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NEOCLASSICAL MACCAIG

If Norman MacCaig is a poet of the Scottish Renaissance, surely the "Renaissance" for him is very different in character from the commonly accepted application of that label. He distrusts labels - "Scottish Renaissance" is one of limiting connotations calling up strongly nationalistic (chauvinistic?) themes in a (dying?) dialect. He distrusts groups of poets - they tend to incest and degeneration. He can only admit to being a Scotsman contributing to the contemporary body of poetry being written in Scotland; he scoffs at being tagged an "essentially Scottish poet;" for what can this mean? He is put on his guard, for he is primarily aware of broader "Renaissance" connections more relevant to his mature work - of "Renaissance" in the first sense of a rebirth of classical ideals, both formal and philosophical, in art. Paradoxically it is this Renaissance, this Neoclassicism which binds MacCaig in a strange and strong way to the Scottish tradition and which ultimately motivates his transcendence of that tradition.

Norman MacCaig makes much of his Celtic heritage:

By blood I am one-sixth a Border Scot and five-sixths a Gael, and one of my chief interests, which is no doubt reflected in what I write, is the Highlands, particularly the North-West and the Outer Isles. I should like to think that some of the classical qualities of their poetry and music were present in my verses . . . . The romantic one-sixth from the Borders keeps interfering with the precision and compression of utterance and the formal elaboration which are the inbred ambition of the larger fraction . . . .

Celtic art is an art of careful design, superb discipline of imagination; its beauty is its form. The element of rhyme in poetry is considered to be a Celtic invention arising from the ordering world-view and love of pattern characteristic of the civilization. MacCaig thus attributes his fundamental attraction to formal art to his Celtic background and greatly respects the Gaelic poets especially in their complex and varied experimentation with rhymes. He has adopted this experimental approach in his own poetry, always recognizing the necessity for form in poetic art,

even in his earliest efforts. However in that brief early excursion into Surrealism which linked him with the so-called Apocalyptic School of poets in the 1940’s, he showed little feeling for the overall form of a poem; though he played with rhymes at times very effectively and showed skill at the small effect, he had not succeeded in unifying his striking images into coherent, organically-developing poems. The syntax of these disjointed image-groups is a maze, the tone strident. The highly subjective, expressionistic nature of Apocalyptic poetry in general brought it to be called a “Neo-Romantic” movement, and MacCaig’s contributions were similarly private and inaccessible. Yet MacCaig stood apart from the movement in his feeling for formal devices which later enabled him to develop unified, coherent expression in entire poems, first evidenced in the collection _The Inward Eye_ (1946) where new restraint, precise diction and quieter tone represented in a more carefully ordered imagery lent some of the poetry new clairty and classical simplicity. _Riding Lights_ (1955) is the first collection where these qualities truly dominate.

MacCaig still admits to strongly antagonistic impulses in himself reflected in his work, which he again attributes to his racial heritage, namely a wild sentimentality which must be disciplined with Celtic formality. Professor G. Gregory Smith coined a handy label for this Scottish paradoxical nature - “Caledonian Antisyzygy” - and MacCaig affirms this in the recent poem “Inward Bound” where he writes of:

> journeys remembered  
> to be divided amicable between  
> my romantic my classical  
> my gothic my Georgian  
> my orchestral my plainsong  
> me.

Undoubtedly he is a complex poetic personality and has assimilated diverse cultural influences. He has happily chosen to channel his “romantic” and “gothic” tendencies into “classical”, “Georgian” formal expression and these modes shape and dominate his mature work. Crombie Saunders thus says: “His poetry has most of the ‘classical’ virtues and exhibits few of the ‘romantic’ vices.”

The direction MacCaig has chosen to take in his mature poetry was


directly indicated by his education. It is significant that he spoke neither
Gaelic nor Lallans as a natural language but has always used English
as his spoken and literary language. Thus finding linguistic affinity with
the Anglo-American literary tradition rather than with the Scots tradition
he was profoundly influenced by the former; this is readily apparent
in the style of his more recent poetry. MacCaig obtained an anglicized
education at Edinburgh’s Royal High School and earned an Honours
M.A. in Classics at the University of Edinburgh. He feels that his Celtic
sensibilities first motivated his course of study in the Classics, and since
English is his native language this facilitated his study of classical litera-
ture in translation and adaptation.

Scottish tradition is certainly full of adaptations and imitations of
classical literature, including the work of the unfortunately-termed Scot-
tish Chaucerians and the 17th Century Scots Metaphysicals; however,
MacCaig has felt the influence of the English Neoclassical tradition in
poetry more directly than through those imitative or derivative works
in Scots. He readily admits great admiration for the poetry of John
Donne and says that Donne’s poetry is one of the very few “discernible”
influences on his own work.6 Donne was, of course, in the line of develop-
ment from the Italian Renaissance, notably, Dante whose lucid imag-
sery, accurate diction and sure formal elegance he adopted. Like Dante
and Donne, MacCaig has developed the ability of saying difficult things
with apparent simplicity. He appreciates the compression and clarity
possible within such strictly formal verse, and shares with models Dante
and Donne a similar philosophical attitude to the world they see. Mac-
Caig is a poet always aware of other sides to reality, possibilities be-
ond the initially apparent visual world, and, with skillful Metaphysical
wit of extended analogy, finely developed argument and quick inversion,
he presents this realm of Platonic otherness as an equally “real” alterna-
tive. The comparisons of vastly different things within Metaphysical
concepts strengthen the tangible “reality” of each object perceived. Con-
stant restraint of the poetic imagination is vital to this mode, and both
Donne and MacCaig are able to speculate on the complex nature of the
universe, and especially of the Self in the universe, by working through
strict forms. Their imaginative and supremely intellectual inquiry and
its poetical expression is thus very similar; indeed, the poetry is witty
and deeply thought-provoking.

A poem from the collection *A Common Grace* (1960) entitled
“Celtic Cross” will illustrate several of the qualities of MacCaig’s poetry
discussed so far:

6. Interview.
The implicated generations made
This symbol of their lives, a stone made light
By what is carved on it.

The plaiting masks,
But not with involutions of a shade,
What a stone cross says and what a stone cross asks.

Something that is not mirrored by nor trapped
In webs of water or bay-nets of cloud;
The tangled mesh of weed

-lets it go by.

Only men’s minds could ever have unmapped
Into abstraction such a territory.

No green bay going yellow over sand
Is written on by winds to tell a tale
Of death-dishevelled gull

-or heron, stiff

As a cruel clerk with gaunt writs in his hand
-Or even of light, that makes its depths a cliff.

Singing responses order otherwise.
The tangled generations ravelled out
Then links of song whose sweet

strong choruses

Are those stone involutions to the eyes
Given to the ear in abstract vocables.

The stone remains, and the cross, to let us know
Their unjust, hard demands, as symbols do.
But on them twine and grow

beneath the dove

Serpents of wisdom whose cool statements show
Such understanding that it seems like love.

The poem is a series of conceits. The stone cross is speaking, mapping, writing, singing, growing, showing: it is its own symbol. It is telling of "their lives," the implicated generations," "men’s minds," "unjust, hard demands" and "understanding" akin to love, of a past civilization.

A reversal in sober Metaphysical wit ends the poem by seeming to unravel the cross's message yet really leading to further speculation on it.

The imagery of the small conceits is intensely sensuous, synaesthetic: "unmapped/ Into abstraction such a territory," "Links of a song whose sweet/ strong choruses/ Are those stone involutions . . . ." The poet thus describes the stone cross Metaphysically as representative of the otherness the imaginative mind perceives beyond the physical subject (and here, the object) of art. The art he depicts is perhaps hard but it is elegantly formal and achieves a "Grecian Urn" immortality as an

expression of the complexity of the human spirit. The poem is a coherent, thought-provoking exploration, formally as well as philosophically complex. It illustrates MacCaig's experimental yet disciplined use of metrical and rhyme patterns: each stanza rhymes AB(B)CAC, in conversational iambics (two lines pentameter, one trimeter, one dimer, and two pentameter). The poem is a verbal Celtic Cross, carefully constructed in patterns which are visually and aurally satisfying as well as intellectually provocative in the Neoclassical-Metaphysical tradition.

Norman MacCaig's Neoclassical traits are appropriately comparable in many points to the 18th Century English tradition. A Scotsman writing in English in another age of "Renaissance" (the 18th Century Scots Renaissance of Ramsay, Ferguson, Burns, etc.), David Hume prefigures MacCaig in a number of fundamental attitudes. Hume postulated a theory of "phenomenalism" which developed from the Newtonian experimental science of his time; he emphasized the shifting, changing nature of our perceptions and thus placed a skeptical limit on the power of empiricism, not far different from the metaphysical awareness of the mind's uncharted territories. The Self that perceives is itself constantly in flux, yet, Hume and MacCaig both strive to know the Self even in its instability, consciously following the Socratic apothegm "Know thyself." For both writers Self-knowledge is the "only science of man" and both pursue it throughout their works with a philosophy that can indeed be called humanistic in an Italian Renaissance sense - man-centered, ultimately self-centered and on an accessible human scale. However, neither Scotsman is content with the optimistic humanism revived by the Augustans; they hold great respect for reason and a realization of its limits, and both subject it to a skepticism which is undoubtedly strengthened by their Calvinist background. Calvinism is a self-centered religion to a great extent, a faith which would never affirm the perfection of man's reason in the confident Augustan manner; rather, it stresses man's limits and harshly accepts them. Hume always admitted to man's rational limits, and MacCaig certainly accepts them, though without bitterness or cynicism; his tone is most often of gentle resignation. He does not profess the Calvinist religion (nor did Hume) but instead believes in the landscape, in the people within the landscape, with a religious devotion and also with a realistic recognition of their imperfections. MacCaig's adaptation of the philosophy of the 18th Century Enlightenment in Scotland is embodied in his poetry of common sense and un-

9. Interview.
failing honesty, which G. S. Fraser describes as anti-Calvinist but with a "Calvinistic gloom and rigour . . . . It is a humanist message but a hard one."10

MacCaig's ontology is certainly closer to Hume's psychological approach, his tempered humanism than to that of the over-confident Augustans, yet, one vital quality of MacCaig's mature method can usefully be compared with the Augustan poets: this is his skill in making abstracts tangible, giving them life in the poetic landscape. His acquired discipline over imagery included the more frequent use of conventional classical and Judeo-Christian myths in his poetical world; this increasingly accessible imagery was more carefully ordered and coincidental with a quieter tone, a more dignified expression. The vision remains personal though it is now universally recognizable. He has achieved universality without the benefit of a common readership enjoyed by the 18th Century authors; for example, Pope expected his audience to recognize contemporary people and events he commented upon, as well as the classical literature to which he frequently alluded, while MacCaig necessarily appeals to the broader common experience of man. A strong sense of history, not merely Scottish but Western, pervades MacCaig's work, and the Western myths (classical and religious) act as workable images co-operating with the predominantly sensuous imagery. His faith is in the landscape. The resultant poetry is not symbolic as such, but suggestive of conventional symbolism. Abstracts act as living beings in the best poems.

It follows that a significant distinction must be made between English Neoclassical poetry and MacCaig's. This is the difference in the object of their clear-eyed, gently ironic view. Public poetry of the Augustans contrasts fundamentally with the personal expressions of MacCaig; indeed, MacCaig avows himself an "apolitical" poet and rarely refers specifically to current events or people in his poetry. The "I" and the "you" of his poems are personal, he readily admits. He is the explicit "I" and feels that poetry cannot legitimately be purged of the Self as that 20th Century Neoclassicist T. S. Eliot would have it.11 MacCaig has succeeded in making these personal pronouns universal with his extraordinary ability of simultaneously objectively observing the Self and its relationships and speaking from deep within that Self. Paradoxical, yes, but in keeping with his "antisyyzygzy"! By so being able to detach himself MacCaig has avoided the Romantic vice of losing the identity of Self in the landscape, of making individual expression an end in itself. Mac-

11. Interview.
Caig, therefore, maintains the individual identity of himSelf as well as of each object in the landscape; that this is always necessary is basic to his creed. The poetry's stance of Neoclassical distancing is synthesized most effectively with a highly personal expression. It seems worthwhile to quote here the poem "Lark in the Air" from The Inward Eye:

The tree on the green hill, it dances and plays
and air is a garden where a goddess walks
and air is a garden honeyed with the sun's praise,
and no dream enchants the quiet river.

Glass walls are glittering round the groves of heaven,
the ambling of quiet beasts and the singing of birds.
Each planet makes verses of its turning stone
rhyming time and distance.

In this close corner summer is its temple.
Trees hold up histories in their holy hands.
I watch in the praising world grown therefore simple
the summer, the trees gravely dancing. 12

It is a tranquil scene on the surface, but deep with mythical and historical connotations. Visual imagery brings the ordered poetical world to life - it is the natural world in its action of prayer and praise, in a classical-religious context ("goddess", "temple"). Trees dance in this world but they "gravely" dance and the religion of the living world is ultimately a very serious business. Abstracts are made tangible: the "garden" of air, the "honey" of the "sun's praise," "glass walls... glittering round the groves of heaven," the planets making "verses...rhyming time and distance," trees holding up "histories in their holy hands." Indeed it is a "world grown therefore simple." Surely the "Lark in the Air" is the poet, watching from above the landscape yet involved in it (the "I" is explicit). From his detached viewpoint he is well able to control the development of the imagery, as well as the tone of the expression. Formally, off-rhymes reinforce the quietness and subtlety of tone, while careful use of alliteration and assonance strengthens the poem's coherence. The diction is straightforward, juxtaposing terms from nature and religion. It is a comprehensible vision wherein Neoclassical restraint and formal skill enhance the poem's powerfully suggestive effect.

Into the 20th Century Anglo-American literature developed a tradition which bears closest comparison with the Metaphysical assimilation of Neoclassicism. Eliot, Pound and the Imagists were fundamentally opposed to the obscurity of the Surrealist-Apocalyptic imagery and

MacCaig grew to adopt a type of imagery much the same as that which the Imagists fostered - clear, concise, precise. MacCaig thus owes much to the Imagist technical models, but little to its overall poetical philosophy. Eliot's poetry of complex symbolism, growth toward profound acceptance of traditional Christianity, and total removal of the feeling Self from the poetical product, are alien to MacCaig's idea of poetry. The poets share the vital Neoclassical element of discipline of both form and tone in their philosophical expressions which exemplify the Metaphysical union of intellect and sensibility, whereby Eliot weighs more heavily on the intellect and MacCaig on the sensibility.

Another 20th Century influence (the other of the two "discernible" influences MacCaig claims) is the work of the American poet Wallace Stevens, who is also very much in the Metaphysical tradition of speculation on the nature of reality. Stevens creates "fictions" to replace conventional myths, while MacCaig continues to assert his faith in the landscape; both poets carry out their subtle explorations of many-sided reality in a poetry where, as in Donne, the imagination is effectively disciplined yet full of the power of suggestion.

Recently Norman MacCaig has moved increasingly towards free verse in his poetry, a trend which at first surprised him but nonetheless opened to him a new and more challenging area of formal experimentation. He feels that it is harder to write a good poem in free verse than in rhyme, since shapeless poetry can result: "It is difficult to give a free verse poem an inevitable shape." It goes without saying that, for MacCaig, a poem must have shape or form to be good. In most of these free verse poems he retains the "ghost" of the iambic as a basic unifying element. The poem "Go-Between" from Surroundings (1966) demonstrates MacCaig's skill in handling this mode:

Out of a night
that felt like a grape's skin
an owl's voice shuddered.
Out of the running
blackness of a river pool
a white salmon unplugged
itself and fell back
in a smash of light.
Out of the throat of
a duck flying over,
delicate, Japanese
on the blue plate of the sky,
came a croaking grunt,
catarrhal and fat-living.

13. Interview.
Out of your never
averted face, come
classical admonitions
of the finality of form
and the unrespassable regions
beyond it. I go
poaching there and come
back with news of
an owl's hoot, exploding
salmon and the profound eructions
from the flat nose of
a delicate duck.

Since I am your convert
and true believer, I have
to enlarge the admonitions
of your never averted face
to include these wild regions
where the lunacy of form
is normal and caricature
impossible. Am I bringing
your news to them or their news
to you? Am I evangelizing
the duck or you? - For how can a man
breathe hymns to the Lord
with one lung and hymns to the devil
with the other? 15

The imagery of the poem is sharply sensuous, compressed. The poem is structured in two stanzas. The first presents the situation of natural things seen through a metaphysical eye, where "classical admonitions of the finality of form" are violated by the poet-persona. In the second stanza he expresses his dilemma of belief and non-belief (which is itself the belief in another side of reality); belief as form, the "Lord" of convention and non-belief as the "lunacy of form", the "devil" which is equally real to the poet. How can he reconcile these different ways of seeing? They are united in love - his love for the "you" of the poem, his love for the landscape - together with his ability to enter the region beyond and to act as a mediator, a "Go-Between" for the physical and metaphysical worlds, "evangelizing" to each. Here MacCaig has created a tangible poetical world with remarkable concision and restraint of the imagination. Precise diction and rhetorical devices of repetition ("Out of . . .", first stanza) and parallel unanswerable questions ("Am I . . .?, second stanza) give the poem balance and coherence. It develops logically and is self-contained yet provocative. It is a poem about - and which exemplifies - form and the limits of form.

The poetry of Norman MacCaig represents a unique expression of Neoclassicism, a uniquely Scottish response to and adaptation of the classical literary tradition and its Anglo-American developments. Neoclassical ideals as exemplified in the poetry of the English language, apprehended with deep-rooted Celtic sensibility have created a durability and universality in the poetry of Norman MacCaig which renders the label "Scottish Renaissance" both hopelessly inadequate and, at the same time, suggestive of the broader Renaissance tradition to which he belongs. Surely the MacCaig Renaissance is a healthy rebirth of Scottish poetry, baptized, as it were, in the mainstream of world poetry - this is the theoretical goal of the Scottish Renaissance writers, and MacCaig has achieved it in his individual 20th Century-Neoclassical way.

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