Philippe Romanski

Louis MacNeice, *The Burning Perch*

"The Crash"

Suggestions for commentary

In Louis MacNeice's later poems, and most obviously in *The Burning Perch*, mental landscapes, dream-like or *liminal* experiences, moments of vision, etc., become more frequent—perhaps as his interest in parables and allegories also become greater. One of the best of these poems is "After the Crash". This three-stanza poem takes the nightmare theme (or dimension) in a very specific direction, and in a very particular type of world in which the *persona* is neither a dream nor having one, but is unable to remember the events surrounding or preceding the accident in which he has been involved. "Something" has taken place—something which the title calls a "crash". This is an obvious moment of phenomenological *rupture*, since the term "crash" is in no way meaningful, except it points to the violent end of some sort of process, without explaining anything. The episode also involves a process of amnesia and, of course, as a consequence, the persona's will to *re-member*. Something —a crash— has happened. But what sort of crash is it? How did it happen? The character only understands that time has passed just by observing the hemlock that has grown all over the asphalt round him, and by *seeing* or *imagining* the damage done to his helmet and his hand and, consequently, his possible multiple injuries.

Key-words:

Boundaries ; liminal ; transgression ; time vs. *duration ; dislocation ; equivocation ; ambivalence ; suspension ; nightmare ; night-mare.*

To put it differently, the poem evokes—in a rather surrealistical and hallucinatory way—the (physical and psychological) dislocation of a motorbike rider after crashing. The first stanza of this rather perplexing and most disturbing poem unfolds with the curious illogic quality of a dream. Things are noticeably difficult to picture out and visualize for the reader—difficult but *not* impossible. What we see is essentially bits and pieces, and the world acquires a fragmented and kaleidoscopic dimension in which we can distinguish here and there signals bouncing back from the moon, hens ans small, blind cats What is fascinating is that, in the dreamworld that is here conjured up, we tend to accept such logic without any hesitation or quibble. Duration replaces Time. The usual boundaries of space are blurred, if not annihilated. And reasons questioned.

We are told that life "seemed still going on" and that he "came to", but in what sense he awoke ("came to") remains most unclear, since, all of a sudden, he has a vision of a pair of scales in the sky as fatally balanced. The reader is invited to grasp that the poetic persona has missed his chance—so to speak —to fully

experience the process of death, though he is paradoxically and nightmarishly aware of that fact: "it was too late to die". The character seems to wake up to the knowledge that *dying* is no longer a central issue. That being said, we readers, are faced with an essential difficulty in terms of interpretation. It is indeed extremely difficult to understand the meaning of this line. Does it imply that the persona is still alive? Or does it mean that *dying* as such is no longer an issue because the character *is* now *dead*? To return to the phraseology used in "To Mary"—the dedicatory poem (remember: the poem that is *simultaneously* included and *not* included in this collection of poems [*cf*. the table of contents]), "dismount(ing) the mad-eyed beast »— the night-mare—is not always easy.

The fact remains that nothing definite or certain can be inferred at the end. Interestingly, as evidenced by the use of the gigantic scales, the last stanza suggests an allegorical vision of *judgement*, but its meaning remains unstated and ambiguous. This final image is an image of suspension, of judgement being suspended in-between two "dead empty" pans (*dead* empty here meaning *definitely* empty, *really* empty). And this of course also holds true for our own critical judgement. We too are eventually left "debating whether to pounce" on some sort of conclusive reading. Symbolically enough, no helmet is no longer to be found in the poem—in other words there can't be any no *protection* or *guarantee* against equivocation and ambivalence. Interpretation is condemned to be kept at bay, or more exactly reenacted on and on.

Now the fact that the "asphalt is high with hemlock" is an element which we must not dismiss to easily or too quickly. The term "hemlock" brings to mind the death sentence of Socrates. Bear in mind that, at trial, the majority of his jurors examined the charges (moral corruption and impiety) then, consistent with common legal practice, voted to determine his punishment, and agreed to a sentence of death to be executed by Socrates's drinking a lethal dose of hemlock. Socrates therefore *executed* his *own* death sentence. He was his own executioner. What is here problematic is that hemlock (and this veiled reference to Socrates) is therefore connected with *indirect* suicide. And this of course brings us back to this other poem entitled "The Suicide" — which if you remember is as ambivalent as this one. The presence on hemlock in the poem somehow raises the question of the origin of this accident.

The poem, although conceptually inexplicable in any fully satisfying way, has a haunting, memorable power. What makes this poem so convincing is the complex amalgam or fusion (or confusion) between the real and the surreal, the prosaic and the parabolic. *Though* they are oblique and ambiguous (or *because* they are oblique and ambiguous), images fix gruesomely in the mind—but, strikingly enough, no real or definite knowledge (in spite of the repetition of the phrase "he knew") can be be attained at the end. The ride is not over yet (*cf*. "To Mary").