It was always a place to reject. It would always represent in one of its manifestations an intimation of primal terror, of those forces which can overwhelm a self-hood insecurely possessed of its own identity. Ireland for MacNeice is therefore a place of hauntings, where dark ghosts of the past cannot be laid to rest. The sources of this vision of Irish reality lie, as is by now well-known, in the poet’s own haunted Northern Irish childhood, chillingly addressed in his poem ‘Autobiography’:

When I was five the black dreams came;  
Nothing after was quite the same.

Come back early or never come.

The dark was talking to the dead;  
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

Come back early or never come.¹

What is perhaps less widely observed is the obsessional degree of MacNeice’s preoccupation with a childhood whose traumata he could never fully exorcise. The fact indeed that he chose to attempt a full-scale autobiographical prose work (posthumously published as The Strings are False) at the early age of thirty-two suggests psychological necessity and compulsion rather than any fully mature retrospective composure. And this work, (for which he signed a contract in 1939 and abandoned c. 1941) was only the culmination at that date of the various autobiographical passages which had pushed their way with obsessional insistence into prose and critical works such as Zoo (1938) and Modern Poetry: a Personal Essay (1938). MacNeice at the outset of The Strings are False recognised the therapeutic aspects of his endeavour, that his
feelings were ‘too mixt to disentangle’.\(^2\) We are reminded that in 1934 in his poem ‘Valediction’ he had confessed ‘The woven figure cannot undo its thread’. But the past now demands comprehension if all the threads are not to be lost in a chaotic tangle:

I am 33 years old and what can I have been doing that I still am in a muddle? But everyone else is too, maybe our muddles are concurrent. Maybe if I look back, I shall find that my life is not just mine, that it mirrors the lives of the others – or shall I say the Life of the Other? Anyway I will look back. And return later to pick up the present, or rather pick up the future.

So MacNeice in *The Strings are False* picks up the threads of his Irish past hoping to escape a vitiating entanglement.

In that book we learn, therefore, of a shadow-filled rectory, lit at moments of psychic release by the brilliance of sense impressions, where a remote father played out a strange conspiracy with God and a loving and wholly attentive mother fell into acute melancholia and departed suddenly for the nursing home in which she was, unexpectedly, to die; of a mongoloid brother who seemed frozen in a condition of emotional stasis and of a Calvinistic children’s nurse who abused her charge with warnings of hell-fire and damnation. Family legend of a West of Ireland, from which the MacNeice’s had been uprooted to a Northern exile, provided the emotional dialectic for a childish sense of personal alienation from a deeply unsettling experience of the natal place. In another autobiographical essay, begun in the 1930s, MacNeice wrote:

I have always had what may well be a proper dislike and disapproval of the North of Ireland but largely as I find on analysis for improper – i.e. subjective – reasons. A harrassed and dubious childhood under the hand of a well-meaning but barbarous mother’s help from County Armagh led me to think of the North of Ireland as prison and the South as a land of escape. Many nightmares, boxes on the ears, a rasping voice of disapproval, a monotonous daily walk to a crossroads called Mile Bush, sodden haycocks, fear of hell-fire, my father’s indigestion – these things, with on the other side my father’s Home Rule sympathies and the music of his brogue, bred in me an almost fanatical hatred for Ulster. When I went to bed as a child I was told ‘You don’t know where you’ll wake up’. When I ran in the garden I was told that