

“EXILE FROM IRELAND LEFT HIM A STRANGER EVERYWHERE“:  
REPRESENTATION OF DUBLIN IN SELECTED LOUIS MACNEICE’S  
POETRY AND SOME OF THE STORIES FROM JAMES JOYCE’S  
*DUBLINERS*”

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the representation of Dublin in the selected poetry of Louis MacNeice and some of the stories from James Joyce’s collection *Dubliners*. A close investigation of the city as a representative of urban space is interlinked with an examination of its role from the perspective of psychogeography. Both techniques are applied to show why and how two Irish authors portray the multi-dimensional decay of life in the city. In order to paint a whole picture of the relation between ‘space’ and ‘human’, I will also review the biographies of MacNeice and Joyce. For MacNeice, who was tormented by the experiences of domestic Belfast, going to the South was a promising escape. Yet, the change of urban setting did not bring him the expected result. MacNeice quickly became aware of the dirty, paralysed face of Dublin. Similarly, the childhood and day-to-day reality of the lower-middle-class profoundly shaped Joyce’s perspective of Dublin and, eventually, prompted him to go into deliberate exile in Europe. In his writings, however, Dublin constitutes the focal point of the structure, becoming an active participant in the events. Therefore, Dublin for MacNeice and Joyce is a place characterized by blandness, powerlessness in the face of foreign influences, and suffering caused by inertia.

**Keywords:** Dublin, Joyce, MacNeice, city, psychogeography, urban studies.

### Introduction

Louis MacNeice was a Northern Irish poet of the 1930s and a member of *Auden’s group*, alongside artists such as W.H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis, or Stephen Spender. Born in Belfast, he spent only the early years of his life in Ulster. At the

age of ten, MacNeice was sent to boarding school in Sherborne, England, and from thereon, he visited Ireland only on a few occasions. In a similar fashion, and being almost twenty-five years MacNeice's senior, James Joyce also spent most of his life outside of his birthplace, living in Europe. His deliberate exile from his home country was caused by the religious, social, and political conditions of Irish society. Hence, in the works of both MacNeice and Joyce, Dublin's bleak landscapes and the mundane state of its citizens are recurring topics. Their representation of the city is synonymous with a cold, merciless, and confined state of one's freedom. Therefore, it is noticeable that both writers try to respond to the influence that the city space has on them. Their works are responses in the process of communication with the environment and the result of psychological stimulation.

Such reliance also became the object of study for psychogeography, which negotiates one's inner feelings and reflections towards a particular space. Among others, Guy Debord's research into the importance of the *flâneur* and *dérive* in the interpretation of the city space will help to explore MacNeice's and Joyce's works with a focus on psychological dependencies between the self and spatial area, which in this case is Dublin. The decisive criterion as to whether the text contains some "psychogeographical element" is based on the close reading of descriptions of the place and physical surroundings, as they may have an impact on one's mind and evoke psychological moods.

Consequently, in the selected poetry of Louis MacNeice, it will be considered whether his representation of Dublin could have been somehow influenced by the process of engaging with the city during his visits. It can be assumed that his poems present some parts of the city, as well as its landscapes, which he notes while wandering the streets. In the case of Joyce, it has already been observed that his representation of Dublin is painted with colours resembling those of rust: brown, orange, and yellow. These appear when the author tries to sketch the general *mise-en-scène* of the city, as well as when he depicts the ambience of a particular scene: either the *décor* or interior of architectonic sites. In addition, it is interesting that the street constitutes an important element of Joyce's narratives. His characters spend most of their time in the public spaces, wandering. This activity gives them space for reflection which is when they feel the repressing power of the city. Seeing Dublin in this state gives them the feeling of being stuck in a labyrinth. The infinite horizon of the narrow, dark, and oftentimes blind streets evokes in Dubliners the feeling of confusion and powerlessness.

### Urban Sociology

The Industrial Revolution was a turning point in the consideration of the city space, which from that moment meant a place of meeting, where one came

together and engaged with the community members. With time, the urban space became the focal point of social science scholars’ critical commentaries, which aimed at describing the essence of living in the city, as well as the relationship between an individual and the city. In consequence, it has led to the formulation of a wide range of views, theories, and approaches associated with this topic. (Wirth-Nesher 1996:4)

For example, the German sociologist Georg Simmel in his essay *Metropolis and Mental Life* focuses mostly on the psychological life (*Geistesleben*) of urban residents (Simmel 2010: 103-110). He examines how individuals approach the city and why most frequently they feel solitude and separation when being in the urban space (Finch 2016: 36). Simmel noted that the feeling of aversion and indifference is an outcome of one’s presence in the city space because it is crowded mostly with strangers (Tonkiss 2005: 11). Only in this way can one preserve private life and, at the same time, negotiate social space with others (Tonkiss 2005: 11). Thus, it can be said that an individual’s freedom is intermingled with their impersonality and anonymity (Tonkiss 2005: 11).

Another German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, describes the figure of a city inhabitant in a similar way to Simmel, yet he starts his study in a different place. Namely, Tönnies organizes social life in the city and invents two types of contrasting principles of human association: the community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) (Finch 2016: 29). He also elaborates on them by juxtaposing big cities (e.g London, Berlin, or Manchester) with smaller settlements, which were supposed to be less industrialized but more oriented towards the achievement of the common good (Finch 2016: 30). Therefore, social life in the community means the unity of families and neighbourhoods, a private and quiet atmosphere characterized by one shared language, traditions, and friends (Finch 2016: 30). On the other hand, society and its members, just like in Simmel’s theory, stand for a large city, where people are individualistic, rational, and calculating (Finch 2016: 30). *Gesellschaft*’s inhabitants are focused on providing and exchanging services and goods on the market, and in contrast to those of *Gemeinschaft*, they do not act in unison, despite shared qualities (Finch 2016: 30).

It is also important to state that the description of a city dweller is considered in contemporary sociological conceptions of city life. A member of the Chicago School of Sociologists, Louis Wirth, delineates in *Urbanism as a Way of Life* the negative consequences of the growth of big cities and popularization of urban life (Wirth 1938: 21). For instance, he wrote that the city causes “the weakening of bonds of kinship, the declining social significance of the family (...), and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity” (Wirth 1938: 21). As can be recognized, Wirth pondered on the unfavourable outcomes of the development of modern cities that may affect an individual. Just like his predecessors (Simmel

or Tönnies), Wirth foresaw that the city dweller would surrender to a life in isolation with less direct social interaction.

### City and literature

The city has always been present in literary works in a way that constituted a background for the storyline and a character's actions, but the urban space was considered only in terms of its landscape, architectural qualities, or facilities. In recent decades, however, the city's position started to be taken into more careful consideration (in humanities, it is called the *spatial turn*). In other words, the city is no longer perceived just as a setting; a less significant part of the narration that exists somewhere in the reader's knowledge. It became an important part of the work's structure, as well as a topic of different analyses or readings.

The phenomenon of urban space is most profoundly discussed in modernist and postmodernist texts of, for instance, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, or Franz Kafka. In their works, the significance of the city shifted from being only a platform of information and description to that of emotion and meaning. Thus, the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was "an art of cities" (Rechniewski 2005: 7-12) that was written in cities, happened in cities, and was about cities as well as their effects on the human psyche (Bradbury 1976: 96).

The growth of urban spaces led to the formation of a variety of studies that examine these areas in the context of literary works. It is known as a multidisciplinary phenomenon, which combines thoughts of social sciences, cultural studies, geography, or psychology with approaches of literature to the city. The main focus of the field is the study of literary cities; geographical places represented in narrations. Kaczmarek (2014: 90), for example, argues that space starts to constitute not only a background to the storyline but a paramount element of the work's structure. He assumes that it is more important how the author makes use of the city landscape, or its "life" than where the story is set (Kaczmarek 2014: 90). In this way, the analyses of urban spaces in the literary works help to comprehend the meaning of these spaces. In the words of Kaczmarek, to comprehend literature, one needs first to comprehend the city and, analogically, to understand the city, one needs to understand literature (Kaczmarek 2014:90).

Psychogeography is one of the directions of thought in urban studies that focuses on the relationship between an individual and the city; in other words, how a place may affect a person, their emotions, or behaviour (Richardson 2015: 1-2). The term was defined at the same time as the Situationist International movement, with Guy Debord as one of its founding members (Richardson 2015: 1-2). He gave form to a field of study, which would examine "the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or

not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord 2006: 8). In recent decades, scholars like Iain Sinclair or Will Self, continue to meditate on the importance of psychogeography as a study of the influence of the place on the human psyche (Löffler 2017: 42). They emphasize the figure of the *flâneur*, a character initially described by Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*, and *dérive*, a drift which defines an unplanned stroll through the city (Löffler 2017: 11), or more precisely “a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord 2006: 52).

The definition of the city dweller was systematized by Walter Benjamin, who was inspired by the character of *flâneur* in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) written by French poet Charles Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, the person in question is a “leisured wanderer” whose task is to watch the modern city and take pleasure in moving about without any particular goal (Mullin 2016). The wanderer finds it enjoyable to be in the crowd of strangers; he is not afraid of anonymity and indifference, rather he rejoices in channelling through the stream of unknown faces (Mullin 2016). In Baudelaire’s words, “the crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd” (Baudelaire 1970: 9).

What is more, Baudelaire points out that the driving force of the *flâneur* is examination. He strolls the streets to consume the views and then interpret the modern city (Mullin 2016). The wanderer is the witness of the commodity-filled marketplace, where everyone is anonymous (Tester 1994: 7). He is aware of the fatalism of this system but continues to be “the secret spectator of the spectacle of the spaces of the city” (Tester 1994: 7). He finds pleasure in directing his gaze upon the buildings or people, which makes his incomplete existence complete (Tester 1994: 7). As Keith Tester argues, the city stroller captures the fading and impermanent moments of city life (Tester 1994: 7).

The quality of his life in the city is encompassed by the high activity of the eyesight (Benjamin 1997: 38); each day means for him meeting new strangers, looking at their appearances, and trying to discover their mysteries. J. W. von Goethe once wrote that “every person, the most worthy as well as the most despicable, carries around a secret” (Benjamin 1997: 38) and this secret is considered to be the main focus of the city’s inhabitant. Continuous observation of the city elements equips him with facts: he knows how to discover the true self, how to become that self, and how others may become aware of who one is (Benjamin 1997: 8). Consequently, the examination of the urban space provides the city dweller with knowledge about humanity; he is equipped with information about personalities and behaviours.

Another situationist practice is *dérive*, which Guy Debord, in his essay *Theory of Dérive*, connects with a swift movement across different parts of the

environment. This activity involves the participant's "playful-constructive behaviour" as well as consciousness of the surroundings' psychogeographic influences. For this reason, *dérive* is antonymous to a journey or a stroll because these are motivated by the usual reasons of arriving at a destination, performing activities, or participating in entertainment. Debord attests that there is no limit as to the time spent on experiencing the city, as well as the area of practice, which is not circumscribed. It can be a whole neighbourhood, the centre of the suburbs, or simply a block of flats. The desired achievement is either the feeling of being lost in the city or attraction to certain zones. Eventually, by reading the reactions to the urban environment one can distinguish the "psychogeographical articulations of a modern city" (Debord 2006: 66).

### Representations of Dublin

For Louis MacNeice the home country was always a changeless, immobilized place. In his autobiographical essay, MacNeice wrote that "County Armagh led me [him] to think of the North of Ireland as a prison" (Brown 1989: 80). Also, in his poems he often reflects on the time of his childhood, when he felt imprisoned in some kind of a demonic place of his "black dreams" and since then nothing was the same (MacNeice 2015: 10-11). He eventually admits that his opinion of Ireland was largely biased by his traumatic experiences in the North. That is to say, the overprotectiveness and firm hand of his mother combined with the excessive religiousness and nationalism of his father shaped the poet's perception of this place (Brown 1989: 80). Indeed, Belfast constitutes for the poet a wasteland, a "city of smoke and dust" (MacNeice 2013), which is a part of the "country of callous lava cooled to stone." (MacNeice 2015) And this country, as Terence Brown assumes (1989: 79), was to haunt MacNeice all his life, as if some ghosts from the past were to never cease reaching him.

For MacNeice, the island of Ireland is the representation of "hell and heaven combined on the earth," (Grennan 1981: 146) yet, he wishes to come back to her. The poet reveals his true intentions when he addresses Ireland as if it was something dear to him. His directness ("to you Ireland, my Ireland") underlines that MacNeice knows the country well and does not have to use formalities when speaking to her. The product of their fondness can be his greater awareness of her true identity; the depravity and narrowness that pains him in *Autumn Journal* and to which he is so reluctant to return:

"A culture built upon profit,  
Free speech nipped in the bud,  
The minority always guilty,  
Why should I want to go back

To you Ireland,  
My Ireland?” (MacNeice, L., *Autumn Journal*: XVI)

However, when he eventually comes back he knows that, incessantly, there is nothing that can alter his unpleasant memories about *his* Ireland. In “Dublin” from *The Closing Album* (1939), he writes:

“And the mist on the Wicklow hills  
Is close, as close  
As the peasantry were to the landlord,  
As the Irish to the Anglo-Irish,  
As the killer is close one moment  
To the man he kills.” (MacNeice, L., “Dublin”, 1939)

In these lines, MacNeice compares the view of mountains near Dublin to less pleasant scenes of Irish everyday life. The dreamy atmosphere of foggy peaks reminds him of the dependency of the weak and the supremacy of the stronger. What is more, in all three examples mentioned by MacNeice, there is a subject-master relationship; one side always wins, while the other loses. The mountains tower over the city as the Lord has authority over his vassal, the British Empire over its colony, or the armed murderer over their culprit. It can be also assumed that this type of subordination represents his relationship with Ireland, in which the poet represents the weaker side.

Born in Belfast, MacNeice many times mentioned that the Southern part of the country constituted a form of escape for him (Brown 1989: 80). He travelled a few times to Dublin, first in 1934 to meet W.B. Yeats and later to either visit his mother in the hospital or spend his summer holidays. Nevertheless, his opinion about the city did not differ much from what he thought about Ireland; “Dublin is the microcosm” of its larger constituent (Schultz 2009: 170). In other words, the city was strange, paralysed, and ruined but, at the same time, it was the epitome of freedom and a new beginning. In his autobiographical essay (MacNeice 1965: 147), the poet explores his feelings about Dublin:

“I felt I was born again, to be able to go to Dublin on my own. (...)  
As I looked down on Dublin Bay, I felt that the world was open.”

MacNeice attempted to find in other parts of Ireland peace of mind and tranquillity (Brown 1989: 80). Dublin was one possibility to start life anew, seek opportunities, and eventually find literary recognition of W.B. Yeats.<sup>1</sup> However, under the surface

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<sup>1</sup> See: A. Haberer, “Yeats and MacNeice: From Context to Intertext,” in: *Irish University Review*, 1997, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 225-227.

of occasional uplifts and longing, MacNeice noted that Dublin is a place that is paralysed and lives in the past, hopelessly occupied with problematic history rather than collapsing reality. He expresses that in the poem “Dublin”:

“Grey brick upon brick,  
 Declamatory bronze  
 On sombre pedestals –  
 O’Connell, Grattan, Moore –  
 (...) And Nelson on his pillar  
 Watching his world collapse.”  
 (MacNeice, L., “Dublin”, 1939)

The omnipresent greyness and brownness continue to prevail during the whole poem as MacNeice names particularities of life in Dublin. He notes that both animate and inanimate nature in this city is characterized by dullness (“grey stone, grey water” Dublin: 62). It would seem that visual imagery conveys the negative emotions one may feel about Dublin. Since the dark colours may represent the feeling of exclusion, loneliness, or depression, this is the real image of Dublin – a city that dwells on past glories, displaced from the contemporary world, unwelcoming yet dependent.

In the same poem, MacNeice also underlines the city’s lack of character. He notes that due to its multiculturalism and commercialism, Dublin lacked individuality (Brown 2005: 121). It constitutes, therefore, a visible combination of foreign influences, which were assimilated by the Irish. Like a marionette, the city was manipulated and then became a reflection of the oppressor:

“Fort of the Dane,  
 Garrison of the Saxon,  
 Augustan capital  
 Of a Gaelic nation,  
 Appropriating all  
 The alien brought,” (MacNeice, L., “Dublin”, 1939)

The intrusions of the other, unknown force consequently led to the blandness and colourlessness of Dublin, which now “is not an Irish town and she is not English” (Dublin 38-39). What MacNeice tries to underline is probably the fact that Dublin was lacking distinguishable features, which would ultimately come to define it. This city is also a centre of paralysis, which is signaled by its general unwillingness to express objection to the changes of the other.

MacNeice admits that it is not his city, since he does not feel good while there. It is because he was never a proper citizen of Dublin, but rather just a tourist or visitor. Therefore, not having been born or studied there, enables him a safe escape; as the



poet puts it, “she [Dublin] will not have me alive or dead” (Dublin 16-17). Hence, in addition to Belfast, Dublin is another Irish city that would not imprison Louis MacNeice and could count only on his quiet admiration of scarce virtues.

Just like MacNeice, Joyce did not have an easy childhood. In a period of only twenty years, his family moved fourteen times around Dublin (Whitney 2014: 56), as a consequence of his father’s inability to guarantee the family’s well-being. For instance, in 1892, when John Joyce lost his only source of income, the old man was forced to sell his belongings in order to feed the family and cover their living expenses. Hence in *My Brother’s Keeper*, Stanislaus Joyce notes that with each new house, the economic status of the Joyces was worse; each new place was reminiscent of their descent down the social ladder and a phase in their lives as ‘gipsies’ (Whitney 2014: 56-57).

James Joyce was well aware of the poor conditions of living in Dublin and that is why, in his publications, he employs a realistic image of the city and people. It is especially visible in *Dubliners* that Ireland’s capital is depicted as a bleak, gloomy, and decaying place. Joyce did not uphold the romanticized vision of the *fin de siècle* Dublin with its roots in the Gaelic past but more preferably, he wrote a diary of lower-middle-class experiences (Harding 2003: 35). By way of “scrupulous meanness” (Fagnoli and Gillespie 1996: 60), he represented the city realistically: with its unemployment, insufficient housing conditions, slums, high death rates, and alcohol abuse (Harding 2003: 45). He uncovered the religious, social, and political troubles of the city in order to raise awareness of its moral and physical disease. As he explicitly signaled in his letters: “it is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs around my stories” (Leonard 2004: 95).

Joyce sketches convincingly realistic portraits of citizens who are powerless in the face of the unruly city. Their spiritual and material paralysis leads to isolation and detachment from reality because they do not notice what hopeless position they are in. Dubliners live and die in a cheap replica of a European city, which holds its grip around their necks and does not give them any chance of escape. Joyce conveys that people are unaware of the powers that the city holds and which forcefully make them stay where they are (Lanigan 2014: 2) The citizens never think about moving out, going abroad, or changing their situation because they are utterly paralysed by Dublin.

However, it is not only in the psychological portraits of Dubliners that the reader can notice the subjugating power of the city. In other words, the way parks, squares, streets are depicted is of high significance as well, for Dublin’s paralyzing quality can be expressed through the architectonic authority (Lanigan 2014: 116). Indeed, a significant part of the *Dubliners* constitutes the street; Bakhtiari and Sajadi write that in Joyce’s collection the word “street” is brought up around one hundred times (Bakhtiari and Sajadi 1984: 17-22). Similarly,

Chiara Salvagno draws attention to the fact that the characters spend hours on the streets often pointlessly walking around the city, which can, in turn, symbolize their lack of orientation and time (Salvagno 2013: VII). Therefore, life in Dublin is a constant state of stupefaction. Its citizens wander through the city without a purpose, not counting the time. It exemplifies Dublin's monotony, the city has nothing to offer except for dreary views and decay. Even more interestingly, Joyce in his stories usually captures Dublin at sunset, when "the air had grown sharp" (D, 54-55) and people spill out from their houses onto the streets (D, 19). Dubliners are active most frequently in the hours of nightfall, they experience the city at the time between the rustling hours of the day and the stillness of the night (Salvagno 2013: 71). It may symbolize the kind of life Joyce's characters lead: something between light and dark, life and death.

James Joyce pays special attention to the setting. Francesca Valente claims that Joyce uses "labyrinth imagery" which then she explains in such a way: a Dubliner's eye is the prisoner of the labyrinth and it is blind to the spiritual and intellectual paralysis of itself and the city (Valente). Therefore, while reading, the recipient feeds mostly on Joyce's visual codes that represent the state of Dublin. For example, in *A Little Cloud*, Gallaher "chose the darkest and narrowest streets and, as he walked boldly forward, the silence that was spread about his footsteps troubled him" (D, 62). Likewise, Gallaher, Lenehan in *Two Gallants* prefers to walk the dark quiet street because it is where he feels at ease (D, 48). As he wanders to pass the time, he reflects that the greyness of facades suits his mood, too. Consequently, the darkness here may highlight not only the characters' confusion or thoughtlessness but also their desire to escape and to be alone. Nevertheless, living in the darkness, they have a limited scope of perception, which makes them, literally and metaphorically, unable to see clearly.

Chiara Salvagno (2013: 25) assumes that the colours of Dublin resemble that of autumn or winter. She writes that the main tones that represent the city are: grey, brown, yellow, and green. The darker ones constitute metaphors for the city's decay. (Salvagno 2013: 25). Having said that, one can easily notice the abundance of such representations in *Dubliners*. For example, in *A Painful Case*, Duffy's face is "of the brown tint of Dublin streets," (D, 77) his name translated from Irish would mean "dark" or "brown," (Duffy 1968: 147) and he lives in an "old sombre house" (D, 95). Mangan's sister from *Araby* is seen as a "brown figure" (D, 24) on the street, and the eponymous bazaar is "completely dark." (D, 24) Then in *Clay*, Maria is grateful for having her brown rain cloak on, while travelling to the Donnelly's for dinner.

The places that Joyce's characters inhabit mirror their lives. In *Araby*, one can read about the disadvantageous and rather dark district of Dublin, which also happens to be the home for the main character. Indeed, North Richmond Street is a quiet and murky one with rows of uninhabited, detached houses. The

neighbourhood is considered appalling and offers its inhabitants only dull landscapes of brown, paint-ripped facades. The street is a blind one; since there is no exit, the dead-end symbolizes people’s confinement to their lives, the impossibility of change, or escape. Ben L. Collins (1967: 85-86) writes that the blind North Richmond Street stands for the failure of any undertaken quest to sail away from Dublin. That is why at the end of the story, the young boy becomes aware of the inescapability of his fate and feels disillusioned about his blindness and highly-regarded romantic values.

### Conclusion

The landscape of Dublin from Louis MacNeice’s poetry and James Joyce’s *Dubliners* resembles a gloomy and decaying place. As a capital city, Dublin, has nothing to offer apart from muddy streets, crowds of hopeless drunk people, and an omnipresent feeling of stasis. Everything there is a reminiscence of the past; the buildings, monuments, memorials are connected with past glories rather than with the facts of the present day.

The psychological relations between the city and its inhabitants, as studied by Guy Debord in psychogeography, reflect the complicated relationship between the *psyche* and urban space. MacNeice and Joyce fought with the powers that a place can have over an individual and present the examples of the resistance in their works and adult life. With each move, the authors signalled their wish to break their links with Dublin, yet the bleak images of the place still followed them. It is believed that as a consequence of such a relationship, both authors represent this city in a way that would emphasise the type of bond that exists between the authors and the city. Thus, it can be concluded that MacNeice and Joyce use a particular spectrum of colours to underline the city’s decaying landscape. The colours brown, orange, and yellow are employed to convey the rustiness of life in Dublin. Also, as has been emphasized, walking and *flânerie* are two important elements when considering psychogeography, an attempt has been made to recognize the traces of both these activities in MacNeice’s poems and Joyce’s stories.

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