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"Such Clarity of Seeming": Norman MacCaig and his Writing

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Now in his 79th year, the poet regarded by many as Scotland's laureate is kept as busy as ever fulfilling a diary of reading engagements under the auspices of the Scottish Arts Council's "Writers in Public" scheme. "I am," Norman MacCaig reflects with laconic good humor, "looking forward to retiring from retirement."[1] He has been a favorite reader for many years now, not least because of an attractive talent for memorable phrase-making. MacCaig possesses a seemingly inexhaustible ability to strike off utterances which connect immediately with his audience's hitherto unexpressed reflections and perceptions. Whether he's noticing "The goat, with amber dumb-bells in his eyes,"[2] or that "a butterfly, crazy with wings,/ is trying to go in every direction at once" (CP, p. 372), that "the daddy-longlegs helicopters/ about the room" (CP, p. 304), or, as, a cock struts by, that "one can almost see/ the tiny set of bagpipes/ he's sure he's playing" (CP, p. 299), the precision of MacCaig's rhythms invites us back into the minutiae of life, sharpening our recognitions and amplifying our senses of the world.

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[1]This essay incorporates an interview conducted with MacCaig early in 1989.

[2]Norman MacCaig, *Collected Poems*. (London, 1985, rpt 1988), p. 67. Subsequent references to this volume are marked CP and given parenthetically in the text.

While he delights in proposing novel cognitive identification for things around him, fleshing abstractions with a deceptively casual ease, MacCaig also registers depths and resonances beyond the perceptual. At the "End of a cold night" for example, "...a spell is broken; suddenly Time scratches/ The hour on its box and up flares a new day" (CP, p. 10). Or consider how closely focussed is the eye which asks, in "Rain on fence wire":

> What little violences shake
> the raindrop till it turns from apple
> to stretched-out pear, then drops and takes
> its whirling rainbows to the ground? (CP, 86)

MacCaig's "lust of looking" (CP, p. 77) here achieves memorable definition, as the poem turns to a bird's foot shaking the fence-wire when the bird takes flight, thereby vibrating a chord of exhilarating paradox, a movement simultaneously into the air and down to earth:

> Was it the world itself that quaked
> Enormously beyond my knowing?
> Or tiny claws, that perch and shake
> From yards away a rainbow down?
>
> No difference... I look and see
> The dry wings flirt, the small ounce soaring
> And with its leap a shower of drops
> Flames down, released into the grass.

There is an apparent sense in which Norman MacCaig is happiest obeying Aristotle's injunction to give instructive pleasure. "Here is the world about you," he seems often to be saying, "while you are able, scrutinise its intricate measures." Partly as a consequence of this, his is an imagination which also registers concerns with being and nothingness, with time and transience, which echo in the mind to sobering, often unnerving effect. A celebration of being is pervasive in his writing, but the figure which death makes as it flits through MacCaig's pages is also chillingly engraved:

> A hand dangles
> from a chair arm;
> and a man's head droops.
> The night outside creeps into it.[3]

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[3]Norman MacCaig, *Voice Over* (London, 1988), p. 34. Subsequent references to this volume are marked VO and given parenthetically in the text.

"The old conspiracy of space and time," (CP, p. 20) is one which haunts his writing first and last. And as theme, this, too, can produce images of unaccustomed concretion. In "Wreck" (CP, p. 24), the poet considers a "hulk stranded in Scalpay bay":

> Twice every day it took aboard
> A cargo of the tide; its crew
> Flitted with fins. And sand explored
> Whatever cranny it came to.

That silting of the sand in the ship's remains, so slow as to be virtually imperceptible, enables the poem's final meditation, a gesturing of movement within an eon of time:

> Its voyages would not let it be.
> More slow than glacier it sailed
> into the bottom of the sea.

Norman MacCaig's own world and time is initially defined by the context of Scotland's capital city. Born in Edinburgh's New Town in 1910, he grew up in Dundas Street, living in a top flat above the chemist shop his father owned. He remembers moving house when he was still at school, "straight across the road to another top flat. And later we moved to Howard place, opposite the Botanic Gardens. I think by that time I was at the University." Entering Edinburgh University in 1928 to read Classics, he went on to spend a year at Moray House College of Education, training to be the schoolteacher he remained for 34 years. He always wanted to be a schoolteacher and could never remember there being another profession in his mind.

But he did not have the same assumption that he was going to be a poet. "I got interested at school, of course, because the teacher, Puggy Grant, asked us either to write a composition or a poem by next Wednesday. And, with my sturdy Scottish pragmatism, I thought to myself—well, a poem's shorter. So I wrote my first poem then—got interested, and started writing, writing, writing." His first volume of poems had been published during the Second World War, and an enquiry about these circumstances led to a digression concerning MacCaig's imprisonment in Edinburgh Castle.

"I was a conscientious objector, and when I was called up, I was supposed to go to Ilfracombe to a unit in the Pioneer Corps. I wrote to the head chap and said 'I'm not coming, but if you want me I'm generally in by midnight.' And eventually I was collected—it was after midnight—by a couple of policemen who stuck me in a local gaol near the house. The

next day or so, a corporal and a private came and bundled me off to the Castle, where I was imprisoned. At the Tribunal I had made it clear that I was willing to join the Royal Army Medical Corps, but that I wasn't going to kill anyone. Some time after our arrival at Ilfracombe, they put us on a job in a tank depot. I don't know what we were supposed to do there because I refused to go. And I was court-martialled. In Aldershot no less. And they were very fair. I was drummed out of the army with contumely."

It was while he was in the army that his first volume of poems was published—poems which MacCaig would now prefer never to have seen the light of day.

"A collection of *terrible* poems—semi-surrealistic. I have a phrase for them: every poem is a 'vomitorium of unrelated images'—which nobody could understand. Routledge and Kegan Paul published them during the war. A friend of mine asked to see this terrible book, and when he gave it back he said the only thing about them that was ever of any use to me, spoken or written. He said 'There's your book, Norman, when are you publishing the answers?' And I came to what was left of my sense: struggled on my hands and knees along the rocky road to lucidity and comprehensibility—which took me a good few years. Any fool can be obscure, but to be lucid is hellish difficult."

Several years ago, during his time as Edinburgh University's first writer-in-residence, MacCaig had maintained at a seminar that he was not a writer who went through draft after draft of a poem to produce a final polished version. Yet he achieves the kind of lucidity on the page that must always look hard worked for, and it was natural to wonder about his process of composition.

"Well, I can tell you what happens, I can't explain it. I feel like writing a poem the way you feel hungry or thirsty. And if it's possible, I sit down always in this particular chair, and with a particular size of blank paper, no lines on it. And I have not an idea what's coming. Not a clue. And very quickly into my head comes a memory of a place or an event or a person or all three. But far more often it's a short line, a short phrase—four or five words, nothing extraordinary about them. Down it goes, and the poem trickles down the page until it's finished. They come very quickly, very easily. I'm asked 'how long does it take you to write a poem, Norman?' And I say 'two fags.' Sometimes it's only one. And I can't work on them. I never write a second version, as most poets do—three, four, five, six, ten sometimes. I just can't. I don't want to. I'd rather try to write another poem. And often they come out without any changes. You'd think I just copied them. Now the snag of course is, I write a lot that don't please me. They're duds: they don't come off: boring; dull. And about twice a year I look through what I've written and I throw them out. I suppose I

put five or six out of ten in the bucket. But they come so easily, and I write such a lot."

Pressing him further about this simply had the effect of bringing out his sense of fun: "Someone once asked Philip Larkin 'what gave you the idea of using the toad as a symbol for work?' 'Genius,' Larkin replied." MacCaig then reached into the battered folder he takes with him on readings to pull out a recently written poem. There it was, on blank, unlined paper, with only the correction of a slight error to mar its otherwise straightforward inscription. But he accepts that for many people this is difficult to believe: "After all, most poets have two or three versions at least—sometimes a dozen. I never did that."

How then did he account for the purely formal accomplishment of his writing? But the mischief was in him now: "well, it's my Gaelic origins, you see—they're great formalists the Celts." Gaeldom was, though, something to which we would return in our conversations, and what began as a humorous aside soon developed into something more.

"The Gaels *are* very formal in their arts, even where there is not much, as in sculpture, but did you ever see anything more formal than a Celtic cross? Same with their great music: the pibroch is extremely formal. And you know, I always loved form, which I think may be one of the reasons I took Classics. That, anyway, in turn encouraged this admiration for form. So that I didn't often write a poem that was formally bad."

Though for many years he did not re-read Classical Literature, as reference and allusion it enters his own writing in a variety of ways. He has always considered arcane reference to "figures that nobody ever heard of and languages that nobody can speak" to be "bad art and bad manners," and unlike Pound, the allusive web which Classicism weaves in his poetry is characterized by an affable, invitational tone and structure, as though one part of his intention sought to domesticate these legends and gods, bringing them back down to a realm of more immediate, recognizably human, discourse.

"That's right. They were an appalling shower, the classical gods —lecherous, treacherous, bad-tempered, cruel; they were fearsome! They're just enlarged people. So I take the mickey out of them. Also, though, I'm quite careful, if I write about classical figures, either real ones or legendary, mythological ones, I very much restrict the choice to names which even today are known to a lot of people."

Related to this aspect of his writing is MacCaig's habit of reference to, and inclusion of, myth. This tendency is recurrent, and often involves using myth in its popular or colloquial application signifying a tale or account that is not according to the facts. On other occasions, though,

MacCaig will engage in senses of myth as an aesthetic creation of the human imagination, with poets figuring thus as early mythologizers.

"Well, myths are very important. Whether you believe in them or not, they are."

Still, though, his own use of the terms and apparatus of myth and mythology has an often arresting and immediate vitality. In a poem like "Apparition," for example, the poet climbs Ben Stack, to the north of Lochinver, in Sutherland:

> At the cairn I turn round and scan
> the jumbled wilderness
> of mountains and bogs and lochs,
> South, East North and then—West
> —the sea
>
> Where a myth in full rig.
> a great sailing ship, escaped
> from the biggest bottle in the world,
> glides grandly through the rustling water.
> (VO, p. 34)

Apprehended so directly, what might "myth" signify in such a context?

"It all goes back to the old clipper days, with everyone trying to be the fastest from Britain to Australia: the 'Cutty Sark'—those great ships, which had become a sort of myth."

So it was the reality within and underneath the myth that he wished to bring back into focus?

"Yes, and to see this beautiful—I don't remember how many masts it had, but it was a real, full-rigged ship in this wilderness of a place. It was like something from another time."

Years earlier, a poem called "The Rosyfingered," (CP, p. 14) from the first volume to be gathered in the *Collected Poems*, used Homer's habitual mode of reference to the dawn to bring the mythic back down here into the mundane world. A comic vein enriches MacCaig's working of the theme of the sun rising:

> And an old myth tries to heave itself to its feet:
> The phoenix newly feathered in the east
> Takes wing, blundering; and Phoebus not so fleet
> Comes cantering after it, but comes at least.

The blend of cadenced phrase with uneasy movement is entirely to the point, and when the sun is up MacCaig's praise of it has an apparently unadorned directness:

> Only a beauty with no rouge of myth
> Walks plain in the plain field.

It is that "rouge of myth" which catches the mind's eye.

"Well, the facts of history, like Coeur de Lion—the way he was taught at school, his myth was rouged up. It was an act. It wasn't real. It wasn't the fact. And I am for the facts."

Agreeing that in this instance he returns to Homer, a mythic structure, in order to stress the everyday aspect, the here and now dimensions of experience, MacCaig's sense of mischief bubbles to the surface again.

"That's right. Rosy-fingered my foot! Just have a look at it! What's more, that's a mistranslation, though that's always the way it's translated: *rhododactylos*—it's equally rosy-toed, since dactylos meant both your fingers and your toes!"

Nonetheless, the fascination with metaphor remains a constant; the beauty who walks in the plain field still figures the sunrise as beautiful woman, with MacCaig substituting the adornment of metaphor for the projection of myth. Linguistic structures thus form sufficient framework for the excavation of human motivation. Similar considerations seem to be appropriate for the drily witty demythologizing of a poem like "Two Ways of It":

> You are no Helen, walking parapets
> and dazing wisdom with another beauty
> that made hard men talk of soft goddesses
> And feel death blooming in their violent wits
> With such seduction that they asked no pity—
> Till death came whistling in and loosed their knees.
> (CP, p. 74)

At its close the poem reflects upon 'natural celebration', and it seemed sufficiently characteristic to inquire further.

"This is me at it again. This woman is not Helen: she's not going to be turned into a constellation by some god or other. She is exactly what she is. In that last stanza, I'm objecting, I suppose, to things in the past being curmudgeonly, mystified, and 'rouged.' Helen is a myth, and the poem is written against this mythologizing. You are what you are—five foot four inches high, seven stone eight pounds. This is a very recurring thing with me."

That same resilient empiricism and plea for human self-sufficiency may help to account for another continuing strand in MacCaig's writing; his usually witty, frequently cutting and sometimes angry references to

formalized religion. And this, too, forms part of his constructed poetic, since he had no religious upbringing as a child.

"I don't think my parents had any belief at all and, as I like to put it I was born an atheist. It isn't the fact of religion that I oppose, it's what the believers do with it and because of it. There's more blood shed in the history of the world because of religion than anything else. Religion has consistently, even in primitive tribes, caused cruelty, torture, death."

But what then adds a depth and complexity to MacCaig's response is his awareness of the almost religious function of metaphor in primitive language as a factor joining poetry and myth. The relation of ritual to the rhythmic, metrical aspects of poetry is widely accepted, and the ritualistic basis of myth suggests further affiliations. It may well be that MacCaig's sceptical acknowledgement of the attractions of myth, and his continual investigation of the conditions of metaphor connect in fruitful ways. Perhaps such considerations underlie the secularizing of biblical cadence and the implied supremacy of the language of poetry in "Between two Nowheres":

> We praise the good God for his creation
> of the universe.—When are the hymns to be written
> in praise of the unimaginable power of the Word
> that first made the chaos that made
> creation possible?
>
> (CP, p. 275)

Insofar as traditional mythologies seek to explain the Creation, divinity and religion, they become a subject for MacCaig's radically secularizing attitudes. Conversely and simultaneously, though, a literary approach which sees in myth vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony that might give order and a frame of meaning to a poet's personal perceptions and images finds a more sympathetic response. It also seems to be the case that a twin and tandem continuity of attention relates to MacCaig's consistent celebration of the present. A detectable development in his life of writing has been the utilization and integration of the facts and problems of historical material and experience, with his writing feeding such reference and recuperation into a sense of the now.

"Very much so. I quite often, I suppose, write exactly about the past and now; and even the future. I despise the future! It doesn't exist until it's now!"

> It's my pretty Now I'm in love with
> that won't stand still
> to be measured. The past
> has gone to a far country; and as for the future

there's no future in it.
But my pretty Now, I love her, I love her,
because she shows herself off to me
and will always be faithful.
(CP, p. 274).

Evidently, fidelity to the figure of woman remains a metaphoric constant, but given that his sensuous registration of perception and experience also concerns the now of the reader, there are times when his verse has a distinctly existentialist ring to it.

My own self
Is what surrounds me and it trembles
With my own winter. I hang in ragged
Branches and echo like these grassy cobbles
(CP, p. 130)

"Well, there was a time when existentialism was a kind of craze-cult, and I read some existentialist books at that time. The only philosopher I read with any interest was Kierkegaard, who really was a kind of founder of existentialism."

In *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens remarks that "the accuracy of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality,"[4] and this is something that MacCaig has preserved in his own writing, beyond the registration of glittering surfaces. Early and late with him, imagistic precision is placed at the service of a sensuous probing not only of what things mean but of how they come to signify what they do:

"I often mention Suilven, but I'm well aware it's only a lump of sandstone. I don't put my feelings onto it, or extract new feelings from it. Except that it's a most beautiful lump of sandstone. That's what it is."

He has, correspondingly, always striven for physical accuracy in his representations, sometimes to an obsessive degree.

"Take the oyster-catcher. I first described it as having yellow legs. That's not true. It has orange legs. But by the time I realized that, the poem was already published. And that troubled me for about thirty years, until it appeared in the *Collected Poems*, when I changed it."

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[4]Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*. (London, 1969), p. 71.

In his poem "Notes Towards the Supreme Fiction," Stevens uses the phrase "theatre of trope,"[5] and it seems an appropriate description for some of the ways in which MacCaig works in extended metaphor, giving a dramatic intensity and often a sense of physical presence to his verbal conjurings. Quite apart from such occasional echoes of Stevens' characteristic phrasing as "lordly magnifico" (CP, p. 236), "opulent/ ululations" (CP, p. 247), or "dandified gluttony" (CP, p. 294), the idea of 'the poem as the act of the mind' also brings Stevens into focus.[6] Yet there can be few poets who have introduced the word 'mind' into their work as variously as has MacCaig, often enough in apparent exploration of the Stevens aphorism, "what we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye."[7] It seemed to be a case of genuine poetic interaction.

"When I first came across Wallace Stevens' work, it was the occasional poem here and there in different magazines, because he wasn't published in bulk over here for a ridiculously long time. I was very much attracted to his work. I am not saying I am as good a poet as Wallace Stevens, but I felt a sort of affinity with his persistent—perhaps too persistent—talk about the difference between reality and imagination, and what imagination does to reality. He was all for what the imagination does to it. I don't go that far; in fact rather the opposite. But I felt this interest of his in reality and imagination, and his notion that everything has to be a fiction. And when the books began to appear, I read them gluttonously. I read books about him, and was fascinated. I still think that he's a great poet, but my direct interest in him stopped quite suddenly. I was saturated, you know, I'd read enough."

That is an interesting response, and one which suggests a carefully selective sense of convergence and difference on MacCaig's part. But one area where it seems he was able to turn American precept to Scottish account lies in Stevens' attitude to poetry as a satisfying of the human desire for resemblance, expressed with clarity in *The Necessary Angel*:

> Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance. As the satisfying of a desire, it is pleasurable. But its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance, it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it.... It makes it brilliant. When the similarity is between things of adequate dignity, the resemblance may be said to transfigure or to sub-

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[5]Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*. (London, 1955), p. 397.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 240.

[7]Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel Fench Morse (London, 1959), p. 162.

> limate them. Take, for example, the resemblance between reality and any projection of it in belief or in metaphor. What is it that these two have in common? Is not the glory of the idea of any future state a relation between a present and a future glory? *The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise.*[8]

In the secular rigor of such an utterance, and in its emphasis upon metaphor as a transfiguring embellishment of the here and now, a writer of MacCaig's abilities could find imaginative space to breathe and develop.

Certainly, MacCaig forges a distinctive voice, yet it is further interesting that one of the abler contemporary American critics of Stevens makes a remark which can as accurately apply to the Scottish writer.

> For [MacCaig], however, poetry always remains *lyric* poetry, as late Romantic theory (if not always the poetry) had defined it—the poem as short verse utterance (or sequence of such utterances) in which a single speaker expresses, in figurative language, his subjective vision, a truth culminating in a unique insight or epiphany that unites poet and reader.[9]

I asked whether the affinity with Stevens also survived, though now in very different ways, in MacCaig's continued interest in mind and in the mental construction of perception.

"Oh I'm sure, I'm sure."

MacCaig's closely focused attention to the fictionality of metaphor is recurrent:

> - But how hard it is
> to live at a remove
> from a common wall, that keeps out and
> keeps in, and from water, that
> saves you and drowns you.
>
> But when I went on to notice
> that I could see the pair of them
> as a trickling wall or as a wall
> of water,
> it became clear that I can describe only
> my own inventions.
>
> (CP, p. 158)

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[8]*The Necessary Angel*, p. 77 (Emphasis added).

[9]Marjorie Perloff "The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of the Modernist Lyric" in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge, 1985), p. 51.

Again, perhaps deriving from Stevens' insistence that "Every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in terms of an attitude,"[10] MacCaig seems to be accepting that "Every image is an intervention on the part of the image-maker."[11] No matter how careful the scripted attention to detail, a part of the poetic process will always be that "a transference has been made" (CP, p. 16). And MacCaig's reference here to Aristotle's *Poetics* is pertinent, where metaphor in the familiar sense of "the application to one thing of a name belonging to another thing" is rhetorically categorized. Aristotle continues: "The transference may be from the genus to the species, from the species to the genus, or from one species to another, or it may be a matter of analogy. As an example of transference from genus to species I give 'Here lies my ship,' for lying at anchor is a species of lying."[12] In characteristic high spirits, MacCaig, the sometimes surreal classicist, puts into practice his proclaimed preference—as "Means Test" expresses it—for "things shifting/ And lucid, not locked in a hard design" (CP, p. 307) by subjecting Aristotle's determination of rhetoric, his own example of metaphor, to the glissade of a metaphorical destabilization which manages to call into question the mimetic efficacy of *any* mode of figuration:

> A ship sails clean out of its metaphor
> And birds perch on no simile; and Time
> Breaks all the rules of reason and of rhyme.
> (CP, p. 53)

In such circumstances, a poet can only embrace the shimmer of signifiers almost as an act of defiance against their own duplicities:

> I won't give up being deceived by landscape's
> Likenesses and incorrigible metaphors.
> (CP, p. 274)

Little wonder, then, that "A Sigh for Simplicity" (CP, p. 305) laments in comic vein:

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[10] *The Necessary Angel*, p. 128.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[12] Aristotle "On the Art of Poetry" in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T.S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 61.

> If only I could see a hazelnut without thinking
> of monkish skullcaps. Does the fishing boat at
> the pier
> Really rock like a bear? Is a mussel really
> *bearded*?
> It's time I put the lady moon on my blacklist.
>
> I groan and think, if I were only Adam
> To whom everything was exactly its own name—
> Until one day the other appeared, the shameless
> Demander of similes, the destroyer of Eden.

Language itself becomes a permanent temptress towards the next created likeness.

In a famous utterance, Wallace Stevens declared that "the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."[13] But a Scottish scepticism distances MacCaig from the American's transcendental sweep. It seems at times to be a scepticism which is nurtured by the absence of territorial security: "That transcendental One I don't believe in./ How give it birth with no place to conceive in?" (CP, p. 276). Bringing to bear a postmodern alertness to the coding of all experience as forms of textuality, "Ego" expresses its existential doubts in navigational terms:

> Tree
> And star are ways of finding out what I
> Mean in a text composed of earth and sky.
>
> What reason to believe this, any more
> than that I am myself a metaphor (CP, p. 46).

It is not the case, however, that MacCaig expresses any fundamental suspicion about the poetic exploration of metaphor.

"Not at all. I wrote a wee poem confounding metaphor, saying I'm sick and tired of it—except that it consists entirely of metaphor. Which I'm well aware of, because I can't escape from metaphor and image—I just can't. It's the way my mind goes."

Rather than Stevens' often assertive mode, then, a characteristic uncertainty holds sway:

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[13]"Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous*, p. 163.

eyes change what they look at,
ears never stop making their multiple translations
and the right hand refutes the meaning
of what the left hand is doing.
(CP, p. 308)

Yet it remains the case that MacCaig considers himself to be a man of reason.

"That's why I admire 'mind' so much. Of course no one really knows what it means, but often to me it stands for reason, for accuracy of that physical kind you know—Suilven isn't a phallic symbol, it's a great lump of sandstone. I'm a great admirer of reason, though I know it has its limitations."

Given this ambience of ratiocination in verse, and MacCaig's often ingenious deployment of conceitful thought, it seemed appropriate to mention what many have felt in his writing to be a deep affection for what we still call the "metaphysical" poets, the great lyric writers of the seventeenth century.

"Oh well, I still have that; especially for John Donne. I loved him for—well, he's extraordinary. His technique alone is admirable, and the fantastic images and metaphors that he creates. And the straightforward almost prosy way in which he states them—only it's not prosy at all, it's poetry. But he just speaks directly out, you know, very forthright in spite of his metaphors and images, because that's the way *he* thought."

And earlier in his writing career, MacCaig paid homage to this technique?

"Early on, I would agree, but not for a long time now. There's one book of mine where two, maybe three poems would make somebody think, 'Aye aye, MacCaig's been reading Donne again.' But that was a long time ago. 'Poem for a Goodbye' (CP, p. 52)—that seems to me to be 'Donneish.'"

Yet in other ways, MacCaig's relationships with his more direct ancestors had seemed to be ambivalent, at least. He seems to have spent considerable time finding creative space for the peopled history of his own past. But, increasingly, they come to occupy significant space in his writing. I asked him about his own genealogy.

"I don't know much about it, largely because three of my grandparents were dead before I was born and the other one died when I was about eight, and living in Edinburgh. They were all Gaels. I spent three holidays in my teens at my mother's place in Scalpay, off the Isle of Harris. But it wasn't until years later that I began to realize what an important thing these holidays were. They shifted me from thinking that Edinburgh consisted of me and my mammy and my daddy and my sisters. I found on

Scalpay my aunties and my cousins. And it did two things. It made me realize that I, like everybody else, come from generations and generations and generations—which was the beginning of an interest, though not a very well exploited one, in actual history. It gave me a channel, a telephone wire to the past, which before that I didn't have at all."

And MacCaig's father?

"From Dumfries. But *his* father was from Argyll—another Gaelic speaker."

How then did he feel that he related to the world of Gaeldom?

"Now that's awfully difficult. I know that I feel more at home when I'm amongst the Gaels at Lochinver—never mind the Outer Hebrides—than I do among Edinburgh people, although I've lived here all my days: I really do. I much enjoy the company of Gaels. I feel at home among them—genetics, I suppose. And then, of course, my mother: she was illiterate all her life, yet I never knew anybody who in conversation, without realizing it, used metaphors and images as much as she did. If there's any poetry in me, that's where it came from: some of the most astonishing images and metaphors—often very funny. It was just the way she thought, and there's a bit of that in me."

It became natural then to wonder about his relationship to poetry in the Scots tongue.

"I love the Scots language. My father lived in Dumfries until he was 18, and no doubt spoke rich Scots in those days, so that the Scots language does not in any way feel alien to me, not a bit. On the other hand, I've lived all my days in Edinburgh, and I talk English—did at school. Ninety-nine percent of what I read is in English. English is my language. And if Edwin Muir was right when he claimed, I think stupidly, that no Scot could write good poetry in English because he is not using his ancestral language—why then my ancestral language genetically is Gaelic, not Scots at all, except that wee bit through my father. So if there's any truth whatever in 'the language of the blood,' then mine is Gaelic, which I can't even speak! No, English is my language, just as it is the language of almost all Scots people these days. The number of people who speak a *rich* Scots—oh, you'll get them in Aberdeenshire, but hardly anywhere else."

Given the way in which MacCaig has combined his role as the poet of Edinburgh's urban landscape with his extraordinary imaginative possession of the Assynt region of Sutherland, he has earned the right to claim representative status for his writing. Assynt, in particular, symbolizes a Scottish territory deeply cherished and powerfully preserved, and was the result of what to an observer, and with hindsight, resembles a quest of some significance.

"I cycled all over Scotland, with a tent, when there was no tourism really. I started in my teens, and I poked into all the corners of Scotland, and I fell in love with that particular area. In the first place I was attracted to it just because it is so beautiful—and also it's scattered and splattered with trout-lochs—my other passion! And also, at Achmelvich near Lochinver there is a beautiful bay with white sand and sand-dunes—wonderful for children, and after the war, we had two very young children. So we started going there, and have gone back every year since."

The whole area becomes a literary *topos* of profound significance in MacCaig's writing, a landscape of the mind where exploration and articulation at many levels can take place. Suilven in particular sustains a variety of treatment, and a photograph of it in MacCaig's living room, taken from about five miles to its north-west shows serried ridges in the foreground, and gives an intimation of the kind of perspectives MacCaig can derive from what he freely acknowledges is his favorite mountain.

"The groundwork on which the mountains there stand are made of a hard, hard, hard rock: I'm told it's one of the oldest rocks in the earth's surface—Lewisian gneiss. It's all over the Hebrides, the west coast, the Highlands. Very hard, comes in different colors, grey, greenish, purplish, that change with the light. These ridges that you see, they're not high, 600 or 700 feet at the most, with hollows between them, hence the innumerable lochs. And that foreground there—the geologists have a wonderful name for it—'the unruffled foreland'—beautiful. Millions of years ago it was covered with thousands of feet of sand, which became sedimentary rock, of which the mountains are formed. The weather wore it away, and glaciers came and thrust their way between the mountains and left them all standing separate and solitary. And they're all made of sandstone."

His longer poem, "A Man in Assynt" (CP, pp. 214-20), from his 1969 volume *A Man In My Position* is interesting for several reasons, not least its free verse form which combines with orchestrated developments of theme and image. In fact, a move away from closed forms had begun earlier with the volume *Surroundings* in 1966.

"It was totally unconscious. I had written in strict form, meter and rhyme—often wavering meter, often para-rhyme—but strict form all the same. And one night I sat down to write a poem—felt like it—and the damned thing came out in free verse. Of course, I got interested in the form. I wrote for a good while in both free verse and strict form, but as the years passed, I've been writing more and more in free verse."

How did "A Man in Assynt" come to be written?

"The poem was written because Scottish Television ran a series of fifteen-minute programs called 'Poets and Places.' Iain Crichton Smith did Lewis, George Mackay Brown did Orkney, Signey Goodsir Smith did

Edinburgh, and so on. They asked me to do one on the Lochinver area. And I said no. I don't write long poems. I even added, I don't like reading long poems, why should I write one? Well that series finished, and in the autumn of that year they had another, shorter series, and they approached me again. I said, 'Well, I'll have a shot, and if I don't like it, you won't get it.' I sat down one night and wrote the whole poem; just as if someone were dictating it to me. The reason wasn't brilliance and genius and cleverness: it was all there waiting to be spoken. So I spoke it."

In one sense, the interest in history, to which MacCaig had earlier referred, becomes the subject of the poem. From the "Glaciers, grinding West" in the opening line, the structure modulates to its closing stanza where

> the scraping light
> whittles the cloud edges till, like thin bone
> they're bright with their own opaque selves.
> (CP, p. 220)

"A Man in Assynt" composes a meditation upon Highland time and identity, weaving themes of possession and dispossession into a celebration of imaginative independence. From figures and moments "clear and tiny in/ the misty landscape of history" comes the suggestion that "up from that mist crowds/ the present," before its litany of interconnectedness shaped as phrasal repetition and choric echo confronts the difficult continuities of the present:

> Or has it come to this,
> that this dying landscape belongs
> to the dead, the crofters and fighters
> and fishermen whose larochs
> sink into the bracken
> by Loch Assynt and Loch Crocach?—
> to men trampled under the hoofs of sheep
> and driven by deer to
> the ends of the earth—to men whose loyalty
> was so great it accepted their own betrayal
> by their own chiefs and whose descendants now
> are kept in their place
> by English businessmen and the indifference
> of a remote and ignorant government.
> (CP, p. 215)

Since it marks a shift in perception and perspective in MacCaig's writing, I wondered to what extent "A Man in Assynt" represents his own coming to terms with history, even a laying of historical ghosts.

"Sutherland, the county, the whole of it, was the most shamefully treated in The Clearances. And it's a beautiful, beautiful countryside. But it's also very sad, because there are hardly any people in the place. And you keep coming across ruins of what used to be crofts, in the most unlikely places, from a time when the population was much bigger than it now is. So it's a sad landscape, in that way. You can walk for miles and miles and miles and miles and never see a house, let alone a person. It's got that sadness in it, and you can't help being afflicted by that history in that landscape, because there it is under your very eyes."

What happens is that history and topography come together in his more recent work, achieving senses of permanence and durability and also of security which chime to achieved, harmonious effect. "Old Highland Woman" is a case in point, where a crippled immobility is counteracted by a transcending feel for the spirit of the place:

> She has come here through centuries
> of Gaelic labour and loves
> and rainy funerals. Her people
> are assembled in her bones.
> She's their summation. *Before her time*
> has almost no meaning.
> (VO, p. 20)

"Crofter," too, can answer its own question with a quiet, wry confidence:

> What's history to him?
> He's an emblem of it
> in its pure state.
> (VO, p. 49)

And if there is a touch of self-dramatization in the politically arch "Chauvinist," it speaks directly nonetheless to the "little plot" in Assynt around Suilven and to MacCaig's achieved relationship with it, a sense of Scottish territorial identity worked for over many poems:

> Of the rest of space
> I can say nothing
> nor of the rest of time, the future
> that dies the moment it happens.
>
> The little plot—do I belong to it
> or it to me? No matter.
> We share each other as I walk
> amongst its flags and tombstones.
> (VO, p. 16)

So as MacCaig reflects upon his life of writing, might he accept that the struggle towards lucidity which is an evident characteristic, has not always entailed such stark effects of simplicity?

"Oh well, I don't mind poems being a bit difficult. I hate poems being obscure. A good difficult poem is trying to say something which is difficult to express and to understand. But an obscure poem is bad writing. That kind of obscurity always brings to my mind a remark in a Peter de Vries novel, where a man and wife are talking about a friend. The man says, in his accent, 'Oh he's got a head on him; if he says something it's worth thinking about.' And his wife made the splendid reply—'Oh I don't know. He's very profound on the surface, but deep down he's shallow.'"

The depths and shallows of MacCaig's poetic endeavor mingle to such different effect that his own question from "The Streets of Florence" suggests appropriate continuities:

> I, then? What am I
> a continuing creation of? What Hebridean
> island and what century have I failed
> to escape from in the dangerous journey
> from my first great rendezvous to the one
> I have still to keep?
>
> (CP, p. 142)

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