestoes, answer questionnaires, Ditto my soul. My soul is all for moving towards a classless society. With my heart and my guts, I lament the passing of class property and snobbery. A man for me is still largely characterized by what he buys - his suits, his books.7

Samuel Hynes suggests that the world that he wanted was a world of ordinary pleasures, suited to the ordinary, sensuous man-in-the street that he liked to imagine he himself was and wished all poets would be.8 But MacNeice's confessions should not lead us to think that he was merely an ordinary sensuous man. Though Maxwell places MacNeice's poetry somewhere 'between perfectly sincere humanitarian sentiment and honestly selfish pleasure in a world irreconcilable with altruistic ideals,9 we must accept that MacNeice felt sincere concern for the common masses. He was concerned with all the important issues of the day. He was fully aware of the socio-economic and political developments happening in the world around him. His subjects as well as his poetic technique speak volumes about his deep association with the characteristic social poetry of the decade.

MacNeice found a synthesis of Marxist philosophy and Aristotelian viewpoint congenial for the implementation of his creative mission of social change in the contemporary society. He believed in the theory of man-in-action, who according to him is essentially and really living. In the context of Marxism, he
himself points out in *The Strings Are False* that while Marxism attacked human-individualism, it simultaneously made cosmos once more anthropocentric... Asserted purpose in the world. Because the world was ours.¹⁰

Unlike Auden and Stephen Spender, MacNeice's social commitment is to be greatly seen in his awareness of impending doom rather than in enthusiastic exhortations for solidarity and active involvement. In this respect, MacNeice may be compared with C.Day Lewis whose commitment too consisted in his optimistic and confident tone rather than in any kind of emotional appeals for action.

MacNeice viewed a new world based on flesh and blood and not a materialistic world of money and power. His literary preoccupations were extended to the urban scene. He was more an ardent critic of the new England of industrial and technological development than the rotten economic scenario in the existing society. A.T. Tolley suggests that in MacNeice's case, in particular, it is the unostentatious humility of his acceptance of limited goals for his poetry that makes his poetry at once so engaging and so acceptable.¹¹ A.T. Tolley remarks that MacNeice's attitudes are more precise, less sentimental and more honest than those of his contemporary poets.¹²
MacNeice shares with Auden and others of his group a deep passion for capturing the typical way of middle-class life in his poetic spectrum. Like them he adopts an amiable as well as critical attitude to that kind of life, condemning as well as making constructive suggestions. In his poem, "The Individualist Speaks" (1933), MacNeice too, like his contemporaries, chooses to focus on the pretensions of the middle class life underlining the complacent and casual attitude of the members of this class towards the gravity of the existing situation. The poet accuses the middle class people for maintaining a status quo to avoid endangering their material prosperity - an off-shoot of all pervasive materialism. These people prefer to remain lost in the 'feathery clover' of luxuries as they lack moral courage to confront the reality. They are always 'Drunk with steam organs, thighrub and creamsoda' (CP P.22). Weltering in physical comforts they are not in a position to think coolly and logically. Their vision is limited. The poet believes that it is essentially a spurious kind of life. Commitment to meaningful and deep concerns of life demands more unselfish thinking. Overwhelmed with superficial concerns of life the middle class wants to evade broader issues. The poet points out that an anarchic type of individualism prevails in the existing middle class society as people are devoid of basic humanistic values. Instead of utilizing their brains in a constructive way, they extirpate their physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual faculties in frivolous kind
of activities. Consequently, like chestnut candles, they give signs of failing. Groping in the wilderness of superficial pleasures, they are unprepared to heed to the warnings of the prophet. The poet seems to recognise the imperative need for change and wishes to awaken the middle class towards impending doom. He, therefore, warns the middle class to mend its ways otherwise history will repeat itself.

MacNeice's approach in the treatment of the subject in the poem is scientific and analytical and his perspective is historical. His emphasis on constructive and meaningful utilization of mental, physical and intellectual faculties and his optimistic faith in the ushering in of a new order out of the debris of the old are progressive gestures and pointers to the nature of his radicalism. His optimistic faith in the inescapable death of the old order and the rise of the new dawn may be likened to Auden's faith in the birth of a new order. But the expression: 'But I will escape with my dog to the far side of the fair' (CP P.22) hints at the complacent attitude of the individualist himself which MacNeice ridicules as an escapist tendency in the members of the middle class. By implication the statement also adversely comments on the tendency of bourgeois intellectual to withdraw when the crisis demands firm resolution.
MacNeice's condemnation of materialism, his appreciation of moral values and his highlighting the absence of humanistic values in the members of middle class and the world-view that he seems to hold lend a liberal slant to his radicalism. The poem, above everything, provides a strong and constructive criticism of middle class by peeling the layers of its hypocritical existence.

The sharply critical exposure of middle class snobbery and its artificiality of life continues to be MacNeice's focus in "An April Manifesto" (April, 1934). He ridicules their obsession with material security and worldly comforts. In the lines quoted below, the poet attacks their surface glamour to bring out the hollowness underneath their brilliant appearances. Our April must replenish / our bank account of vanity and give our doors a coat of varnish (CP P.25).

Again the poet comments about their life-style and its essential insignificance:

Leave the tedium of audits and of finding correct
For the gaiety of places where people collect
For the paper rosettes of the stadium and the plaudits,

(CP P.25)
The attack grows more strident when it comes to the depiction of their outward mannerisms:

Let you paint your face and sleek your leg with silk which is your right to do.

(CP P.25)

Thus, lost in outward show, the members of the middle class refuse to bother about impending doom:

As gay trams run on rails and cows give milk
Sharp sun strop, surface gloss, and momentary caprice
These are what we cherish
Caring not if the bridges and the embankments
Of past and future perish and Cease

(CP P.25)

They seem to be concerned about nothing else than their comforts which they do not want to lose till the final calamity. The sarcasm in the lines is apparent:

Before the leaves grow heavy and the good days vanish
Hold out your glasses which our April must replenish.

(CP P.26)
The ironical style bespeaks the poet’s veiled intention to warn the middle class to shake off its apathy to the approaching disaster.

"Eclogue Between the Motherless" is yet another attempt of the poet to expose the whole extent of emptiness in the lives of middle class families. The use of dialogue form is effective in making the exposure emphatic. 'A' talks with distaste about the liberal middle class aspiring to maintain false values by putting restrictions on every step:

I could not stand a great deal of it bars on the brain
And the blinds drawn in the drawingroom not to fade the chair covers

(CP P.48).

The way, the speaker 'B' introduces his dialogue pointing out that these people care for false brilliance, reminds us of the sophisticated tastes of his father's second wife. He discloses that she wanted to have 'everything bright' (CP P.48). This artificial type of life is being filled up by artificial means only as 'A' says: "My father sits by himself with the bossed decanter" (CP P.48). Even married life in such families cannot fill up the sense of loneliness and hence alienation as 'B' suggests:
One marries only
Because one thinks one is lonely - and so one was. (CP P.48).

He is dismayed to think that he remained lonely even after marriage and had to seek divorce. He goes on to bring out the sense of hollowness through the contrast between the early easy days after marriage and the declining of love afterwards. In the following lines he recounts the early phantasy pleasures which could not be realised in practical life later on:

My wife was warmth, a picture and a dance
Her body electric-silk used to crackle and her gloves
Move where she left them.

(quoted from page 49)

Then comes the stark realisation:

But how one loves the surface,
But how one lacks the core.

(quoted from page 49)
"A' feels disenchanted with his class which imposes lots of restrictions on him in order to maintain outward facade. He feels a sense of guilt in maintaining false middle class values and norms. He wants to revolt against past. He, in fact, feels:

Helpless at the feet of faceless family idols,
Walking the tightrope over the tiger pit,
Running the gauntlet of inherited fears.

(CP P.49)

This sense of guilt prompts him to revolt against traditional family ties. He gasps for want of a wife but 'B' acutely feels that under the impact of technology, even the most tender human emotions have lost their significance and have become mechanical. He painfully yearns for intimate relationship which is absolutely lacking in this materialistic world.

Thus in both the cases of 'A' and 'B', the emptiness of family relationships in middleclass is brought to limelight. Both seem to be groping in wilderness only. 'A' craves for a woman 'with only one year to live' (CP P.51) to fill up his loneliness temporarily even. 'B' is fed up with mechanical type of relationship in marriage. The half-uttered sentences, disgruntled responses, empty reiteration of each other's utterances and distressing tone - all stand evidences to the vast expanse of frustration which they experience beneath the false show of life.
MacNeice's depiction of the pressing issue of hollow family-relationships in the middle class is authentic and his social insights appear to be extremely penetrating.

Even in "Carrickfergus" (1937) MacNeice flings a biting sarcasm on the hypocrite middle class. He suggests in the following lines:

I was the rector's son, born to the Anglican order,  
Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor.  

(CP P.69)

MacNeice seems extremely ironical in the concluding lines of this poem where he attacks middle class pretensions and snobbery. Their attitude of over-protectiveness towards their children comes under MacNeice's sharp criticism. He brings out the inconsistencies of this type of upbringing as it fails to develop any initiative and self-confidence and smells of snobbery of parents. This puppet world is:

Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter the salt-mines,  
And the soldiers with their guns.  

(CP P.70).
In "Bag Pipe Music" (1937), MacNeice brings to sharp focus the distortions of materialism, which characterised the life-style of the contemporary ruling middle class. He also captures the consequent despair and disgust which prevailed in the existing capitalist society. He makes an oblique reference to the obliteration of natural pleasures with the gradual passing away of traditional pattern of living - the inevitable outcome of advanced technology and the resultant excessive materialism.

The socio-cultural chaos in the England of the thirties becomes evident in the emphasis on the predominance of 'limousine drives' craze for 'peep shows' and the bleak absence of 'merry-go-round' and 'Riksha' (CP P.96). The further references to the silken knickers and the python shoes of the show girls are suggestive of their amorous sex practices.

MacNeice laments that simple country side pleasures of merry-go-round and riksha have been replaced by artificial and mechanical pleasures. He visualises a nightmarish condition of human beings in the contemporary set up where people live in an illusion of luxury and splendour and are unscrupulously ready to sacrifice even human values for material gains. He highlights the spirit of the British society of the times by using the technique of juxtaposition of traditional and materialistic Values.
in the references to Mac Donald, Anne Mac Dougall, Laird of Phelps, Mrs Carmichael and Willie and his brother. The governing ethos are best depicted by MacNeice when he says:

It's no go yogiman, it's no go Blavatsky
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi

(CP. P.97)

Again, the line "All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the puncture (CP. P.97) is aptly suggestive of the confusions in the present-day materialistic culture. Then, there is a reference to the advanced materialistic society where:

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar stick for the baby.

(CP P.97)

The modern world, thus, stands in complete contrast to the world of traditional values upheld once by Laird of Phelps and Mrs. Carmichael. Willie Murray and his brother represented honest and simple living but in the advanced technological society
'Herring Board' and 'The Bible' have been replaced by a packer of fags (CP P.97). The poet features the complacent nature of middle class in the following lines:

Sit on your arse for fifty years
And hang your hat on a pension

(CP P.97)

In the concluding stanza, the poet seems to warn the ruling middle class against the threatening challenges of the ill off-shoots of the technological advancement to the socio-cultural conditions of the Britain in the thirties. The distortions and excesses of materialism and abuse of individual freedom in the capitalist society provide the major focus. The momentary excitements found in 'limousine drives', 'peep shows' (CP P.96) and 'a bit of skirt in a taxi' (CP P.97) are artificial recourses which, the poet warns, are insufficient to elude Time which must blot out the whole show. MacNeice's tone acquires a distinctly prophetic touch when he jolts the middle class to get up from their apathetic slumber. The expression of a feeling of helplessness before time and acceptance of the innate absurdity of the things may, however, be attributed to a liberal humanist's restlessness and dissatisfaction with the way of life in the contemporary society:
The glass is falling hour by hour the glass will fall forever
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

(Cont P.97)

The poet's awareness of the impending doom shows that he is wide-awake to the socio-cultural conditions of the time. His warning to the members of the middle class against excesses of materialism, his attack on their apathy to simple traditional pleasures and satirical view of their beguiled escapist tendencies provide the direction in which the radical content of MacNeice's poetry makes itself manifest.

MacNeice's emotional reactions to the contemporary crisis find an emphatic expression in Autumn Journal (1938), a sequence which consists of twenty four poems dealing with different aspects of the chaotic situation in the thirties. The sequence, infact, was composed in the backdrop of intense European crisis - when liberal and democratic values were at stake and the Spanish Civil war became a symbol threatening another fascist victory in the second world war. MacNeice takes up the issue of middle class apathy and escapist attitude to the prevailing crisis and severely denounces their steadfast refusal to confront the new realities and the new challenges.
In poem No. I of this journal, the growth of vulgarity in the middle class becomes the focus of attention:

And becon and eggs in a silver dish for breakfast
And all the inherited assets of bodily ease.
And the growth of vulgarity, cars that pass the gate-lodge
And crowds undressing on the beach
And the hiking cockney lovers with thoughts directed
Neither to God nor Nation but each to each.

(CP P.102)

The poet suggests that the members of this class take life as synonymous with presents, jewellery, furs and gadgets etc. He takes note of the complacency of this class and the resultant callous indifference to issues threatening the outside world and warns these people that change must come as "no river is a river which does not flow" (CP P.102).

In poem No. III, MacNeice exposes the decline of ethical standards of the ruling bourgeoisie:

Would like to sleep on a matteress of easy profits,
Servants or houris ready to wince and flatter
And build with their degradation your self-esteem
What you want is not a world of the free in function
But a niche at the top, the skimmings of the cream.

(CP P.105)
The tone is ironical but the hollowness of the bourgeois ruling class in their claims to morality and justice is brought out with immense clarity. The discrepancy between the profession and practice of the ruling middle class so aptly reflected in the following lines exposes their pretentious life style:

And now I relapse to sleep, to dream perhaps and reaction
Where I shall play the gangster or Sheikh,
Kill for the love of killing, make the world my sofa
Unzip the women and insult the meek.
Which fantasies no doubt are due to my private history;
Matter for the analyst,

(CP P.106)

The lines reflect the mental degeneration and the perversions which such fantasising involves.

The poet is aware that it is hard to imagine a world where many would have their fullest expression and chance. Still he favours action and urges upon the members of the middle class:

The final cure is not in his past dissecting fingers
But in a future of action, the will and fist,
Of those who abjure the luxury of self pity
And prefer to risk a movement without being sure.

(CP P.106)
He, therefore, exhorts them to 'look up and outwards for a wider glance' (CP P.106)

In poem No. V the poet visualises the impending doom when he refers to "the heavy panic that cramps the lungs and presses the collar down the spine" (CP P.109).

The middle class obsession with their material comforts acquires a nostalgic tone in poem No. VIII:

There were lots of things undone
But nobody cared, for the days were early
Nobody niggled, nobody cared,
The soul was deaf to the mounting debit.

(CP P.115)

The middle class refuses to shed its complacency even in the midst of burgeoning disasters:

And the next day begins
Again with alarm and anxious
Listening to bulletins
From distant measured voices
Arguing for peace
While the Zero hour approaches,
While the eagles gather and the petrol and oil and grease

(CP P.116)
Inspite of this, the poet concludes that mental and moral decay kills all humanistic feelings.

In poem No. XII, MacNeice favours a return to a more humane set up in which the demands of both body and the soul are met in a balanced way:

All that I like to be is human, having a share
In a civilized articulate and well adjusted
Community where the mind is given its due
But the body is not distrusted

(CP P.125)

In this agony of degenerated moral values the poet finds nothing more important than the restoration of even a semblance of humanistic order. By bringing into comparison the great discrepancy between cultural antiquity and the present cultural chaos, the poet concretizes the scene of disintegration in the thirties:

With the twang of Hawaii and the boom of the congo,
Let the old Muse with stockings and suspenders
And a smile like a cat,
With false eyelashes and finger-nails of carmine
And dressed by Schiaparelli, with a pill-box hat

(CP P.129)
Unlike Auden and other radical-liberals of the time who were idealists, MacNeice believed in the functional and democratic kind of poetry and showed pragmatic approach to the crisis. As he himself suggests in poem No. XXI:

And so when the many regrets
Trouble us for the many lost affections,
Let us, take the wider view before we count them
Hopelessly bad debts.

(CP P.144)

Like C.Day Lewis, he is optimistic in his attitude to life and death as the following lines indicate:

Can you not take it merely on trust that life is
The only thing worth living and that dying
Had better be left to take care of itself in the end?
For to have been born is in itself a triumph

(CP P.145)

Again he suggests:

A fire should be left burning
Till it burns itself out:
We shan't have another chance to dance and shout
Once the flames are silent.

(CP P.145)
He makes an effort to awaken the middle class;
We who play for safety,
Where as these people contain truth, whatever
Their nominal facade
Listen: A whirr, a challenge, an aubade—
It is the cock crowing in Barcelona

(EP P.105)

Though the poet is apprehensive of the oncoming doom and
becomes nostalgic about the earlier easy days but he is confident
that there must be some means to resolve the crisis:

Yes, the earlier days had their music
We have some still today,
But the orchestra is due for the bonfire if things go on this way.
Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice
Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
And while a man has voice
He may recover music

(EP P.139)

Again the same confidence that life would eventually turn
a new and positive leaf is seen:

There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sun-light later
And the equation will come out at last.

(EP P.153)
Thus in the last poem of this journal MacNeice reasserts his optimism:

The New year comes with bombs, it is too late
To dose the dead with honourable intentions,
If you have honour to spare, employ it on the living.
The dead are dead as Nineteen-Thirty-Eight.

(CP P.153)

The inevitability of change emphasised earlier in poem No. 2 of this journal continues towards the end and MacNeice seems to reiterate the vital truth that the possibilities of life are a match for life as the following lines about the efforts of the Spider suggest:

While he spins that tomorrow will out weigh
Tonight, that Becoming is a match for Being.

(CP P.104)

He confidently remarks:

For from now on
Each occasion must be used, however trivial,
To rally the ranks of those whose chance will soon be gone
For even gurrilla warfare.
The nicest people in England have always been the least
Apt to solidarity or alignment
But all of them must now align against the beast
That prowls at every door and barks in every headline

(CP P.129)
Autumn Journal also underlines MacNeice's response to the evil of war in Spain and his consequent understanding of the threat that war poses to the basic human ideals. In poem No 6 of Autumn Journal, Macneice refers to Spain in his characteristic synthesis seasoned with surrealistic expression without showing any ideological thrust as for as Spanish Civil war was concerned. He did not appear to take any serious political interest in the war and its repercussions. On his visit to Spain, however, he experienced a sense of ruin and degradation. He felt disgusted at his own loss of awareness of the full implications of Spanish war in terms of social and human situations in the whole of England and Europe and comes to realise:

That Spain would soon denote  
Our grief, our aspirations;  
Not knowing that our blunt  
Ideals would find their whetstone,  
that our spirit  
Would find its frontier on the Spanish front

(CP P.112)

In "Carrickfergus" (1937) also MacNeice uses the war metaphor to expose the hollowness and rottenness of the middle
class and the decaying moral and humanistic value system implicit in its desperate search for security. It cuts a biting sarcasm when he says:

The steamer was camouflaged that took me England—
Sweat and Khaki in the Carlisle train;
I thought that the war would last for ever and sugar
Be always rationed and that never again—
Would the weekly papers not have photos of sandbags
And my governess not make bandages from moss.

(CP P.69)

In Poem No. VII of *Autumn Journal* the poet expresses his apprehensions about another aspect of war in its brutality in terms of its destruction of pastoral landscape. He vividly describes:

They want the crest of this hill for anti-aircraft,
The guns will take the view
And searchlights probe the heavens for bacilli
With narrow wands of blue.

(CP P.113)

In the description of tug of war between technology and pastoral beauty, MacNeice never loses focus from the middle-class apprehensions about losing material comforts:

In a village tug-of-war I found my dog had vanished
And thought that this is the end of the old regime'

(CP P.115)
Their apprehensions are clothed in their persistent desire to dilute the seriousness of the situation and evade the real problems:

They are sure to go away if we take no notice. Another round of drinks or make it twice. That was a good one, tell us another, don't stop talking Cap your stories; if You haven't any new ones tell the old ones, Tell them as often as you like and perhaps those horrible stiff People with blank faces that are yet familiar Won't be there when you look again...

(CP P.130)

The poet suggests that their apathy cannot evade the impending disaster. They are always haunted with nightmarish threats of doom.

The advancement of technology, for MacNeice, has resulted in the disappearance of the traditional values of life and the mass-produced uniformity in modern technological world has caused the obliteration of individualism. In "Turf Stacks" (September, 1932), for example, this concern for traditional patterns of life makes him nostalgic about Northern Ireland of his childhood. He bursts forth:
Among these turf-stacks graze no iron horses
Such as stalk, such as champ in towns and the soul of crowds,
Here is no mass production of neat thoughts
No canvas shrouds for the mind nor any black hearses:
The peasant shambles on his boot like hooves
Without thinking at all or wanting to run in grooves.

(CP P.18)

MacNeice feels that those who live in towns away from simple natural surroundings feel insecure in the face of insidious shock of the 'theory vendors' (CP P.19):

The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy
Who tilt their aggregate beast against our crumbling Troy.

(CP P.19)

The poet's apprehensions about the smudging impact of technology on pastoral scenaria leads him to warn the decadent middle class in the following concluding lines of the poem:

It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia
Or any other tunnel where the world recedes,
Or turn blind wantons like the gulls who scream
And rip the edge off any ideal or dream.

(CP P.19)
MacNeice exhorts people either to save tradition with all its deprivations or be prepared to accept technology with all its ill off-shoots like mechanization of human beings, ecological imbalance and disregard for humanity and righteousness. His social vision does not preclude the development in science and technology but it appears that the cost this galloping advancement has extracted in terms of finer human feelings puts MacNeice on the offensive against this phenomenon.

In his poem "The Glacier" (July, 1933) also, the poet condemns the fast pace of technology which is leading human beings towards calamity. He vividly pinpoints the impending ruin which it is going to entail in terms of humanity:

But the whole stream of traffic seems to crawl,  
Carrying its dead boulders down a glacier wall.  

(CP P.24)

He condemns the artificial life which is being led by the members of the ruling-middle class in towns in the following lines:

.... among plate glass cases in sombre rooms  
Eyes apprise the glazen life of majolica ware  

(CP P.24)
But he also seems concerned about the deficiencies and hardships which human beings encounter in simple country life where "the gardener, with trowel and rheumatic pain" (CP P.24) becomes a symbol of hardships. The details show that the poet is in favour of advancement, no doubt, but he does not wish that the change must come at the cost of human values.

Infact, MacNeice's identification with the social cause was distinct and individual. He was concerned about the problems of the suburban humanity with which he identified himself. Suburbs, in fact, were the outcome of industrialisation process. Bernard Bergonzij has rightly remarked:

There were some aspects of mass-civilization in the thirties that the writers of the time could not contemplate with anything other than profound distaste. I mean the spread of dormitory suburbs around our large cities, and the prevalence, in particular of mock Tudor style of architecture14.

"Birminagharm" (Oct. 1933) evidently brings out this:

Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
Seductingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed
So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic through bleary haws
And only a six-inch grip of the racing earth in their concrete claws;

(CP P.18)
The miserable lives of common masses in the modern materialistic society are aptly illustrated through the commuters who struggle to make a reasonable living. The poet ironically suggests:

In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms
With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to fickle norms

(CP. P. 18)

The people living in suburban houses endeavour to find God and wish to score one over their neighbour. They indulge in cut-throat competition and desire to climb upwards on jerry-built beauty and sweated labour. The poet employs the vivid imagery of the overworked shop girls who feel relaxed at the lunch hour and implicitly brings out the devastating impact of mass-civilization on common humanity:

The lunch hour: the shops empty, shop girls' faces relax
Diaphanous as green glass, empty as old almanacs
As incoherent with ticketed gewgaws tiered behind their heads
As the Burne-Jones windows in St. Philip's broken crawling leads;
Insipid colour, patches of emotion, Saturday thrills
(This theatre is sprayed with 'June') the gutter take our old play bills,
Next week end it is likely in the heart's funfair we shall pull
Strong enough on the handle to get back our money; or at any rate it is possible.

(CP P. 18)
'Insipid colour', 'patches of emotions' and 'Saturday thrills' present a scenario of sucked up energies as well as an eagerness to make more efforts to extract the last ounce of life's thrill.

With the help of an effective imagery the poet paints a frightening picture of life in the technological jungle:

The trams like vast sarcophagi: move
Into the sky, plum after sunset merging to duck's eggs, barred with mauve Zeppelin clouds, and pentacost like the car's headlights bud
Out from side roads and the traffic signals creme-de-menthe or bull's blood.

(CP P.18)

MacNeice's attitude to technology appears even more conservative than that of C.Day Lewis as he exhorts the humanity to put a stop to technological development or be prepared to accept it with all its defects and Vulgarities. He is so much upset over its evil impact on common humanity that he simply bursts out:

Tell one to stop the engine gently breathing, or to go on
To where like black pipes of organs in the frayed and fading Zone - of the west the factory chimneys on sullen sentry will
all night wait
To call, in the harsh morning, sleep-stupid faces through the
daily gate.

(CP P.18)

The description of objects of technology has been
conspicuously set against the depiction of thin slumward vista
to show the priority these objects have gained over simple,
pastoral things. Their 'fidgety machines', big shopping centres
with, 'cubical scent bottles', 'artificial legs', 'arctic foxes',
'electric mops' and 'Vulcan's forges' (CP P.17) display the vast
extent of technological development, MacNeice's love for common
humanity accounts for his attitude to technology. There is a
distinct note of sympathy and compassion in MacNeice's delineation
of the tiresome and sweated lives of commuters. His aversion to
technology, infact, is bornout of the pathetic appearance of
suburbs and slums which unveil the agony of common man living in
modern materialistic world of technology. The poet holds this
process of civilization responsible for the wretched and tiresome
lives of common masses.

Nodoubt, MacNeice felt deeply concerned with the vital
issues related with town life and commercial culture. In "Eclogue
for Christmas" he makes a comprehensive analysis of contemporary
ills by raising the issue of socio-cultural chaos in an
industrialised society through an elaborate analysis of urban and rural crisis: "The excess sugar of a diabetic culture/Rotting the nerve of life and literature" (CP P.33). The poem also reflects an insistent emphasis on the poet's apprehensions about the impending doom for the ruling middle class, one of the central problems, which the major poets of the thirties, sensed and vocalised in their poetry. Nodoubt, the poem voices forth the obsessions of a generation yet a distinct note of individuality persists in the poem.

In this poem, split into two parts, the speaker represents both town and the countryside and both seem equally afflicted with "The mad vertigo of being what has been" (CP P.33). Total chaos prevails everywhere as the following lines clearly suggest:

One place is as bad as another
Go back where your instincts call
And listen to the crying of town cats and taxis again
Or wind your gramophone and eavesdrop on greatmen.

(CP P.33)

The townman 'A' seems fascinated to some extent by the glamour of the city life. His passages on the cultural developments of the century and on the towns and their traffic reveal the poet's acceptance of technology. He feels tempted to remark:
But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous
In this vast organism grown out of us:
On all the traffic-islands stand white globe like moons,
The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,
And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes
With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like crysanthemum:

( CP P.35)

Here the effective use of epithets adds to the glamour
which city life holds for the townman. The lines reveal the poet's
receptive outlook towards technology but as we know that the
social criticism of MacNeice was implicit in the criticism of
the new vulgarity he saw around him. He felt that the middle
class life style reflected a degenerated culture which refused
scope for fresh growth and creativity. We agree with A.T. Tolley
when he suggests that in this Eclogue the 'Decline of west' is
seen in terms of the decay of traditional patterns of life and
their replacement by newfangled and standardised patterns and
products. MacNeice himself suggests this in the lines:

And over elaboration will nothing now avail
The street is up again, gas, electricity or drains,
Ever changing conveniences, nothing comfortable remains.

( CP. P.34)

We feel that like Stephen Spender, MacNeice is not
enthusiastic in his appreciation of the technological objects.
He rather feels hurt to think that technology attacks the individuality of human beings who will become automatons, incapacitated to think even. The townman, we notice, finds himself devoid of human feelings. Even the tender human experiences have become so painfully mechanical in the decadent contemporary society. He remarks:

I have not been allowed to be
Myself in flesh or face but abstracting and dissecting me
They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,
Stylised profile, any thing but soul and flesh

(CP P.33)

Such expressions make it self-evident that in the world of technology human beings lead mechanical existence. In the technological world man is compelled to "... turn the jaded music on to forswear thought and become an automaton" (CP P.33). The countryman is no less apprehensive. He, too fears that human beings shall be reduced into something having 'Mechanical Reason and Capricious Identity' (CP P.34).

The poet's pastoral self seems agonised over the changing pattern of life and the urbanself regrets the mechanisation of human beings and loss of individuality in an industrialised society. The conflict leads him to apprehensions which are so
explicitly stated in the following lines:

What will happen when the sniggering machine-guns in the hands of the youngmen
Are trained on every flat and club and beauty parlour and Father's den?

(CP P.35)

The irony of circumstance is that the members of the upper middle class are addicts of unproductive routine and will die of moral abuse. There is no alternative left for them. Thus, while the poet satirically unveils bourgeois decadence and at the same time confesses his own alliance with its tradition, he lacks the required confidence to overthrow it. He ends the poem with a prayer for regeneration of humanity.

MacNeice's poem "Train to Dublin (1934) too clearly illustrates his concern about the thoughtless mechanical life which human beings have started leading. Human beings, he points out, are experiencing complete chaos of thoughts as the basic facts about life are being repatterned without any pause in the modern world of technology. The continuous rhythm of moving train, which leaves behind the telephone posts, suggests the galloping strides of technology. The poet feels extremely concerned over the ecological imbalances and environmental pollution that it will entail in its wake. The poet is reminded of the beautiful
architecture and craftsmanship of the old Georgian houses. He is afraid to visualise the extent of adverse impact the speed of technology will cause to human civilization. Technology, MacNeice apprehends, will cause an irreparable loss as the following lines suggest:

I count the buttons on the seat, I hear a shell
Held hollow to the ear, the mere
Reiteration of integers, the bell
That tolls and tolls, the monotony of fear.

(CP P.27)

MacNeice has infinite faith in human capabilities. He believes that human beings can constructively utilize their mental and physical faculties and make technology play a positive role. He suggests that the positive channelisation of energies would enable human beings to recognise their dormant inner strength instead of being in a position of painted wood only playing a mechanical role—sometimes acting a doctrinaire and sometimes becoming frivolous: 'plastering over the cracks, a gesture making good'. (CP: P.27)

He is averse to the artificial world that the advancement of technology has given to the human beings. MacNeice feels that with the advancing technology human beings keep moving thoughtlessly till death comes to draw the final curtain on their
lives. He likes countryside where technology has not yet stepped
to impair its genuineness. He wishes that human beings there
should continue enjoying: 'the laughter of the Galway sea juggling
with spars and bones irresponsibly' 'the toy liffey' and 'the
vast gulls' 'fuschia hedges' and 'white washed walls' (CP P.28)
He feels disturbed to envisage the damaging impact of advancing
technology on natural beauty in the approaching future. He,
would like human beings to have 'real faces, not the permanent
masks'. The next line holds out his fears even more strongly: 'But
the faces balanced, in the toppling wave (CP P.28). The last
stanza holds out dramatically:

I would like to give you more but I cannot hold
This stuff within my hands and the train goes on;

(CP P.28)

In "Christmas Shopping", MacNeice seems to capture through
the depiction of the frivolous and spendthrift habits of the
women of middle class, the emptiness and the meaninglessness of
games that people play to bolster their drooping spirits in the
general drama of ennui and boredom. The poet feels that this
sense of boredom and ennui is expressed in the absence of any
creative and constructive activity. The pretentious way of living
has created a vacuum in human relationships: 'Only the faces on
the boxen of chocolates are free from boredom' (CP P.95). The poet
feels that after a couple of years even the non-living things like the chocolate-box girl will feel tired and bored like others. Thus, the people in this materialistic world waste their time, energy and money on unproductive recreations: "Here go the hours of routine, the weight on our eye lids/Pennies on corpses". (CP P. 95).

MacNeice apprehends that directionless technology may yield no gain for humanity. His poems dealing with the adverse impact of technology reflect that MacNeice shows his disgust with the advancing technology and the consequent changing patterns of life, with degenerated standard of values. MacNeice does not share Auden's or Spender's enthusiasm in his approach to technology. On this score, his poetry, however, offers strong and constructive social criticism, which spontaneously emerges out of various social aspects which come under his close scrutiny.

MacNeice's love poems too demonstrate his concern for healthy social relationships. He highlights the bleak disappearance of genuine love in human relationships in the modern materialistic society and condemns the artificial and mechanical nature of love in the existing society. His love poetry also throws light on sexual promiscuity and degenerated standard of values in the contemporary society as we have seen in the analysis of poems like "Bag Pipe Music". He points out that in the world
of mechanical human relationships love is measured in materialistic terms only—money, intoxicants and excessive sex-practices. Baser tendencies have replaced humanistic feelings. Love, has become synonymous with a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi. Genuine feelings of love have been distorted into sexual enamours only. In "Eclogue Between the Motherless" MacNeice painfully unveils the emotional vacuum in the modern world. He exposes the artificiality in the sphere of love. In this Eclogue 'B', evidently, is dismayed to review that he remained lonely even after marriage. The impermanence of such love relationships in the existing society is suggested in the following lines:

The first half-year
Is heaven come back from the nursery - Swans down Kisses

(CP P.48)

But after that one misses something. The poet conveys the fragility and even frivolity of love under conditions generated by materialistic set up:

I remember her mostly in the car, stopping by the white Moons of the petrol pumps in camel hair rug comfortable, scented and alien.

(CP P.50)
He painfully yearns for close relationship. He laments: "...All I wanted was to get really close but closeness was only a glove on the hand, alien and veinless" (CP P.51).

Infact, MacNeice's depiction of love is passionate, profound and sensuous. Love, for him, has to be intimate and intense. He makes a retrospective analysis of early days in Autumn Journal. He recapitulates the most tender moments of love vividly enough:

I shall remember you in bed with bright Eyes or in a Cafe stirring Coffee Abstractedly and on your plate and white Smoking stub your lips had touched with crimson.

(CP P.108)

The lines are evocatively sensuous and overwhelm with emotions. He, infact, longs for sincere love as it is reflected in the lines below:

And I shall remember how your words could hurt Because they were so honest And even your lies were able to assert Integrity of purpose And it is on the strength of knowing you I reckon generous feelings more important Than the mere deliberating what to do When neither the pros nor cons affect the pulses And though I have suffered from your special strength
Who never flatter for points nor fake responses  
I should be proud if I could evolve at length  
An equal thrust and pattern

(CP P.108)

Even amid socio-political chaos, MacNeice painfully recollects the reverberations of his lingering love for his first wife, who had deserted him and had married someone else. Autumn Journal refers to that lost love in some poems in movingly intimate details which show the extent of his concern for authentic love. He reviews his past and recollects his early easy days:

But life was comfortable, life was fine  
With two in a bed and patch work cushions.  
And checks and tassels on the washing line,  
A gramophone, a cat, and the smell of Jasmine

(CP P.115)

Infact, in Autumn Journal MacNeice treats love with nostalgic affection but we may not overlook that ironically he is conscious all the time that it is irrelevant in the face of existing crisis. We see that in "Meeting point" (April, 1939) amid war shadows the poet portrays the intimate atmosphere of the presence of his lady love. He captures the timeless character of that delicate moment:
Time was away and somewhere else,
There were two glasses and two chairs
And two people with one pulse.

(CP P.167)

The poet seems to love his beloved wife dearly enough and communicates his profound feelings in vivid images:

Time was away and she was here
And life no longer what it was
The bell was silent in the air
And all the room one glow because
Time was away and she was here.

(CP P.168)

MacNeice conveys his urge for genuine and intimate relationship in a poignant manner:

If we could find our happiness entirely in somebody else's arms
We should not fear the spears of the spring nor the city's yammering fire alarms
But as it is, the spears each year go through
Our flesh and almost hourly
Bell or siren banishes the blue
Eyes of love entirely.

(CP P.159)

MacNeice's social perspective entails the presence of healthy human relationships which he feels, only genuine love is
capable of generating. For the development of a sound social community love needs to get free from the distortions created by the modern age of technology.

Thus, the dominant picture of MacNeice's social perspective that emerges out of a comprehensive analysis of his poems, is certainly that of a radical-liberal. MacNeice shares with Auden, Stephen Spender and C.Day Lewis, a critical attitude to ruling middle class while remaining within the framework of the same system. Whereas Auden's approach was to criticise the ruling middle class and highlight its ineffectiveness to resolve common problems and give a call for action as he does in "It's Fare well to the drawingroom's civilized cry" and "Brothers, who when the sirens roar", MacNiece condemns the complacent attitude of the ruling middle class to the existing crisis and the impending doom and wishes to arouse them from their slumber. His own remarks in this context are quite pertinent: "The writer today should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct16".

He satirises with disgust the derelict culture of the ruling middle class and shows deep concern for sliding down of standard of values. In his attitude to the Spanish civil war, MacNeice is not partisan like W.H.Auden. Like C.Day Lewis he just finds in it a sense of ruin and degradation. He looked at Spanish
Civil war as something which exposed the hollowness of the ruling bourgeoisie rather than any struggle between ideologies. Where as W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender were idealists dreaming about utopian millenniums, MacNeice's approach is more pragmatic than the other radical-liberals. That explains why he did not have to change his former stance in future after the thirties. Like other radical-liberals, MacNeice too thought of the great issues of the contemporary society. He was a poet of the shape and substance of what was actually happening around him. Again when Auden and others depicted the misery of the weaker sections of the society, MacNeice sang for the pangs of suburban masses. His left wing criticism of society consisted in the criticism of the new vulgarity which MacNeice saw around him. His preoccupations were with the people in society in urban scene. He was in favour of a social system expedient enough to reintegrate the individual personality. In his response to the developing technology, MacNeice, like C.Day Lewis, was more concerned with its adverse impact on traditional patterns of life and pastoral scenes. In the sphere of love, MacNeice unlike Auden and much like Spender and Day Lewis is sensuous and passionate. But in totality, like all the other radical liberals including even Auden, he favours love's instrumental role in the establishment of healthy human relationships. MacNeice conducted more linguistic innovations
than C. Day Lewis or Spender. He is more surrealistic than W.H. Auden. MacNeice, in fact, excels in technical innovations, particularly manipulating words to form unusual imagistic phrases.

We may conclude our evaluation of MacNeice's poetic achievements in the context of his social perspective with the view that MacNeice more than any other radical-liberal effected a perfect fusion of form and content. He knew his world intimately enough and his aesthetics helped him to capture it in all its entirety and perfection.