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Norman MacCaig and the Fascination of Existence

by
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PhD thesis presented to the
College of Humanities and Social Science

The University of Edinburgh

2013

Declaration of Originality

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Nathalie Ingrassia

Abstract

This thesis is a comprehensive study of the poetry of Norman MacCaig. His poems have received relatively little critical attention and scholars appear to have concentrated on a few specific points such as MacCaig's characteristic restraint or his inscription in a given literary tradition. Critics have notably pointed out different dichotomies in his works. I argue that these dichotomies are fundamentally inter-related. It is characteristic of MacCaig's writing to simultaneously engage with and challenge philosophical and linguistic concepts and positions as well as literary traditions and stylistic choices. These dichotomies are both a cause and a symptom of this phenomenon. They take on a structuring role in a body of works often regarded as a collection of independent lyrics rather than a cohesive totality. The first half of the thesis will follow a thematic approach: considering first the poetic project MacCaig outlines and the interplay of celebration, faithfulness to the object and the problem of perception; then the treatment of religion and the divine by this notoriously atheist author and how it relates to his worldview. This will provide a basis to address MacCaig's lifelong concern with the relationship between perception, language and description and what this entails for both his writing and his philosophical positions. In the second half of this study, I will address MacCaig's engagement with tradition – and its limits – through consideration of three different modes and how they relate to his writing project: elegy, pastoral and amatory verse, regarding the latter two as specific examples of the former. Through these interconnected studies of MacCaig's poetry, I argue that the critical tendency to

either undervalue his central place or treat his works in a fragmentary fashion originates in MacCaig's sense of the instability of our perceptions and our possible discourses about the world. This uncertainty at the root of his writing reflects his constant and often uncomfortable awareness of the elusive nature of existence and meaning – death and the limits of language threatening both his perception of the world he evinces such fondness for and his ability to write about it.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors, Drs. Carole Jones and Alex Thomson, without whom I might have given up on MacCaig and his confusing ways. Their constant support over the past three years has inspired me the confidence I needed to make my research truly my own – thankfully, their judicious guidance has also guarded me from somewhat less judicious but beloved pet ideas.

I am immensely grateful to Dr. Carole Jones for her infinite patience as she let me ramble on about MacCaig until the ideas fell into place. The role this has played in allowing me to devise my argument cannot be overestimated.

Dr. Alex Thomson, my primary supervisor, has the uncanny gift of seeing where I might be going with an idea before I do, which did greatly simplify matters whenever I was floundering helplessly in an ocean of unrelated points.

The kind people of the Centre for Research Collections at the University library, and more particularly Dr. Paul Barnaby have also contributed greatly to this thesis by helping me to find my way through the University's collection of MacCaig's personal papers – may they be praised for their great patience that has permitted me to finally access documents which, though they are only referred to once here, have given me a better grasp of who the man behind the poems was.

I will also come away from this experience with a profound gratitude for the University of Edinburgh itself, which has such an excellent library and grants its PhD candidates the opportunity to become tutors. There is much to learn from teaching undergraduates, and my research is richer of everything it has taught me.

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INTRODUCTION

MacCaig occupies a central place in Scottish poetry. Becoming the first Writer in Residence at the University of Edinburgh in 1967 before occupying a similar position in Stirling from 1970 to his retirement in 1978, MacCaig was moreover made a member of the O.B.E in 1979 and received the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1985. He was a well-known figure of the 1950s and 1960s social, literary – and pub – life in Edinburgh¹. George Mackay Brown, in a 1990 short essay, “Poet's Pub: a Personal Tribute,” attests to this and emphasises MacCaig's sociable and welcoming nature. The interest in his poetry persists to this day – a new edition of his complete poems which includes previously unpublished texts came out in 2009, as well as another volume entitled *Selected Poems* on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of his birth.

Born in 1910 in Edinburgh where he lived until his passing in 1996, MacCaig defines himself as “a hundred percent” Scottish (qtd in Riach “The Poetry of Experience” 559) and learns Gaelic as an adult, but writes in English. The great majority of his poems are divided between two locations, his native city – seldom referred to by name – and the Scottish Highlands, with whose landscapes he has what he describes as a love affair in “A Man in Assynt” (*Collected Poems*² 224). Critics have noted in his mature writing a particularly distinctive voice – “the individual MacCaig cadence of almost every line” (MacLeod 30) – of which a proto-

¹ “[H]is sense of mischief and conviviality recalled a fraternal Edinburgh literary life that harks back to the era of Ferguson and Burkes” (R. Crawford 614)

² Hereafter, the *Collected Poems* will be abbreviated in *CP* when citing a poem.

form can already be made out in his two early volumes. These, which MacCaig would later entirely disavow, constitute an early surrealist output which, by MacCaig's own admission, has yet to develop the clarity of his later works.

Despite the success of his mature collections, critical works about Norman MacCaig going beyond the simple review are relatively scarce. They appear to belong to three different periods: that of his contemporaries, a renewal in the early 1990s, prompted by the publication of the *Collected Poems* (constituted mostly of Degott-Reinhardt-Reinhardt's study – in German, which makes it unwieldy for English-speaking scholars – and the *Critical Essays* whose analyses do not always reach sufficient depths to be useful sources) and finally a few articles in the early 2000s divided between D. Delmaire, A. Riach and M. Fazzini. I will first discuss these critical responses to MacCaig's works in order to better situate his poems with regards to the Scottish and wider English-speaking poetic traditions. Following this critical review, I will offer a preliminary overview of MacCaig's poetic subject and writing persona. At this point, these two discussions will provide sufficient context for me to introduce the aims of this study and summarise the steps it will follow.

A - Situating MacCaig – influences, affinities and critical context

Criticism on MacCaig's writing tends to concentrate on specific issues rather than seeking to give a unified account of his body of works. Critical response to MacCaig's verse centres on three complementary key approaches. Critics have notably sought to locate MacCaig with regards to the various literary traditions he has affinities with by considering him in either the Scottish context or the wider

context of poetry in the English-speaking world. This has however proven a delicate matter as a result of his well-known gift for ambiguity and ambivalence. A second approach has focused on identifying characteristic formal features in his works. Ross, for instance, reflects on this aspect of MacCaig writing in his 1990 essay: “Since he began publishing poetry, Norman MacCaig has been rightly praised for his stylistic and linguistic abilities, his metaphysical wit, his dazzling metaphors, formal conceits and his perceptive – indeed illuminating – use of imagery” (7). The double question of the self and its relationship to the object is another favoured topic for the critics and ties into the central issue of this characteristic distance perceived in his poems. The critics do not seem to reach a true consensus on these questions, however, and praise of MacCaig’s poetic prowess coexists with scathing dismissals – this distance being seen variously as restraint or shallowness of feeling. While this does not mean that both interpretations are equally convincing, the existence of these diverging appraisals betrays the often underestimated complexity of his writing.

The geographically obvious answer when seeking to place MacCaig in a tradition has been to explore the possibility of his inscription in a Scottish literary context. Depending on the critic, he has been claimed for the English tradition as often as he has been considered a purely Scottish poet – Iain Crichton Smith, John MacInnes and Mary Jane Scott in particular turn their attention to the essential Scottishness of the poet in their articles. His place in twentieth-century Scottish poetry is however difficult to ascertain. While MacCaig is often accepted as one of Scotland’s greatest poets writing in English (Riach “The Scottish Renaissance” 473) and sometimes as the greatest, he appears to remain at the periphery of the Scottish

world of Letters in the twentieth century. This is visible for instance in his relationship with the Scottish Renaissance, in which literature historians either do not include him or mention him in passing as part of a second wave, as Roderick Watson does (*The Literature of Scotland, Twentieth Century* 122). M.J. Scott summarises MacCaig's positioning with regard to the Renaissance by pointing out his distrust of labels: "If Norman MacCaig is a poet of the 'Scottish Renaissance,'" she writes, "surely the 'Renaissance' for him is very different in character from the commonly accepted application of that label." "Scottish Renaissance," she adds, "is one of limiting connotations calling up strongly nationalistic (chauvinistic?) themes in a dying dialect" (135).

Scott's words imply a certain detachment from Scottish nationalism on MacCaig's part. This does not however mean a refusal of Scottish traditions in his poems, and there is definitely a traditional dimension in his works. His mother was a native Gaelic speaker and he always felt both a strong link to her people – as well as an unbridgeable distance in regards to them, as this study will discuss. Ascertaining what his poetry owes to Gaelic tradition is delicate. The poet "has always denied, and denied strenuously that there was any conscious use of Gaelic exemplars" in his works (MacInnes 23). It is true that, according to MacInnes, Gaelic metrics have not influenced MacCaig's. Nevertheless, "MacCaig and Gaeldom" points out the frequent allusions to Gaelic culture, be it in toponyms, characters or references to other texts. MacCaig also makes use of off-beat stresses, of rhymes such as "road-red" which are deemed by the poet to be "nothing new" as "Gaelic poetry has been assonantal for centuries" (MacCaig qtd in MacInnes 23). The use of these two

devices inscribes him in a Gaelic cultural tradition, as does his predilection for praise poems (Riach “The Poetry of Experience” 558), a traditional Gaelic form. However, one might object that Ted Hughes’ animal poems could also be considered as praise poems, and what kinship there is between MacCaig’s and Hughes’ poetry is rooted in their shared surrealist tendencies. In this case, praise poetry is too slight a criterion to base a characterisation of MacCaig as a Scottish poet on.

The most elegant conclusions regarding MacCaig’s relationship with the Scottish literary context may perhaps once again be found in M.J. Scott’s “Neoclassical MacCaig” where she states that “he can only admit to being a Scotsman contributing to the contemporary body of poetry written in Scotland; he scoffs at being tagged an ‘essentially Scottish poet’” (135), which is how Crichton Smith sees him in his 1959 review of MacCaig’s poetry in *Saltire Review* (20). It is once again a testament to MacCaig’s zest for cultivating apparent contradictions that Riach can cite an anecdote in which the poet, upon being asked “How Scottish are you?” answered, as was noted earlier, “a hundred per cent” (“The Poetry of Experience” 559), thus highlighting the divide between the writer and the man which will be discussed in more details later in this introduction.

Indeed, it can be argued that MacCaig has more in common with the English and American literary tradition than with the Scottish tradition. M.J. Scott, who discusses this tendency in “Neoclassical MacCaig,” ascribes it to the poet’s anglicised education (137). In support of this claim, I would point out that the two writers MacCaig readily recognises as having been influential for his poetry are John Donne and Wallace Stevens, an Englishman and an American respectively. However,

even in the vaster context of English-speaking literature, MacCaig appears to remain a peripheral presence, as he can never truly be said to belong to a movement or a group or to truly embrace a systematic approach, but only to have affinities with some conceptions of literature and poetry.

For instance, Peter Childs gives the following definition of imagism:

Imagism began as a group in Soho led by T.E. Hulme in 1909 and ended with the last anthology published in New England in 1917. The creed of Imagism has been expressed in polemical and prescriptive documents, but the poet's emphasis was always on precise and concrete presentation, without excess wordage. They disliked the iamb and abstractions but favoured free verse, accuracy, and scientific principles in poetry. The idea of "image" (...) summed up their preference for precision and compression (38).

It can be noted that the "avoidance of excess wordage," the preference for free verse and the attention to accuracy are traits MacCaig's poetry also presents, and, according to Delamaire in "The 'Zen Calvinism' of Norman MacCaig," so is the influence of haikus, with their particular use of images (152). It could perhaps be conjectured that MacCaig inherited some traits from Imagism, since the movement vastly pre-dated his own writing period.

The 1950s Movement is another literary group with which he seems to have affinities. This corresponds, chronologically speaking, to the moment MacCaig started writing again after his post New Apocalypse hiatus. However, MacCaig had been born in 1910, which made him ten years too old for Robert Conquest's *New Lines* anthology and, while he was included in 1962 in Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry*, he had very little in common with the other poets figuring in it, let alone with the critical affirmations of the editor. Angus Calder's article "Unmoved by the Movement: Fifties MacCaig" remarks that

Alvarez' introduction, famously, lambasts the English "disease of gentility," critically elevates the "violent" Ted Hughes above the "nostalgic" Larkin and praises the courage of suicidal American "confessional" poets who "walk naked." None of this argumentation makes it clear why he included MacCaig (Calder 38).

MacCaig's profound distaste for "confessional" poetry, which will be addressed later, ensures an absolute incompatibility between his poetic practice and Alvarez's ideas. There are however some superficial resemblances between MacCaig and some Movement poets. The constant concern with the inevitability of death and decline present in the poems of the "nostalgic" Larkin is notably reminiscent of a certain melancholy aspect of MacCaig's poems which will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis. Nevertheless, Calder's article ultimately refutes convincingly the possibility that MacCaig may belong to the Movement and, despite obvious affinities, there is in some of Larkin's verse a crudity and bitterness which MacCaig's never displays.

While the mature MacCaig does not belong to any literary movement, the same can not be said of the early Apocalyptic MacCaig whom literature historians do not seem to set apart from the rest of the New Apocalypse. As it is, Childs writes: "in the work of the New Apocalypse writers, including (...) J.F. Hendry and Norman MacCaig, Romantic poetry had a resurgence, as did the visionary poetry of Yeats and the experimental poetry of the Surrealists" (120). And indeed, some of the Apocalyptic characteristics do not seem out of place even regarding MacCaig's later works: the rejection of social realism, the belief that society should adapt to the individual, the drive to produce poetry that "aimed to be organic rather than mechanistic, personal rather than public, abstract rather than social" (Childs 120). Riach's commentary on this period in "The Poetry of Experience" follows along the

same lines: “a neo-romantic reaction to the overtly politicised poetry of pylons and industrialism of Auden and Spender for example” (558). But MacCaig rejected his New Apocalypse period, “having come to value clarity; compassion and a certain humane elegance of the mind above all else” (Watson *The Literature of Scotland, Twentieth Century* 121).

There are however influences that MacCaig straightforwardly admits to. The first one – in chronological order – is that of Donne, for whom he professes much admiration:

He never wrote a weak line in his life. He has an extraordinary energy. His similes and metaphors are powerful and exact. He is full of passion. Oh, full of passion, not sentimental, full of passion. A wonderful technician, marvellous technical writer. These are the main reasons. I can re-read John Donne over and over, which I wouldn't say about very many poets (in Degott-Reinhardt 291).

While we have MacCaig's word for his finding inspiration in Donne (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 119), little research has been done on how this influence presents itself. In fact, while other critics limit themselves to mentioning Donne's conceits in relation to MacCaig's use of imagery, M.J. Scott gives the most detailed account of the correspondences between the two writers. She argues that something of Donne's tone – his “return to natural speech” (Austin 7) – is also perceptible in MacCaig's poetry (“like Dante and Donne, MacCaig has developed the ability of saying difficult things with apparent simplicity” M.J. Scott 137) and illustrates her point by commenting upon the poem “Celtic Cross” (*CP* 69) which is, according to her “a series of conceits” through which the poet “describes the stone cross Metaphysically as representative of the otherness the imaginative mind perceives beyond the physical subject (and here the object) of art” (ibid. 138).

The other admitted influence on MacCaig's works is the American Wallace Stevens ("A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 119). In his interviews with Degott-Reinhardt, the Scot confesses that, when he first came across a few of Stevens' poems in magazines, he was "terribly interested" (285). "I took to him very much. In fact, he was a dangerous influence on me for a while," he adds (*ibid.*). The obvious affinities between MacCaig's and Stevens' verse is a topos of MacCaig criticism, though it is never actually detailed. To summarise it briefly, it can be noted that MacCaig shares Stevens' preoccupation with the nature of the self – Stevens recognises in himself an "evilly compounded, vital I" (qtd in Borroff 2), which is reminiscent of MacCaig's chronologically posterior "faggots of selves" ("A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 112) and the "man in [his] position" (116) who looks through his eyes. Steven's "rejection of revealed religion" (2) and the "austerity of temper which is essential to [him]" (5) moreover echo characteristics of MacCaig's works which will be discussed later in this thesis.

Situating MacCaig nevertheless remains a challenge, partly because the poet himself actively resists being pigeon-holed, and partly because his poetry contains a startling number of internal tensions. His acknowledgement of the Donne and Stevens connections makes it however easier to place him in the world-wide context of literature in English, but the final word on the subject may perhaps be better summarised by T. Crawford's account of the position adopted by M.J. Scott in "Neoclassical MacCaig:" "labels such as 'metaphysical' for the early poems and 'neoclassical' for the middle are pointers to the essential MacCaig, but in the last resort all verbal classification fails: all we can say is that he is a very good poet who

has written a large number of most enjoyable poems” (T. Crawford 14). The critical enterprise of locating MacCaig in a specific literary tradition often reaches similar non-committal conclusions.

Another point of critical interest mentioned earlier, the sense of distance present in his poems, also seems to garner very different responses amongst MacCaig scholars. I attribute this to a tension between the restraint and apparent remoteness of the “I” and MacCaig’s adopted poetic and writing persona, which will be discussed at length later in this introduction. Indeed, rather than an exalted poet, he portrays himself as a simple man whose common-sense responses and unpretentious tone seem to lessen the distance between writer and reader by uniting them in their shared human experience. Most critics agree that MacCaig’s poetry follows the author’s self-admitted interest in metaphysical (in the philosophical sense of the term) questions³. More precisely, his concern with metaphysics seems to concentrate on the question of the self and its relationship to the world, a concern Wells chooses to describe as “a life-long interest” in “perception, more precisely the use of language as a way of exploring the inner landscape of the mind and the outer landscape of the world, usually both at once” (31). The “I” in MacCaig’s poems presents a problematic self which colours his investigation of “the enigmatic relations between observer and observed” (Ross 9). Indeed, the fluctuating “I” of the poems constantly reflects and comments upon itself in the act of perceiving in an attempt to capture the essence of the process. Nairn considers that “examinations of how things are seen and how they

³ Addressed both in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” and in his interviews with Degott-Reinhardt on several occasions.

are and the gulf in between is a major part of what [MacCaig's] poetry 'is about'" (78). Language appears as a source of frustration as it creates a "sense of urgency and linguistic distance" (Watson *The Literature of Scotland* 135) that Watson attributes to Scotland being a trilingual country, a particularity which, he explains, can influence even a writer that is not a Gaelic speaker. Moreover, language in MacCaig's poems is often seen as "contrivance and subterfuge" (Nairn 80) in a post-lapsarian context in which Cratylean naming has become impossible and tropological language is all that is left to preserve the moment of perception (Delmaire "The Zen Calvinism of Norman MacCaig" 151) – though MacCaig admits both fondness for and impatience with metaphor. Crichton Smith dubs this conundrum "the riddle of the observer:" "What exactly does the observer see when he sees a heron, a horse, a toad. Is it only an idea of these that he sees?" (22). This central concern of MacCaig's is already present in Stevens' poetry – for the American, the world "can not be known apart from one's present awareness of it" and "must remain forever the sum of perception and appearance" (Borroff 3), a conclusion which, as will be seen later, is very close to MacCaig's on the subject.

This questioning of language and the self ties into a key ambiguity in MacCaig's poems: his conception of reality. On the one hand, there are empiricist characteristics in his poems. The very visual quality of his works suggest an experiential basis in keeping with the empiricist idea that all knowledge comes from sensory data. The thought processes presented in MacCaig's writings suggest definite affinities with the empiricist Hume, as M.J. Scott and Crichton Smith both point out. The latter sees MacCaig as a craftsman whose intellect plays much the

same role as Hume's in his works: according to him, Hume "is a man of superlative common sense dealing with reality one thing at a time. It is this also we find in MacCaig's poetry" (Crichton Smith "The Poetry of Norman MacCaig" 23) and his "search for concrete analogy" is related to MacCaig's methods (ibid). Confirming this idea, M.J. Scott draws a parallel between MacCaig's and Hume's focus on the nature of perception, and of the self "even in its instability" (M. J. Scott 139). However, the underlying conception of reality appears in flux in MacCaig's poems. There are strong indications of the opposite position, that is idealism. Delmaire, in "Self and Otherness in Norman MacCaig's Poetry," explains that, in MacCaig's writing, "reality is utterly denied in favour of a Berkeleian emphasis on perception envisaged as the subjective and idealist act of an autonomous mind for which nothing exists outside representation (...) thus leading to the immaterialistic spiritualism of 'Ego'" (45). Delmaire elaborates on this in "Free Verse in Norman MacCaig's Poetry, or the World without the Mind's Forms," affirming that MacCaig advocates subjective idealism (55). There are indeed in his works a number of poems which question the existence of a stable reality underlying his perceptions. However, his works concurrently focus on the object-in-itself, as chapter 1 will discuss, which would be in keeping with an empiricist approach. In this context, one can wonder whether MacCaig, with his dislike of organised schools of thought, truly made a conscious choice regarding which philosophical system he would adhere to when writing his poems. Furthermore, the fact that the same poet can be compared to both Hume and Berkeley signals the presence of a strong ambiguity regarding his metaphysics. As chapter 3 of this thesis will analyse, empiricist and idealist attitudes

coexist in MacCaig's poems. There is a sense, however, that the conclusion he reaches when he reflects on the question favours the latter even though his attitude towards existence – the wonder discussed in chapter 1 and 2 – suggests an affinity with the former. If one were to give an oversimplified account of this site of tension in MacCaig's works, it could almost be said that, though he is intellectually persuaded by the idealist conception, MacCaig chooses in spite of this to adopt an empiricist attitude. This seems to be a way for him to deal with what he considers an absurdity.⁴ The idealist perspective casts doubt on the existence of the sensible world which MacCaig celebrates in his poems. By choosing to write from an empiricist point of view, the poet manages to circumvent the contradiction to be found in praising something that may not exist.

Because – maybe despite – this, it is generally accepted that MacCaig “is not really a philosopher in the sense that he works all the way through his poetry a developing chain of ideas as Stevens does. He is too dazzled by the world that he sees, takes too much relish in it” (Crichton Smith “A Lust for the Particular” 22). Despite his fluctuating conception of reality, MacCaig's focus on the objects he perceives is central to his poetry. Indeed, a praise poem or a snapshot poem revolves around the object evoked in it, and MacCaig is well-known for his mastery of description and what critics have termed his “accuracy.” According to Crichton Smith, he demonstrates “a sensual accuracy which, at its best, strikes its target like a bullet” (“The Poetry of Norman MacCaig” 22). Watson describes MacCaig as “ever

⁴ In an interview with Degott-Reinhardt, MacCaig gleefully recounts an anecdote about Johnson refuting Berkeley by kicking a stone, exclaiming “I refute him thus” (294). MacCaig comments: “there is a bit of that in me as well as its opposite, you see, like Suilven as a lump of Sandstone. I don't care about what scientists tell me about electricity, atoms” (ibid.)

alert to the physicality of the moment and the formal trickiness of trying to catch it” (*The Literature of Scotland* 125), a characteristic that earned him the appellation of “physical metaphysical” (MacNeice qtd in C. Saunders 27) for the “sensuous energy” (A. Scott 30) with which he conjures up the objects of his regard. For Sorley MacLean, he is “a specialist in hundreds or thousands of ways of the eye, ear, touch, taste and smell and whatever can be called sensuousness” (3), “[achieving] through his best poems” a “strangeness and supranormal condition of illumination” (Fazzini 34).

There are however, as intimated earlier, those who accuse MacCaig of shallowness, of being mostly concerned with description and lacking in real philosophical reflection or true emotion. I have chosen to focus on the accusations levelled against it in Alexander Scott’s and Robert Preston Wells’ reviews as well as Erik Frykman’s 1977 book. There are two main criticisms: that he mechanically produces poems that rely on a small number of literary tricks, and that he is uninvolved to the point of indifference, be it to the world around him and its history or the feelings the poetic “I” professes to have.

This second reproach charges MacCaig with being Parnassian in the sense in which Manley Hopkins used the term: “MacCaig has practised his repertoire of verbal and metaphorical tricks to the extent that he could now write a MacCaig poem in his sleep” (R.W. Scott 40). Moreover, MacCaig “[hides] any kind of personal identity that may struggle to reveal itself” (ibid.) and Wells declares: “I rarely expect to have my serious emotions engaged, nor to find much variance in the emotional spectrum” (32). The two judgements, while pointing towards excessive detachment

on MacCaig's part do not exactly describe the same situation: while Wells feels that MacCaig involves little feeling in his poetry, R.W. Scott evokes a conscious effort to tamp down the emotion inhabiting the poems. He is however relentless in his quest to debunk what he perceives as mere affectation of depth in MacCaig's poetry:

MacCaig's persona is a pseudo-metaphysical self which observes and is observed, which thinks and is thought about. (...) He is playful, he pulls off his conjurer's tricks not only with words and images, but also with ideas, he is an intellectual conman and one may be forgiven for asking if there is in fact anything at the end of the garden path (40).

Scott concludes: "at the end of his newest book, he slithers out of our fingers like one of his wily trout and we're left wondering how big was the one that got away" (43).

In the face of harsh pronouncements such as these, numerous critics have worked at vindicating MacCaig, and I will summarise their arguments here. MacCaig's use of images, for instance, has often been seen as "conjurer's tricks" with no other purpose than to dazzle the reader or at best as a mere ornament pulling the poems towards preciosity. Nevertheless, other critics, like Whyte in "This Trash of Metaphor," consider them instead as the medium through which MacCaig reflects on language and its limits. Delmaire similarly judges that MacCaig's mastery of metaphor is never gratuitous. "Metaphors do not strike us as far-fetched and intricate expressions of subjectivity (...) Instead, they highlight the peculiarities of the world around us" ("Self and Otherness in Norman MacCaig's Poetry" 105). In fact, what Austin writes about Donne could be applied to MacCaig's works, considering the affinity between their respective poems:

Donne's images "are thought to characterise any poetry that is deemed "metaphysical." Donne's subject matter is inseparable from the language

in which it is written and the different facets of the language themselves are intertwined in such ways that it is hard to isolate any one of them for examination (Austin 18).

Williamson's words about Donne, in *The Donne Tradition* could also be put to the same use here: "This intellectual intensity derives its peculiar power from the unified sensibility which makes it impossible to isolate the faculties of Donne (...) his unified sensibility makes his images the very body of his thought, not something added to it"⁵ (qtd in Borroff 49).

MacCaig's fondness for images has also been accused at times of facilitating what is occasionally perceived as his avoidance of genuine feelings. However, this opinion is not unanimously shared by MacCaig's readers as some, on the contrary, suggest that his poems remain rich in emotion regardless of the intent behind them. Crichton Smith, for instance writes: "although they are on the whole poems of praise, and although Norman has always insisted on how happy he has been, they come across as the poems of a lonely man, radiant in presences" ("A Lust for the Particular" 21). This emotional ambivalence has also been noted by Fulton as a capacity to embrace "sunny E major and C sharp minor" (684), and it is true that MacCaig's writing is capable of melancholy in the face of loss, time and the loneliness that stems from the poet's solipsistic tendencies.⁶ This coexistence of a celebratory and an elegiac tonality in MacCaig's poems will be explored over the course of this study in order to draw out the underlying structuring dichotomy that

⁵ Incidentally, Borroff notes: "Had Williamson been describing Stevens instead of Donne, he could not have chosen better term," (ibid.) which further supports the idea of a Donne-Stevens-MacCaig connection.

⁶ "Even in the most empathetic mood, the observer 'stares, in the end, at his own face' ('By Comparison,' 8)' (...) 'The subject, having become "the ultimate fetish"' (Bloch 96), condemns himself to an alienation which he can only lament from then on" ("Self and Otherness in Norman MacCaig's Poetry" 107).

motivates it.

The sense of distance in MacCaig's poems and the specific poetic persona it creates – the third critical focus listed earlier – is central to his works to the point that any critical reading of his works builds on and returns to these ideas. Most of the aspects of MacCaig's writing discussed in this thesis are intimately linked with and often conditioned by them and it will become apparent over the course of this thesis that this can be attributed to the centrality of MacCaig's chosen persona and metaphysics – the “simple man” ethos alluded to earlier and his *parti pris* of empiricism in his poems. For this reason and because critical responses to this issue tend to be more descriptive – and occasionally subjective – than analytical, while I will review and discuss the various positions adopted in regards to MacCaig's poetic “I” and his typical remoteness as I have done for the other critical questions evoked earlier, I will also in this case establish through close readings of his poems a more complete characterisation of the speaker in MacCaig's works and how this poetic persona contributes to the creation of this pervasive sense of distance. This preliminary work will provide a stable basis for the issues that will be raised in the following chapter of this thesis.

Writers such as Riach have interpreted what might look like indifference in MacCaig's poetry as restraint that grows more pronounced over his career. Riach argues that MacCaig's poems evolve over time from “careful and lean” to “gaunt and spare” (Riach “How to Say It” 48), alluding both to the display of emotion and the place of stylistic ornamentations in them. C. Saunders emphasises in “A case of Old

MacCaig” a sense of order and formality in his poems: “his poetry has most of the ‘classical virtues’ and exhibits few of the ‘romantic’ vices,” ascribing this to a conscious choice of “channelling his ‘romantic’ and ‘Gothic’ tendencies into ‘classical,’ ‘georgian’ formal expression” (25). MacCaig’s restraint has in fact been perceived by some as a quintessential trait of his writing, as Crichton Smith remarks: “in spite of the gregariousness there is an invincible privacy at the heart of his work and at the heart of himself. He has never complained in his poetry about the unfairnesses of life, he is not a confessional poet. One would look in vain in his verse for personal revelations” (“A Lust for the Particular” 21).⁷ MacLean similarly notes that the poet is capable of “ineffable and reticent poignancy” (3). This tendency can be observed in the poems in their rather subdued use of expressive punctuation, for instance (“You’ll look through an awful lot of my poems before you see an exclamation mark!” “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 104). MacCaig himself is aware of the critical ambivalence regarding this characteristic, which he mentions in “My Way of It”: “by some, sloped in the other direction, my work has at times been criticised as being, to their taste, too cool, too restrained, too controlled” (81-82), he remarks. His phrasing makes it clear that he does not subscribe to this idea. Indeed, his reticence to emotional outpourings is, as Riach suggests, a conscious part of his writing method, “his heart’s turbulence [having] been subject to cerebral control during the process of writing itself” (T. Crawford “Norman MacCaig: Makar

⁷ This, too, is a characteristic that could already be found in Wallace Stevens’ poetry: “in Stevens we are made aware of a deliberate impersonality, a refusal to use the poems as a vehicle for the outpouring of emotion” “this impersonality impresses us not as the bloodlessness of a shallow temperament, but as restraint, the reserve of a man who will accept us as fellow in a communal intellectual enterprise but has no interest in making us his confidants. The personal feelings of such a man are judged the deeper for the infrequency of their expression” (Borroff 7).

Compleit” 4). MacCaig articulates this in the poem “Writing a letter” (*CP* 365):

And gray, the shy one, tries
not to be noticed. It bows its head,
smiling quietly to itself. Already it knows
I’ll brush it, so gently,
over my gaudy meanings.

Using painting as a metaphor for writing, MacCaig affirms his artistic preference for “gray, the shy one” – the most subdued colour representing the least bombastic means of expression available to the poet – to express his “gaudy meanings,” the feelings that his characteristic restraint rescues from being expressed in a tawdry manner. The stylistic choice evoked through this metaphor is one way MacCaig’s refusal to be a “confessional” poet⁸ manifests itself, an intent that also translates thematically into the poems through their author’s well-known reluctance in letting real life show through in his writings.

Indeed, however many contradictions can be found between MacCaig’s declarations about his poetry and his writing itself, there is one point on which his stance has never wavered throughout his life, and that is his unwillingness to allow his readers to connect his public, writing persona to the personal life of the private individual Norman McCaig. This reticence expresses itself notably through the fact that, while the poet would sign his books “MacCaig,” the school teacher was known to his pupils as Mr. McCaig, the writer’s original surname.

According to James Olney, this practice can be likened to the way

the name “Walt Whitman” referred (and refers) not to a man but to a

⁸ For this see for instance “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” (110) and Degott-Reinhardt (287 and 293).

poetic persona. Before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* there literally was no “Walt Whitman” but only Walter Whitman of Brooklyn, New York; the poet whose Life is recorded fully in *Leaves of Grass* did not come into existence until midway through the first of the poems, later to be known as “Song of Myself” (2).

In the same way, McCaig published his first two (later disavowed) collections under his birth name, and only reinvented himself as Norman MacCaig for the publication of *Riding Lights* in 1955. There is a clear concern here both with privacy and with managing his image as a poet, as will be seen later.

The reproach made to MacCaig, however, denounces the total absence of a believable, involved subject in the poems, as though the “I” were merely an empty place-holder. Riach’s assessment of “restraint” nevertheless appears to account more accurately for the situation. Indeed, however much MacCaig insists on keeping his poetic universe hermetically sealed off, biographical elements still find their way into the poems. They include notably a mention of the poet’s age at the time “Balances” (CP 174-175) was written and of his *nom de plume* (“Private” CP 299-300⁹) as well as references to his friends and to significant events in his life, such as the severe illness of his wife (“Her illness,” “End of her illness” and “Emblems: after her illness” CP 435-436). The poet’s stance regarding this meshing of real and literary life is, as always with MacCaig, equivocal: in an 1988 interview, he underlines the distinction between the two as he explains the title he gave to his 1983 collection, *A World of Difference*: “the world in the poems comes out of my life but they are not my life. It’s a different sort of world” (Degott-Reinhardt 299). This different sort of world however happens to share very precise factual traits with the

⁹ “That comfortable MacCaig whose/ small predictions were predictable” (l.11-12).

one MacCaig lives in.

There is no doubt that the real-life Norman McCaig was an intensely private individual, and as such, sought to avoid or disguise any disclosure of his personal accidents and feelings, but this stance may also call to mind T.S. Eliot's championing of an impersonal conception of art in which the individual self channels tradition to depersonalise his experiences and transmute them into poetry independent from the real-life occurrences. James Olney explains that, in his attitude towards a possible critical focus on the relationship between his biography and his art "what Eliot was resisting, in one sense at least, was the transformation, effected by someone else, of his lower-case, unitalicized, lived life into an upper-case, italicized, written Life" (Olney 1). This may be the case with MacCaig when, in the foreword to the *Critical Essays*, editors Hendry and Ross warn that, "at the poet's insistence," the book does not include a biographical essay. "He believes first that it is irrelevant to his poetry, and secondly regards his life as a teacher and later lecturer and poet as largely uneventful," they explain, but add that several of the essays "do give glimpses of the poet's life and personality – which are clearly visible in his work." This persistent shying away from biographical bleed-through plays a role in producing the typical restrained style Riach and MacLean see in MacCaig's poems, even though he himself agrees belatedly with Ross and Hendry when he admits that the *Collected Poems* are an "autobiography" of sorts (MacCaig "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 110).

MacCaig's restraint often takes the form of his personal brand of humorous detachment: the poet had, as mentioned earlier, a reputation for being a brilliant wit

and a master in the art of sardonic repartee – his and MacDiarmid’s good-natured bouts of flyting were well-known¹⁰ – but his interviews display even more prominently his humorous outlook on life and, more importantly for our purpose, on himself. Indeed, when he recalls his switch to free verse, he does so with characteristic flippancy: “There came an evening, eight or nine years ago, when I broodily sat down to write a poem and to my surprise, the little thing was fledged in free verse” (“My Way of it” 83). It is part of MacCaig’s unrelenting reticence when it comes to laying his inner life bare that he appears to have difficulties in taking himself or his writing seriously. In his later years, he admits to this tendency:

I’m pretending to be boastful. In fact, I’m an extraordinarily shy man (...) with a smile; it is a fact that often enough in my poems, I self-deride myself, I deride myself and this leads into something I have to watch very carefully. I can so easily become flippant. Flippancy is my terrible enemy. I get on fine with him, mind you, but I have to watch it (Degott-Reinhardt 311).

His characteristic restraint, however, is not necessarily specific to MacCaig¹¹ as it could be argued that many distinctive MacCaig traits can be seen in an inventory by Larrissy of the hallmarks of twentieth-century poetry in English. Description, for instance, at which MacCaig excels, is an “obsession” that represents “only one very large manifestation of a general, but less obvious, conviction: that good writing is, in Craig Raine’s memorable phrase, ‘the slavery of sense-experience’” (Larrissy 1). The concern with accuracy appears then as a corollary of

¹⁰ MacCaig in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things”: ‘we argued about everything, savagely. We both believed that vituperation is an art form. Often to the bamboozlement and discombombulation^[sic] of any innocent bystander, who thinks we’re going to punch each other on the nose; We’re just enjoying ourselves” (113).

¹¹ “[E]motive language is a characteristic the modern period can honestly say it has tried to avoid. Indeed, the ‘spirit of anti-pathos’ as David Trotter calls it, is pervasive in the twentieth-century” (...) “it has to be said that the modern aversion to stated emotion, combined with the common dislike of rhetoric, is a fairly distinctive feature of our period” (Larrissy 4).

this “obsession with description.” “Accuracy” becomes “the touchstone of value for contemporary critics and reviewers of British and Irish poetry, indeed for many poets and readers,” an evolution Larrissy illustrates with examples of poets being praised for their “precision,” “descriptiveness,” and “exactness about things seen” (1). MacCaig’s accuracy is often achieved through his expert wielding of metaphor and comparison, a trait that appears to be the dominant poetic tendency of the century according to David Trotter. Comparison is, to his sense, “the method by which the contemporary British poet renders descriptions memorable” (Trotter qtd in Larrissy 1) and “one of the many different ways in which poems signify” that “has become a sign for poetry itself: for the entire scope and value of the art” (Trotter qtd in Larrissy 2). Trotter also considers this use of images to be the cause of the poetic self’s isolation in Hughes’ and Heaney’s poetry, a remark that might perhaps also apply to MacCaig and explain how, indeed, poems “radiant in presences” can induce the reader to feel the writer’s loneliness: “like Hughes, Heaney chooses a striking metaphorical style with which to bludgeon the reader into an acceptance of his tough vision. And as with Hughes, the impression conveyed is one of isolation and alienation” (Larissy 149).

Furthermore, beyond stylistic features, MacCaig’s thematic aspects and indeed the whole mood of his writings seem to be mirrored by the general tendency developed by Larrissy:

we retain the old problem of the individual, isolated yet aspiring to common meaning, confronting a world from which the deity has absconded or which seems to give, at best, parsimonious evidence of transcendence. To put it another way, the alienation of contemporary society has exacerbated the old Romantic problem of how (or whether)

to infuse a world of fascinating but chaotic sense-data with transcendent meaning when one is deprived of agreed myths (3).

Even MacCaig's "individual twentieth-century neo-classical way" (M.J. Scott 144) can be connected to a vaster trend of neo-classicist renewal in reaction to the nineteenth century excesses of Romanticism.¹² It is then possible that the difficulty of situating MacCaig in his century stems from his writing not from the peripheries as an individual voice with patchwork characteristics but from the centre as an embodiment of his century's literary disposition.

It is a topos of MacCaig criticism to say that the "I" is at the centre of his poetry. This is reflected in the speaker's self-description in "Summer Farm" (*CP* 7):

Self under self, a pile of selves I stand
Threaded on time, and with metaphysic hand
Lift the farm like a lid and see
Farm within farm, and in the centre, me.

The centre is in fact a recurring image in MacCaig's writing. "Centre of centres," with the lines "to call the pier a centre, / I sit in a centre" (*CP* 271) positions the "I" at the centre of the poetic universe. In "Solitary Crow" (*CP* 188) the same phenomenon occurs in the sentence "Where he goes he carries, / Since there's no centre, what a centre is, / And that is crow, the ragged self that's his" as the crow is often an avatar of the poet in MacCaig's texts (as in "A Writer" *CP* 155, for instance).

The central place of the "I" makes it the one fixed point in the poetic world. "Climbing Suilven" (*CP* 14) gives a new perspective on climbing a mountain by

¹² "British poetry is doggedly faithful, even in the face of its own contrary practice to the ideal of a refurbished neo-classicism, to empiricism, and to anti-Romantic prejudice" (Larrissy 6). MacCaig is himself quite abrasive when it comes to Romanticism and Celtic Twilight (Degott-Reinhardt 303 and 305).

making the speaker the referential point, with the consequence that, while he remains immobile, the mountain is, most uncharacteristically, moving: “I nod and nod to my own shadow and thrust / A mountain down and down.” The usual perception of the climb is turned around: climbing *up* becomes thrusting *down*, and the bobbing motion of the climber’s head is translated into endless nods of recognition towards his own shadow – himself, thus once again making the “I” the centre of the poem.

Moreover, the poems almost never leave a predefined space (Edinburgh, which is often evoked without being named, and the Highlands) appropriated by – and sometimes identified with– the poetic persona, and “London to Edinburgh” (*CP* 448) concludes MacCaig’s lifework on a centripetal movement, thus firmly placing the poems in a nearly unchanging “here.” This “here” is completed by a “now” in which almost all of MacCaig’s texts are set. Poems such as “Chauvinist” (“Of the rest of space/ I can say nothing / nor of the rest of time, the future / that dies the moment it happens” *CP* 415) and “Horoscope” (“It’s my pretty now I’m in love with” *CP* 289) as well as the recurring metaphor of the “still”¹³ associated with MacCaig’s snapshot poems are testament to that.

Even when the “I” appears to be displaced from the centre, as in “Memorial” (*CP* 267), the speaker remains the object under scrutiny in this text underlining the egocentric nature of grief. The very title of this poem implies the transformation of the self into a vessel of sorts, emptied out and filled with the sorrow caused by the death of the beloved. The “I” becomes an artefact created by the dying woman as evidenced by the lines “the way her dying/ shapes my mind” (l.11-12) and “she

¹³ “Icy road” (*CP* 135): “that any moment will/ Come to a stop with us its stars: a still” or “Nothing so memorable” (*CP* 156): “You remember it/ a foot above the water, not coming out / or returning to it: a still” come to mind.

makes me/ her elegy” (l.18). The self is disassembled into different parts in the phrases “how can *my hand*/ clasp another’s” and “the way her dying / shapes *my mind*” (my italics). These two devices might be intended as ways to distance grief and as such contribute to the soberness of the expression, but they also produce the effect of displacing the speaker from the center of the poem. Yet in this poem, though on the one hand, the semantic and syntactic roles of the self and the woman would suggest that she becomes the central point of the text, the self nevertheless remains the perceiving instance, notably through prosodic emphasis. Though the dead/dying woman is semantically the agent in the sentence, and as such, could be taken as its focusing point, it is the ‘me’ referring to the poetic voice that is stressed and put into relief through its position at the end of line 8: “she grieves for my grief. Dying she tells me (...)” Additionally, “dying” is grammatically fulfilling the role of predicative adjective, that is referring to dying-as-process, dying-as-act experienced by the woman, the verb is however perceived as an adverbial temporal clause (“while she is dying”), which erases this dimension. The subjective experience of dying is ignored by the dying subject itself, giving the poetic “I” centre stage.

The use of neutral, seemingly objective phrasing (l. 15-16) of “the nowhere she is continually going into” and “Ever since she died, / she can't stop dying” (l. 17-18) places the poem firmly in the speaker’s point of view: both statements are factually wrong, but subjectively accurate as they suggest that, in the consciousness of the grieving “I,” the punctual moment of death is stretching indefinitely much in the same way the complex at the core of a neurosis in psychoanalysis works: a cluster of traumatic affects the mind perceives as still happening even years after the

event they originated from. In the last stanza, a shift¹⁴ occurs when the “I” goes from fulfilling the syntactic role of patient in “she makes me her elegy” to being upgraded to subject in:

I am a walking masterpiece,
a true fiction
of the ugliness of death.
I am her sad music.

The focus on the “I” that was, until this point, somewhat obliquely evoked, becomes explicit.

This focus on the self has also been criticised as a way to avoid dealing with the social and political issues pervading the troubled twentieth century (Preston Wells 33 and Sorley MacLean on page 4 of his “Introduction” to the 1990 *Critical Essays* seems almost to defend and excuse MacCaig’s avoidance of his topics). I will show in this thesis that MacCaig does not truly abstract himself from his social and historical context. On the contrary, though this topic seems at first glance under-represented in his poems, he is deeply concerned with the evil that Man can effect, to the point that writing directly about it is uncomfortable for him. He admits that this underrepresentation results from his deep pessimism in regards to Mankind (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 111) and explains:

People are very very important to me, and I know I am not unusual in that. Friends are tremendously important, and yet I think that man as a whole are monsters. Think what’s happening all around the world, from Ulster to Thailand. The things, the brutalities, so I *hate* mankind, I think man is on a suicide course; On the other hand, I like people, you know.

¹⁴ Strikingly enough, the emphasis on that shift afforded by the anaphora “I am...,” combined with the highly positive term “masterpiece” conjures up a sense of pride in his grief on the speaker’s part and has a poem whose tone is rather subdued in the beginning end with a rather spectacular flourish when the “I” is able to justify his pain in a seemingly objective way by representing it as the fulfilment of a duty to the dead woman – MacCaig’s characteristic reticence to emotional outpourings may perhaps be at work here.

Individual people, but I don't like Man with a capital M at all. That's why I hate – that poem is about Burns's 'man's inhumanity to man' which makes me sick when I think about it (ibid.).

This vehement indignation is then generally expressed indirectly in his writing, mostly in two different fashions: religious satire as criticism of what should be a paragon of human morality contributes greatly to social and moral commentary in MacCaig's poems while his engagement with the pastoral mode enables him to propose a counter-model by portraying the lifestyle of a type of individual he could admire.

Outside of this, the first problem with the central place of the "I" in MacCaig's writing is that it is also a "not-I," even once instances where it obviously does not refer to MacCaig in any shape, as in "Cock Before Dawn" (*CP* 354) are discounted. Among others, a passage of "In no Time at All" (*CP* 49), in which the "I" stands in the "false centre" of paradise, before being expelled from it hints at this: the "I" is also a "not-I" because its identity is uncertain and changeable, and because it is not a simple concept, but a complex construct. The poetic "I" in MacCaig's poems can often be considered as a multi-layered entity, as outlined earlier. In "Centre of centres" (*CP* 273) MacCaig writes: "I sit and stare at them / with a multiple eye," which can be taken as multiple "I" as well. His conception of the self nevertheless appears to tend towards unity. For instance in "No time at all" (*CP* 49), the poetic persona declares "I shall go on being monolith." In "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" MacCaig informs his two interviewers that "There are three faggots of selves sitting at this table" (112). This can be understood diachronically, as in the

poem “So many make one”:

There are so many deaths that go
To make up death, as a grown man
Is the walking grave of boy after boy.
– Sometimes we see in him the frown

Of a forsaken ghost, or a dead boy
Speaks suddenly in a petulant voice (CP 17),

an idea that is taken up again in “Among the talk and the laughter” (CP 266):

He has died too often.
And something has been said
that makes him aware of the bodies
floating face downwards
in his mind.

However, more strikingly, the self is also multiple in the sense that several different psychological entities whose nature is difficult to discover seem to coexist within the “I.” The much commented-on “A Man in my Position” (CP 210) is a prime example of this, to which MacCaig comes back when he warns: “it's a dangerous mistake to suppose that if a poem is ‘I,’ ‘I,’ ‘I,’ ‘I’ that it's strictly about me. Very dangerous assumption. (...) It might indeed be a man in my position” (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 116). The pronoun “I” refers to an unstable self. The distinction between poet and poetic persona is a key methodological principle: the “I” is not always the poet – for some critics, it never is, even outside of such straightforward cases as dramatic monologues. A process of transformation occurs between the real-life experience and the poetic output – this was already touched upon earlier in a comparison of MacCaig’s and Eliot’s attitudes to biographical readings. The situation of the “I” in MacCaig’s works is however not always so clear-cut. For instance, the I-as-poet appears in several poems under the *nom de plume* MacCaig.

Conversely, MacCaig attempts to have his poetic “I” carry over into his real-life interviews as he maintains the “simple man” ethos that can be found throughout his poems. This suggests a certain blurriness of the limit between poetic persona, I-as-poet and real-life “I.” This, perhaps, also enters into MacCaig’s conception of the self as an accumulation of psychological selves. It does at least intimate that there is a conscious construction of the poetic self at work in MacCaig’s writing.

Critics frequently remark that MacCaig is cautious with his poetic persona. T. Crawford, for instance, concurs: “the poet who tried to suppress his own first books and who liked to display his rapier wit to acolytes was clearly conscious not just of his imagery but of his image” (614). “The slyness that made MacCaig hard to interview and led to his complex private life, contributes to the sense of a pronounced but playfully elusive personality” Crawford writes (612), and this slyness plays a definite part in the difficulties critics encounter in attempting to classify MacCaig’s poetry.

MacCaig is very insistent on building his canon according to his specifications. He takes great pains to distance himself from his first two collections by situating them in a distant past compared to his post 1955 works, speaking of a “long haul towards lucidity” (MacCaig “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 101 and “My Way of It” 85¹⁵). However, while the second of them, *The Inward Eye*, was published in 1946, at least part of *Riding Lights*, the first volume MacCaig will acknowledge, was written nearly concurrently: according to the latest edition of his complete works, four poems published in 1955 date back to 1947 and twelve to

¹⁵ The repetition of the same phrase several years apart in an article and an interview is a characteristic of MacCaig’s declarations about his writing. The same phenomenon occurs very often in regards to his position on metaphor, philosophy, confessional poetry...

1948. There is clearly a temporal continuity which the poet seeks to obscure in his interviews.

Moreover, there are also deeper connections between the first and second MacCaig manners. There are of course vast differences between them. For instance, his later writings generally comprise relatively simple sentences in short poems while *Far Cry* features instead lengthier poems with more complex sentences. The first poem of the collection yields one example amongst many:

where can courage sound for me its appealing
and gentle voice, who visit the dismal courts
thumbed by a grimy king and snivelling courtiers
whose voices echo emptiness, only the emptiness
bred inside them by a destruction of vision,
murder of sympathy even with their own stars,
egotism that scorns even time's richness (5).

In spite of this, stylistic and thematic correspondences can still be detected. For instance “the air is filled with ocean” (*Far Cry* “II” 5) inaugurates the same construction that can be found again in “Heron” written in January 1963 and published in *Measures* (1965): “upon releasing its own spring, it fills/ the air with Heron” (*CP* 137). Similarly, “and yet” is a favoured way of phrasing a restriction in his later poems as in “Caterpillar Going Somewhere” (written in April 1973 – “and yet, and yet/ it looks so melancholy” or in “Bluestocking” (October 1970 “and yet she's pretty”). It is also featured in the second poem of *Far Cry*: “and yet the knowledge / of its fragile trance between two moments of waking (...)” (“II” 5). MacCaig also makes frequent use in his mature poems of run-on lines, as in “Caterpillar Going Somewhere,” and it must be noted that he already displays this tendency in *Far Cry* as the lines cited illustrate. Thematically, the central concerns of

the later MacCaig are similarly present in his earlier poems, though they are more difficult to detect considering the obscurity of the surrealistic images that characterise it. However, it must be concluded that even as MacCaig insists on an absolute separation between his early collections and the rest of his works, an actual comparison does not actually support this idea.

Even as he constructs his canon, MacCaig also constructs the already alluded to specific poetic persona that assumes an ethos of simplicity and common sense, which I will hereafter dub the “simple man” ethos for the sake of brevity. This persona evinces for instance a marked disdain for the academic world as the particularly scathing poem “An Academic” (*CP* 233) shows. In the last stanza, MacCaig boasts “I’m a simple man” and contrasts this attitude with the analytical processes of the titular academic whom he accuses of “dismantl[ing] Juliet, Ahab, Agamemnon / into a do-it-yourself kit / of semantic gestures” (l.8-10). He thus purposely presents himself as an intuitive rather than analytical writer and reader – and perhaps the idea that there might be some machismo in this (Scottish literature is often considered a very masculine world) should not be entirely discounted. This is reflected in his declarations about the way he writes. He claims that writing a poem takes him “two fags” as several people who have known him such as Aly Bain have reported (news.Scotland.com), and that he knows it is finished “because it finishes. It trickles down the page till it is finished (...) I am an innocent, a polite word for ignorant,” he explains (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 293). He composes in one sitting and either discards or retains the text, but does not go back to work on it again. He explains in “My Way of It:”

Many poets polish and refine and eliminate and add, making version after version of the original attempt. I can't do that. The poem, whatever its worth, generally comes easily and quickly and pretty often with no correction at all, and once it's on the page, that's that. This hit or miss way of writing means that I write a lot. It also means I write a lot of unimprovable duds. I reckon at least half, probably more, of what I write I put in the bucket (87).

This is however contradicted in the existence of the twin poems "It Has Come to This" and "Her Illness," which are actually the same poem with a few small but meaningful differences reappearing in two different small volumes:

For this once I manage, I force myself
to write down the word *light*.
So many times in the last cloudy years
I've tried and my pen
spelt it *dark* ("It's come to this" CP 403 l.1-5).

is almost identical to

For this once I force myself
to write down the word *light*.
So many times in the last cloudy months
I've tried and my mouth
said *dark* ("After her illness" CP 435 l.1-5).

The similarity carries over in the rest of the two poems, but considering their respective first stanza is enough to convince the reader that one is the reworking of the other.

Beyond this facility for writing, the "simple man" ethos also entails a rejection of all that is perceived as over-complicated, too jargon-like or too abstract – something that is already suggested in "An Academic," but is made particularly obvious in "Ineducable Me" (CP 351). The poem accentuates the idea of simplicity by building up an extended metaphor of the poet as a toddler: "my profoundest ideas were once toys on the floor," he writes; "I've licked / most of the paint off. A whisky

glass / is a rattle I don't shake" (l. 3-6). The trope implies the vanity of the human belief in the absolute value of our reflections by reducing the meditations of a grown man to pointless child's play. The poem mostly uses monosyllabic words, which is put into relief by the inclusion of a very small proportion of complex Latinate ones, of which "amateurish," derived from the French appears almost as the quotation of an outside criticism. The poem is supposedly meant as an admission of ignorance, or at least of a lack of sophistication, but after further reflection, comes across as a boast of humility – which is, essentially, the very purpose of the carefully constructed "simple man" ethos in MacCaig's poems.

B – Aims and structure of this study

There is one trait which is never truly addressed by the critics: MacCaig makes a habit of upholding opposite views without appearing to take note of it. Several instances of this tendency have already been mentioned, such as his conflicted relationship to metaphor, and many others remain as of yet undiscussed – his recurring strategy of describing nature in religious terms when he is very vocal about his atheism, for instance. I will argue that these constant tensions between coexisting and supposedly mutually exclusive opposites is the central trait of MacCaig's poetry. M.J. Scott ascribes this to MacCaig's Scottish heritage: she mentions MacCaig admitting "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” (136) in what seems to be a resurgence of the “Caledonian antisyzygy” theorised by Gregory Smith (138). This is not truly convincing, however, and Scott does not seem entirely persuaded by this attribution of the sense of tension in MacCaig’s poems to a psychological national trait herself, as the relatively offhand way in which she mentions it suggests. Indeed, MacCaig’s poems do not inscribe themselves in a specifically Scottish concern. There is, as discussed earlier, strong evidence that MacCaig places himself in a wider tradition, his literary forefathers being Englishmen and Americans. This interpretation thus seems unsatisfactory on two levels: because it treats MacCaig as an essentially Scottish poet, which I will not do in this thesis, and because it relies on the notion of a national spirit entirely conditioning his writing. Even barring the distinction I have established between private, Edinburgh-born McCaig and his writer persona Norman MacCaig, having a “racial” trait account for this defining characteristic of his poems does not seem coherent with the very individual voice and thought developed over the course of his poetic career. As such, I opt to disregard this explanation and instead aim to demonstrate that this sense of tension in MacCaig’s poems is both a symptom and a cause of a refusal to fully commit to ideas, genres, forms on his part, a sort of reticence in the writing, if you will, which is born from three distinct sources: one of them is personal in nature and resides in the innate restraint of a private man, a subject which has been broached earlier. The second and third one have to do with the instability MacCaig sees at the core of human perception of the world, which is caused jointly by the inadequacy of language to fully apprehend it and the looming presence of death as a threatening void which inevitably negates

being. To support this thesis, each chapter will foreground one way in which MacCaig simultaneously embraces a theme, mode or tradition and distances himself from it.

This thesis also possesses a secondary aim of addressing negative criticism of MacCaig's poems, hopefully to show that it is rooted in the habit of ignoring the aforementioned tendency to make opposites coexist. Despite the impression of a fragmentary body of work that has often been reported, there is an underlying world view that unifies MacCaig's poetic universe. This study seeks to establish what it is by drawing out the links between different and apparently unrelated areas of his works. To do so, the first three chapters will address themes that are central in MacCaig's writing while the other half of the thesis will investigate the way he engages with three different literary modes. Because MacCaig is not a systematic writer and, as I will show in chapter 1, insists throughout his poetic career on looking at the object with as little mediation by tradition and preconceptions as possible, I have chosen to adopt in this thesis a methodology that reflects this intention to some extent in that it seeks to consider and respond to MacCaig's poetry in its own terms.

The first question discussed will deal with MacCaig's bid for faithfulness to the object and the attendant question of description and the "riddle of the observer." By cross-referencing MacCaig's declarations, articles and poems, I will seek to reconstruct a form of fragmented programme. It is around this programme that his works organise themselves in a project of celebratory poetry that focuses on the object and thus tries to minimise the presence of the poetic "I" in the text and the mediation of cultural references. This focus on the object and on renewing his vision

of it will introduce the problem for MacCaig of writing within a tradition, whether he embraces or rejects it. It will become clear in later chapters that he does both, committing to a tradition or mode by re-appropriating some of its elements, yet appearing to position himself if not outside, then at the periphery of it by frequently undermining it.

The first chapter will have established the presence of a profound fondness and awe for the world, natural or otherwise in MacCaig's poems. In the second, I will be correlating this with the fact that MacCaig who, as I will illustrate is, as a very vocal atheist, deeply hostile to organised religion, evokes the contact with nature in terms of a religious experience – of “grace.” My aim is to demonstrate that, though an atheist, MacCaig is in a sense a religious poet who transfers his sense of the divine into his wonder at existence and the interconnectedness of all that exists.

I will then move on to an issue that could be deemed more technical, MacCaig's conception of language and its consequences for his world view. The first and second chapter ascertain how and why MacCaig considers it almost a duty to be true to his object when he writes about it. In this context, his well-known ambivalence towards tropological language as both inadequate and able to sharpen the gaze of the observer by renewing his perception of the object is highly problematic. I will first be seeking to account for this ambivalence, then to determine how MacCaig, whose poems display both the views of subjective idealism as well as a down to earth empiricism deals with the fact that language does not allow the human subject to truly access reality as it is, and thus to verify the pertinence of his perceptions – or its existence. The problem, I will argue, is not left open-ended in the

poems, although this is a reproach that has been made in the past: a network of interrelated metaphors, which I will term the WORLD IS WORD tropes network for easier reference, underlies his works¹⁶. These tropes have in common the particularity superimposing textual/linguistic/cultural elements over objects of the natural world. This type of device will prove significant on several occasions in this examination of MacCaig's poetry. In chapter three, I will look at the WORLD IS WORD tropes network as a type of oblique resolution proposed by MacCaig in order to allow him to write on despite the conflict between idealism and empiricism perceptible in his texts – he composes his poems in the manner of an empiricist focused on the data of experience, but suggests an underlying subjective idealism to be his conclusion on the matter.

These first three chapters will foreground the celebratory aspect of MacCaig's poems and treat his project of object-centred writing as a consequence of this prevalence of praise. However, even when considering MacCaig's works from this angle, it will be impossible not to take into account the pervasive sense of melancholy that coexists with this celebratory intent¹⁷. I propose that this dichotomy could be a central structuring axis in MacCaig's poems and as such, will focus the second half of this thesis, in which I will be considering three different modes of MacCaig's poetry, more decisively on the elegiac dimension of his works. Elegiac modulations are constitutive of those three modes I posit as the most prevalent ones in his writing, but I will be opening this part of the discussion on MacCaig with a consideration of his engagement with the elegiac mode itself. To do so, I will be

¹⁶ Tropes listed in the appendix.

¹⁷ This aspect of MacCaig's works has been noted p.22 of this study.

concentrating more particularly on a cycle of poems written after the death of his close friend, Angus MacLeod. MacCaig, I will demonstrate, engages both with the English elegiac tradition and its evolution in the twentieth century even as he highlights its shortcomings. Death in his poems, I will argue, represents the failure of meaning which is in itself ineffable but also impedes reflection by being the constant and inevitable threat of the blinding of the perceiver and the silencing of the poetic speaker. In the coexistence of “the weight of joy in [his] right hand / and the weight of sadness in [his] left” (“Equilibrist” *CP* 344) lies, I propose, the central dichotomy of MacCaig’s works, which is the most essential one in general as it opposes life and death, and underlies all the other sites of tension in his poems.

The following chapter will examine his engagement with the pastoral mode. On a first level, I will seek to demonstrate that, contrary to several critical assessments, MacCaig does not merely produce a somewhat elegiac, naïve take on the pastoral, though there is a strong sense of elegy for a lost or at least fading culture. He engages fully with the set of issues characteristic of this mode and in so doing proposes a model of Epicurian ethics he attributes to pastoral life presented as an alternative lifestyle. There are dissonant strains in MacCaig’s practice of pastoral, however. As I examine them, I will argue that, in his post-pastoral modulations, MacCaig calls up the same sense of immanent harmony and “grace” in the world that was discussed in chapter 2. This gives rise to the idea that Man and his environment are not merely interconnected, but that he is an intrinsic part of the world around him despite the distance self-awareness creates, resulting in a discreet but present ecological concern in MacCaig’s works which has not been hitherto addressed by

critics.

The final chapter will have a double aim. It will first consider MacCaig's amatory verse in its problematic relationship with his central writing project. The nature of this mode entails a primary focus on the subject, in radical opposition to the celebratory agenda evinced in the bulk of MacCaig's poetry. I will be highlighting how the poet grapples with the European tradition of love poetry and its conventions even as he places himself firmly in this context. His clear affinities with the Roman love elegy, Petrarchism and, more specifically, Donne's love poems appear to be perceived in MacCaig's poetry as a distorting influence. He regularly denounces it in his writing by developing often parodic Petrarchan counter-discourses. Both this conventional aspect of his borrowings from tradition and the ironic distance as he seeks to disentangle himself from it contribute to creating a sense of distance in his love poems which critics have often found to be a fault in them. Determining the other factors that contribute to this impression is the other aim of the chapter, and I will argue that, though they are in their focus on the self atypical and distinct from MacCaig's central project, his love poems are however intrinsically linked to it by their frequent role as vehicle for his reflections on the nature of language, perception and reality. This more abstractly meditative mood that attributes to the beloved the part of a guide in the speaker's search for a stabler sense of the world even as it connects the subset of amatory modulations in MacCaig's poems to the rest of his work however plays a role in creating this sense of detachment which has been frequently noted by critics, at least until the later collections where an evolution seems to take place, as I will show to conclude this discussion of MacCaig's love

poems.

Because MacCaig's poetic and writing personae are so carefully constructed, I wish to concentrate in this study on his later works published between 1955 and the end of his life as they represent the entire sum of writing the poet acknowledged as worthy of preserving. In this same spirit of considering only poems MacCaig personally vetted for publication, the corpus chosen for this thesis will be the 1993 edition of his *Collected Poems* rather than the 2009 *Poems of Norman MacCaig* edited by his son. Moreover, the 1993 *Collected Poems* is the last edition in which MacCaig himself has not only selected but ordered the poems. As such, their sequencing can be considered significant, and I will treat it as such in this dissertation.

I – “To let things be”: Realism as moral imperative

The interdependent processes of perception and description fascinate MacCaig. They are the concepts that come up most often when he seeks to define his writing project in interviews and articles. There is a third term, to which he refers only slightly less often in these discussions: celebration. The link between these three concepts in MacCaig’s works lies in that the poet considers a realistic treatment of the object – being faithful to it in his writing – which involves questions of perception and description, to be in itself a celebration of the scene or object he evokes.

MacCaig makes it clear that the central aim of his writing is to celebrate the object. He declares in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things”:

I love the world, I’m a very affectionate man. I love animals and landscapes and people and differences and likenesses. And to write a poem or try to, is really a kind of – Dylan Thomas said this – but if he meant it? I’m quoting him, and meaning it – every poem is a kind of celebration, of whatever the subject of the poem was – and of the art of poetry (102).

The collection *A Round of Applause* evidences this in its title, which the poet explains as “some praise of existence” (ibid). MacCaig sums it up conversationally: “Oh, that’s just me and the world. – ‘Good for you, boys. Splendid mountain. What a pretty flower. Look at that nice, wee lamb. Look at that person over there swilling pints; Say cheers’” (ibid). This celebratory intent is moreover not confined to this one volume. MacCaig’s sequence of explicitly titled praise poems (*CP* 318-320)

attests to this with “Praise of a Collie,” “Praise of a Boat,” “Praise of a Thorn Bush” and “Praise of a Road.”

Poetry is celebratory for him, but that is only one definition of his writing. He gives another one in terms of transmission of an experience: “it is as if you are trying to transfer your own experience of whatever into the mind of the other person. Not in any sort of didactic way. You try to recreate in the reader’s mind what you experienced at the time you were experiencing it” (Degott-Reinhardt 288). This second evocation of his writing suggests a realistic approach – “transfer” and “recreate” do not suggest a transformation of the experience. MacCaig intends to pass along to his reader a faithful, undistorted rendition of it – this quotation leaves no room for outside influences that could superimpose themselves over the scene or object he seeks to evoke. I take the coexistence of these two definitions in MacCaig’s interviews to support the idea that celebration depends on realism in MacCaig’s poems.

To establish that praise is effected through faithful evocation in his writing, my examples will be drawn mostly from MacCaig’s nature poems for two reasons. Firstly, this is because he has often been considered as a nature poet. Indeed, when Thomas Crawford seeks to give a general description of his poetry, natural elements receive pride of place: “MacCaig’s favourite topics are landscapes and seascapes, townscapes, animals, and people, with people looming larger in the later volumes” (4). Secondly, MacCaig’s writing is perceptibly more descriptive when he evokes natural elements. As such, his nature poems provide the clearest illustrations for discussing his writing project of faithfulness to the object.

Moreover, MacCaig often turns to the natural world when he reflects on this question. For instance, he evokes one of his favourite landscapes, Suilven, to demand that things should be seen as and for themselves rather than as symbols of something else:

I remember where I go most summers, there is a mountain called Suilven, my favourite mountain. Looking at it from the west, it is like the top of your thumb. I was speaking with two, three locals and one of them said: "Och, you and your love of Suilven. It's just because it's a phallic symbol." I got furious. It is not. It's a lump of sandstone, so shaped that it's very beautiful. "You and your phallic symbol." I hate that sort of thing. Looking at a bird, a creature, a person, don't muck them about. Try to see them as they really are, whatever that means (275-6¹⁸).

When he discusses his writing project in terms of celebration and realism, MacCaig adopts a stance in keeping with the "simple man" ethos discussed earlier. The distrust of abstraction that is part and parcel of it and is also perceptible in the way he relates to language, philosophy and politics, as will appear later in this thesis, plays an important role in the attitude apparent in this quotation.

MacCaig's choices in terms of subject-matter are coherent with his "simple man" persona: he favours relatively commonplace subjects and "marvellous matter-of-fact notations of / unemphatic marvels" ("Learning" *CP* 175-176 l.10-11). The poet underlines this in "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things":

people say why do you write all these poems about toads, blackbirds and weasels and stags, cows, dogs, you know? Tut-tut-tut! That's another thing that enrages me (I have to borrow a rage because I don't have one myself). The subject of any work of art doesn't matter all that much, it's what you do with it (118).

This choice is not only a matter of simplicity, but also has to do with MacCaig's insistence on fidelity to the object.

¹⁸ This statement is repeated almost verbatim in two other interviews p.290 and p.313.

Because he considers realism a criterion on which poetry can be judged, it is also important to him that he write about things he knows well. He explains to Degott-Reinhardt:

I write a fair number of poems about creatures, earwigs, cows and things. I never write about an animal I never saw. I never write about the Amazon jungles. I couldn't do it in the first place and (...) see, I'm back to my pedantics. Talk about what you know. I never saw a boa constrictor winding around some improbable tree of some stinking and humid jungle. Never. So I couldn't possibly write about it and I'm not tempted to. I write a lot about perfectly ordinary Scottish animals: deer, raven, foxes, cows, horses, cattle, sheep, people (Degott-Reinhardt 279).

One need only look at the table of contents in his *Collected Poems* to verify this statement. MacCaig even remarks playfully on this trait in "My Last Word on Frogs" (CP 402) where he writes: "People have said to me, *You seem to like frogs. / They keep jumping into your poems*" (1.1-2). He similarly chooses familiar subjects in his descriptions of scenes and landscapes. They are, with the exception of a few texts written after his visits to the United States and Italy, generally set in places he knows well – Harris, Assynt, where he holidays frequently as an adult, and Edinburgh. As a consequence of this long acquaintance with his subjects, his Highlands poems are particularly realistic, as his contemporary Sorley MacLean notes:

one of the marvels of MacCaig's poetry is that the large evocations of Suilven, Cul Mor and the other big manifestations of the landscape are not diminished by the wealth of detail in the description of places and things not seen by anyone from the roads of the district. Indeed, it could be said that this poetry has heightened the "reality" of the landscape by making it more "real" (2).

MacCaig's choice of a subject-matter he is familiar with is a condition for this superlative realism, but it is its treatment which ensures that the description does not distort its object. For this reason and coherently with his "simple man" ethos,

celebration does not entail dithyrambic praise in MacCaig's works. I will show in this chapter that it is instead effected through a process of redescription which, even as it aims to refresh the reader's vision of the object, seeks to remain faithful to the object, inasmuch as this is possible.

To follow this intent of fidelity to his subjects, MacCaig must however work through several different issues. The temptation of imagistic writing, for one, seems to be very much on his mind. In poems and interviews both, he shows himself to be concerned with this risk, especially in light of his early New-Apocalyptic writings and his facility with surrealist imagery – in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” he intimates that this style of writing comes to him easily (101). He admits: “there are many pretty surrealistic images in what I write. I can't escape from it. I have to watch myself” (Degott-Reinhardt 290) and, reflecting in 1986 on his career up to this point, he considers he was “ruined for years by this interest in Surrealism” (MacCaig “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 101)

Similarly, MacCaig avoids distorting his object through aggrandising rhetoric. This has been noted by different critics and Frykman indeed remarks upon the poet's “frequent contentment with concrete objects, without metaphysical embellishments” (16). He refers here to “Above Inverkirkaig” (*CP* 152) specifically, but also quotes on the subject “Miracles in Working Clothes” in which the poet multiplies rhetorical questions to emphasise his point: that he will neither idealise nor aggrandise his subjects. He writes: “Why should I drench them with false light? / Why should I soar to make them tiny / Or grovel to make them huge?” (*CP* 135-136 1.5-7) “Can I understand them? Can / I lie to them and call it glory, / The light they move in, that is

only / A light creeps beneath a door?" (last stanza).

This represents a significant and characteristic writing choice on MacCaig's part – he places the object at the centre of his praise poetry as opposed to expounding on the impressions it inspires in him as a means to eulogise it. The object, rather than the self, would then be the focus in this schema. Moreover, it is the object itself that MacCaig evokes, and not a theme it might call up. This may be the reason why he almost never writes about Nature with an emphatic capital N (unless he is semi-humorously referring to the traditional poetic conception of "Nature, that vogue mistress" in "Standing in my Ideas" *CP* 77).

This focus on the object seems to be recognised by most critics and they generally appear to consider MacCaig successful in his pursuit of it. There is indeed an obvious consensus amongst them when one compares their assessments of his poems: Press writes:

[MacCaig in his nature poems] portrays with a vivid immediacy the exact physical contours of a scene and of the objects in that scene, evoking their sensuous qualities with an unfailing accuracy. Yet even in his most direct transcriptions of the visible world he is never content merely to reproduce a physical likeness: he wants to make us aware that the simplest objects are part of a marvellously complex system of interrelationships, which we can explore by means of our five senses and by letting our minds play upon this elaborate network. What might degenerate into a pretentious and arid piece of scholastic logic-chopping is saved from this disaster by the alertness of MacCaig's observation and by the vivacity of his five senses (174).

His wording is very reminiscent of the way Alexander Scott foregrounds MacCaig's "sensuous awareness," "his almost-daemonic sensitivity to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the natural world which exists outside himself, however indispensable that self may be in experiencing and interpreting it" (31) as well as of Frykman's

remark that “there are fine examples of pure, sensuous description” (7)¹⁹ Hendry discusses this topic in more analytic terms: she considers realistic description to be “one of MacCaig’s real objectives.” (69) and surmises that he aims “to describe the external world in such a way that it is recreated exactly and vividly for the reader, so that the characteristics of the object are clearly perceived in the imagination” (69) The intent according to her is to “allow[] us to see the world differently, in one ‘mind-blink’” (Hendry 73). By renewing the reader’s outlook on his subject, MacCaig forces him to become aware of its inherent specificity and communicates his sense of wonder at it. It is this strategy which allows the object to stand as its own monument through the communication to the reader of what MacCaig presents as worthy of admiration in it.

MacCaig returning frequently in his poems to favourite landscapes or animals could give the impression that it would entail some repetition. It could be asked in these conditions how he intends his evocation of the object to renew the reader’s vision of it in each poem. The poet addresses this in “No End to Them” (*CP* 406) where his solemn promise in the first stanza presupposes the reader’s familiarity with his favoured subjects:

I said, Never again will I write
about love, or frogs, or absence
or the heart-stopping intrusion
of steep-down, steep-up mountains (l.1-4)

Having posited that these are recurring elements in his poems, MacCaig however

¹⁹ MacDiarmid’s characterisation of MacCaig’s poetry emphasises these same traits: “His poems are rich in first-hand observation often of a very subtle and stimulating sort and the fruits of long and intimate and well-lived experience, (...) the beasts and landscapes (...) are sharply defined, brilliantly described in a well-chosen word or two, or seen from an unusual but effective angle that gives a bonus of freshness to the most familiar scenes or commonplace incidents” (23).

delivers an unexpected conclusion:

Satisfied, I sat down and was overwhelmed
with sheet lightnings of revelations
of new things, of absolutely new things.

Twitching with joy, I scribbled for days
– about what?
About love and frogs and absence ...
etcetera (l.5-11).

Instead of the expected innovation, MacCaig instead stages a near-rapturous experience of novelty in repetition, phrased, as God's Word, in terms of “lightning” and “revelation.” The often negative connotations of the labyrinth (l.14) are subverted and instead, the mouse-poet is shown “scuttl[ing] happily” in what should be a confining, frustrating space. “Small marvels” (l.16) are what MacCaig is after when he writes. This continuing process of renewing, poem after poem, the way he sees his subject, and in doing so, of making his readers look at it with fresh eyes themselves time and again is what is – or should be – for him the function of poetry: “a brisk dose of Optrex. It clears your eyes” (MacCaig in Degott-Reinhardt 286).

Refreshing the reader’s vision of the object without distorting or idealising it is however conditioned by the writer’s perception of it. This is a concern MacCaig often returns to in his interviews. Upon being asked whether “one can't take things as they actually are” (Degott-Reinhardt 281), he replies:

That is one theme that runs through everything I've written or damn near it. (...)A tree that somebody hangs himself on isn't the same to that fellow who climbs up the tree with a rope as it is to the wee boy pinching the apples. Every object, the tree, is different to everybody else. Pasternak in one of his poems says: ‘That tree outside the window is not a tree, it's a category of human passion,’ meaning that every object has a different meaning to every single person who looks at it. So have words (ibid).

Pasternak’s tree image obviously resonated strongly with him as it echoes in “Lies

For Comfort” (*CP* 37): “All that the eye names is disguises. / That’s no tree but a way of feeling”(1.9-10). MacCaig phrases his reflections on this issue in terms of compulsion, showing how essential this problem is in the way he writes and thinks: “this compulsion to try to find what on earth a tree is objectively and what it means to me myself subjectively is what niggles and naggles at my mind all the time” (*ibid.* 309). The centrality of perception in MacCaig’s work will be simultaneously obvious and somewhat puzzling to the reader. Crichton Smith remarks: “at the heart of his poetry is the riddle of the observer” (“A Lust for the Particular” 22). This wording – “riddle” – is significant. It implies a certain level of difficulty – a riddle is always somewhat obscure – but also a certain detachment from the problem. Riddles are usually playful questions and, unless they are asked as a form of trial as in the myth of Oedipus, their answers are not necessarily important. Similarly, MacCaig’s poems often leave the question open-ended, but the speaker does not display any existential angst over this lack of solution. In this sense, the issue of the observer in MacCaig’s writing seems a riddle which the poet worries at incessantly without ever truly solving it.

This nevertheless sets the problem of the perceiving subject at the centre of MacCaig’s poems. Consequently, observing how MacCaig writes in praise of the world around him also means studying his analysis of perception and how he works through the question of the perceiver’s subjectivity and of his cultural background in order to attain the balance of realism and renewed perspective he seeks in his poems. This is what this chapter will focus on, notably in observing MacCaig’s reluctance to superimposing *literari topoi* over the object he describes, as he indicates notably in

the poems “Work in Progress” and “Romantic Sunset” (*CP* 109 and 110 respectively) which will be discussed in this chapter. MacCaig seems to be of the opinion that introducing literary topoi such as are parodied in these two texts into a poetic evocation of an object or a scene causes the former to overwrite the latter, as will be developed later. This disappearance of the actual object or scene under an external representation would be the complete opposite of MacCaig’s project to redirect the reader’s full and sharpened attention to the subject he chooses. The poet does not merely point out these threats to his project, however. He also designs and implements compensatory strategies which ultimately correspond to much of what critics have most praised about his works.

A – The pursuit of realism

MacCaig adopts a very visual, imagistic style in order to convey a precise sense of the object. This trait seems to be the most characteristic aspect of his descriptive poetry. The fact that the consensus observed amongst the critics quoted earlier hinges on it only supports the idea that this visual quality plays a – the – major role in MacCaig’s search for faithfulness to the object. I take his poem “Still Life” (*CP* 104) which, in keeping with its title, refers to painting, to provide significant information on this hallmark of his writing. “Still Life” presents itself as a manifesto of sorts in favour of the visual. The immediate quality of the painting is preferred to the symbol or the narrative, and to underline this, MacCaig focuses on “Now” (l.6) in a manner reminiscent of the pictorial metaphor he exploits in coining the expression “snapshot

poem.” This snapshot effect relies notably on the instantaneous, always present quality of the visual which MacCaig foregrounds in lines 7 and 8 of “Still Life”: “like a **bursting** bomb / That keeps on **bursting**, one **burst**, on and on” (l.7-8). The visual stuttering of the signifiers presents a dilated, endless present – the sentence, as the explosion it refers to, remains in stasis, caught in the moment of utterance as the bomb is in the instant of detonation.

This instantaneous quality of the visual is what is sought after in MacCaig’s descriptions and possibly accounts for his way of depicting a scene by juxtaposing several small touches – details or vignettes – rather than giving sweeping statements about it. It may also be what he seeks to achieve with his abundant use of colour notations. Poems such as “Laggandoan, Harris” (*CP* 17), “By the Canal, Early March” (*CP* 84), “Climbing Suilven” (*CP* 14), to cite a few, appeal to the reader’s sense-memory of the colour to supply parts of the evocation of the scene. The same device can be made to work using shapes instead of colours: the appearance of the letters we write with is universally shared knowledge, which makes them ideal for this purpose. As a result, MacCaig occasionally makes use of them to support his descriptions, as in “Two Thoughts of MacDiarmid in a Quiet Place” (*CP* 400) where he evokes “a pantile branch hang[ing] its S” or “Sandstone Mountain” (*CP* 141) in which “Hinds raised their heads in V’s,” for instance.

MacCaig’s project to be strictly faithful to the object seems to be most strictly adhered to in what he describes as “snapshot poems.” These are

a kind of poem that I myself, depreciating, of course, in my usual arrogant way, call a snapshot poem. I don’t make any reference in that poem [“Edinburgh Courtyard in July” *CP* 70] and poems of that sort to anything outside what’s in the poem itself. I don’t make any subjective

response to the objects that I'm describing.(Degott-Reinhardt 310).

The term implies photographic exactitude – the rendering of a faithful copy of the model. Despite “snapshot” being a photographic term, MacCaig is not implying these poems to be particularly static. He remarks: “I find myself to be fascinated by movement, I love the movement of creatures and grasses, anything. And I think I’m sometimes not bad at describing things in movement. I’m not a static writer in spite of these snapshots” (Degott-Reinhardt 311). In fact, in response to a suggestion made by Degott-Reinhardt, MacCaig concedes: “I would accept your change of the word from snapshot to film, but if it’s a film, it’s a documentary kind of film. It is as objective as words can be and no word can be absolutely objective” (Degott-Reinhardt 310). This choice of the term “documentary” emphasises the idea of faithfulness to the object – rather than a narrative or fictional film, a documentary is rooted in and describes facts. Similarly, MacCaig’s “snapshots” and “documentary” texts are the most exemplary manifestations of his poetic project in their aim of pure description.

The snapshot poems often take animals for their subjects, as happens in “Caterpillar” (CP 263), “Kingfisher” (CP 315) or “Ringed Plover by a Water’s Edge” (CP 283). These are poems of pure evocative effort that seek to translate into words the exact sensual experience of their object. To this end, “Kingfisher,” like “Fetching Cows,” begins with an anaphoric article – the deictic “that” which has the same function as the definite article in “the black cow” from “Fetching Cows” (CP 125) – the poem appears to begin *in medias res* and this absence of what comes before the scene we are observing is also a characteristic of photographs. Through

the deictic, the bird is made present to the reader as though he or she, too, were standing with the speaker observing it. In the first line “That Kingfisher jewelling upstream,” the enallage – noun to verb – stresses the quicksilver speed of the bird's flight while the bird-as-jewel metaphor seeks to render the impression produced by the bright colours of the kingfisher as it streaks through the air. Of “Ringed Plover by a Water's Edge” (*CP* 283), Hendry remarks that it “shows the poet's true mimetic eye, where line endings, word choice, words run together and punctuation are all carefully geared to imitate the bird” (62).

In order to induce the reader to consider the subjects of his poems with a fresh outlook, as is necessary for his definition of them as “optrex” for the mind to apply, MacCaig implements in his snapshot poems a defamiliarising strategy which, perhaps, owes something to his early surrealist tendencies. Through defamiliarising metaphors and images, he produces a *verfremdung* effect, that is to say that he “makes the object strange” to translate the German expression. In so doing, MacCaig forcibly prevents the reader's perception from following docilely a conventional, expected vision of the thing. In the same way that the *verfremdung* effect stops a theatre audience from totally entering into the illusion of the stage, MacCaig's defamiliarising and distancing techniques promote a critical outlook on the object. This writing choice yields two results: firstly, it contributes to the depiction of nature as other discussed earlier, and secondly it jars the reader into looking anew at the object. Consequently and despite his constant insistence on writing faithfully to the object and, as such, in a realistic manner, MacCaig's works – his nature poems most strikingly – contain numerous surrealistic touches sometimes bordering on

uncanniness as in “Caterpillar Going Somewhere” (*CP* 287). A series of metaphors in absentia consistently anthropomorphise the titular insect throughout the poem, which produces a certain sense of unease in the reader with the introduction of “its jaws will open sideways / instead of up and down” (l.12-13). In this, the contrast between the image of the caterpillar as a human figure doing calisthenics and this utterly alien anatomical feature is uncanny, especially when the reader visualises the anthropomorphic metaphor first. The sudden mention of the caterpillar’s sideways jaws is an abrupt departure from the extended anthropomorphic metaphor developed up to that point. It represents a sudden return to a realistic description of the animal in the poem and through this highlights the artificiality of the metaphor. This encourages the reader to revise retrospectively the picture the poem paints and in doing so to question what exactly the caterpillar is – thus fulfilling MacCaig’s intent to create poetry that acts as “optrex” for the mind.

“Fetching Cows” also relies on a defamiliarising strategy based on the use of surprising metaphors which do not however elicit the same sense of unease. This text adopts a paratactic format. It juxtaposes successive descriptive vignettes imitating a collection of impressions that are laid out seemingly as they come to mind as one starts to take in a scene consciously. The poem culminates in a striking conceit that spans the last two lines: “The black cow is two native carriers / Bringing its belly home, slung from a pole.” The metaphor, in addition to transporting the relatively familiar country scene in a an exotic colonial setting moreover divides the organic whole that is the cow into three distinct and independent elements. This renders the common tableau utterly alien, forcing the reader to apprehend it with “a refreshed

eye,” as MacCaig puts it:

I think [poetry] also makes people see things which they have seen before, but never really seen. If you write a good poem; say, for example, Ted Hughes’ “Hawk.” I’ve seen lots and lots of hawks, but I’ve seen them with a refreshed eye; I see them, sometimes, it could even be for the first time, you know (Degott-Reinhardt 286).

Judging from MacLean’s assessment of MacCaig’s nature poetry, the latter encounters a certain success in his pursuit of this proposed goal. MacLean discusses

[his] wonder at MacCaig’s “realisation” and evocation of the manifestations of nature external to man, how he can, for instance, make a dog “flow” through a fence or a toad sit as it sits, or a thousand objects take you gently by the that and make you breathe all the better for their grip²⁰ (3).

MacCaig frequently employs an artificial vehicle for a natural tenor in his metaphors. This plays a significant role in his *verfremdung* strategy. This tendency can be observed for instance in “Nude in a Fountain” (CP 69) with the metaphoric and metonymic description of a running dog as “a red rag in a black rag” (l.17). As in “Fetching Cows,” an organic whole is divided into two separate elements, the effect compounded here by the fact that a single living entity becomes two inanimate objects. The very visual defamiliarising and anthropomorphic evocation in “Spate in Winter Midnight” (CP 79) functions similarly, though it reverses the living to inanimate dynamic:

The streams fall down and through the darkness bear
Such wild and shaking hair
Such looks beyond a cool surmise,
Such lamentable uproar from night skies (l.1-3)

The metaphor is not necessarily obvious at first glance. Elucidating it forces the reader to consider carefully what is being described. This too is a way to recreate a

²⁰ It is possible that this comment refers to “Black Cat in the Morning” (CP 85), which MacLean misremembers as a dog.

certain innocence from the cultural context. The abstract idea of a stream and all the streams evoked in literature are set aside to allow the reader to picture the specific one chosen to be the subject of the poem.

One of the features that promote the impression of faithful, unmodified description in spite of the sometimes surprising comparisons and metaphors lies in the speaking persona MacCaig sets up in his poems. Hendry discusses in her 1990 article the place of the “I” as pure observer in MacCaig’s writing. She writes that MacCaig

has the extraordinary ability to let things be, or to seem to let things be. The whole point of his descriptions is to recreate the external object for the reader and, while this is going on, the poetic persona must stand back, with a “hands off” gesture, something some may regard as paradoxical, considering the centrality of MacCaig’s “I” to a great deal of his work (68).

Hendry illustrates her point with several key quotations (72). In order to take the discussion further, I would add a few observations of my own. “In Everything” (*CP* 305), for instance, turns the speaker into a non-sentient element of the natural world through the simile “I sat, still as a shell.” This represents a higher degree of passivity than his description of the “I” as “an observing, blank-puzzled cliff-hanger” in the same poem. This speaker moreover is granted only a passive role as patient in the phrase “I was introduced.” This function of mere observer sets the “I” at the periphery of the scene he describes, as an outsider, as in the tellingly titled “Outsider” (*CP*106), where a sense of alienation comes into play (“And feel myself a foreigner in this scene” l.16). This positioning of the speaker on the outside of the scene aims to avoid modifying the scene by inscribing the speaker in it, either literally as a participant, or figuratively through his role as more or less unreliable

perceiver. This choice of a persona relegated to the periphery of the poems even as they originate from him also constitutes a form of metaliterary comment. The mind, “its own element” in “Absorbed” can “creep into” the object, but this movement being necessary to enable description of it evidences that the speaker remains exterior to the scene. Moreover, “creeping” is a type of movement towards the thing which has the one who moves adapt himself to his destination: one creeps into something quietly and carefully without disturbing one’s surroundings. “Creeping” implies that the creature that moves does not disturb the space it moves through and/or into and, in the context of the poem, that the writer does not distort the object to suit his perception or understanding of it. This definitely cements the link between the choice of this de-centred persona and MacCaig’s bid for realism.

MacCaig’s observer persona only offers up minimal explicit comments on and characterisation of the objects and scenes he evokes. This is visible in “Praise of a Collie” (CP 318) for instance. The celebration of the dog is constructed as a partly oblique portrait: the speaker describes directly the dog’s physical appearance, but lets the reader put together a notion of her personality and her relationship with her master from objective observations about her. The least commented upon amongst them, “She greeted you with *bow*, never *bow-wow*” (l.3) reads as descriptive shorthand for the reality of the barking dog. The line conveys an idea of brevity – the canine equivalent of a man of few words, the portrait seems to suggest. Even in the last stanza, after “but suddenly” signals an abrupt change in tonality, the poem avoids overt sentimentality: “But suddenly she was old and sick and crippled / (...) / I grieved for Pollóchan when he took her a stroll / And put his gun to the back of her

head.” The sober evocation of canine old age trails off into a modest aposiopesis while the ternary rhythm produces an impression of inexorable deterioration. Immediately after, the account of a man putting down a beloved companion only relates strictly factual information without any explicit reference to the feelings of the parties involved. This, as will be observed later, is coherent with MacCaig’s usual approach to elegy – the pathos of the scene is prevented from descending into overly conventional bathos through the outward objectivity of the relation and the displacement of feeling to an outside element, in this case the speaker’s “I grieved.”

Despite these strategies, the degree to which MacCaig appears to follow his stated project in his writing fluctuates in his poetry. While the snapshot poems represent the most exemplary cases of pure description, it must be noted that evocations of the natural world regularly give rise to a marked emotional response and – or – act as the starting point for further reflections, resulting in texts that sometimes depart greatly from the parameters MacCaig outlines for his descriptive nature poetry.

It happens relatively often in MacCaig’s writing that texts appearing initially to be snapshot poems veer off into a more subjective territory as “gradations of the poet’s presence” (Frykman 27) are incorporated. Frykman chooses to cite “Drifter” (*CP* 15) as an example of this. The poem delivers a visually striking description but shifts its focus to the speaker midway through. The “I” is the most prominent element in the last stanza, in which the pronoun appears in every single line – in an anaphoric construction for three out of the four lines. “So Many Summers” (*CP* 220-221) exemplifies a similar, but more radical shift. All but one line of the poem depict

the successive states of a decaying boat and dead hind, with no human character intruding on the scene. The last line, however, brings the speaker to the fore, closing the poem with “And I have lived them too.” Even as the sentence outwardly states a mere parallel, its brevity and situation as the closing statement of the poem give it a decisive influence on the text: it retrospectively modifies the reader’s comprehension of the poem as a whole by transferring the melancholy atmosphere of the scenes to the speaker himself; with it a succession of purely descriptive snapshots becomes an extended metaphor for human ageing and the poet’s apprehension of his own death. “Two Focuses” (CP 203) also exemplifies this departure from MacCaig’s project. Nature in the poem is indifferent to the transient life and death of its creatures. The speaker on the other hand inserts his own response to it in the poem, juxtaposing the documentary project MacCaig has been arguing for with his own empathetic emotional response to his subject highlighted in the text by the solemn-sounding spondees “But death / shrinks back” (l.5). In this instance, his speaker refuses to “creep into” the objects he describes but forcefully interpolates his own perspective by foregrounding its absence in the scene itself:

Such dooms, and nothing to tremble for them
but the one human figure in the landscape
who, because he trembles for them,
is the one intruder.

I tremble for them. But death shrinks back again
into the beautiful forms of his disguises.
And I see only that mountain, this stream,
this pool, clipped between rocks like an agate (l.13-20).

The epiphora “nothing to tremble for them (...) he trembles for them” links the signifiers “nothing” and “he” in the reader’s mind and emphasises the otherness of

the human observer in the context of the natural world. This impression is further amplified by the shift between the direct, second person address, which marks a certain degree of involvement in the first three stanzas, to a form of soliloquy in the third. This different type of utterance displaces the natural elements evoked in the poem from the position of addressees to objects of contemplation and separates them irrevocably from the speaker. "Two Focuses" foregrounds a problematic aspect of MacCaig's stance towards nature as it brings into relief the contrast between objectively described indifferent, non-sentient nature and the speaker's own human sympathy and empathy with the places and creatures depicted in the snapshot poems. The speaker, because he can and does reflect on what he perceives, pictures himself as isolated from the scene by this awareness itself. In this poem, MacCaig offers a commentary of sorts on the absence of self-awareness in nature and through this on its place in Man's world view. As a result, the text possesses, as the title intimates, a double focus, thus deviating from MacCaig's general writing agenda, on the object – nature – and on the perceiving subject as an everyman figure separated from the scene by the very thing that allows him to describe it, his human consciousness.

The tension between focus on the object and on the perceiving self is also visible in "Caterpillar Going Somewhere" (CP 287), for instance, as the first eight lines of the poem are pure observations of the insect's appearance and way of moving. The mournfully repetitive "and yet, and yet" (l.9) signals a shift in the mood of the poem as the writer empathises with the sadness he seems to perceive in his subject which he personifies into the melancholy figure of "a retired sea-captain / scanning horizons" (l.17-18). To what extent the caterpillar actually "looks so

melancholy” is however questionable. As such, it can be argued that this qualification might be superimposed on the animal’s neutral aspect by the speaker as a sort of pathetic fallacy, perhaps as a result of the caterpillar’s small size compared to the poet’s human scale. “Swimming Lizard” (CP 12) presents the same combination of objective observation and authorial empathy: the lizard is distanced in the metaphoric evocations “the tiny monster, the alligator/ a finger long” (l.4-5), but in the last three lines, the speaker registers a sense of kinship with his subject: “And I, like it, too big to be noticed, / Hung over him in pity, and my help, too, was / No reaching hand, but a loving and helpless will.” In this instance, the lizard’s size is what arouses pity in the poet and the “I” separated from the object of its contemplation and commiseration by a comma in “And I, like it” is explicitly distressed by this uncrossable distance between himself and this particular representative of the natural world. More strikingly in “Greenshank” (CP 286), the speaker identifies as desolate the birdsong the reader has been warned against misinterpreting in “Birds All Singing,” arguing that “one can’t help” interpreting it in these terms – the urge made to seem irresistible through the repetition of the expression:

His single note – one can’t help calling it
piping, one can’t help
calling it plaintive – slides droopingly down
(...) but is filled
with an octave of loneliness, with the whole sad scale
of desolation.
He won’t leave us (...)
Cuckoo, phoenix, nightingale,
you are no truer emblems
than this bird is.
He is the melancholy that flies
in the weathers of my mind,

He is the loneliness that calls to me there
in a semitone
of desolate octaves.

In contradiction with his avowed project, MacCaig turns the bird into an emblem; the living animal disappears behind its song, and more precisely behind the emotional interpretation the poet superimposes on it. With the intent attributed to it by the speaker in “He won’t leave us,” it becomes at least partially the vehicle in a metaphor of human loneliness – explicitly so in line 21.

B – MacCaig’s take on writing faithfully

When he seeks to characterise how he can remain faithful to the object, MacCaig tends to describe what must be avoided rather than what must be done to reach that goal. He details the pitfalls of writing choices he deems incompatible with it, such as pathetic fallacy, idealisation of the object or superimposition of cultural tropes over the thing being evoked, but does not truly enunciate writing guidelines to follow in order to remain faithful to the object. My aim in this section is to compile from MacCaig’s stated positions on distinct issues a list of principles he appears to try to follow in his works as a whole.

MacCaig rejects adamantly the idea of endowing the external world with characteristics derived from his own state of mind. His position on pathetic fallacy is unequivocal:

I don’t know what their identities [of the objects he describes] are, of course, but I’m aware that they have them and I hate intruding on their identity. I loathe the pathetic fallacy. Makes it rain when you feel sad;

makes it sunny when you feel gay. I loathe burdening outside objects with human feelings, making them some kind of sympathetic translator of my own tiny small self. I hate it (Degott-Reinhardt 312).

This meteorological type of pathetic fallacy is indeed not present in his poems. However, the examples of the caterpillar and the bird observed earlier do contradict this particular rule MacCaig has set for his writing. In “Greenshank,” the idea that the speaker’s superimposition of an emotional content on the bird’s song is compulsive foregrounds the measure of pathetic fallacy to be found in the poem. However, “one can’t help / calling it plaintive” also implies that there is something in the string of sounds emitted by the greenshank which a human mind can only interpret as an expression of distress. Perhaps musically-inclined MacCaig²¹ suggests in this a cultural interference – modern Western, ancient Roman and traditional Chinese music do not necessarily assign the same emotional connotations to the same tonalities. However, whether the injection of an emotional dimension into the bird’s song is the product of the speaker’s own state of mind or cultural associations, the idea of compulsion serves in both cases to highlight the fact that this “plaintive” quality is not actually present in the greenshank’s call. This foregrounds the pathetic fallacy and in so doing undermines it. The poem, though it points out the device, does not however reject or criticise but merely states its inevitability in this instance. In that respect, “Greenshank” seems to suggest that MacCaig’s project of celebrating the object through complete focus on it is problematic – in this particular case at least, following it is implied to be impossible. In support of this idea, it must be noted that Frykman remarks: “a very frequent pattern is for a description of scenery

²¹ In “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” MacCaig declares “I love music, more than poetry, I respond to music more than poetry. Music to me is *the* great art” (109).

to turn subtly – sometimes rather too subtly – in one of inner landscape, and for correspondences to be thus established between the physical and the mental” (7). The poem “Wet Snow” (CP 4) is similarly arresting: MacCaig develops in it an extended metaphor of the snow covering a tree as its ghost – the choice of the vehicle is in itself an intrusion of the writer’s subjectivity. Because the poet chooses a ghost as the vehicle of the metaphor, the text is haunted by a melancholy awareness of death. However, visually a metaphor of snow as blanket or coat – something that protects – would have been equally as viable.

The trait “Caterpillar Going Somewhere,” “Greenshank” and “Wet Snow” share is the melancholy quality that defines the examples of pathetic fallacy they showcase: the first and last poems have in common the idea of death and ageing – the “retired sea captain” discussed earlier and the wintry “ghost” suggesting the constant human awareness of time and mortality. The “plaintive” quality found in the greenshank’s song has to do with “loneliness” and “desolation.” The poem offers no further explanation. It can be argued however that time and death appear almost constantly in filigree in MacCaig’s poems. He appears quite preoccupied with this issue, as will be discussed at length in chapter 5 of this dissertation. Even as he celebrates the world around him, MacCaig is also “a death-poet” (Thomas Crawford 4) who “says as much as many more pretentious poets about man’s nearly tragic plight” (ibid.). It could be justified then to consider the sense of loneliness and desolation in “Caterpillar Going Somewhere” as a result from this same existential sadness constitutive of what MacCaig loathes to call “the human condition.” The use of pathetic fallacy in his poems might conceivably be seen as an oblique *memento*

mori.

Incidentally, pathetic fallacy in MacCaig's poems appears to usually occur in correlation with elegiac modulations; injection of the speaker's cheerfulness into his description of his surroundings is comparatively rarer. Critics have remarked on a certain elegiac quality coexisting in MacCaig's poems with his celebratory mode. Beyond Crawford's characterisation as a "death-poet," Crichton Smith's assessment is particularly telling on this score when he writes that "[a]lthough they are on the whole poems of praise and although Norman [MacCaig] has always insisted how happy he has been, [his works] come across sometimes as the poems of a lonely man, radiant in presences" (21 "A Lust for the Particular: Norman MacCaig's Poetry"). This juxtaposition of radiance and loneliness encapsulates quite aptly the impression created by MacCaig's poems. While there is an undeniable sense of enjoyment of and awe at the world, at nature in his writing, an answering pervasive strain of quiet melancholy can be felt throughout his works. Themes of loss, absence and the impending threat of death and decay creep into most poems – even optimistic ones – seemingly originating in the writer's own preoccupations. I would conjecture that realism and object-centred poetry – the agenda he pursues when writing about the world around him – are associated in MacCaig's writing with a celebratory mode, while elegiac modulations arising from the poet's awareness of time and human mortality occasion a shift in focus towards the subject. This dichotomy appears to circumscribe two major currents in MacCaig's poems: a celebratory and an elegiac mode which are characterised by different stylistic and modal traits. The interplay between MacCaig's poetic agenda of faithfulness to the object and these two

tonalities constitutes a complex problem which can not be treated properly at this point of the dissertation²². In the second half of this thesis, I will be focusing on three prevalent modes in MacCaig's poems. It is a serendipitous consequence that, as elegiac modulations play a predominant role in all three, the first half of this study deals more directly with MacCaig's celebratory modes in the context of his object-centred agenda while the second part highlights how the incursion of the elegiac – which I propose to be the province of the subject in MacCaig's poems – intervenes in its implementation.

MacCaig regularly displays concern over the fact that his poems necessarily inscribe themselves in their respective poetic tradition – the nature poems, for instance, have to contend with the landscape and pastoral poetry that has come before. Potential similarities with the style and cadence of other poets does not trouble him. However, he is concerned with the influence of images originating in the literary, pictorial and even musical traditions that predate his poems. Several instances in his works indicate that he is aware of the possibility of the scene-as-it-is being overwritten with preformed images latent in his cultural background. He is also uneasy about the idea that the complex experience of reality should be brought back to human cultural categories: the titular “Half-built Boat in a Hayfield” (*CP* 67) is “making midget its neat pastoral scene” (l.2) – it could be understood that the modal conventions cannot contain all that it represents, but also, as the poem is a metaphor for poetic creation, that modes and genre are ultimately often only incidental to the writing process.

²²A true analysis of this duality is however impossible at this point of the study as an examination of MacCaig's elegiac writing would be required. Consequently, this will be discussed further in chapter 5.

MacCaig gives voice to these concerns in a number of his poems, adding through the course of his career to the fragmented *ars poetica* that can be traced through his poems and interviews. His strategy in his metapoetic verse appears to be either to point out cultural influences on the phrasing, composition of a scene, choice of metaphor in his poems or to parody them. This second case is particularly developed in two poems forming a very short metaliterary sequence in the 1993 edition of the *Collected Poems*: “Work in Progress” (CP 109) and “Romantic Sunset” (CP 110). In order to gain an insight into what it is MacCaig considers to be an abusive reliance on artistic tradition, I will be taking a closer look at both.

In “Work in Progress” (CP 109), MacCaig chooses to reflect on another artistic medium by parodying the idealising treatment of a scene by a painter. The first stanza underlines the artificiality of the description with the logical impossibility of “dolphins blowing to the true / North in every corner.” Immediately after this, the oxymoron of “ships, elegantly wrecked” stresses the stylised quality of the seascape the artist seeks to render. The same line of criticism is taken up in the fourth stanza as the speaker conflates physical and mental characteristics ascribed to the mermaid in the space of three hyphenated adjectives, the third coined for the occasion: “fancy-free, / blank-eyed and draggle-tailed.” This has the effect of speeding up the pace of the description in contrast with the static, stately quality of the scene to the extent that the composition of the mermaid as – pictorial – character appears mechanical and purely dictated by conventions, an “[e]rotic image that the sea / Has not a thing to do with.” The flippancy demonstrated by the artist in the last stanza – “And now, a pastoral, perhaps?” is underlined by the rupture created with the sudden irruption of

the painter's free direct speech musing within the speaker's description. As was the case for the mermaid, this landscape is not a product of observation but a careful composition put together out of conventional elements. Among these, the "lowing cows" and "pert milkmaids" are subjected to ludicrously aggrandising transformations – respectively "God's thunderclaps" and "the Furies" – which MacCaig superposes paratactically between parentheses to better underscore the contrast between both terms of the metaphors and the arbitrariness of it.

"Romantic Sunset" (*CP* 110), which follows "Work in Progress" immediately on the same page frames a similar sentiment. Whyte remarks:

this irony extends to the use of landscape typically made by certain English Romantic poets, in "Romantic sunset" (...) MacCaig tartly paraphrases the projections, the uplifting of the poetic soul before this spectacle of natural beauty, placing everything in a resolute simple past tense which is itself a denial of the experience's claim to a validity beyond the temporal and the individual (100).

The scene described by the observer is entirely remade and replaced by a fantasised version of it:

The purple flare made images, of course,
In the image-mad (...)
And gods, of kinds, and meanings, of a sort,
Emerged from a worn seascape and became
Its substitute, and seemed the very same (*CP* 110 l. 1-2 and 10-12).

The "revelation" "expanding through affinities till it was / So near divine it was almost its own Cause" (l.13-15) seems to further erase the landscape being described by making the artistic perception and transformation of it its own Cause, the capital implying a divine act of self-creation rather than ordinary causality. The focus here is definitely no longer on the object, nor does it target the perceiving subject. It is perception as a creative act which is the centre of attention. At this point, the self-

referentiality of art borders on self-absorption. The scene that is supposedly being described has not merely been displaced from the centre of the work of art, but been entirely erased. It is no longer the subject but only the occasion of a painting or a poem in which the creative process “substitute[s]” other elements for what is really there and “[takes] from nothing there engaging miracles” – “from nothing” entails pure invention. This is the exact opposite of what MacCaig wants poetry to do: art celebrating, if anything, itself rather than its objects.

Though those two poems are the most obvious metapoetical directions written by MacCaig, the rest of his poems also yield significant contributions to his fragmented manifesto. “By Achmelvich Bridge” (CP 132) has the speaker evoke then reject the clichéd image of a moonlit body of water: “no moon need slide / into the sky to make that water bright” (l.9-10). This type of poetic preterition is one way for the poet to distance himself from the pre-formed images inherited from nature poetry and painting tradition. Attributing authorship of the image to another writer achieves a similar effect: in the first line of “Midnight, Lochinver” (CP 98), MacCaig describes the water through quotation: “wine-coloured, Homer said, wine-dark,” taking up the traditional Homeric epithet of the sea, paralleling Greek and Scottish seascape in a metaphor he extends in the last stanza: “The nursing tide moved gently in./ Familiar archipelagos (...) / (...)heard her speak / Things clear, though hard to understand / Whether in Gaelic or in Greek.” This strategy has the added advantage of borrowing for the landscape he evokes the undisputed claim to fame attached to Homer’s verse. The Scottish seascape becomes the equal of the places of legend depicted in the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. It can be conjectured that

conflating the locations together also equates their respective inhabitants. If that is the case, the modern-day Gaels, always spoken of positively in MacCaig's poems, take on the same larger-than-life quality that defines Homer's characters and become themselves near-mythical figures. In this way, MacCaig's twentieth-century description is not subordinated to the classical text it uses as a template. Instead, it re-appropriates its relevant elements and forges them into a new, personal evocation that is nourished but neither constrained nor threatened by its literary precedent.

"Mountain Streamlet" (*CP* 415) is a different case; material taken from reality is quantitatively much less present than cultural references: the poem contains only two actually descriptive notations, the "thin splash of water" (l.1) and a reference to white pebbles (l.11-12). Outside of this, the entirety of the text depicts the objects and creatures the observer imagines "should" be in the water – "There should be / red eyes in it or a shiver / of gold grains" and "I look for the red eyes" – the verbs "should" and "look for" hinting that the elements of the natural world are overwritten with a fantasised scene. The couplet that provides the fourth stanza makes this explicit: "And gold grains? They're in my mind,/ enriching me" – the titular streamlet has by this point entirely disappeared, even as the "I" is brought to the fore with a double reference in the space of two short lines.

This does not mean however that the actual scene is entirely absent from the poem: On the one hand, it is true that MacCaig does indeed call upon the literary figures of Orpheus and Ophelia, which are, like the "gold grains" and "red eyes" present only in the mind of the poet:

It [the stream] couldn't trundle away
even the head of Orpheus.

And Ophelia would step over it
singing her sad songs (5-8).

However, he does so in order to humorously point out the discrepancy between the rivers of the stories and his own mountain streamlet which due to its small size could never play the momentous roles assigned to them. In the process, MacCaig points out the inadequacy of the literary models attached to running water in describing the specific scene he has chosen. The larger implication is that, though the temptation to call upon literary tradition is there, reality does not conform to the precedents it offers. Applying them regardless to the situation at hand yields humorous or, in this case, parodic result. This is what is presented to the reader in MacCaig's re-imagining of the well-known literary scenes in "Mountain Streamlet." The poem is indeed parodic in its juxtaposition of prosaic concerns with the high-flown, grandiose disregard for technicalities that necessarily accompanies the tragic – simply put, the stream is too small for grand literary tragedies. It must be noted, nevertheless that, though the poem lampoons this use of literary references and points out that they do not suit the situation at hand, they still remain the measuring stick of reality in MacCaig's description of the scene.

This phenomenon occurs frequently enough in his writing that MacCaig appears to highlight it through the inclusion in his works of an underlying structural conceptual metaphor that presents objects of the world as writing or reading materials. "Bookworm" (*CP* 243) is built entirely on this trope, pondering "the second volume / of a rose" and asking: "the waves of the sea (...) why aren't they divided / in paragraphs?" Before introducing a modal shift into amatory verse in the last two stanzas, the text evokes a series of natural elements which are systematically

paired with typographic notations and are either found wanting in comparison to them, or appreciated because a likeness between the two has been observed. The thought process here is reminiscent of what happens in “Mountain Streamlet” and suggests the same primacy of literary culture over direct perception of the object. The trope in itself strengthens the impression that there is no innocent perception that would be entirely free from literary – artistic – precedent. The blackbird of “Sparrow” (*CP* 249) is similarly “writing / pretty scrolls on the air with the gold nib of his beak,” paralleling the poet’s actions as he puts this description to paper, or possibly even a predecessor’s.

C – The moral dimension

In this section, I will argue that MacCaig’s insistence on writing realistically possesses a moral dimension. This was already implied in the way he phrased his refusal to see Suilven as anything but itself.²³ MacCaig seemed almost offended on behalf of the mountain, as though the observer, in his interpretation – over-interpretation – of the landscape failed to fulfil a fundamental duty to the object. The way Riach phrases his comparison of MacCaig’s and Hughes’ animal poems points to this moral dimension as well. The “strong contrast” he sees between them hinges on the fact that MacCaig “wants to represent a non-verbal world responsibly, so he doesn’t try to transmogrify the birds and animals into human caricatures” (“The Poetry of Experience” 560). Ted Hughes, however, “weighs his animals with human

²³ Quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

characteristics” while MacCaig’s are “precisely and limitedly themselves” (ibid.). There is a strong sense that each individual object has its own unalienable place in MacCaig’s poems: “Even a leaf, its own shape in the air,” he writes in “Two Ways of It” (*CP* 78) “Achieves its mystery not by being symbol / Or ominous of anything but what it is” (l.19-21). Arguably, it would not be amiss in these lines to read mystery in its stronger religious sense: the sacred dignity of the thing-in-itself which is its own celebration.

The way MacCaig ends the essay he wrote about his own practice of poetry, “My Way of It,” with a definition of what poetry should do appears to support this idea:

Poetry teaches a man to do more than observe merely factual errors and measurable truths. It trains him to have a shrewd nose for the fake, the inflated, the imprecise and the dishonest. So it compels him to resist stock responses, because it compels him to examine the emotional significance, as well as the rational significance of whatever comes under his notice (88).

This moral aspect of poetry becomes particularly visible in the case of MacCaig’s nature writing as this is where his project to write realistically is most consistently pursued. We generally think of nature according to different cultural tropes, depending on the aspect of the natural world which strikes us most. This is where possible stock responses to nature originate. For instance, considering it on a purely aesthetic level, the representation of nature in terms of landscapes and especially of picturesque landscapes obscures part of its reality even as it highlights others. Landscape is a cultural construction born from a representation of nature as art. As a result, the question of landscape writing – which constitutes a large portion of MacCaig’s poems – provides a good example of how cultural conventions mediate

MacCaig's pursuit of his poetic project. While the idea of landscape as opposed to cityscape suggests a natural origin for the former contrasting with the human construction of the latter, it is however to be noted that "[b]y the end of the eighteenth century, landscape was not a natural phenomenon but a cultural one, something jointly created by the triangulated arts of painting, poetry, and landscape gardening" (Heffernan xviii). I would argue that, in the respect of his landscape poems, MacCaig relies at least partially on an idea of picturesque nature and thus contends with a specific form of cultural interference in his project to faithfully describe the thing as it is. Cultural construction of landscapes mediates his perception of them in the guise of reference to other artistic mediums – most commonly, painting – conditioning his recreations of the scenes he chooses.

Firstly, the idea of landscape is intimately bound up with that of painting. The notion of "picturesque" can be defined as "something created by the observer out of elements presented to the eye; something initiated by nature, which forms objects 'in the style and manner appropriate to painting,' and completed by the viewer, who creates a picture by associating what he sees in nature with what he has seen on canvas" (Heffernan 4). It is "the ability to see an object purely for its visual effect, to isolate its pictorial qualities" (J.R. Watson paraphrasing Knight in Watson 20). A picturesque description appears to bridge the gap between literary and painterly rendition of the landscape. Another link between the two artistic mediums of writing and poetry can be found in the word "landscape" itself:

the word *landscape* itself – originally spelled *landskip* – was at first used as a technical term for a picture representing natural inland scenery; then it was also used to mean a particular tract of land that could be seen from one point of view, as *if* it were a picture; and finally, it came to mean the

whole of natural scenery (Heffernan 3).

From a historical point of view, talking about a “landscape poem” would then mean something different from what referring to a poem describing a natural scene would entail. This might be reflected in MacCaig’s poems through the presence of a structuring conceptual metaphor underlying much of his nature poetry – that of nature presented in terms of painting. Thomas Crawford notices a symptom of this when he talks about MacCaig’s “painterly images” (8), and it is true that MacCaig’s is a very visual poetry, as discussed earlier. “Things in Each Other” (CP 99) displays the poet’s awareness of this by treating the landscape evoked as a painting in progress and considering the techniques used to produce it:

To fake green strokes in water, light fidgets,
A niggling fidget, and the green is there,
Born of a blue and marrying into blue
With clouds blushed pink on it from the upper air.

And water (...) sketches an island with blurred pencillings (l.1-7).

The intent suggested by the telic structure “to fake” suggests a conscious creation of the landscape by itself, however the end of the second stanza introduces a shift:

Mind does this, too, with the pure shapes of things.

Or mind fidgets and a thought, grown green,
Born of nowhere and marrying nowhere,
Fakes a creation” (l.8 -11)

The last stanza furthers this representation of the “noticing mind” (l.14) as creator of the scene it perceives, a specific manifestation of this being the description and subsequent recreation of a natural scene as a painting, as happens in this poem.

Broadening the scope of this phenomenon, it can be said that MacCaig’s

poems often transform a natural element into a manifestation of human artistry. “Stonechat on Cul Beg” (CP 314), for instance, describes the bird as “a tiny work of art” “bright as an illumination on a monkish parchment” giving the speaker “a stained-glass look” while the speaker re-imagines himself as “a group of solemn connoisseurs trying to see the brushstrokes.” This mental process of perceiving the natural as a product of art is foregrounded with the use of comparatively less common, more erudite colour adjectives – “I murmur *Chinese Black*, I murmur *alizarin*.” Instead of the unmarked signifier “red” which would foreground the colour itself and its most common symbolic associations, the choice of a more precise word related to the realm of art makes more present in the reader’s mind the idea that the terms of a description are selected by the speaker rather than directly suggested by the object being described. Through this, MacCaig once again highlights how the observer’s cultural background will condition his or her apprehension of the world. “You’d expect something like oboes or piccolos” (l.13), he writes about the bird’s song, making it clear that the perceiving subject is measuring the experience in terms of expectations born of human artistic creation – the contraction “you’d” and the vagueness of “something like” seem to imply a casually dismissive attitude towards the scene, as though nature were here found wanting in its lack of the expected “oboes or piccolos.” The visual description is phrased in term of pictorial artistry and the speaker expects a corresponding musical harmony to accompany it. The bird’s song, however, is a natural sound rather than an artificially created melodic phrase. This jars the speaker out of his culturally-conditioned perception of the scene, thus undermining it even as it brings it to

reader's attention.

The musical metaphor here is not an isolated case. It resurfaces as synaesthetic perception of the landscape in "Moment Musical In Assynt" (*CP* 251) where "A mountain is a sort of music: theme/ And counter theme displaced in air amongst/ Their own variations" (l.1). The poem turns on an extended metaphor of the landscape as a musical composition, the impression reinforced by the harmony of the alliterative "Sforzando Suilven"(l.15). The metaphor of nature as art is taken a step further in "Spate in Winter Midnight" (*CP* 79) and in "A Man in Assynt" (*CP* 227): in the first, MacCaig evokes the theatrical and operatic artifice of "a sheet-iron thunder" (l.15) and in the second,

these waves that
pay no heed but laboriously get on with
playing their million-finger exercises on
the keyboard of the sand" (stanza 11).

These particular expressions of the underlying structural metaphor foreground the technical side of art, thus foregrounding the metaphorical process that presents nature in terms of art. This brings into relief the artificiality of the poet's account of the landscape even as it however fulfils MacCaig's agenda of celebrating nature. Because MacCaig is an atheist, he does not posit a divine creator of nature. He is however in awe of the natural world – setting up a metaphor of natural elements as products of art or artifice allows him to re-introduce an idea of creation. It becomes possible then for him to express his admiration through a sense of technical prowess and ingenuity to be found in this nature posited as created by artists. The waves "playing their million-finger exercises on/ the keyboard of the sand" are implicitly metaphorised as master pianists exercising daily to reach the remarkable dexterity

necessary to the execution of their art. Implicitly, MacCaig points out that nature, though non-sentient and thus without agency, will or technique, reaches the same level of artistic perfection and causes the observer to experience the same type of aesthetic pleasure as human master painters and skilful musicians sometimes do. This form of praise for the natural world, oblique though it is, reinscribes the poem into MacCaig's initial agenda of writing celebrations for the world. The means by which this is effected however depart from the straight descriptive accounts he has been advocating in his poems. He does here subscribe, however creatively, to a "stock response." Nevertheless, by introducing the notion of artificiality in the evocation of a natural landscape, MacCaig might also be creating a nesting pattern of sorts – art depicting nature as art – thus indirectly pointing out the artificiality of his own medium. This would satisfy the poet's insistence on consistently examining one's reactions to the objects and ideas encountered through the reminder addressed to the reader that he or she experiences only a poetic textual account and not the thing itself.

There are of course alternative ways to think of nature. The poet could also choose to embrace for instance Edenic or destructive conceptions of it. The natural world could then be presented as a nurturing environment, which could perhaps also call up of historical conceptions of "mother nature," or as the type of space found in literary descriptions of winter scenes or barren landscapes in which a cruel nature is sometimes metaphorised as a cruel mother. MacCaig generally chooses not to rely on either of these representations, however. Instead, he subscribes to a cultural trope foregrounding the otherness of nature. This, in the context of his own realistic

project, has the advantage of not anthropomorphising the natural world and its elements. Nature in his writing is indeed indifferent, radically other and as such, is generally neither idealised nor humanised. For instance, while his poems reflect a profound affection for all animals, none of them build on the traditional motif of animal loyalty as it appears in Wordsworth's "Fidelity" or "The White Doe of Rylstone." MacCaig's animal world, while not as ruthless as Ted Hughes,' has little room for sentimentality. "Birds all Singing" (*CP* 19) has been much commented upon in this particular respect, notably by Crichton Smith who characterises it as an "anti-romantic," "realistic" poem ("Birds All Singing" 50). The text's rejection of idealisation can be summed up in the alliterative collocation "their sylvan slum." By linking together the latinate, somewhat precious epithet often found in idylls and pastorals and the more modern, urban "slum" with its negative connotations, MacCaig creates a dissonance that underlines the discrepancy between the actual behaviour of the birds and the wilful self-deception enacted by man in general and poets in particular on the subject. MacCaig's nature is utterly alien and indifferent; it has no anthropomorphic intent or feelings, no voice. In "Ambiguous Snow" (*CP* 115),

Snowfall makes no insinuations.
Silence in a white disguise
Happens without rhetoric
Of slamming clouds and slipshod raindrops (l.1-5).

While on one level, these lines contrast snowfalls and rainstorms, one could also choose to understand that this poem foregrounds the fact that there is no meaning to be found in natural phenomena. The "rhetoric / Of slamming clouds and slipshod raindrops," as pure rhetoric, does not imply any deeper content, only formal

elements – historically and to this day, rhetoric moreover possesses negative connotations that associate it with empty words and falsities. In this respect, MacCaig’s lines suggest that any attempt to read meaning in nature would be in vain.

The indifference of MacCaig’s non-sentient nature is often depicted through the death of animals which the speaker neither explicitly comments upon nor justifies. In the case of “Ambiguous Snow,” the poet evokes natural phenomena with the lines “And the snuggling bud is warm / And the thrush dies in his feathers.” This seems to enact a certain reversal of the reader’s expectations: on the one hand, the line referring to the bud implies a sense of comfort and enjoyment on its part. The thrush, however, which is more likely to be treated as a sentient creature by a human speaker, if not anthropomorphised, is evoked from an outside point of view, that is as one might have expected the plant to be referred to. This particular choice seems to suggest values and thought processes – if there are any – different from those the reader is used to. The conception of nature it suggests, a nature which allows the thrush to die and preserves the bud may be understood as radically other and incomprehensible to the human reader. The poet thus needs, in order to be true to his realistic project, to refrain from superimposing human morals and conceptions onto an amoral nature. In doing so, he can be said to respect the specificity of his object in the same sense as MacCaig demands that the nature of Suilven be respected: that it should be seen as itself, and not as a symbol of something else. Similarly, in pointing out the radical otherness of nature, MacCaig refuses to distort it to fit human representations.

This is also what he does in regards to violence in nature, which is quite

frequent in his poems. Considering “the last wolf in Scotland” in “Survivors” (*CP* 307), the speaker muses:

I wouldn't ask
why it opened the throats of deer and
tore mountain hares to pieces
I wouldn't ask why it howled
in the corries and put one paw
delicately in a mountain torrent (l.4-9).

The brutally graphic descriptions of the wolf's kills contrasts sharply with the admiration for the animal's grace conveyed through the foregrounding of the adverb “delicately” at the beginning of line 9, displaced there carefully by the enjambment it is part of, as though the sentence were imitating the wolf's movements. The antithetic quality displayed by these two aspects of the wolf is made more striking by the anaphoric “I wouldn't ask.” Significantly, this line also implies the speaker's unquestioning acceptance of a nature that is not brought back to human terms.

The landscape of “A Man in Assynt” (*CP* 224) is similarly irreconcilably other:

this landscape is
masterless
and intractable in any terms
that are human (l.40 – 43)

“Masterless,” segregated in an isolated line, firmly separates the landscape from “any terms that are human.” Moreover the choice of a longer phrasing in this enjambment as opposed to the adjective “human” on its own underlines the divide between the world of men and nature.

D – Conclusion

Letting things be, which is what Hendry believes MacCaig's poems to do (68) is not as straightforward a question as could be expected from reading the poet's pronouncements on the topic. In addition to the "gradations" of the speaker's presence remarked upon by Frykman, the fact that MacCaig's writing necessarily inscribes itself within existing traditions of talking about nature entails that he can only "let things be" to a certain extent. However, as observed earlier, MacCaig appears to consider faithfulness to the object a problem that goes beyond a question of what constitutes good poetry and crosses over into the domain of morals. In his insistence on respecting the object *qua* object, he seems to afford it a dignity that renders the idea of Man's "natural" domination of nature – as prescribed in the Bible – problematic. MacCaig, though he is often considered a nature poet is generally not credited with having given much thought to ecological questions. This perhaps may be a somewhat hasty assessment. A man who defines himself as a pacifist who respects life even in what is often considered to be its least impressive manifestations²⁴ may possibly have a more definite position on the problem, as will be discussed in greater detail later.²⁵

This study of the aims MacCaig defines for his poetry and how he goes about attaining them has been focusing on his nature poems for the reasons stated earlier.

²⁴ "(...) pacifist by nature. I never killed anything in my life except once or twice of necessity. (...) Except fish. And I have killed fish... I don't *know* the reason.(...) I don't leave them flapping in the boat. But I never killed an animal – I've killed a mouse because it was in the house – and you don't like mice in the house – and I don't kill things. I mean, if a wasp comes into the house I catch it in a clout and put it out. You know, even a wasp" (MacCaig "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 103).

²⁵ See chapter 5.

However, the celebratory agenda he pursues can be extended to the whole of existence – animals, objects, people, places. MacCaig’s writing evinces a deep relish in their mere presence, even in the fact that they exist at all it seems at times. This observation is key to understanding another site of tension in his poems, the question of religion and MacCaig’s position in regards to the divine, which is the problem I will now be turning to.

II – MacCaig’s “descending grace”

Scalpay, where his mother's family lived, is very present in MacCaig’s poetry and plays a significant role in his life as the place where he becomes aware of a “connection” with a wider frame than his immediate family. It is there he realises that he “[is] a minuscule and unimportant part of history. No, that's putting it too portentously. I felt I *belonged* to people in a way that I hadn't before, except to my parents” (MacCaig “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 87). Whatever prompted him to discontinue his visits there must have been an important point of contention. Atheist MacCaig found himself in radical disagreement with his relatives on the fact that

they have a breed of religion which I cannot tolerate – Free Presbyterianism – and I know – I got to know fine – that if I were to go back there, oh, if they knew I was coming they’d be at the pier and before we’d walked a quarter of a mile they would say, and what church do you go to in Edinburgh, Norman? And I would have to say I don’t share these filthy, spurious and murderous superstitions. (laughs) (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 88).

This is significant on several levels. It reminds the reader of the place religion and Presbyterianism in general have long held in Scottish culture and literature. Furthermore, the introduction to *Scottish Religious Poetry, An Anthology*, responding to the claim that this no longer holds true for twentieth-century Scotland refutes it by making the argument that “exploration of religious imagery and themes” has

continued in Scottish poetry over that period (Bateman, Crawford and MacGonical xxvi). The editors support this claim by remarking that “in the Highlands, even the most anti-clerical poetry (...) denies the pertinence not of the questions posed by religion, but of the answers” (ibid.). I will show that the idea that anti-clerical poetry may remain religious in spirit suggested in this last comment can be applied to MacCaig’s poetry in particular.

In this context, MacCaig identifying as an atheist rather than an agnostic or a non-practising believer indicates that the label is not chosen lightly. But going back to his anecdote, its interest also rests in its ability to demonstrate how decisive a factor religion can be for him. I have suggested earlier that his reader must often look at MacCaig’s declarations about himself with a critical eye. It seems that his adamant claims of being an atheist – unequivocal, with no hesitation at any moment of his life – should be treated in this way: both MacCaig as a private individual and the poetic persona of his works proclaim themselves completely divorced from religion and his poems posit the non-existence of God, which should logically come with a certain indifference towards Him. However, they display instead open resentment towards a God he depicts as either powerless or malevolent – two characteristics which obviously require Him to exist in the first place. God simultaneously does and does not exist in MacCaig’s poems, which constitutes a paradox that will need to be addressed.

To make sense of the contradictory hints which appear in his poems, M.J. Scott has argued that MacCaig “does not profess the Calvinist religion (...) but instead believes in the landscape, in the people within the landscape, with a religious

devotion” (139), which is perhaps why two poems by this notorious atheist can be found in an anthology of Scottish religious poetry (“In a Level Light” 240 and “July Evening” 241). I will develop M.J. Scott’s insight by arguing firstly that MacCaig is in fact both an atheist and a religious poet in the sense that he transplants the feelings of awe normally associated with the contemplation of God into his wonder at existence and the world around him. In discussing this position, I will seek to determine why a traditional conception of the divine as a personal god coexists in his poems with a pantheistic mode of thought.

Secondly, MacCaig takes care to foreground the logical contradiction that lies in resenting a god whose existence is not recognised. This hostility is directed towards the human concept of a personal god but takes on an additional dimension: MacCaig has often been reproached for not concerning himself with the horrors of history and criticising the notion of God becomes an occasion to stigmatise the evil Man is capable of and of which he is, as stated earlier, deeply aware.

To be able to examine these claims, I will start by establishing how MacCaig presents himself in regards to religion: determining whether he is rejecting god, organised religion, or the idea of the religious as a whole will make it possible to either apply or discard the label of religious writer. If he can indeed be described as a religious poet, the next step will be to investigate how the sense of the religious can coexist with an explicit rejection of religion. I would account for this by proposing that MacCaig makes nature the privileged locus of his experience of the sacred, which I will seek to demonstrate by considering first his reliance on the Eden myth, then the place of the sublime in his works.

A - “I, Atheist, god-hater” – the paradox

When interviewed, MacCaig leaves no doubt about his being an atheist – from birth, as he declares facetiously in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things”: “I was born an atheist. The first thing I said when I sprang out of my mother’s womb was, ‘Down with Popery!’ I said it in Gaelic, of course!” (88). The speaker of “Pantheon” (CP 279) characterising himself “I, atheist, god-hater” (l.23) is particularly vehement in his phrasing: the opening spondee, the ternary construction of the line and its two pauses lend the statement a *gravitas* which, though there is a certain amount of ironic distance, as always when MacCaig injects solemnity in his discourse, nevertheless stands out. It is worth noting that the terms defining the self become increasingly subjective in this line. The unimpeachably objective first person pronoun is succeeded by a chosen ideological position, which is itself replaced and corrected immediately. The phrase that substitutes itself for it is a violent and highly emotional expression substantivised for the occasion, a novel coining which underlines its singularity. It can be argued that the context – a love poem – can account for this as hyperbolic statements are a staple of the lover’s discourse. Nevertheless, the etymological contradiction between the neutrality of “atheist,” the one who is *a-theos*, without a god, and the vehemence of “god-hater,” which implies the existence of a god – of gods – if only as ideas to be reacted against appears significant. His poetic persona is not exactly the same as the real world Norman McCaig, he warns, but even so, considering the poet’s stance as a pacifist who has to borrow a rage, himself lacking the capacity for it, “god-hater” is a particularly

striking phrasing. It seems then that Religion and god is a point of contention as crucial in MacCaig's works as it seems to be in certain areas of his life.

The question that can be asked now is what exactly is being rejected: a first – obvious – possibility lies in a more political type of criticism which lambasts religious hypocrisy. There is a long literary tradition in this respect which can be traced back all the way to medieval fabliaux and which is still occasionally noticeable in MacCaig's poems, notably in "Street Preacher" (CP 129) and "Assisi" (CP 155). In the former, the supposedly respectable "rosy bourgeois" (l.3) preacher is mercilessly ridiculed as he "howls." The insistent repetition of the present tense "he howls" implies a meaningless and inarticulate discourse. This brings down the preacher to the level of a raging, unreasoning beast: "He howls outside my window. He howls about God. / (...) he lifts / His head and howls" (l.2 and 3). Having the word "howls" repeated three times and both opening and closing the sequence creates a sense of stability, as though this howling were the immutable essence of the character. This is what he does, continually. And this howling that call up images of beasts and violence – perhaps there is here a reference to the responsibility of religion in failing to prevent the horrors of the twentieth century, or centuries before of the inquisition – also provides a jarring contrast with the italicised reported vocative "*Friend.*" The ironic mention of his denture, his rosy complexion and "sensible underclothes" (l.11 and 12) scathingly anchors him into a farcical physical plane, thus ridiculing his spiritual aspirations. The poet presents him as his distorted double as he imagines them together, "two rosy bourgeois howling at each-other" (l.8) through a window in a decidedly comedic scene, and the parallel eliminates any

chance of misunderstanding what the true target of the satire is, not the sardonic notations of apparel or complexion, but the presumption of the fanatic.

The priest of “Assisi” fares no better: he exemplifies a certain religious hypocrisy which talks of “the goodness / of God and the suffering / of His Son” but makes no effort to adhere to the doctrine they imply. The alliterative quality of “**goodness of God**” and “**suffering of / His Son**” lends the expressions the shallowness of a formula learnt by rote and spoken without thought. Moreover, both of them occur in run-on lines, which has the effect of separating the signifiers “God” and “His Son” from their attributes of “goodness” and self-sacrificial “suffering.” This might be taken to suggest that the priest whose voice is heard in free indirect speech from line 11 to 15 has no true understanding of the ritual discourse of the Church. This is preceded by a contrasting allusion to the profoundly humane religious figure of “St Francis, brother / of the poor, talker with birds.” An enjambment isolates “brother” from its complement (at the end of l.6). The suspension of the latter leaves it for a short while to the imagination of the reader which, by allowing him or her to imagine various possible targets of this brotherhood may perhaps imply universal charity and benevolence. The continued refusal to acknowledge the beggar outside maintained by the group composed of priest and tourists creates an ironic contrast with this attitude through the metaphor of the dwarf as “ruined temple” (l.21). The church on which they lavish the attention they refuse to their fellow man is a place of worship turned tourist attraction and, in this sense, a “ruined temple.” The parallel drawn implicitly through this association serves to highlight the betrayal by the group – standing for well-meaning, reasonably educated

middle class – of the religious value their presence at the church and reverence for it seem to imply.

There is no doubt then that the tradition of religious satire is represented in MacCaig's works, evidencing that he has no love for organised religion – about the "Cheerful Pagan" of the eponymous poem (*CP* 362), he writes "His holy life has no religion" (l.8). However, while the two poems considered here are straightforward examples of this genre, they are not the most common type of case amongst his works.

MacCaig moreover targets issues outside the traditional satire of religious hypocrisy in his evocations of God. His representation in MacCaig's poems is problematic, firstly for the reason stated earlier: the simultaneous affirmation of atheism and expression of resentment towards God which, considering the notion of atheism denies him existence, is paradoxical. There is also a second question to be addressed regarding MacCaig's conception of the deity: the God he refers to appears to be a traditional monotheistic personal god, yet simultaneously is referred to in terms that would imply that he is regarded as a pantheistic immanent entity coinciding with the entirety of creation. I propose to observe the treatment of the figure of God in a few key poems to try and untangle the different possibilities presented in MacCaig's poetry:

When he considers a personal god, MacCaig will often depict him as callous or at best indifferent. "Equilibrist" (*CP* 344), one of the very rare poems in which the speaker identifies himself as MacCaig, outlines the contrasts of beauty and horror in our world. Nature, of course, with his mentions of an adder – the biblical echoes of

the Genesis' serpent are probably no accident – and “a yard away, a butterfly being gorgeous” (l.1-2) is the first realm of contradiction. The juxtaposition of “torture in foreign prisons” with the harmony of “a sonata of Schubert” is already jarring and further compounded by the xenophobic parenthesis “(that foreigner)” (l.3-4). The effect attained is an indictment of Man's ability to enact the greatest evil even as he can create utmost beauty and, indirectly, of God's ability to tolerate them – the same idea appears in “Yes” (*CP* 385) where God “tremble[s] / like a man caught /with the imprint of the gun butt /still on his palm” in lieu of stigmata. In the face of this contradiction, the speaker of “Equilibrist” concludes:

I had a difficulty in being friendly
to the Lord, who gave us these burdens,
so I returned him to other people
and totter without help
among his careless inventions (l.14-18).

The poem conveys revolt against and disappointment in a God that fails his creatures rather than incredulity about his existence. This indignation over the evil He allows to happen is a leitmotiv in MacCaig's writings. The speaker of “The Kirk” (*CP* 345) asks in what may be a mixture of disbelief and weariness: “Haven't the people learned yet that God / is an absentee landlord?” (l.2-3). One could incidentally see a certain irony in the fact that the poet employs a metaphor in presentia to characterise this absent God. “Absentee landlord,” moreover, may be endowed with echoes of the eighteenth century Clearances, which in “A Man in Assynt” (*CP* 224) are lamented at length as an unbearable injustice. And indeed, extending the metaphor with an image of God “in some Bahamas in the sky” (l.4) “reaching down through the clouds only / for the price of suffering with which to pay / a pittance to his estate workers”

(1.6-8) evokes a scathing vision of capitalistic exploitation to replace traditional representations of God/Christ in majesty. Traces of this same rancour may be found in “The Big Tease” (*CP* 282) as the speaker recounts with disillusioned irreverence the two biblical episodes of Noah and the Flood and Abraham's near sacrifice of his son. Both patriarchs are depicted giving thanks to God for their reprieve as “anyone who carried a joke / so far / must be the Lord.” The remark implies his callousness to be the identifying attribute of God, and this even in the eyes of the faithful.

There are times, however, when God is not portrayed as indifferent. This does not nevertheless signal a return to religion as God is instead in those texts possibly benevolent, but powerless, which goes against one of the defining characteristics of the Christian personal God, that is omnipotence. “God in the Grass” (*CP* 212) portrays one such impotent deity. Interestingly, the poem can be said to play on presence-absence dynamics: while the title considered separately offers a metaphor in absentia, once it is associated with the poem itself, the trope that present God as an adder becomes a metaphor in presentia. Similarly, while the signifier “God” is absent from the stanzas, it is suggested through the mode of description chosen for the snake: a parodic retelling of the Creation episode in Genesis – this remarkably inefficient God is simultaneously present and absent, a point to which I will return later.

The basking adder
looks at the world
with a softly beaming eye
as though he had created it.

Coiled around himself
in a sabbath stillness
he approves of everything, he knows

it is all good.

In heavenly contemplation
he lets the world
bask in his look

(... How is he to know
the cries, the sad crying
that he is deaf to?)

The hissing sibilants of “sabbath stillness” (l.6) directly followed by a paraphrasing of Genesis emphasise the blasphemous choice of having a serpent, the very symbol of the Adversary, become a metaphor for God. Moreover, the “sabbath” is the seventh day of the Creation on which God took his rest; yet the word can also designate a witches' assembly and thus reinforces the adder's traditional link with the devil. God becomes an adder that is “coiled around itself” (l.5) which may call up echoes of the Hermetic Ouroboros, a decidedly non-Christian reference. At the very least, the position implies self-involvement and indifference to the outside world well in keeping with MacCaig's vision of an indifferent God. This particular representation is unaware rather than uncaring, as the “softly beaming eye” first suggests in line 3. The parenthesis that concludes the poem seems to support this interpretation. Once again, MacCaig uses a rhetorical interrogation to underline the irrelevance of God to human matters. However, the polyptoton that repeats the diphthong [aɪ] in line 13, lengthening it plaintively with a second vowel sound at the second iteration seems to imply that empathy would be possible on God's part if not for his deafness (l.14).

“Godot” (CP 372) provides a related example as it imagines the point of view of Beckett's Godot, a character often considered to be a metaphor for God in *Waiting*

For Godot. In MacCaig's first-person lyric, Godot/God laments his impotent omnipresence and Man's inability to recognise it:

I feel miserable, acting
their uncomprehending parts.
Don't they know they're waiting
for who's already there?

There I am, in their minds,
in their boots,
in the footlights: and worse,
in their incomprehension.

I can't even go
and sit in the audience,
since I'm there too.

MacCaig presents us here with a surprising take on a God whose first words come out as a complaint. Having two consecutive stressed syllables in "I **feel miserable**" weighs down the utterance and suggests exhaustion and, in the second half of the stanza, the rhetorical interrogation gives off a sense of helplessness hardly compatible with the definition of an omniscient, omnipotent god. The attitude assumed by Godot/God towards religion similarly defies expectations considering who develops this discourse, but is not altogether surprising in MacCaig's poems: in "A Man I Agreed With" (CP 363) the eponymous character states paradoxically and yet as though it were self-evident: "of course, God, like me, is an atheist," echoing the exclamation "Good godless God!" in "In a Whirl" (CP 292). Godot's rhetorical "Don't they know they're waiting / for who's already there?" appears to echo the "Haven't the people learned yet that God / is an absentee landlord?" (l.2-3) spoken by the fiercely anti-religious speaker of "The Kirk" (CP 345). These two figures agreeing appears incongruous enough.

Interestingly, Godot/God's plight is articulated through a paradoxical state of simultaneous presence and absence, which may be reminiscent of the situation in "God in the Grass." This is where MacCaig's representation of God becomes problematic. His omnipresence – the only attribute of God applicable to him – lies in his identity with the whole of creation, which suggests a pantheistic conception of an immanent, non-personal god. This of course creates a logical contradiction with the lyrical nature of the poem: a non-personal entity can not, by definition, be the author of any discourse, let alone acknowledge itself as a subject with feelings. The ironic reversal of the Beckett play on which the poem closes upholds and emphasises this situation:

I'm trapped. It seems
there's nothing to do
but wait
for something to happen.

The irony of an infinite being declaring himself "trapped" is not lost. It could be understood that the ironic plight the speaker-god finds itself in is born from the faithful waiting for obvious manifestations of God as a sentient being with a personal volition. This expectation collides with the representation of God that also appears in "A Man in Assynt" (as "Being expressing itself" 1.230) – a God that is as indifferent and unlikely to interact with humankind as MacCaig's nature is shown to be in his poems. One could object that the traditional monotheistic image of a personal god does not entirely disappear from his works, which is essentially true. It is nevertheless possible to counter this objection by pointing out that MacCaig consistently undermines this conception by foregrounding its inadequacy.

The irony in the depictions of God as callous or impotent that have been

discussed here is not unrelated to the Socratic irony at work in Plato's dialogues. Murray, who interviews MacCaig in "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" remarks that "that forensic, mind, that ability to show the absurdity of positions seems to be part and parcel of [his] entire poetry" (92). This seems to be the case in these poems. MacCaig is implicitly working from the widely accepted characterisation of the New Testament Christian God as omnipotent, omnipresent, absolutely good and benevolent. I would argue that MacCaig follows in this Socrates' maieutic method – what he calls humorously the "Socratic sidestep" ("A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 92): having made the reader accept an initial flawed proposition by appearing to adopt it himself, he then proceeds to check it against reality and in so doing prompts his audience to draw the conclusions themselves. When MacCaig juxtaposes the traditional conception of God with the atrocities to be found in the world in "Equilibrist" and a number of other poems such as "Yes" or "A New Age" (*CP* 382-3), the reader is similarly forced to acknowledge the incompatibility between absolute goodness and power and the sufferance of evil. This, to my sense, is a variation on the same method the poet admires in the Greek philosopher when he praises "the way Socrates asked questions and asked questions and asked questions. So that the fellow, he was speaking to, found he was totally contradicting himself. Very annoying^[sic]" (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 304).

B – “The dying Calvinist in me”: The empty space

It has been established that MacCaig does not subscribe to organised religion, nor to the conception of god it dictates. This does not however preclude his writing religious poetry. To evidence this, it is at this point necessary to observe his attitude to the divine in general, which, I argue, evinces a sense of aspiration to some form of transcendence.

It can be noted that, despite his self-identification as an atheist, MacCaig still has the speaker of “Now and For Ever” (*CP* 190) use the words “the dying Calvinist in me.” This prompts Delmaire to describe MacCaig’s approach to religion as “an ingrained Calvinism that casts a pall over much of his poetry” (“The ‘Zen Calvinism’ of Norman MacCaig” 147). That is an intriguing notion, though perhaps somewhat exaggerated – MacCaig seems to revel too much in the world around him to be living under a shroud of Calvinist guilt – in the sense that the critic feels religion holds a significant place in his poetry. This place it holds, however, may very well be that of a lack, an emptiness. In “In a Whirl” (*CP* 292), the lines “An Immanence is what I want, to be / That Unity, / That transcendental One I don't believe in” can be interpreted as pointing to a void left where God should be in the poet's spiritual landscape. MacCaig declares jocularly: “it’s a terrible frustration to me that He doesn’t exist, because I want to spit in His face. And He doesn’t exist. It’s a terrible frustration” (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 120-121). This pronouncement must of course be taken with some caution. Nevertheless, it indicates that a lack is undoubtedly felt, whatever reasons may be given for it – and MacCaig’s characteristic restraint teaches us to be careful when it comes to his claims about

himself. This same dissatisfaction is reflected in the poems. Delmaire focuses on “Accuser” (*CP* 21) where the speaker “feels locked up in his own loneliness (‘within myself I lie’), cut off from heaven where God remains aloof and inaccessible (‘No ladder from the sky / Can slant for me where I lie in that cell’)” (“The ‘Zen Calvinism’ of Norman MacCaig” 148). To palliate this lack, it seems that, somewhat blasphemously, the speaker occasionally attempts to substitute his own self-as-creator to the absent God whose empty place remains carved into his poems. In “Creator” (*CP* 67), he muses: “How hard to be so God-like as one would fancy” while the speaker of “No Time at All” (*CP* 49) proclaims: “I am the pillar; on my self’s top I squat / (A narrow squalor) and think it nothing hard/ To be the centre of a genesis thought.” This undertaking is however undermined with MacCaig’s characteristic flair for gentle self-deprecation, as in “Lord of Creation” (*CP* 266) where, “playing at God” (l.9), the speaker lying in bed “find[s himself] /making a mountainous landscape / of the bedclothes” (l.1-3). The game is presented as childish – the poem opens and closes with the somewhat remonstrating phrase “at my age” (l.1 and 20) and as it ends the speaker concludes “God has destroyed himself again” (l.22). Ultimately, there is a need for some form of spiritual dimension in MacCaig’s world, but neither God nor religion are deemed capable of fulfilling it.

Nature appears in MacCaig’s works to be the privileged locus of this seemingly paradoxical pervasive religious mode. This is particularly well illustrated by Delmaire’s remark in “The ‘Zen Calvinism’ of Norman MacCaig”: “‘In a level light’ (*CP* 98) clearly presents self-inflicted suffering as an act of ‘rebelli[on]’ against God, as the ‘human mind’ wilfully ‘sits in its sense of sin’ and in a painful solitude

resulting from its refusal to enjoy the inviting landscape near at hand” (148). That wilfully ignoring the beauties of nature is a viable way to spite God in MacCaig’s poem places the natural world in an interesting position in his works as the visible expression of the divine. As such, the feelings contemplation of nature inspires in the speaker appear to have a role in fulfilling his need for a form of transcendence that would substitute itself for the absent God. And so it is understandable that MacCaig’s lexical choices in his evocations of the natural world tend to favour religious connotations. “In Everything” (CP 305), for instance, recounts the speaker’s experience of nature in terms of “revelation” and “grace.” “How can there be a revelation / in a world so full it couldn’t be more full?” (CP 305 l.14-15), he asks. “A Man in Assynt” (CP 224), one of the two long poems featured in the *Collected Poems*, takes this somewhat further as the enumeration of names comprised in “this frieze of mountains” (l.5), “Stac Polly, Cul Beag, Cul Mor, Suilven, Canisp” becomes “a litany” (l.9). Contemplation of nature stands as a form of prayer in the first stanza in a way that brings to mind the Roman Catholic *Litany of the Saints* in which different powers are named and called upon in turn. Bearing in mind that MacCaig comes from a Protestant background, this connection must only be considered with the greatest precaution, but does remain interesting as it would substitute natural elements for God and the Saints which are doubly unsatisfactory objects of prayer for an atheist born to a Protestant background.

The poem furthermore links the landscape considered by the speaker with the deep-rooted religious history of its people:

dark minds in black clothes gather like
bees to the hive, to share

the bitter honey of the Word, to submit
to the hard judgment of a God
my childhood God would have a difficulty
in recognising (l.212-217)

The simile transforms the faithful into bees, possibly acting as a criticism of uniform thought – a hive mind precludes individuality. The “sound of that praise,” the prayers of these “dark minds” is subsumed into

the ordinary communion
of all sounds, that are
Being expressing itself – as it does in its continuous,
its never-ending creation of leaves,
birds, waves, stone boxes – and beliefs,
the true and the false (l.228-233).

These observations evidence that MacCaig presents nature as the space which grants access to a form of transcendence. I would argue that the poet relies on the Eden myth, which often underlies his evocations of nature and the countryside, to reinforce the link between this space and the religious that is already apparent through his use of religious terminology to describe nature. In exploiting this myth, he replaces himself in a long-standing literary tradition which Picot, in his study of British landscape poetry after 1945, traces back despite its biblical name to the Greek idea of a lost Golden Age as described by Hesiod. This motif has long been underlying the ways in which writers think Man’s relationship to nature (Picot 15). While it predates the Romantic period by centuries, this tradition still remains active in the minds of modern poets (Picot 15) along with its attendant idea that Man created town and God the natural world. This dichotomy appears to be to some extent conserved in MacCaig’s poems even in the absence of a God. The fact that “The natural world is still often represented as divinely formed, spiritually uplifting

and serene whereas the man-made world is shown as flawed, ugly and riddled with unsolved problems” (xi) indeed remains perceptible in his writing and it can be said that the way Picot describes this conception of the relationship between nature and Man as “often still mythological and pseudo-religious rather than rational and scientific” (ibid.) is still applicable to MacCaig’s poems to a certain extent as the frequent return of the word “grace” appears to suggest.

Representations of Eden do not stay unchanged over time, as Picot cautions, becoming for instance in turns “a garden or a wilderness” and, in MacCaig’s case, possessing alternatively something of both. They do however stay true to the central structuring dichotomy between city and country (Picot 19). MacCaig’s natural world does not really contain many places that would qualify as *loci amoeni*, which separates it from the traditional conception of Eden. However, it does present several key characteristics that define the Garden as well as the Greek Golden Age.

Timelessness is one of those characteristics: the beginning of History is prompted by the Fall and Man’s exclusion from the Garden and so it is a property of the Eden myth that the man-made city should be the place of history and nature that of a perpetual present – the cyclical rhythms of seasons, flora and fauna contributing to buoy this idea. The city as depicted by MacCaig is haunted by history in “High Street Edinburgh” (CP 32) where “Old history greets you with a Bedlam stare” (l.24), or in “Old Edinburgh” (CP 207) where

history leans by a dark entry
with words from his mouth
that say *Pity me, pity me*
but never forgive. (l.13-16)

History in MacCaig’s poems is occasionally positively incarnated in the artists of the

past, as in “Learning” (*CP* 175-6), for instance. Political and social history, however, is a different problem. The poet has often been reproached for not engaging with the world of man as political animal. Wells in a 1979 review regrets: “we learn nothing of his society or his views of it; we are hardly aware of the 20th century existence at all” (32) while Press similarly remarks that he “seldom makes any reference to current affairs or hazards a generalisation about the state of the world” (172), two assessments Ross mentions at the beginning of an essay in which he seeks to disprove them. He supports his argument through a reference to Crichton Smith’s remark that MacCaig targets “violence, power [and] aggression” (qtd in Ross 8) in his more political poems. And it is a fact that history, when the poet is not talking about art and philosophy, is haunted by violence and cruelty. The last two lines of “Old Edinburgh” cited earlier, for instance, provide an intertextual link with the last two lines of Auden’s “Spain 1937” in which “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon” (210). This indirect reference to twentieth-century totalitarianism is not necessarily the only one in MacCaig’s works. “Responsibility” (*CP* 151), one of MacCaig’s bleaker poems, features another. Though his usual attitude to his fellow man is profoundly humanistic, in this particular text, the treatment of the horse becomes symbolic of human behaviour in general and gives rise to an embittered reflection on the callousness and indirect cruelty man is capable of. Though the poem evokes a sadly banal occurrence, the phrasing of the description suggests sinister correlations:

They left the horse standing for two days
with a shattered leg
till the vet signed a paper.
Then they dug a hole beside it

and put a bullet in its skull (l.1-5)

Surroundings was published in 1966, only about twenty years after the Second World War. In that context, the idea of bureaucracy and paperwork taking precedence over human decency – “only following orders” or the rules – and the grisly efficiency of digging the grave next to the future victim can understandably call up echoes of the Holocaust. History in MacCaig’s works is correlated with human cruelty and almost systematically calls up a sense of shame. By transitivity, when it becomes a haunting presence in the town, as in “Old Edinburgh” and “High Street Edinburgh,” in which the “Bedlam stare” evokes the mistreatments inflicted by their fellow man on vulnerable individuals, the world of the city takes on these unfortunate connotations – the town becomes the man-created place of sin.

By contrast, the natural world is described as a “place where no history passes” (“The Pass of the Roaring” *CP* 278 l.6). In “Vestey’s Well” (*CP* 14), the country scene stands in a moment of absolute serenity – the oriental serenity of the toad sitting “as still as Buddha”: “Time in that delicate place / Sat still for ever staring in its own face” (l.7-8). The closed circuit created by the ontological metaphor of time as a person looking into a mirror, a gaze that meets itself and returns to itself ad infinitum reinforces this idea of absolute stillness and endlessness.

It is not only nature’s non-sentient elements, its flora and fauna with their cyclical existences which are taken to live in a non-historic world in MacCaig’s poems: Ross remarks that “the idea of being so completely at one with history that you are unaware of it, a state evoked as a kind of natural innocence, MacCaig typically locates in the Gaeltachd as (...) when he writes of the ‘Crofter’” (15). To

support this claim, Ross quotes from this poem: “What’s history to him? /He’s an emblem of it / in its pure state” (l.10-12 *CP* 432). He also comments upon a similar phenomenon in “a much earlier poem, ‘Boats’” where MacCaig “hints at a similar purity, a completeness of history which is not threatening” (Ross 15). People of the traditional Scottish countryside in MacCaig’s poems are closer to the natural world than the rest of humanity, to such an extent that Gillies reflects: “The Gael like the Greek is so much part of his landscape that he emerges as one of a breed of men dignified by places such as the seaboard of Scotland or Greece” (Gillies 154). It is worth noting that the Scottish landscape is partially the product of human action as the Clearances, which are a discreet but very present element of his poetic universe, have left their mark on it. The Clearances, by removing human occupation and replacing it with animals which have stripped the woodland created a barren landscape. MacCaig, though he depicts the culture of its people as unchanging, is however aware of human influence on their natural surroundings. He explains: “It was always a sad landscape because of the Clearances. Ruins of houses everywhere, you know. Hints of the day when the Glens were filled with people. Now they’re just a wilderness. It’s a sad, beautiful place and you can’t escape the recognition of the sadness” (Degott-Reinhardt 314-315). MacCaig’s countryside is more removed from history than his cityscapes, but it does not always entirely escape it. This perhaps could be read as a doubling in his poems of the Eden myth: nature at the time of writing is considered a first Edenic space over which is however preferred an idealised lost Golden Age set in the pre-Clearances era. The paradox of it of course is that this primary prelapsarian fantasy had to fail to remain an Edenic image.

While the countryside MacCaig's twentieth-century Gaels inhabit is always unspoilt, the world of the city generates images of pollution. "Christmas Snow in Princes Street" (*CP* 102) demonstrates this through the notoriously unpleasant phenomenon that is "slush on the ground," "watery slush" (l.1) after a snowfall in town. This is snow already "on the ground," which may call up the idea of something that has been discarded, snow that has been denatured – become "slush." Moreover, that this slush is described as "watery" implies further alteration: the adjective contains the noun "water" and, to a certain extent, the presence of this second substantive further distances, erases even, the initial essence evoked through the signifier "snow" present only in the title of the poem. The contrast with the opening line of "Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote" (*CP* 333), "The snow's almost faultless," could not be more apparent. This second reference to snow occurs on a journey through the countryside, however, and this is where the difference between the two originates as snow in the country is untouched by man. The lexical choice of "faultless" here is interesting considering the polysemy of "fault" – Nature was not at fault for the fall and so remains unspoilt – whether or not the connotations are intended consciously, the wording is telling. Conversely, city snow becomes polluted through man's mere presence – passers-by tread on it and thus deprive it of its essential characteristics.

MacCaig's natural world appears to belong to a pre-lapsarian era anterior to self-consciousness that calls up the complete innocence of Eden. His natural world is peopled with animals rather than human figures and this, too, ties it to the Eden myth: the difference between animal and man resides in the immediacy of animal

existence as opposed to the awkward self-consciousness of man, in a manner similar to what Picot describes:

because the denizens of the natural world seem less self-aware than we are, we suspect that they may also be unaware of their own mortality and we therefore attribute to them an unselfconscious serenity – a satisfaction with their fate – which Man has lost. In some ways, as we shall see, the natural world seems immune to the effects of Time: a fact which only increases our sense of separateness (20-21).

This is a question that recurs often in MacCaig's poems. "Growing Down" (*CP* 46-7) draws up the image of the "ancient ancestor / pendulous in his emblematic tree" of which the speaker is deeply aware. He reflects:

I stand there, a guilty primitive,
My education down about my knees,
Caught in the act of living, if to live
Is to be all one's possibilities.
A sum of generations six foot high
Learning to live and practising to die (l.31-35).

The image of the speaker's education as clothing is strongly associated with the idea of shame through what can be read as an oblique reference to bodily functions which human beings, unlike animals consider an embarrassing topic. The evocation of the self in "Growing Down" emphasises biological lineage and physical being – "a sum of generations six foot high" – in a way that underlines the absurd character of life's ephemeral quality – of which, once again, only man is aware and which only he deplures.

By contrast, coinciding with their essence is the hallmark of MacCaig's animal subjects. The eponymous "Heron" (*CP* 137) "stands in water, wrapped in heron. It makes / An absolute exclusion of everything else / By disappearing in itself" (l.1-3) and "Releasing its own spring, it fills / The air with heron" (l.11-12).

“Preening Swan” (*CP* 295) works along similar lines: “On the green canal the swan /made a slow-motion / swan-storm of himself” (1.1-3). The essence of the animal is treated as something exterior to it through unexpected and unattested uses of the words: the heron-ness of the heron becomes a blanket or a toga to wrap itself in, then a pervasive substance, akin to a gas or a fluid that would spread in the air around him. Through this, MacCaig foregrounds the terms more efficiently than repetition alone could have hoped to do, underlining the striking, unavoidable certitude of the animal’s essence the poem seeks to convey. “Goat” (*CP* 71) seeks to attain a similar goal through the humorous, even parodic, hijacking of the jargon of philosophy. It contrasts the “goat-in-itself,” “Idea of goatishness made flesh,” “pure essence” unapologetically itself and “the man in his man-ness, passing, feel[ing] suddenly / Hypocrite found out, hearing behind him that / Vulgar vibrato, thin derisive me-eh.” The goat, as part of nature, has not experienced the Fall, is not ashamed of his physical existence. Man by attaining self-consciousness becomes embarrassed by his bodily self – Adam and Eve make it their first concern to clothe their nakedness after eating fruit from the tree of knowledge. Accounting for this, Picot reflects that “the opening of Genesis can be read as an account of how Man’s discovery of rational thought brings about his banishment from the state of unconscious contentment which he previously shared with the rest of the natural world” (20) and correlates the influence of the Eden myth on our conception of man and nature with a sense of “uncertainty and guilt” which links the independence gained through the possession of a rational mind with the notion of sin (*ibid.*). To him, the problems encountered by man after the Fall arise from the fact that in trying

to “rise above the mindlessness of Nature” he has become more deeply aware of the sway Nature holds on him (Picot 23). It seems that MacCaig, though he does not state the problem quite so openly in his poems, would have acquiesced to this evaluation when he writes about: “a feeling of freedom, of dealing with the natural, physical world, obeying its natural laws – savage enough, some of them, till you compare them with the worse perversions of the blessed intelligence of men” (“Foreword” to *Poems of the Scottish Hills* V).

These three characteristics of the Eden model – timelessness, purity and innocence – justify MacCaig positing the natural world as an absolutely positive space. His depiction of nature, however inhospitable it may sound at times, is that of an Eden of sorts, which makes it the most apt host for his sense of the religious. However, while this is a promising beginning, it does not entirely account for MacCaig’s displacement of God into the natural world and another way to look at the question is needed. The notion of the sublime, which, in very simplistic terms, creates a link between the perception of an awe-inspiring part of nature and the subject’s sense of the divine will provide it.

The idea of the religious in MacCaig’s poems becomes easier to consider when remembering the Latin sense of “*religio*,” that is the idea of reverent and somewhat fearful piety. This definition is of interest because it is reminiscent of the emotion purported to be at the heart of the sublime, that is a form of awe coloured with fright. It is true that MacCaig’s poems shy away from the grandiose as a rule and that this applies also to his nature poems. Consequently, while his landscapes are not necessarily *loci amoeni*, it may seem difficult to ascribe the spiritual experience

of nature apparent in a number of his poems to an experience of the sublime – though the possibility should not always be completely discounted. The feelings aroused by landscapes are occasionally described in terms that directly suggest so, as in “No End to Them” (CP 406), where the speaker evokes “the heart-stopping intrusion / of steep-down, steep-up mountains” (l.3-4). This type of sudden, intense emotion appears related to what Burke, whose theory of the sublime appears more in keeping with MacCaig’s “simple man” approach than Kant’s more systematic discussion of the notion, deems to be the source of the sublime in nature: “the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (53). In this particular case, then, the poet may be referring to the type of aesthetic experience of nature that takes on a spiritual dimension. In a poem like “Basking Shark” (CP 219), the momentarily baffled surprise of the encounter – “To stub an oar on a rock where none should be” – and the awareness of potential destructive and adaptive power of “that room-sized monster with a matchbox brain” prompt a more abstract realisation about Man and his evolution. At this, the speaker breaks into an uneasy rhetorical questioning: “so who’s the monster?” and “grow[s] pale” at the thought while the animal merely swims away, unaffected. While there is no explicit fear of the creature which would satisfy Burke’s criterion of terror as source of the sublime – “whatever (...) is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not” (53) – the abruptness of the experience and the sheer surviving power of the beast would perhaps justify the application of the term

sublime to the subject matter of the poem. Looking for another type of sublime quality in MacCaig's poems, one can note that he does at times favour mountains and places devoid of human presences where nature is harsher on the life it sustains, both categories particularly suited to a poet's evocations of the sublime. While the scale of MacCaig's landscapes is not necessarily disproportionate – one of the things he remarks about Suilven is that the eye can encompass it all at once – there is alongside his characteristic fondness for his landscapes a sense of awe which might allow the reader to bring up yet again the notion of sublimity. To give an example, "A Man in Assynt" (CP 224) depicts an inhospitable landscape of which all softness is absent. The conspicuous alliterations in [g], r and dentals in the first stanza provide harsh, guttural sonorities hardly suggestive of a traditional *locus amoenus*:

Glaciers, **g**rinding West, **g**ouged out
these valleys, **r**asping the brown sandstone,
and **l**eft, on the **h**ard **r**ock below – the **r**uffled **f**oreland –
this frieze of mountains, **f**iled
on the blue air – **S**tac Polly,
Cul Beag, **C**ul Mor, Suilven,
Canisp – a frieze and
a litany.

There are two different levels of apprehension at which this landscape calls up the idea of sublimity. The inherent otherness of it, its harshness constitutes the first one – something so alien to the human mind prompts in the human perceiver a reconsideration of his own self. Secondly, the forces which created this landscape are incommensurable with human means. Man can only feel dwarfed in contemplating them, and this arouses the awe at the root of the sublime.

The larger-than-life perception that underlies the sublime is in a sense on the opposite side of the spectrum from the idea of an Edenic nature. The perception of

the sublime presents the object as entirely other and incommensurable with human comprehension. The Eden myth, conversely, offers an idealised image of nature whose proportions nevertheless remain human and hospitable. Between these two extremes, MacCaig translates a sense of the divine into the two opposite aspects of nature, that is the cruel and the nurturing archetypes.

C – Conclusions

I showed in the previous chapter that the central intention of MacCaig's poetry is celebratory. In the light of the preceding discussion it can be linked to his fascination with existence in general and the natural world in particular: I argue that this sense of awe extends his perception of the sublime to the innocuous and the ordinary and thus relates to the world at large with a religious sense of wonder at the existence of a toad, a landscape or a jug (*CP* 76).

There are traces of the traditional deistic idea that the perfection of creation translates the perfection and goodness of the creator ("The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" *Psalms 19:1* for instance), amended for the atheist perspective that has become more common post Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God: in the beauty, otherness and harmony of nature, the speaker encounters a feeling akin to a spiritual revelation. There is something of the divine mystery in his apprehension of the world around him which I would argue translates in his poems into one of MacCaig's interconnected WORLD IS WORD tropes,²⁶ which metaphorises objects into linguistic signs that present a religious and

²⁶ see the tables of WORLD IS WORD tropes in the appendix.

ceremonial aspect. Hieroglyphs, etymologically speaking, “sacred” signs, are the most obvious illustration for this in “Landscape and I,” for instance, where “Loch Rannoch lapses dimpling in the sun./ Its hieroglyphs of light fade one by one.”

This impression seems to be confirmed when MacCaig explains:

I'm not religious at all as I no doubt told you – but I have a feeling of what I would call grace. When I'm amongst landscapes, very much so. “A descending grace” comes into one of my poems, I don't remember which one. It's a feeling of belonging to everything, being connected with everything. Mountains, sea, sheep runs. Naturally I also get it from a few people, but mostly it's from the physical world (Degott-Reinhardt 289).

The poem “July Evening” (*CP* 111) appears to illustrate this statement in a particularly apt manner: the last stanza articulates in verse this “feeling of belonging”:

Something has been completed
That everything is part of,
 Something that will go on
Being completed forever.

It could be argued that through this feeling of belonging comes awareness of the subject's diminutive place in the vastness and complexity of existence which would, in a sense, tie back into the idea of the sublime. Whether or not that is the case, the declaration can also be related to a comment Press makes about the way MacCaig relates to nature:

[MacCaig's] poetry takes on a Wordsworthian solidity and depth when he acknowledges himself to be part of a universal process into which everything is drawn, and which overwhelms all creation. Wherever man looks he discovers his identity with all that exists in the cosmos (180).

MacCaig's poetic “I,” as previously discussed, presents himself as an outsider, perpetually on the outskirts of the world he observes. Despite this marginal position,

he finds a sense of belonging in his contacts with the natural world which also appears, judging by the terms he uses in his poems to describe it, to fill the void left by the exclusion of God. While it could be said that some of the love poems attempt to fill this role²⁷ to a certain extent, the idea of “grace” to be found in nature brings a more definitely spiritual – religious – dimension to MacCaig’s nature poems. “Harris, East Side” (*CP* 121), for instance, offers the image of Nature as a benevolent divine force bestowing its blessing on the poet: “light bends down / In seeming benediction” (l.19-20). In “Signs and Signals” (*CP* 123) the landscape described over the course of the first six stanzas is characterised as a place of worship in the last one: the birds “wheel in the tall cathedral / Where space tumbles before / The altar of everywhere” (l.26-28). “No Accident” (*CP* 140) is particularly relevant in this context for its use of the term “grace” which features heavily in MacCaig’s nature poetry:

Suilven’s a place
 That gives more than a basket of trout. It opens
 The space it lives in and a heaven’s revealed, in glimpses.
 Grace is a crippling thing. You’ve to pay for grace. (l.5-8)

(...)

You reach it by revelation. Good works can’t place
 Heaven in a dead hind and a falcon going
 Or in the hard truth that, if only by being
 First in a lower state, you’ve to pay for grace (l.13-16).

The idea of something being revealed is noteworthy – it might remind the reader of a topos Heffernan introduces in the following terms: “the glory of a prospect discovered by a traveller merging from shadowy depths” (11). He further characterises the particular emotion arising from this situation through quoting a passage of a 1739 letter in which Gray enthuses about the Alps where “not a

²⁷ See chapter VI.

precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff but is pregnant with religion and poetry” (Gray qtd in Heffernan 12). Frykman notices the same phenomenon in “Rhu Mor” (*CP* 173) and relates it to “the concept that George Poulet saw as one of the essential characteristics of the Romantic movement, truth revealed in a brief moment of grace and glory” (25-26). Though MacCaig’s poetic expression of the feeling is somewhat more subdued, a kinship between the two can be detected – there are elements of the Romantic in MacCaig despite his much emphasised distaste for the term itself (in Degott-Reinhardt 303).

Interestingly, the “grace” alluded to in “No Accident” (*CP* 140) does not correspond to the Protestant notion of something that is given and can be neither bought nor earned. Here, “you’ve to pay for grace” (repeated twice for emphasis). While the feeling this evokes appears religious in nature, it can not be linked to canonical dogma. “Grace” is moreover “a crippling thing,” in an obvious physical sense as the poet twists his knee, but perhaps also on another level as well. The landscape is “an odd one” with “no picknicking place” (l.10-11). The “grace” to be found within nature is a reward rather than a gift and, because for all his celebratory intent, MacCaig is not truly an optimist, this grace, which according to its etymology should be given gratuitously, has to be earned through discomfort, and, at least in “No Accident,” a physical journey – maybe a metaphor for a spiritual one that yields enlightenment in the form of unity with nature. This is coherent with what his poems in general display of MacCaig’s vision of the world.

This idea of “grace,” however, does not only apply to a landscape as a whole or an extraordinary occurrence. In “July Evening” (*CP* 111), MacCaig writes: “grass

is grace” (l.13), using a paranomasia to reinforce the identity between the two. Grass can hardly inspire the terror or awe necessary for the experience of the sublime to occur, and yet there is a “grace” to be found in it. I would link this to MacCaig’s obvious relish in the world around him and insistence on the fact that any object is worthy to be the subject of a poem. The descriptive strategy discussed in the previous chapter seeks to enhance the vividness and specificity of the object, notably by avoiding pre-determined images and emphasising how radically other the natural world is to man by underlining its impartiality to life and death. From this otherness can arise both wonder – MacCaig’s snapshot poems are testament to this – and unease – as in the case of “Basking Shark,” for instance, both of them milder forms of the affects at the core of the sublime. However, it could be argued that each object, natural or artificial, is celebrated for the simple fact of its existence. The poem “Miracles in Working Clothes” (*CP* 135) asks: “Can / I lie to them and call it glory, / The light they move in, that is only / A light creeps beneath a door?” (last lines). Between “miracles” and “glory,” the light can also – in its first iteration – be considered a religious reference. However, this idealising influence is rejected in favour of a realist perspective in which the object does not borrow an outside “glory” from the religious connotations the discarded metaphor would have brought. The object appears to possess its own inherent poetic power and this is what MacCaig marvels at and seeks to render when he is at his most descriptive. This, I would propose, is the form of ordinary sublime he refers to when he writes about “heaven in a dead hind” (“No Accident” l.14) or grass being grace.

Through satire and Socratic irony, MacCaig rejects both the often

hypocritical practice of religion and the traditional monotheist notion of a personal god. The divine, however, remains as a form of pantheistic immanence which Man can attain a sense of communion with through contact with nature, thus gaining the sense of “grace” that reappears so often in MacCaig’s poems. Considering the place of religion in his maternal family and in the cultures of Scotland in general, it is not entirely surprising that MacCaig’s vehement and vocal atheism does not eliminate a sense of the divine. There are several interesting implications to this. The “simple man” ethos assumed by the poet who refuses to “confuse solemnity with seriousness” (MacCaig “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 117) would have been at odds with a full-blown treatment of the sublime – MacCaig’s previously discussed “simple man” ethos means that his “notions about the value of poetry and the ways it is produced are (...) fairly low-falutin” (MacCaig “My Way of It” 87) and he flippantly remarks: “I never met a White Goddess in my life and when I find myself in the company of singing robes, hieratic gestures and fluting voices, I phone a taxi” (ibid.). His gift for finding the ordinary awe-inspiring, for seeing a form of sublimity in the fact of existence itself, however, both feeds off from and feeds into the “sensuous awareness,” the “almost-daemonic sensitivity to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the natural world which exists outside himself” (A. Scott 31) discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, it seems both a product and a cause of MacCaig’s pacifist stance, his unwillingness to destroy or harm which is addressed at length in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” (MacCaig 103). Also, at a very prosaic level, the suspicion that MacCaig’s self-descriptions are not necessarily entirely reliable is confirmed, and his choice of the term “atheism,” which rejects

without nuance rather than suggesting another religious identification appears very characteristic: global denial and categorical rejection define the way he describes his writing method – he is adamant about never reworking a text, though evidence to the contrary can occasionally be found – as well as his reaction to being linked to any literary movement such as Romanticism or Metaphysical poetry regardless of any possible affinities.

III – “The Language of Disguise”: MacCaig and metaphor

MacCaig’s predilection for metaphors and similes – images in general – has been noted by most of the critics who have taken an interest in his poetry. Metaphor possesses a particular status in his writing, however, a fact upon which nearly every MacCaig scholar has commented. For instance, Frykman mentions MacCaig’s “conscious obsession with metaphor” (8). Thomas Crawford refers to his “controlled mastery of metaphor” (14) and Roderick Watson affirms that “metaphorical connections (...) are at the heart of how MacCaig makes poems” (*The Poetry of Norman MacCaig* 21).

Critical assessment of his metaphor-making is, however, divided. While MacCaig’s metaphor-making is often considered in a favourable light, it has also been criticised as a showy display of ultimately empty technical prowess. R.W. Scott judges that “[h]e is playful, he pulls off his conjurer’s tricks not only with words and images, but also with ideas, he is an intellectual conman and one may be forgiven for asking if there is in fact anything at the end of the garden path” (40). Scott also words his appraisal of MacCaig’s images in terms of “verbal sleight of hand” (41). This idea of intellectual dishonesty is already supposed in the word “trick,” which recurs no less than three times in Scott’s three-page review of *Rings on a Tree*. This is a 1968 collection – MacCaig being fifty-eight at the time of publication, the poems it contains are hardly the works of a young man and as such, Scott’s distaste with the poet’s “old tricks” (41) can be thought to extend to the entirety of his works.

Frykman expresses a cognate idea when he condemns “the abundance of clever and sometimes farfetched imagery” (39) in MacCaig’s love poems – he does however provide a helpful thematic classification of MacCaig’s metaphors (50-52) in which his assessment is on the whole complimentary.

Scott and Frykman are only two examples of a more widespread suspicion regarding MacCaig’s works. This reproach of facile metaphor-making also suggests an unproblematic use of this trope as mere ornament. In this chapter, I will argue that MacCaig’s reliance on metaphor is actually a central issue in his poems. He regularly reflects on this question in particular and the problem of tropological language in general and recognises these issues as obstacles to the project of object-centred poetry discussed previously. However, it must be noted that MacCaig’s attitude towards metaphor appears conflicted. This is the outward manifestation of MacCaig’s oscillation between two different conceptions of this trope and language in general, a traditional approach that can be traced back to Platonic distrust and a more personal take on it by a poet who feels that this figure he is naturally drawn to can paradoxically provide the “exactness” he seeks in his writing. And he is drawn to metaphor, as he admits himself when he confesses that he has “a metaphorical way of seeing things,” in the eponymous interview (87). Metaphor-making is an innate ability for him – he reflects that he inherited this particularity from his mother. MacCaig, seventy-six at the time of the interview, explains: “that’s the way I *still* think really, and it must be one of the reasons why I write the way I write” (ibid.). However, if his spontaneous tendency is to favour tropological language, he nevertheless distrusts it. This leads to several of his poems evincing a definite

frustration with metaphor, a sentiment that is mirrored in his interviews. He admits: “I have a compulsion to use metaphors. I do it in talking sometimes. Use far too many metaphors. I’m fed up with them. But that little poem in which I said ‘I hate metaphors’ is full of metaphors. I can’t escape” (Degott-Reinhardt 292). Metaphor here is treated as a necessary evil of poetic writing. This impossibility of doing away with it is reflected notably in the titles of two poems addressing the problem of metaphor and its shortcomings: “No choice” and “No consolation.” This double negation may perhaps be read as a mark of the impossibility of avoiding this figure. This appears to contrast starkly with the place the poet himself affords this figure.

In terms of his publications, for instance, it is to be noted that the *Collected Poems* open with a text dealing, through the use of an extended metaphor (Whyte sees in it the “the words of a primary school teacher” as a metaphor for those of the poet – 88), with the process of “metaphorising” (in Whyte’s terminology). This liminal poem, “Instrument and Agent,” sets the tone of the collection by giving pride of place to this figure: the last stanza also introduces the first instance of metaphorical tension. This is significant considering that one of the most striking characteristics of MacCaig’s poetry resides in the numerous sites of tension created by the coexistence in his writing of opposing structural, stylistic and thematic elements.

Metaphor, the central figure in his writings, is both part and instrument of these tensions in several different ways. Structurally, the enigmatic relationship between tenor and vehicle – their apparently impossible, yet meaningful identity – makes metaphor a tensive figure by essence. Moreover, in MacCaig’s textual

universe, the poet's ambivalent attitude towards this trope and his conception of it are in themselves sources and signs of tensions, since he claims to reject the figure even as he makes constant use of it. Even his definition of the trope (in "No choice," *CP* 197) is paradoxical and characterises its possibilities in terms of tension. The rest of MacCaig's works evince the same ambivalence, though the poem "Instrument and Agent" (*CP* 3) possesses, as Whyte remarks, "a sort of primordial innocence and joy" (88) in its approach to MacCaig's key figure. Whyte remarks upon the poet's "cohabitation with metaphor, oscillating between tenderness and aggression" (95). This ambivalence only becomes more obvious with time, as in the poem "No Choice" (*CP* 197), in which MacCaig proclaims: "I am growing, as I get older / to hate metaphors – their exactness / and their inadequacy." Puzzling conundrums pertaining to metaphors are scattered throughout MacCaig's poems. For instance, "Humanism" (*CP* 145) employs a metaphor to argue against the use of metaphor (Whyte 104) and, as Frykman notes, "after the declaration made in 'No Choice,' the opening poems of the following book, 'A Man in My Position,' are as image-ridden as ever." In support of this, he quotes "Still going" where MacCaig professes: "I won't give up being deceived by landscapes / likenesses and incorrigible metaphors" (18).

As stated earlier, MacCaig boasts of a "metaphorical way of seeing things," which he cannot seem to overcome as it implies that he perceives the object in terms of metaphor rather than rethinks the initial impression in this fashion. Evidence supporting this idea can be found in his works, for example in "A sigh for simplicity" (*CP* 322), where the poetic voice laments: "if only I could see a hazelnut

without thinking / of monkish skullcaps,” or in “Heron,” (*CP* 137), in which he writes: “It stands in water, wrapped in heron. It makes / An absolute exclusion of everything else,” a description that calls upon the sole concept of the animal, staunchly refusing to acknowledge any likeness between elements of the rest of the world and the object under scrutiny. This sense of separateness is underscored by the sonorities used in these two lines: “it **m**akes / an **a**bsolute exclusion of everything else.” The plosives [b] and [k] along with the alliteration in [e] force the reader to meticulously articulate the words, making them sound almost unconnected and creating an impression of choppiness. This showcases the isolation of the heron in its specificity as heron. In the moment of observation he is perceived as the expression of an essential being-heron, which, in the speaker’s mind, cuts him off from his surroundings in the sense that nothing around him shares any similarities with his monolithic “heron-ness.” Yet, after this categorical refusal, the last stanza still yields two metaphors in praesentia (in which both the tenor and the vehicle are made explicit): “it fills / The air with heron, (...) and goes, / A spear between two clouds,” and “it is gargoyle,” proof that metaphor is, it seems, inescapable in MacCaig’s poems.

This impossibility of writing without metaphor is problematic in the sense that, though he is aware of it, MacCaig apparently still aspires to circumvent it, though he does not necessarily seem to actively try to do so, as has been illustrated earlier. This can be attributed to the fact that the question of language and metaphor is for him intricately linked with his more philosophical concerns: MacCaig is a student of the Classics and an avid reader. Because of this, he is confronted in his

writing with traditionally negative views of metaphor and, I will argue, partially absorbs them. He is however a poet with a very personal and recognisable voice and world view and this inscription in a tradition is counteracted by his individual inclination towards metaphor. In his claim that he is “growing (...) to hate metaphors – their exactness and their inadequacy,” he uses two apparently incompatible terms. This seeming paradox can guide a reflection on his use of metaphor: the inadequacy of the figure is clearly a reference to the traditional rejection of it as mere ornament and locus of untruths, but the idea of exactness is somewhat more puzzling. I will try to show that with this word, MacCaig intuits what Ricoeur articulates as the form of tensive truth to be found in metaphor and that this is the perspective in which he uses this figure in his poems. Ricoeur explains this idea of “tensive truth” by defining metaphor as “the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality” (5). I will argue in this section that the “exactness” and “inadequacy” of metaphor pinpointed by MacCaig refers to Ricoeur’s concept of “fictional redescription” (5) according to which “the functioning of metaphor in the arts” is akin to “that of models in the sciences” (ibid.). I will show in this chapter that, through the use of metaphor, the poet obtains the emergence of a form of “poetic reference²⁸” which allows him to pursue his project of faithfulness to the object in spite of the multiple obstacles discussed earlier. To do so, I have chosen to draw on the cognitive linguistics approach to metaphor developed in Lakoff and Johnson’s classical study *Metaphors We Live By* and in Zoltán Kövecses’ works on the topic as its systematicity should provide a

²⁸Ricoeur theorises about metaphor that “the suspension of literal reference is the condition for the release of a power of second-degree reference, which is properly poetic reference” (Ricoeur 5)

stable basis for the investigation of metaphor as a figure of thought rather than merely a stylistic flourish, as it is pejoratively considered by tradition and, in the context of MacCaig's writing, by some of his critics.

This examination of what MacCaig intends his use of metaphor to accomplish and how it fits within his project of writing poetry that focuses on the object in celebration of it however raises a second question, that of the perception of the object itself. Traditional views of metaphor consider it incompatible with truth and MacCaig admits to being unable to think non-metaphorically. From this, it follows logically that he can question how accurate perception of reality is. If this concern is taken to its limits, that is if the data of experience is considered doubtful enough that it can not guarantee that the reality we experience in our daily life actually exists in its sensible form, this mode of thinking could lead to philosophical idealism, that is to the epistemological position that consciousness is all that is knowable. In the context of MacCaig's stated project and the way he reinvests the idea of the divine into existence in general, this position would be untenable as the poet would be celebrating things whose existence he cannot know with any certitude, therefore it is rather unlikely that MacCaig leans towards it. This, however, constitutes another site of tension in his poetry and as such will need to be investigated before any conclusions can be drawn regarding MacCaig's problematic use of metaphor.

A – MacCaig, tradition and metaphor

MacCaig's ambivalent attitude to metaphor is partly rooted in the ways it has been thought of in European culture since Aristotle. There are, according to Ortony, "two alternative approaches to metaphor – metaphor as an essential characteristic of the creativity of language, and metaphor as deviant and parasitic upon normal usage" (2). These correspond respectively to the constructivist – meaning has to be "constructed rather than directly perceived" (ibid) and any use of language is inherently creative, which blurs the literal-figurative divide – and the non-constructivist approach. In the latter, metaphors are explained "in terms of violations of linguistic rules" and "characterise rhetoric, not scientific discourse" (ibid). They are "appropriate for the purposes of politicians and poets" (ibid) as per their assignment by Aristotle to rhetoric and poetry. As Ortony outlines, science, associated with "precision and the absence of ambiguity" is assumed to employ a "correspondingly precise and unambiguous – in short, literal" language (1). "For this reason," he concludes, "literal language has often been thought the most appropriate tool for the objective characterisation of reality" (ibid). This belief in a "privileged status" of literal language, he finds, is particularly evident in the first part of the twentieth century, which is when MacCaig, born in 1910, was living his formative years. Additionally, metaphor's association with rhetoric entails its being treated with the same suspicion as this discipline. Rhetoric is indeed, as Ricoeur reminds his reader, "philosophy's oldest enemy and its oldest ally" (10) because it concerns itself with persuading with little regard as to the validity of its conclusions, a fact for

which Plato condemns it as dangerous in the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. Rhetoric for him is an art of “illusion and deception” (Ricoeur 10). This stance, I would argue, manifests itself in various manners in MacCaig’s writing and interviews which, considering his background in Classics and his avowed admiration for Socrates as he is written by Plato, is not actually surprising. There is however a silver lining for metaphor: the constructivist approach defined by Ortony is already present in Aristotle’s assessment of the figure: while it is “primarily ornamental” (Ortony 3) and prone to a certain “obscurity” (ibid.), he nevertheless recognises it to possess a “creative, educative aspect” (Hawkes 10) – a kind of embryonic form of Ricoeur’s metaphorical truth. I would like to argue that, to a certain extent, it is this generally negative view of metaphor which informs the aspects MacCaig distrusts in this figure.

MacCaig articulates three main concerns about metaphor, which I will argue correspond to the same reasons given for distrusting this figure in the non-constructivist approach outlined earlier.

Firstly, he knows from experience that metaphors can be excessively obscure – his very critical attitude towards his New Apocalypse period targets this characteristic in particular in his early works. “It’s long since I decided that poems which are wantonly or carelessly obscure (not difficult) are bad art and bad manners” (5), he writes in “My Way of It.” This particular grievance however only addresses a specific category of metaphors, whose grounds are personal enough to the writer that the reader finds himself or herself unable to divine them. His second point of contention with this figure is somewhat linked to the first. The non-constructivist

conception of language takes for a given that metaphor – tropological reference – is less clear than literal reference as the former requires further interpretation. From this point of view, metaphor used in a purely ornamental capacity – a reproach made by R.W. Scott and Frykman – represents an unjustified loss of clarity.

This idea of metaphor being less clear than denotation is moreover compounded by what appears to be MacCaig's third main reason for distrusting this figure. It follows from his poetic agenda: for a poet who intends his writing to focus on the object it describes, the notion of one element – one conceptual domain – being understood in terms of another introduces a risk of denaturing the first through the transfer of semantic traits from the second. This is related to the traditional idea that metaphor is incompatible with truth – strictly speaking, a metaphor taken literally generally results at best in an untruth, at worst in a nonsensical statement. This mistrust for metaphor's way of enforcing an identity with a different object/concept is addressed frequently in MacCaig's poems. "Report" (*CP* 325) is noticeable for the mildly elegiac anaphoric "all the time," tolling like a bell over the course of the first stanza then returning in the third and last stanza modified through the presence of the "and" to add an intimation of finality – the speaker's resignation to the situation:

And all the time
we won't let them alone –
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.

This process of translation refers at least in part to the "metaphorical way of seeing things" MacCaig claims for himself. The idea of translation appears to be one that resonates with him; "The Tribes of Men" (*CP* 425) come to mind. In this text, it is

not the speaker himself as perceiver and descriptor but human beings in general who are presented as “exiled translators of reality” (l.16). The qualification “exiled” places them in the same alienated position in regards to reality as MacCaig’s speaker finds himself in due to the emphasis he lays on the otherness of nature. The notion of translation implies a certain distortion of the initial meaning – the Italian saying *traduttore, traditore* is called up in this instance as MacCaig shows himself particularly disgruntled with the way metaphor denatures its tenor in “Humanism” (CP 145) from non-human to human:

What a human lie is this. What greed and what
arrogance, not to allow
a glacier to be a glacier –
to humanise into a metaphor
that long sliver of ice (...)
I defend the glacier that
when it absorbs a man
preserves his image
intact (l. 8-12 and 18-21).

The speaker advocates a poetry that maintains the separateness of the glacier – its existence *qua* glacier. In choosing the phrasing “humanise into a metaphor,” the poem implies that the inherent otherness of the landscape is erased as the metaphor reshapes in such a way that the description of nature is at least partly overwritten with human characteristics. The target domain of the metaphor, the glacier, gains traits from the source domain at the expense of its own original characteristics.

MacCaig makes frequent explicit remarks on the false identity created through the – not necessarily explicit – copula “is” of a metaphor: the vehicle is not the tenor. The reader knows it, of course, but does not necessarily reflect upon it unless it is explicitly pointed out as MacCaig does on several occasions. In “A Sigh

for Simplicity” (CP 322), MacCaig questions at length a series of metaphors, arriving at the implicit conclusion that there is no identity between vehicle and tenor of a given metaphor, asking for example: “Is a mussel really *bearded*?” (1.7). Similarly, “Non Pareil” (CP 53) illustrates this as “a ship sails clean out of its metaphor / and birds perch on no simile,” stressing the material difference between the two. “Midnight Encounter” (CP 307), though written much later, follows the same pattern: “the head of one [rose] lolled over the fence, / a fiery bucolic seraph (...)” (1.2-3). “I look at it and am not blinded, / I touch it and am not burned” (1.11-12). “No Consolation” (CP 163) is entirely devoted to this problem and the poet’s frustration with it: the poem delineates successive attempts at finding a “consolation” for this lack of correspondence between the terms of any metaphor. This inadequacy of metaphor is evidenced by the fact that the water and wall are not described but only partially defined through their function (1.10-12). This intervenes after a first attempt at finding compensation in the fact that, though unable to render linguistically his experience to his satisfaction, the speaker can however still find solace in his ability to experience the world around him, “which is more than a wall can do, or water” (1.6-7). The abrupt pause and shift in mood created by the dash at the beginning of line 8 as the consolation is interrupted however makes it clear that this is insufficient: the second stanza, through the idea of “liv[ing] at a remove” from the wall or the water – the reality in which the speaker lives – establishes firmly the existence of an objective real world the poet is attempting to describe – it is merely language that is unequal to the task and can only focus on either wall or water, but not embrace the totality of the effect: “I consoled myself for not being able to

describe / water trickling down a wall or / a wall being trickled down by water” (l.1-3).

The definition through what the objects *do* in the second stanza is inherently bound to fail. The choice of wall and water as the two objects to be described ensures that it does since it could be argued that the wall “that keeps out and keeps in” (l.10-11), that separates, symbolises the impossibility of getting at the thing in itself. Concurrently, the water which “saves you and drowns you” is also incidentally impossible to hold onto, as are the poet’s impressions when he attempts to put them into words that would cover their complete reality. After the failure of this second compensation – the ability to define – a second “but” signals a second failure of the poet’s attempts. The problem is in fact stated more radically in the third stanza: while line 1 dealt with the inability “to describe” the scene, line 14 moves onto the idea of seeing things as a metaphor – the problem is no longer one of expression but now resides in human perception itself which appears to be conditioned by the inadequacies of language. The conclusion “it became clear that I can describe only / my own inventions” (l.17-18) is matter-of-fact. It does however create a problematic tension with MacCaig’s stated poetic project, an issue which reappears regularly in his writing.

I argue that MacCaig associates metaphor-making with a certain sense of guilt. Talking to Murray in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things,” the poet phrases his use of metaphor in terms of temptation: “if you’ve got a metaphorical way of seeing things, which I have, for good or ill, the temptation to exploit that knack of metaphor and image is very strong if you don’t control it” (118). Metaphor is “to be

watched,” it is “too seductive,” he adds, presenting the figure as a Tempter akin to the snake of Genesis, “the shameless demander of similes, the destroyer of Eden” (“A sigh for simplicity” *CP* 322), which he battles throughout his works. This notion of sin echoes in “Humanism” where “humanis[ing the glacier] into a metaphor” is condemned as “a human lie” – a fault rather than a mistake, the idea of sin taken up immediately with mentions of two deadly sins, “greed” and “arrogance” (pride), thus coming back to the idea of a sense of guilt associated with the use of metaphor. This can be accounted for in relation to MacCaig’s personal poetic project. If he intimates that faithful description to be something that is due to the object, that is something of a moral obligation, the “inadequacy” of metaphor (“No Choice”) which cannot apprehend the thing in its thingness but seems to hybridise it through the transfer of semantic traits constitutes almost a moral lapse. This “inadequacy” is something MacCaig will not let his readers forget, almost as though he sought to suggest that they, by appreciating the metaphor, were guilty of the same fault as he is for writing it. His poems repeatedly underline the tropological nature of the expression and Whyte remarks: “the poet refuses to let us simply enjoy metaphor, but foregrounds the whole process of comparison in a problematic way. The machinery is resolutely visible.” He does concede however that “this does not exclude moments of calmer acceptance” (91), but MacCaig’s use of self-conscious metaphor appears to be the dominant case. Whyte chooses to cite “By Comparison” (*CP* 8) as an example, but this is a frequent phenomenon in MacCaig’s poems. The “cradle, at a distance, of a kind” (*CP* 67 l.1) of “Half-built Boat in a Hayfield” exemplifies it, inserting two layers of uncertainty within the link between tenor and vehicle, first by attenuating

the visual resemblance between them with “at a distance” then by restricting the similarity to an approximation – “of a kind?” – pointing out the fact there is no identity between the two ties into MacCaig’s uneasiness about metaphor.

MacCaig similarly calls himself out on his use of metaphor in “Dipper” (*CP* 442-3)

He likes his nest
to be behind a rippling tapestry –
a tapestry? Well,
a waterfall.

Naturally (l.16-20)

The interrogative repetition of “tapestry” then the purely denotative correction introduced with a phatic “well” give this metapoetic – metalinguistic – comment a certain air of embarrassment, as though the poet had been caught in the act of poetic distortion and were ruefully admitting it – almost suggesting a moral imperative to use literal reference whenever possible while representing the poetic mind indulging itself.

MacCaig will occasionally point out the studied wit of metaphor – the last stanza of “No Consolation” (*CP* 163) is a jab at this practice effected through the elaboration *ad absurdum* of a chosen metaphor:

– And how odd to suppose
you prove you love your wife
by continually committing adultery
with her (l.19-22).

In the wife as mistress metaphor, the connotations of mystery and passion supposedly associated with forbidden love and, in this case, extra-conjugal affairs, are transferred to the lawful relationship between spouses. However the image is

undermined through its elaboration with “continually committing adultery,” which brings into play legal connotations – the sordid side of the affair – and so underlines the reversal of values occurring in the conceptual metaphor. This is highlighted by the mild “how odd” (l.19) with which the speaker introduces his musings, and the presence of sedate punctuation with a mere full stop rather than an exclamation mark as could have been expected from the phrasing appears significant – the pretence of surprise is an ironic display put on for the benefit of the reader.

MacCaig does not however always reject outright the metaphor in signalling its figurativeness. In “Starling on a Green Lawn” (*CP* 400), for instance, he implants a metaphor in presentia in the first hemistich of line 7, only to immediately expose the tenuous quality of its grounds: “He’s a guy King, a guy Prince, though his only royal habit / is to walk with his hands clasped behind his back.” Questioning a metaphor is however according to Kövesces a way to renew it (54). Perhaps that is the case here as the BIRD IS KING metaphor immediately follows a figurative “stained glass window” which may be taken to create a medieval atmosphere. Perhaps it might not be too far-fetched to imagine that this extending of the metaphor aims to underline a certain nobility of the bird as – to take a leaf out of MacCaig’s book – bird in its “bird-ness.”

The structural opposition between tropological and literal reference entails that names are the absolute antithesis of metaphor. This dichotomy appears regularly in MacCaig’s poems, and Whyte notably comments on the fact that nouns in MacCaig’s thought hold “a primary guiltlessness of language” (89) which appears to be the counterpart of this notion of guilt that remains attached to metaphor. This

opposition between literal and tropological reference is well-represented in MacCaig's poems – notably, it can be noted that “Names” (*CP* 196), dealing with MacCaig's dissatisfaction with literal language immediately precedes “No Choice” (*CP* 197), the most direct statement of his position regarding metaphor in his works.

MacCaig's directing principle in his writing is a measure of faithfulness to the object. This translates notably into what MacLeod terms “the shock of accuracy in definition” (30) in his poems, which he counts as one of their most distinctive characteristics. And indeed MacCaig himself insists in several interviews on his “pedantry” and need for accuracy:

I like accuracies. For example, I once wrote a poem in which there was a reference to a sea-bird called an oyster catcher. I said it had red legs, “furious red legs,” and I knew damned well that they are not red, they are orange, but I wrote red because it suited the rhythm better. That worried me for years. So when it appeared in *Collected Poems*, it had orange legs. I am a pedant in that way. Another instance, I saw a very nice poem, called “Shorescape” in *The Listener*. A beautiful poem. He mentioned the bird, the gannet, sitting on a post. Gannets never sit on posts for the very good reason that they couldn't. So, out with that. I love that sort of accuracy (Degott-Reinhardt 245).

Accuracy does not stop at factual precision. MacCaig is never content with vague generalities. He admits:

I don't like vague words like that, impressionism, expressionism. I don't like them. I hate abstract words. I'm incapable of abstract thinking, that's why. I like to particularise. I hardly ever say a tree I say what sort of tree it is, that sort of thing. A bird flew up from a cornfield. I would name the type of bird (*ibid.* 290).

He does: “Kingfisher” (*CP* 315), “Stonechat on Cul Beg” (*CP* 314), “Waxwing” (*CP* 310) attest to this. This insistence on exactness is moreover not limited to birds which are the central subject of the poem they are featured in. “Landscape and I” (*CP* 294) makes sure to correctly identify “that sprinkling lark” (l.9). Using the

proper designation of the object he evokes is important enough for MacCaig to return to this topic within the same interview:

That's another of my fascinations [names]. When I see a flower and I don't know its name, I'm quite upset. I wish I knew its name, you know; Anyway, it's also a form of particularising. I wouldn't just say, I saw a red flower. I want to name it. A moss campion or whatever. As anything, trees, animals, I like to name them, to know their names (Degott-Reinhardt 292).

He is indeed similarly precise when talking about plants: "In Everything" (*CP* 305) takes care to identify "seapinks" (l.1) and "Birthday" (*CP* 300) specifies the initial setting to be a "birch wood" (l.2).

This aspiration to accuracy, because MacCaig has apparently internalised the traditional conception of non-truthful, ornamental metaphor, leads to his displaying in his poems a definite preference towards literal reference and more particularly prelapsarian Adamic naming. As a result, the figure of Adam haunts MacCaig's poems whether it be explicitly or obliquely through mentions of Eden. Indeed the image of Adam, already present in "A Sigh for Simplicity" also appears in "Turned Head" (*CP* 72-73) in which the speaker casts himself and his beloved in the respective roles of Adam and Eve naming the creatures of Eden and in "No Nominalist" (*CP* 157) among many other poems – which hints at the centrality of names and naming in MacCaig's thought. Degott-Reinhardt remarks that "there are frequent references to Adam in Paradise where everything had just one name" (292). MacCaig's response veers off course after a brief statement: "He named them, allegedly. He named them all and that was their name" (Degott-Reinhardt 292). It can be noted that the finality and simplicity of his phrasing mirrors the unequivocal he longs for in literal reference. To supplement MacCaig's laconic

answer, it may be useful to call upon an evocation of Adamic language published by one of his contemporaries:

In the garden of Eden, Adam spoke a language in which one word conveyed the root meaning of one thing without the possibility of confusion. His language was semiotic. It ignored or rather penetrated the surface of things, because the surface is multiform and therefore confusing. It moved directly, and like an arrow, to inner natures, illuminating them instantly and once and for all. This plenary instrument of communication was necessarily transparent, for colours and substances occlude. It was everywhere comprehensible, not pestered, like our own partial instrument of speaking and writing, with ambiguity or distracting connotations (Fraser ix).

This language to which MacCaig aspires – rather than he regrets, remaining constantly aware that he writes in a postlapsarian, non-Cratylean context – is an ideal one. It is a linguistic commonplace to affirm that actual human language is conventional, the link between sign and referent being arbitrary as opposed to what would happen in this prelapsarian language. Nevertheless, literal reference appears to remain the desired mode of expression in his poems.

Names and by extension nouns hold a privileged place in MacCaig's writing, as the Adamic reference indicates. Whyte remarks that, in "Instrument and Agent" (*CP* 3), the poet "seems to be [...] identifying denotatory, label words ('tree,' 'girl,' 'star') with the object in its genuine, uncontaminated state, as if nouns held a primary guiltlessness of language" (89). This critic finds the same suggestion in "Double Life" (*CP* 10), quoting:

A noun
Would so usurp all grammar no doing word
Could rob his money-bags or clap a crown
On his turned head, and all at last would be
Existence without category" (MacCaig qtd in Whyte 90).

Nouns appear as the category of pure denotation. Whyte develops this

“guiltlessness” of nouns, remarking that it is “as if words like ‘rose,’ ‘tree’ or ‘star’ possessed a purity likeness had not defiled, as if they somehow gave a key to the essence of ‘roseness,’ of ‘treeness,’ and at the same time effectively linked the speaker to the individual tree or rose” (104-105). They are questioned more often in the poems than adjectives or verbs. They also tend to take on their grammatical roles: for instance, there are frequent occurrences of enallages transforming a noun into a verb, such as happens in “Boats” (*CP* 21): “he crabs his boat / sideways.”

There is also, to a certain extent, traces of magical thinking when it comes to nouns and names. The signifiers “crow” and “heron” recur obsessively respectively in “Solitary Crow” (*CP* 188) and “Heron” (*CP* 137) two of MacCaig’s snapshot poems – four times as “crow” (l.1,2,3 and 8) and once as the homophonous “craw” (l.13). “Heron” reappears three times including the title. It is however the fact that the noun “heron” refers to the animal’s essence as heron rather than the animal itself which draws attention to it and makes it seem as though the term were omnipresent within the text. “It stands in water, wrapped in heron” (l.1); “releasing its own spring, it fills / The air with heron” (l.12-13). In both cases the unusual phrasing which grammatically brings the “heron-ness” of the heron outside of the animal while still superimposing it on the bird lends a disproportionate importance to the word in comparison with the frequency with which it recurs in the text. A similar phenomenon can be observed in “Goat” (*CP* 71) where the signifier “goat” can be found five times between the title and the first two stanzas. Insistence on the noun pushed to this extent eventually produces the impression that, through repeated naming of the animal, the speaker can force the text to reach its essence – names are

attributed power in most mystical traditions. Knowing a name and uttering it as part of a ritual is thought to give the practitioner power over the named entity. This idea is consensual enough that Simon Pulleyn opens his article “The Power of Names in Classical Greek Religion” by presenting it as an axiom: “It has become a commonplace to say that, in classical Greek and Roman religion, to know the name of a god was to have power over him” (14)²⁹. The notion that names have power has also been discussed often by anthropologists. In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer remarks that many tribes

commonly fanc[y] that the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two in such a way that magic may be wrought on a man just as easily through his name as through his hair, his nails or any other material part of his person (244).

This notion of uttering the name as gaining power over the person/thing is moreover present in the modern world in more subtle ways. Betsy Rymes calls up “the stereotype of the pushy salesman who inserts a customer’s first name after each sentence of his pitch” (159). She interprets this method as a way to establish a feeling of familiarity (ibid.), yet there is also an underlying sense that the salesman entraps the potential client through repeated use of his or her name.

MacCaig’s emphasis on naming in general and the repetition of the noun in those three poems could perhaps suggest traces of this type of thinking – the poet

²⁹ Moreover, he writes that “[t]he invocation of a god by name has always been a central feature of prayer and magic. If you know the name of a god, you can make him listen. In the Old Testament, the name of Jehovah was for long a secret name, not to be named or written, because it was too powerful” (Pulleyn 14).

attempting to call up through the utterance of the post-lapsarian designation the absolutely truthful Adam-given name that has been lost in the Fall. This reading is moreover supported by the fact that, while there are very few proper nouns – toponyms excluded – in MacCaig’s poems, nouns such as “heron,” “toad,” or “goat” appear to be treated as actual names, which is what magical thinking endows with power. These nouns are not preceded by a determinant, are not made present with deictics, thus paralleling the syntax of proper names. This particular use of nouns as names might be read as a suggestion that, in the moment of perception and description, the heron that is being observed becomes the heron *par excellence*, that is the essence of heron to the speaker, to the point that the animal is treated as though it were the only specimen in existence. The category name, that is the species, becomes in this context something that is almost a proper name.

B – The paradoxical exactness of metaphor

Adamic naming, that is an idealised type of literal reference, would then be the language which can best apprehend the object according to MacCaig. However, several objections come to mind immediately, suggesting that the poet finds in the figure he decries a form of truthfulness to the object which he deems compatible with his writing project. His constant use of metaphor in his poems despite his explicit criticisms seems to indicate this. Moreover, considering that MacCaig apparently adopts the traditionally negative view of metaphor, in judging that “Fetching Cows” (*CP* 125) is “a bonny poem because of its observation and its

expression of the observation” (Degott-Reinhardt 279) the poet seems to contradict himself, considering that this text relies heavily on metaphorical images. Finally, MacCaig’s attributing “exactness,” which would be traditionally thought to correspond to the idea of naming, to metaphor in “No Choice” (*CP* 197) is problematic. This, I argue, ties into his untheorised conception of the metaphorical truth his eye for images allows him to reach. As Ricoeur explains “metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality” (Ricoeur 5): “the metaphorical ‘is’ at once signifies both ‘is not’” as MacCaig stresses when he foregrounds the previously remarked upon non-identity between vehicle and tenor, but also “is like” (*ibid*), Ricoeur points out. This brings about a “suspension of literal reference [which] is the condition for the release of a power of second-degree reference” (*ibid.*). Ricoeur deduces from this the existence of a “metaphorical truth, but in an equally ‘tensive’ sense of the word ‘truth’” (*ibid*). In this sense, metaphor, even as it is a “human lie” (“Humanism” 1.1), is simultaneously a heuristic device, which can justify MacCaig’s mention of its “exactness.”

This idea of a “tensive” truth strikes a bell for his readers as tension between opposite poles coexisting unquestioned is a constant phenomenon in his works, his constant reliance on metaphor even as he decries it consistently only representing one of many examples. On this last topic, it must be noted that according to cognitive linguistics, “our conceptual system” which “is not something we are normally aware of” and “plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” is “largely metaphorical.” This entails that “the way we think, what we experience and

what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson 3) though our expressions are often not perceived as tropological (Lakoff & Johnson *passim*). Between ontological and spatialisation conceptual metaphors, it appears impossible to truly avoid the use of metaphor – “A Sigh For Simplicity” (CP 322), which has already been touched upon seems to indicate that MacCaig, though there is no evidence that he subscribes to or even knows of the cognitive approach to metaphor, does however assume that all language is inherently tropological, which motivates the generally wistful tone of his references to Adamic language. This idea, however, only accounts for conventional conceptual metaphors. Creative metaphor, that is what results from MacCaig’s “metaphorical way of seeing things,” is the defining characteristic of poetry in particular. MacCaig’s poems, however, are specifically noted for “their mastery of metaphor” (T. Crawford 14) – leaning on the cognitive approach to metaphor, I will adopt a more technical point of view than has been employed to this day in investigating how his metaphor-making works, what justifies this glowing praise and how it can coexist with the scathing criticism listed earlier.

His poems provide evidence that, despite his overt adhesion to the more traditional view of metaphor, MacCaig however conceives of it as a way to supplement denotation. It could be objected that the forms of metaphors he favours are not the most specific ones or only provide limited metaphorical mappings. To show that this is not truly the case, I will now consider how MacCaig constructs and uses his metaphors.

There are in fact two prevailing types of metaphor in MacCaig’s works: he

makes abundant use of ontological metaphors, with a clear emphasis on personification – of natural and man-made objects as well as abstract notions. His other predominant form of metaphor is harder to characterise. Its linguistic expression may rest on a complete structural conceptual metaphor, but because of its very limited exploitation in the text, it may be argued at times to be a simple one-shot image metaphor³⁰. As previously noted, MacCaig has been criticised for “his repertoire of verbal and metaphorical tricks” (R.W Scott 40) – a facile use of metaphor that only exists as an ornament to his poems – which might be attributed to this phenomenon. I would argue however that, though the one-shot images he employs are often based on visual resemblance, they call up a more elaborate metaphorical mapping which does have a certain influence on our reading of the text, in which case this frequent reproach of a purely ornamental use of metaphor must be disregarded. To establish this, I will consider a number of metaphors selected from MacCaig’s poems. It would be advantageous to start with observing the first poem of MacCaig’s *Collected Poems* edition, which coincidentally presents his conception of the inner workings of metaphor: “Instrument and Agent” (CP 3).

The poem belongs to the 1955 *Riding Lights* collection, which makes it anterior to the rise of cognitive linguistics. Between this and the fact that MacCaig was never fond of theory for its own sake, his analysis of metaphor hinges on a simple exchange of semantic features between vehicle and tenor presented in an extended metaphor built on the personification of the tenor and vehicle:

³⁰ When “the mapping is of the one-shot kind generated by two images brought into correspondence by the superimposition of one image onto the other [, the metaphors] are one-shot image metaphors”(Kövecses *Metaphor, A Practical Introduction* 44). Kövecses defines these figures by contrast with structural conceptual metaphors which superimpose whole domains rather than isolated images.

In my eye I've no apple; every object
Enters in there with hands in pockets.
I welcome them all, just as they are,
Every one equal, none a stranger.

Yet in the short journey they make
To my skull's back, each takes a look
from another, or a gesture, or
A special way of saying *Sir*:

So tree is partly girl; moon
and wit slide through the sky together;
And which is star – what's come a million
Miles or gone those inches farther?

The specificity of the poem is the high degree of utilisation of the source domain: stanza 1 references the human vehicle concretely in its bodily presence – MacCaig's gift for visual suggestion is at work here. Interestingly, it is not the words, but the concepts – MacCaig uses the designation “objects” in the second line – that are considered as tenor and vehicle. This signals that the poet is aware that metaphor is not a merely linguistic phenomenon, as the traditional view of this figure as a rhetoric flourish would prescribe, but functions at a conceptual level.

Two things appear noteworthy regarding what this poem implies about his understanding of metaphor: firstly, the self provides only the space in which this exchange takes place – the MIND IS ROOM mapping of the central personification implies a lack of agency on the speaker's part – the metaphor is self-created or rather arises from the object itself. This outlook on metaphor-making is in fact supported in “Jug” (CP 76) and “Waiting to Notice” (CP 151) where, Frykman remarks, MacCaig “makes the objects responsible for the process” (18). This appears to be incompatible with the “metaphorical way of seeing things” which has the trope originate in the subject. This object-centred view of metaphor would allow MacCaig to reconcile the

use of this figure with his project to describe without distorting by considering the metaphorical link with the vehicle to be an intrinsic trait of the object.

Occasionally MacCaig will implement a strategy aiming to pass metaphor as pure denomination, which may be another way of making metaphor compatible with his poetic agenda. This happens in “Toad” (CP 350) – the speaker demands of the animal: “Stop looking like a purse.” The command implies that the visual resemblance between the toad and a purse upon which the metaphor is based is already there before the metaphor is produced. This means that the grounds of the metaphor are entirely dictated by the object, making the poet a mere observer consigning the details of his surroundings, as previously discussed. “Pastoral” (CP 389) works similarly: “The cock, in the amazing uniform / of a wildly foreign Field Marshal.” “The Field Marshal becomes / a Pioneer Corps in drag.” The repetition of the vehicle “Field Marshal,” which is substituted to the tenor “the cock” as the subject of the second statement has the effect of making the reader perceive the metaphor as a matter-of-fact description reported by an objective observer. However, this apparent passivity in simply recording impressions does not hold: in “By comparison” (CP 8), the lines “tree and stars and stones / Are falsely these and true comparisons / *Whose likenesses are the observer*” (my italics) are in direct contradiction with the conception of metaphor suggested in “Toad” and “Pastoral,” as the grounds of the metaphors are not already present in the object, but created by the speaker.

The metaphors chosen to exemplify the metaphorical process in “Instrument and Agent” are questionable. Being isolated from any specific context, they appear

unmotivated and independent of any underlying structural conceptual metaphor – this phenomenon could however be construed as a bout of deliberate teasing on the poet's part. “Tree is partly girl” brings the reader to the fringe of the uncanny valley and the impression of incompleteness produced by these seemingly unmotivated metaphors acts as a riddle and piques the reader's curiosity – the linguistic metaphors proposed in stanza 3 then act as a sort of preview of the figure's potential in the rest of the collection, prompting the reader to try and decipher, in this case in vain, what the grounds of the metaphor might be.

It seems then that “Instrument and Agent” suggests, if not a detailed theory, at least a certain reflection on MacCaig's part regarding the production of metaphor. But even so, as stated earlier, a number of critics consider that he uses his talent for images in a superficially brilliant but ultimately meaningless fashion. This probably has to do with the fact that many of MacCaig's metaphors, often his most renowned ones to boot, are apparently one-shot image metaphors with a skeletal mapping. Of course, if Kövesces is to be believed, the reader “know[ing] exactly which part maps onto which on the basis of the common shape” “is what makes image metaphors conceptual as well, rather than simply linguistic” (57) and this furthermore is not a specifically MacCaig trait as “poetry abounds in image-based conceptual metaphors that are rich in imagistic detail but do not use image-schemas” (ibid). This being said, I would argue further that, although a few exceptions exist such as the “sugared grasses” image in “Frost and Thin Fog” (*CP* 61) which rests solely on visual similarity and does not add to the utterance in terms of semantic charge, MacCaig's metaphors generally bring a significant contribution to his descriptions, by giving

rise to this metaphorical truth posited by Ricoeur. To show this, I will first observe his treatment of a few one-off image metaphors chosen from his poems.

The titular “Black Cat in the Morning” (*CP* 85) “pours to the ground, is pool, is cat” (l.13). The linguistic expression rests on the conventional conceptual metaphor of SMOOTH MOVEMENT IS LIQUID apparent in phrases such as “to speak fluently,” “to move fluidly” or “a flowing style,” which is itself visually motivated. The metaphor is however stacked onto a metonymy in which the cat’s movement is representative of the cat herself. It is in the shift of connotations between “pours” and “pool” that MacCaig’s cat truly becomes noteworthy: the first describes a rather general type of movement and as such brings only visual elements to the description. The second, however, draws on the idea of a pool as a calm, undisturbed body of water and, through this, moves from the visual to the behavioural, for lack of a better term. “Pool” then simultaneously reinforces the liquid metaphor of smooth, elegant movement and additionally suggests the detached serenity observed in cats most of the time. It must be concluded then that the metaphor, though it builds on a one-off image metaphor, grows out of its boundaries.

To prove that this is not an isolated incident, I will look at “Toad” (*CP* 350), which metaphorises the titular animal into a purse. The obvious visual resemblance provides the grounds for the metaphor, which, though the image is repeated three times in the same terms over the course of the poem (twice in l.1 and once in l.9), appears to remain a one-off image metaphor. However, in spite of its being limited to its *in absentia* variant that substitutes “purse” for “toad,” the metaphor is not reduced to this skeletal mapping. Implicitly, a wealth of connotations arise to complete the

figure: firstly, MacCaig chose a purse rather than a wallet as his vehicle. The former is associated with female accessories and thus might connote a certain primness an old-fashioned perspective would associate with femininity which maps onto the careful quality of a toad's movements. Secondly, a purse contains valuables as a toad's head supposedly holds a jewel (l.12). It becomes apparent then that the one-off image metaphor is in fact supported by a more intricate structural metaphorical mapping than expected.

Finally, a one-off image metaphor in the snapshot poem "Fetching Cows" (*CP* 125) constitutes a more complex case. The cows evoked in the title have "great Greek eyes" (l.5). However, "Byre" (*CP* 104), a second snapshot poem, recycles the metaphor by presenting the cows as "swag-bellied Aphrodites." Its metaphorical mapping is elaborated on as the metaphor is extended: the cows are "mincing," which brings to mind both the coyness of the goddess and the cautious way the cows step into the building. Similarly, their "silver slaver," an expression in which silver doubles as the colour of the cows' saliva and as the metal of the goddess' necklace, activates other parts of the source domain. The example is particularly arresting as the metaphor's unvoiced but not truly hidden areas contribute to the atmosphere of the poem – Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of love and through this finds herself linked with femininity and fertility, which supports the statement made in the last stanza: "all is milky, secret, female."

Though they may appear to justify the criticism of shallowness levelled at MacCaig's images, these few examples show that his apparently purely visual metaphors nonetheless possess a certain amount of conceptual structuring that

constitutes a non-negligible semantic contribution to the poem. The purely denotative phrase “black cat” cannot call up the living cat in the reader’s mind as thoroughly as the metaphor of the cat as moving liquid can. This is the metaphorical truth Ricoeur theorises, and it seems that MacCaig’s critics, without employing these particular words or actually analysing the phenomenon nevertheless recognise this as the criterion which decides the quality of an image considering that this particular line is generally considered especially successful in their eyes.

MacCaig also makes use of conventional conceptual metaphors in this same perspective of providing a more rounded picture of his subject. To highlight this, I will analyse his treatment of the LOVE IS FIRE trope, which Kövecses counts amongst the conventional conceptual metaphors of love (36). I would like to show how, through questioning, elaboration and combining, MacCaig renews it. “Fiat” (*CP* 13) recognises the LOVE IS FIRE metaphor only to discard it as inadequate: “fire and thunderhead / Are momentary metamorphosis / of the most gentle word ever was said.” In “The Year, Only, Goes By” (*CP* 24), however, this same conceptual metaphor plays an indirect role: several conventional conceptual metaphors are revitalised through their combination into a single rich and complex linguistic expression: “[‘]Is this, of all that fire, what’s left?’” (l.12). The poem plays on a metaphor of time: LIFE IS A YEAR, with its specific mapping of summer as prime of one's life is linked to the LOVE IS FIRE metaphor through the LIFE IS FIRE general metaphor – here a more specific variant as VITALITY IS FIRE may be envisaged. The result of this triple metaphorical conceptual mapping is a remarkable density of meaning in this line which manages to capture a fuller perspective on the

issue of passing time and ageing than any of these tropes separately. This in itself provides an interesting example of MacCaig's much celebrated mastery of metaphor which only becomes more obvious when the reader considers the title of the poem: "the year, only, goes by," in which "only" points out the metaphoricity of the LIFE IS A YEAR conceptual metaphor by denying it ironically, before going on to exploit it in the text.

However, while MacCaig is aware that metaphor affords him access to a particularly prolific type of reference – the dense semantic richness of combined conceptual metaphors or the "tensive" metaphorical truth theorised by Ricoeur – his criticism of the figure as "inadequate" and deceitful is nevertheless not entirely invalidated as the fact remains that there is no true identity between tenor and vehicle.

Indeed, "Instrument and Agent" also suggests a second notable aspect of metaphor which undermines the compatibility with object-centred writing it apparently establishes. In this poem, MacCaig does away with the traditional tenor over vehicle hierarchy. Without the interference of the self reduced to a mere locus, the objects are "every **one equal**," the weight of the spondee stressing this equality of status, as happens with the spondee "**back, each**" (l. 6) emphasized by its position astride the caesura. De-individualising pronouns and adjectives which reinforce this idea are highlighted in the text: "every" closes the first and opens the last line of the first stanza, while "one" and "none" echo symmetrically on each side of the medial caesura in line 4. With a similar goal in view, the terms referring to the pairs of objects in stanza 3 can apply indiscriminately to either or both at once in order to

suggest an equal level of involvement in the trope for each object: “partly” (l.9), “together” (l.10) and “which” (l.11). This distributes the focus equally between the tenor – the object being evoked – and the vehicle, which, as I will attempt to show by examining how personification is employed in the snapshot poems, is problematic within MacCaig’s poetic project.

To determine a reduced corpus of snapshot poems, I will be leaning on Frykman’s list of “Spate in Winter Midnight” (*CP* 79), “Byre” (*CP* 104), “Fetching Cows” (*CP* 125), “Heron” (*CP* 137), “By Achmelvich Bridge” (*CP* 132), “Solitary Crow” (*CP* 188), “Old Rose Bush” (*CP* 218), and “Sparrow” (*CP* 249) as “poems of pure description, where a minimum of reflection or intrusion of the speaker’s ego” (27). These snapshot poems are “scattered over all the books” (Frykman 27). They are not the most abundant category in MacCaig’s poems, nor do they belong to a specific period in his life. They are however, as discussed earlier, the texts that offer the most evident example of MacCaig’s poetic agenda. Coincidentally, they all have in common their use of personification which, as will be discussed, brings with it an interesting quandary that will become apparent through the analysis of “Solitary Crow” (*CP* 188). Firstly, it is not necessarily clear whether the poem comprises several personifications or one extended metaphor: “he in his feathers” (l.1) presents the natural covering of the bird, which is part of its body, in the same way as a man’s clothing would be evoked – the preposition employed is the same and the reader recognises the same strict differentiation between the self and what covers it. A more specific extension of this personification intervenes in lines 4 and 6 with the “tough-guy clowning” and the “sardonic anarchist” which contributes to pencilling in details

within the previously undefined human portrait. Even more pointedly, “black things done / To a sprawled lamb whose blood beads in the sun” (l. 4-5), bracketed by these two expressions brings up sacrilegious connotations: “black things” may hint at satanic rituals, the lamb and the blood – of Christ – being perhaps transparent symbols in this case. Similarly, “he jeers at the world then halts / To jeer at himself and turns two somersaults” (l.9-10) conveys admirably the unpleasant, jarring cry of the animal but imbues it with a hostile intent. The paradox of the poem then is that the reader is able to picture the bird clearly and would swear that no more faithful rendition could be possible even as the focus of the poem seems to be divided between – diverted from the former to the latter even? – the bird it explicitly describes and the source domain of the metaphor, that is the specific human type MacCaig outlines.

A similar phenomenon occurs in “Sparrow” (*CP* 249). A shift takes place within the last stanza; the description displaces its focus from the bird to the human type used as source domain for its evocation – in both cases, the problem rests on “partial metaphorical utilisation” (Kövecses 93: in metaphorical mappings, “speakers tend to use only some aspects of a source domain in understanding a target”) – between animal target domain and human source domain, the psychological aspects of the latter would be expected to be hidden as there is – as far as we know – no corresponding mapping in the former. MacCaig declines to do so and instead incorporates them into the linguistic expression of the conceptual metaphor, thus creating the shift in focus noticed earlier.

The question might furthermore be more complex in “Solitary Crow” as the

eponymous bird is a recurring figure in MacCaig's poems and is frequently associated with the poet. This needs however to be demonstrated indirectly: in "Centre of Centre" (CP 271), for instance, MacCaig writes: "To call the pier a centre / I sit in a centre." The self is, as discussed in the introduction, almost systematically at the centre of the poem, and frequently explicitly named a "centre." Symmetrically the "Solitary Crow" (CP 188) occupies a similar place: "Where he goes he carries, / Since there's no centre, what a centre is, / And that is crow, the ragged self that's his" (l.6-8). The crow is moreover presented as a metaphor referring to the poet in "A Writer" (CP 155), where "a stoned crow" is associated with the titular figure:

[the stoned crow] sometimes
suddenly lurches, stalls, twirls sideways
before continuing his effortless level flight
so high over the heads of people
their stones can't reach him

In "Quoting Day" (CP 11), the "I" indirectly identifies as a crow as well as he pronounces "I croak as raven and coo as dove." Beyond this simplistic equivalence between the poet-speaker and the crow, MacCaig's flippancy and humorous distance towards religion should be considered: the "sardonic anarchist" can appear to be an edgier version of his customary poetic persona. In this case, there is a third subject to focus on as the poem links into MacCaig's general treatment of his relationship to religion in his writings.

The other snapshot poems provide less egregious yet similarly valid examples, but the point stands that, when MacCaig chooses to introduce a personification in his evocation of his subject, the reader's focus is split to varying

extents between the target and source domain – whether the source domain is actually activated in the comprehension of metaphor is a still being debated in the field of cognitive linguistics. However, when considering literary metaphors as opposed to dead metaphors usually perceived as literal language unless further thought is given to them, it is possible to maintain that the source domain is indeed playing a role in the comprehension of the metaphor.

For instance, in “Old Rose Bush” (*CP* 218), the personification of the rose bush takes place in the last stanza. Over its first two lines, MacCaig eases the reader into it through a comparison: “It stands like a beggar / at the corner of the road” (l.10-11) then, after a dash marks a pause sufficient to consider the following lines as a separate metaphor rather than an apposition to the simile: “skinny old seaman with / a parakeet on his shoulder.” MacCaig chooses to keep the copula “is” implicit, thus blurring the link with the tenor of the metaphor, which has furthermore only appeared as an anaphoric “it” in this stanza. Moreover, he separates the vehicle from the rest of the poem, which strengthens the impression that it is somewhat more independent from its tenor than happens in most cases – it is not necessarily instantaneously evident that the parakeet is the one rose of this old bush.

Metaphor in these instances enriches the description, but also distorts the object to a certain extent. Ultimately, the figure both facilitates MacCaig’s pursuit of realism in his writing and simultaneously hinders it. He is “growing, as [he] get[s] older, to hate metaphors – their exactness and inadequacy.” The statement was judged puzzling earlier, but from this perspective becomes easily understandable. Traditional views of metaphor consider it based on a deception, that of the

affirmation of an identity which does not truly exist. This is the “inadequacy” MacCaig is dissatisfied with here. However, this same inadequacy is what allows for the existence of the “exactness” he relies on in the poems hailed for their masterful descriptions. MacCaig, having acknowledged and articulated the problem in his poems comes to the conclusion that there is no possible solution to it – which is possibly why he writes that he grows “to hate metaphors.” He makes in the end a pragmatic writing choice by electing to continue writing in metaphors, thus following his natural tendency, but the strain of incertitude in regards to tropological language remains perceptible in filigree in his poems.

C – the implications: reality according to MacCaig

Outside of the specific context of poetry, language is however still largely tropological, as Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated. MacCaig appears to subscribe to this idea. However, as I will show in this section, he displays a sustained interest for naming as the traditional antithesis of tropological reference, thus marking his dissatisfaction with tropological language. Literal reference, he appears to postulate, is better able to apprehend the real. It is however a specific kind of literal reference he desires, the prelapsarian Adamic naming his poems often come back to. The difficulty is that, as MacCaig is well aware, our language is arbitrary, the thing and the word that refers to it being linked only by convention. There is no essential relationship between the two which would allow language to offer the insight into the essence of the object that MacCaig wishes for. As such, there remains

in his writing a constant low-key frustration with it, which I take to be one of the central issues of his poetry. Whyte points out that “he longs for a world of mere identity, in which stones are stones, water is water, and October is merely October. Yet immediately after this he gives us one of the most brilliant comparisons in his whole oeuvre” (90). The disconnection between the sign and its referent – names and their things – is a recurring theme in his writing: “the name of a thing means one thing and / The thing means another” (“University Staff Club” *CP* 312 1.8-9). This question intervenes on two levels in “1,800 Feet Up” (*CP* 326): “The flower – it didn’t know it – / was called dwarf cornel. / I found this out by enquiring” (1.1-3). The arbitrariness of the flower/name association is suggested by the apparently offhand precision in line 3, its corollary being that, were “everything exactly its own name” (“A Sigh For Simplicity” *CP* 322) the sign could be read within the referent and would thus not necessitate the enquiry. As this does not happen, the world does not present us with already-formed signs, and language remains non-Cratylean. Secondly, the flower being unaware of its name appears to be a commonsensical statement. However, this is not the first time this idea has been brought up: “Names” (*CP* 196), which saturates the text with the term it seeks to question as the word “name” appears nine times, title included, over the course of the poem, is a love poem set against a problematic linguistic context. The first stanza introduces an early variant of the situation encountered in “1,800 Feet Up”:

In that shallow water
swim extraordinary little fish
with extraordinary names
they don’t know they’ve been given (1.1-4)

There follows a short catalogue of these fish names before the speaker moves on to

various forms of plant life which “no more know these names / than [he] know[s] who named them” (l.9-10). Displacing the problematic of the name onto the beloved herself allows the poet to point out indirectly that the name – the word – does not possess any heuristic value that would impart information on its bearer – the referent: “I know your name and who named you” he writes, “But you have selves as secret from me / as blenny and butterfish” (l.11-13). “1,800 Feet Up” (CP 326) presents a more radical take on this same problem. Not only does the name-signifier not allow the speakers to get at the thing *qua* thing, it moreover becomes an obstacle as the former usurps the place of the latter in the mind of the poet. The speaker remarks resignedly: “Now I remember the name / but have forgotten the flower.// – The curse of literacy” (l.4-6), a curse that is enough apparently to make him ask wistfully in “Beside a Water” (CP 311): “Is it too much to hope / I have a silence in me that never heard /Of words?” (l.15-17)

Considering MacCaig’s very Scottish interest for philosophical questions, it is unsurprising that the problem of what can be known of reality if language cannot apprehend it intimately should be a recurring concern in his poems. It is however difficult to determine how crucial the answer to this is for his poetry. The speaker of “No Consolation” who can “describe only [his] own inventions” and can only “see” in tropological terms could come to doubt the existence of this elusive outside reality were he to engage in advanced philosophical speculation, which could, if taken to its limits, result in a form of hardline idealism.

MacCaig studied Classics at university and considers Socrates to be “one of [his] big men” (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 91). As a result, the Platonic

system in which sensible objects are the imperfect reflection of an immutable realm of ideas would have come to mind easily to him, and indeed “Inward Bound” (*CP* 256) calls upon it:

Yet that leaf
signed itself in triplicate
on the branch –
in the pool –
in my mind –
and of the three statements it made
I could read only the third
and it the most corrupt (l.166-173)

The system of immutable idea, the object as imperfect copy in the sensible world and a second, faultier copy in the mind of the perceiver is reworked here to apply to the leaf as MacCaig postulates no immortal realm of idea but instead replaces the three terms respectively with the object of experience, its reflection in the water and its perception in the mind of the poet. The fact remains however that “the third” being “the most corrupt” is a stock-taking of sorts regarding MacCaig’s poetic project. As has been seen previously, he has devised several strategies aiming to create faithful renditions of his subjects which would ideally be unmodified by the mediation of culture or an overly present speaker. He is however entirely aware of the essential impossibility of this plan. There are a fair number of poems in which MacCaig intimates as in “No consolation” that discourse cannot describe but only construct a fictional re-creation of the object, as has been shown earlier. This is due both to the impossibility of avoiding metaphor and the obvious problem of the arbitrariness of language – Hendry talks of “his persistent suggestions that what really matters in the world is beyond words, beyond intellection” (73). The frustration MacCaig evinces over this difficulty is however rather mild and his poems tend to go back and forth

on the topic, as on that of the reality or lack thereof of the world around him. Hendry observes that his

“metaphysical” poems (...) often pose a problem, raise a metaphysical issue, but leave you with a question to which an answer may be suggested but rarely stated. And the response he evokes in the reader is not so much to start you off on a train of philosophical thought, but to leave you with a feeling, which is an affirmation, often of several things (73).

She notes that “he warns in ‘Inward Bound,’ ‘illuminations/ are not answers (...) there’s no end to the windings or the journeyings,’ and his territory is ‘the region of the possible,’ a world which includes ‘possibilities that vanish/ when I turn to stare at them’” (ibid). I argue that, while he does not indeed provide an “end to the windings” of his thoughts when questioning the “riddle of the observer,” despite Hendry’s assessment that “he provides no answers, and sometimes contents himself rather glibly with posing the question in a way which permits both the reader and himself to avoid putting themselves out to look for an answer” (74), a form of provisional resolution is present in his poems. Focusing on the inadequacies of language would render his project of celebrating the world through faithful evocations of its objects moot and thus possibly lead to complete mutism. It is thus necessary for the poet to set this question aside to some extent in order to write. However, underneath his working hypothesis that there is a world out there that he can describe, MacCaig has inscribed in his poems the unknowable character of reality.

This, I argue, is suggested by his predilection for a certain type of image, which I have introduced in the introduction to this thesis as the WORLD IS WORD

trope network³¹ for easier reference. As stated earlier, they constitute a chain of related but still distinct tropes underlying his writing. One of them, which metaphorises the objects it considers into the materials of writing and reading has already been discussed in regards to the mediation of culture in perception and description. As observed previously, it betrays the poet's awareness that he must always contend with the relevant literary traditions in writing – no one can write in a vacuum. A second trope, the conceptual metaphor of OBJECT IS LINGUISTIC ELEMENT, which is the one that interests us in this instance, relates to the problem of human perception of nature on a more radical level. Taking into account the impossibility of a Cratylean language discussed earlier, the presence of this trope underscoring MacCaig's works suggests what "No Consolation" articulates with the example of the wall with water trickling, "that I can only describe my own inventions" or rather the inventions of language. Because language cannot revert to its prelapsarian perfection, it is incapable of truly reflecting reality. The human mind, already impeded in its perception of the thing-as-it-is by the mediation of cultural and personal backgrounds which necessarily condition each observer's vision of the object, as MacCaig insists, encounters in the inadequacy of language a further difficulty which leads to the possibility of the radical doubt evoked earlier. In the face of language being unable to apprehend the thing-in-itself, the OBJECT IS LINGUISTIC ELEMENT suggests a worst case scenario in which the human subject cannot perceive the object, but only a creation of language – noticeably, the linguistic expressions of the structural conceptual metaphor are often metaphors in

³¹ See table of occurrences in appendix.

absentia, that is metaphors which omit the tenor. This, I advance, could be interpreted as a way to address the possibility of hardline idealism: the hypothetical because not perceived directly object-in-itself is erased from the sentence and replaced by a linguistic object, which is thus implied to be all the human mind can have access to. It appears for instance in “Among Scholars” (*CP* 168), which works on the subversion of the image of the scholar. Instead of the expected bookish figures, MacCaig evokes here scholars of experience and intuition who “spoke like a native the language they walked in.” Initially the poem lays emphasis on the two characters walking with the speaker knowing the names of the plants, but there could be a second interpretation of the material world as a language that one can “speak” as implied by the idea of learning the world like a language. The related WORLD IS WORD trope would suggest in this case a secondary reading proposing that the world we perceive is a creation of language, which would be supported in “Prism” (*CP* 248) by the similar trope claiming that “the whole city / is a code in a foreign language.” Similarly in a narrower but related expression of this conceptual metaphor, the “Swimming Lizard” (*CP* 12) “twinkled his brief text through the brown and still.” The body of the animal disappears from the scene, only to be replaced by a “text” which could be thought of as its description in the poet's mind or perhaps even the poem itself. The sound of running water in “Hill Streams in Abruzzi” (*CP* 158) is similarly no longer a non-human sound, but is transformed by the speaker's anthropocentric perception into a human language as he “listen[s] and understand[s] that watery Esperanto.”

This second example raises the specific issue of non-human sounds which the

subject's mind automatically comprehends in human terms. Sounds of water being heard as human voices can almost be considered as a conventional structural metaphor – MacCaig employs this type of image several times in his poems, for instance in “On a Croft by the Kirkaig” (*CP* 416) with “the river bundling its sweet vocabulary / towards the swarming languages / of the sea.” He does not however stop at this conventional trope. In “Thaw on a Building Site” (*CP* 113), “a concrete mixer cleared its throat / For a boring speech, all consonants.” There is a conventional metaphor for this type of sound, that of animals roaring. However, MacCaig elects not to use it and instead links the occurrence with the question of onomatopoeia, that is the substitution of a form of speech different from human language but constructed from linguistic elements – for the concrete mixer, “all consonants” – to the non-linguistic sounds produced by the object. The “boring speech, all consonants” of the poem, as the description of an onomatopoeia that remains implicit is the closest translation in human terms of the sound. In human terms is the key notion here as it implies moving away from the specificity and radical otherness of the object. This becomes problematic in the context of MacCaig’s realistic project. The use of onomatopoeia here can be considered as the human recreation of a non-human sound. It would in this case constitute one of the distortions MacCaig advocates so strongly against and become a hindrance rather than a tool for his poetic project.

The mediation of language in perception is also made apparent in visual variations on the OBJECT IS LINGUISTIC ELEMENT trope. The use of a letter to refer to an actual object by alluding to its shape has similarly been considered as a

way to call up a visual memory in the reader's mind – a mimetic effort to inscribe a picture of the shape in the poem rather than the word that refers to it. However, the phenomenon can also be read as the effacement of the object behind the linguistic element. The petal of "World's Centre" (*CP* 75), for instance, becomes "the crimson curl, O of its natural graph," thus simultaneously supporting the idea of something central, perfect and whole with the symbolism of the circle attached to the shape of the letter "o," but it also replaces in the last stanza the signifier "petal" which has not been seen since the first line. The letter "o" is also called upon in "Frost and Thin Fog" (*CP* 61) where "The cold and melancholy sun hangs his red O above," while the "Caterpillar" (*CP* 263) similarly "makes a row of upside-down Us."³² This last case is especially egregious as the caterpillar's body does not form a "u" strictly speaking. Instead, the actual object is perceived in terms of the difference between it and an element of language – the Us are "upside-down." The reader could have been reminded of a rainbow, a bridge or any similarly shaped object which would not have needed this qualification. This foregrounding of a letter regardless reads as a deliberate interposition of language between the human observer and reality and as such argues in favour of the WORLD IS WORD tropes being interpreted as MacCaig's way of signalling to his reader that the real world remains inaccessible to Man.

D – Conclusion

This appears to be entirely incompatible with the celebration of the thing as it is and thus with MacCaig's entire poetic programme, and yet the poet, though fully

³² Additional examples can be found in the table appended to the dissertation.

aware of this, seeks to follow his project regardless. Perhaps this decision arises from a more personal perspective as MacCaig does insist on his sense of fondness for the world. At any rate, this awareness that his pursuit of realistic description can only have a limited success as “it [becomes] clear that [he] can only describe [his] own inventions” accounts for the sense that MacCaig commits to this project only to a point, or rather that he seems relatively content to simply ignore obstacles and move beyond them, as previously discussed regarding the phrasing of “the riddle of the observer.”

Beyond what this means for MacCaig’s poetic agenda, this inaccessibility has epistemological consequences. If the human subject cannot apprehend reality as it is, is confined to a possibly distorted reflection of it similar to the experience of the sensible world that is so mistrusted in Plato’s works, then MacCaig’s thought has at its root a fundamental instability. He is a very visual poet – critics tend to comment on his ability to recreate sensible data – and yet following his reasoning to its limits may lead to hardline idealism. MacCaig however does not continue his line of thought explicitly. Even the WORLD IS WORD metaphor network can only imply that what is perceived is a human creation, but not that there is no unknowable material world underlying it. This may be what prompts Hendry to remark that “MacCaig does not (...) seem to suffer from metaphysical doubt: he seems quite assured of his ability to recreate the external world in some real way, in his mind and writing” (71) as well as the reason for his branding as “an intellectual conman” “pull[ing] off his conjurer’s tricks not only with words and images, but also with ideas” (R.W. Scott 40). MacCaig however is not a philosopher and defends himself

quite vehemently from being one – “I’m allergic to philosophy because it deals with abstractions,” he claims (Degott-Reinhardt 295). He considers that historically, questioning the existence of the real world has led to “ridiculous extreme[s].³³” The strategy of hyperbolic doubt that earnest consideration of the problem would implement would render a poet seeking to be faithful to his subject mute from wondering about the very existence of said subject. As a consequence, instead of pushing his reasoning to its conclusion and adapting his writing project to the resultant world view, MacCaig composes his poems in the manner of an empiricist focused on the data of experience, but suggests an underlying subjective idealism to be his conclusion on the matter. This empiricist *parti pris* MacCaig adopts in his works is coherent with his “simple man” writing persona. It also exemplifies a tendency to reserve a different treatment for smaller-scale matters: expressing a violent disappointment with Mankind as a whole, MacCaig can nevertheless be extremely fond of individuals, as was discussed in the introduction. The sublime and the admirable in his writing is also placed in the smaller scale of the ordinary and the human-sized. His refusal to commit to fully investigating the question of reality and our perception of it has often been considered as a weakness in his works. This writing choice, in addition to being the very thing that enables him to write the type of descriptive poetry for which he is renowned, may well also be one the most defining traits of MacCaig’s poetry.

³³ “I took first year philosophy at the university and we were concerned mainly – fascinating, excellent choice – with a Frenchman, an Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman. The Frenchman Descartes and the Englishman John Locke, who pushed Descartes’ ideas further; Bishop Berkeley, the Irishman, who pushed them further still. Logical old David Hume pushed it to its ridiculous extreme where he wondered if he existed. Actually, he didn’t, he was far too sensible. But he pushed that succession of logical extensions of Descartes’ original ideas. That’s when I read David Hume” (MacCaig qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 295).

IV – “I hate death, the skull-maker³⁴”: MacCaig and elegy

MacCaig’s poems are difficult to characterise. They project a certain sense of “genrelessness” that Ramazani takes to be a property of “modern poetry” (xii). I would argue that in this, his writing parallels the “often oblique” elegiac practice of Wallace Stevens (ibid) – one of the few influences MacCaig actually acknowledges – which offers an insight into possibly linking this “genrelessness” to traditional categories. The manifestations of the elegiac mode in MacCaig’s poems should allow a careful reader to unearth how he appropriates and tailors to his personal world view the most traditional structural tension in human culture, the life and death dichotomy, as a tension between a pervasive elegiac tonality – regretting present, past and future losses – and an admiring love of existence. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I take this coexistence to be the defining element of the characteristic MacCaig tone, which is why this chapter will be investigating what exactly has been or is being lost and regretted in the elegiac modulations of his works, and how these effected and/or impending losses are experienced and dealt with.

The first step in this direction is to circumscribe what can be termed elegiac in MacCaig’s poems. This naturally requires first to establish a definition of elegy that would yield the criteria necessary for this operation. This may be a more complex process than one would initially anticipate as “there is little literary consensus about what constitutes an elegy, or how to distinguish between elegy and

³⁴ “Two Skulls” *CP* 371

the broader category of elegiac literature” (Weisman 2). This distinction between elegy and elegiac literature implies that a sense of loss and regret, though it is the central theme of elegy, is not a sufficient criterion to determine what elegy is. In the context of MacCaig’s twentieth-century poetry written in English, the formally defined elegy of Classical literature in all its diversity (Miller 47) has no bearing on the discussion. Though its presence is easily discernable, elegy is a particularly elusive lyrical subgenre: “in its adjectival form it is all-pervasive in literary criticism, and yet few scholars would profess certainty in knowing precisely what *elegiac* denotes,” Weisman remarks (1). Thinking back on the critics quoted page 22 of this thesis regarding the more melancholy strain in MacCaig’s poetry, one notices that it is impressions rather than specific traits that are referred to. To circumvent this problem, Fowler is helpful here in characterising elegy as a mode: he distinguishes the mode from “kind” which implies “certain features, such as size and external form. Modes, however, involve a more elusive generic idea” (88). This appears more suited to evoke the pervasive sense of melancholy in MacCaig’s writing which prompts Crichton Smith to describe it as “the poems of a lonely man, radiant in presences” (“A Lust for the Particular” 21). Considering MacCaig’s reluctance to adhere to pre-formed systems – he borrows traits and concepts from literary movements, philosophical world views, but vehemently refuses the idea of embracing one wholly³⁵ – the notion of a modal term, which Fowler points out often takes an adjectival form (epic, elegiac, amatory), being more flexible than the nouns ascribed to kinds appears more apt to characterise this prominent tendency in his

³⁵ For an example of this, see his attitude to MacNeice’s characterisation of him as a Metaphysical in Degott-Reinhardt 291.

works as a whole. The fact that the elegiac mode is even independent of verse and can occur in both theatre and novel only illustrates this plasticity which makes it so suitable to MacCaig's purposes: one can think of Beckett's *Endgame* where the stage direction "elegiac" can be found à propos of Nell lamenting the passing of time (15). Virginia Woolf provides an even more striking example by implying that elegy might be able to characterise an entirely new literary creation that traditional terms can not do justice to: Potts recounts that "Virginia Woolf as she was 'making up' her book, *To the Lighthouse*, (...) wrote: 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel." A new ----- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?'" (Potts 3).

This plasticity of elegy allows us to account for the pervasive sense of melancholy which is not limited to his elegies proper in MacCaig's poems but bleeds into his pastoral and amatory modulations. In this context, elegy as a mode in his writing can "amount to no more than fugitive admixtures, tinges of generic colour" (Fowler 107) that can be signaled in various ways: "a characteristic motif, perhaps; a formula; a rhetorical proportion or quality" (ibid). These last three chapters devoted to the elegiac, pastoral and amatory mode in MacCaig's poems will highlight several such types of signals depending on the topic the poet is dealing with.

However, going back to the narrower acceptance of "elegy" this particular chapter intends to focus on, the distinction between elegy and elegiac modulations must be kept in mind. My aim in this section of the thesis is to see to what extent either or both concepts apply to MacCaig's poems. This will entail an examination of what traditional elegy is in order to determine whether the poet can be said to write

elegies *stricto sensu*. Loss and absence is of course at the centre of elegy. In a narrow definition, of funeral – mourning – elegy, this loss is brought about by death. Funeral elegy, on which this chapter will focus first, can be characterised more precisely as traditionally following a “movement through lamentation, praise and consolation supported by a progress narrative of gloomy, despairing contemplation of death eventually overcome by an exultant confirmation of Christian eschatology. Terror and pity were evoked, then trumped by joy and relief” (Clymer 172). This is obviously problematic considering MacCaig’s previously discussed atheism and the fact that the divine in his world view is immanent and re-situated in existence itself. Funeral elegy, however, appears to be an attempt on the speaker’s part to work through his grief as in MacCaig’s “Poems for Angus” (CP 333 – 338), written after and about the death of his close friend Angus MacLeod and which will be the primary corpus in regards to which I will examine MacCaig’s engagement with traditional elegy. I intend to observe what strategies if any are implemented to this end in MacCaig’s poems. For instance, “elegy, as a poem of mourning and consolation,” Sacks observes, “has its roots in a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies, in the light of which many elegiac conventions should be recognised as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary versions of specific social and psychological practices” (2). This ceremonial aspect appears to go against the grain of MacCaig’s poems as a whole, ceremony and ritual implying something that is pre-determined while, as discussed earlier, MacCaig’s poetic project strives to give a fresh outlook on the subject it considers. However, as will be shown later, there is an element of ritual in the “Poems for Angus” – this appears to prolong the

thematic life and death dichotomy into the forms the respective evocations of both elements take, thus further underlining the centrality of this tension in MacCaig's writing.

The problem that arises from this traditional definition of funeral elegy is that its validity may be questioned in the case of modern nineteenth and twentieth-century poetry. Ramazani does so at length when he argues that contemporary elegy has evolved towards a form of “melancholic,” unsuccessful mourning (4) and that Sach’s successful mourning is “inadequate for understanding the twentieth-century elegy” (xi). It will become apparent in examining MacCaig’s elegies and the “Poems for Angus” especially that they do not truly conform to traditional successful mourning. I aim to show that Ramazani’s alternative proposition of “the psychology of melancholia or melancholic mourning” based on the argument “that the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override, but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (xi) to describe modern elegy is more appropriate to describing MacCaig’s elegiac poems, notably because it can account for the lack of truly consolatory considerations in the cycle of “Poems for Angus,” which will be evidenced later in this chapter.

From the idea of unsuccessful mourning in modern elegy follows that the idea of elegy as the “replacement of the lost object by the sign of it” (Sacks 6) designed to draw the mourner away from his or her grief and allow for successful mourning in traditional elegy becomes problematic. I will aim to show that MacCaig does not think this possible, as the anti-elegiac strain in his poems evidences.

This is however how these problems present themselves in the case of his

funeral elegies. Several critics have noted a sense of pervasive melancholy in MacCaig's writing in spite of the prominence of the celebratory mode in his works. This, I argue, is an indication that the elegiac mode is constitutive of his poetic writing as it is for many poets after the Second World War. This phenomenon is not however to my sense entirely tied into the *Zeitgeist* but also arises from MacCaig's personal favoured themes, as I will show. There is a second, broader definition of elegy which is more diffuse. The texts it defines similarly deal with loss. However, this loss can take many forms. Elegiac modulations in MacCaig's poems indeed arise from various sources of regret. One of them is the previously discussed impossibility of a non-tropological, pre-lapsarian language. "No Choice" (CP 197) and "In Folds of Fire" (CP 394), for instance, display distinctly elegiac traits, as will be shown later. MacCaig's love poems, as will be discussed in a separate chapter, are generally deeply elegiac. The *tempus fugit* theme, a topos of elegy which is related to the question of death but not entirely identical also has its place in MacCaig's writing where it can be traced through poems such as "Memorials" (CP 349, especially with the typically elegiac repetition of "last summer" 1,3,5 and 8). Similarly related to this theme, the *ubi sunt* motif is often present in MacCaig's elegiac treatment of the old Highlands traditions he portrays dying away after the Clearances, though I will argue that this idea is closely linked to the more narrowly defined mourning elegy. The elegiac modulations entailed by the broader definition of the mode, however, generate different answers to the problems of elegiac writing – successful or pathological mourning. I argue that, while MacCaig's mourning elegies reflect an unsuccessful type of mourning to the extent that he implicitly and explicitly

undermines the tradition he inscribes himself in, as this chapter will show, the losses featured in the poems displaying elegiac modulations in the wider sense of the term are more successful in mourning this loss and moving beyond it. The difference lies in the role played by death in the former and not in the latter. Through this study of elegy in MacCaig's writing, I hope to evidence that, as existence is the target of his awe and fondness in his celebratory poetry, death is the limit experience of radical otherness that haunts his poems under the guise of elegiac modulations. Existence – life – is something the poet relates to in his writing. Death, on the other hand, is the complete negation of all that he celebrates and, eventually, of himself. In this sense, it represents the anti-matter in MacCaig's poetic universe, the alterity that can not be brought back to any sense of kinship³⁶. The coexistence of these two poles of equal import in his writing creates the most radical tension in MacCaig's poems, a tension which constitutes the basis upon which all others build in their specific manners.

A – MacCaig's engagement with the tradition of mourning elegy

The twelve texts collectively entitled "Poems for Angus" (CP 333- 338), which this section will mostly concentrate on to consider MacCaig's involvement with traditional elegy, stand out amongst his poetry. Firstly because, although MacCaig does recognise that "if one reads the *Collected Poems* with interest (...) you'd know an awful lot about him: indirectly" and that they are his "autobiography" of sorts ("A

³⁶ It must be noted that MacCaig's speaker displays an ability to relate to any and all things (living and non-living, natural and man-made) in the poems. The natural world appears as a specific case, as will be seen in the section of chapter 5 on the post-pastoral.

Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 110), “The Poems for Angus” are only one of two groupings of verifiably autobiographical poems in his works. Moreover his choice of assigning them an overarching title is a unique phenomenon in his career. In doing so, he firmly sets apart this cluster of poems as an elegiac cycle mourning the loss of his close friend A.K. MacLeod. To further mark the unity and specificity of this sequence, MacCaig also isolates the “Poems for Angus” at the beginning of “The Equal Skies” in the 1993 edition of the *Collected Poems* and leaves half a page blank after “Defeat” (CP 338), the last of them, to materialise in the layout the separateness of the texts. This also stresses the fact that they form a poetic cycle presenting a coherent narrative strategy, something that only occurs once elsewhere in his *Collected Poems* with the three poems dealing with the illness and recovery of the poet’s wife – the second sequence of poems mentioned earlier. In the case of the “Poems for Angus,” the twelve poems appear to record the process of loss and grieving chronologically: “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” (CP 333) is seemingly composed of notes taken by the speaker on his way to his friend’s home for a visit expected to be innocuous; that death “waited for [him]” there only appears in the very last stanza. The second poem, bearing the name of A.K. MacLeod as its title evokes the moment of death itself, while the third one follows the speaker through his attending the “Highland Funeral” of his friend, which can be assumed to take place within a week of his passing. The title of the next poem, “A Month After his Death,” sets it explicitly after this point. The rest of the “Poems for Angus” give no further temporal indications and concentrate on eulogising the deceased, mourning his absence and reflecting on the nature of loss and death.

This sequence displays some very traditional elements of elegy. In “Highland Funeral” (*CP* 334), MacCaig inscribes himself in the tradition of the graveside elegy – this being an isolated case in his works, the poem gains from it a certain exemplariness as an elegy – by placing his speaker near the open grave. While the grave is not mentioned explicitly, lines such as “over his landscape / the frozen air was a scrawny psalm,” “the sanctimonious voice dwindled away / over the boring, beautiful sea,” indicate that the scene is set outside while a priest is speaking over the grave during the funeral (“the minister’s voice / spread a pollution of bad beliefs”).

MacCaig also inscribes himself in a masculine literary tradition of elegy. Booth, quoting Melissa Zeiger remarks that “mainstream elegies have treated an admired but not intimately known male acquaintance or peer. Most often fellow poets” (Zeiger qtd in Booth 173). In this case, Angus MacLeod is a close friend. The statement does however still apply to his poetry after a fashion. Booth notes that “Harold Bloom offers a different literary interpretation of the survivor’s mourning. In order to fashion his own distinctive voice, the poet, Bloom says, must master the anxiety of influence induced by his forerunners. Elegy dramatises this trial of strength” (173) and that “in this very masculine perspective, the ‘great tradition’ of the elegy comprises poems written about a man, perhaps another poet, to whom the writer owes a debt” (ibid) – as happens in Milton’s *Lycidas*, in Shelley’s *Adonais* or in Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (ibid). If we depart for a moment from the “Poems for Angus,” this can be true of MacCaig’s elegiac practice to a certain extent. The poet has written two elegies to MacDiarmid, “Two Thoughts of MacDiarmid in a Quiet Place” (*CP* 400) and “After His Death” (*CP* 243-244) – the second written

prior to his death, which correspond to this schema. MacCaig does not recognise MacDiarmid's poetry as an influence on his: R. Crawford reports that an interviewer once found himself faced with this unanswerable quip: "when asked if he enjoyed a filial relationship with MacDiarmid, a man two decades his senior, MacCaig replied 'Yes, in a way, he was my son'" (MacCaig qtd in R. Crawford 613), subverting the idea of a filial relationship with the other poet as a means to refuse the suggestion of a literary filiation between them. Nevertheless, in "Two Thoughts of MacDiarmid in a Quiet Place" (CP 400), MacCaig portrays MacDiarmid as a clear influence on his understanding of language and his own lexical choices:

He helped me to understand
the swimming of words – slippery adjectives
with their pilot fish nouns, muscular verbs (l.1-3)
(...)
He gave me the meaning of words
like *pantile*, like *corrieneuchin*'. He wooed them
from their lair in the dictionary.
Now, where a pantile branch hangs its S
over this gossiping stream that I've heard so often
corrieneuchin' a' *the nicht* (...) (l.6-11)

In this elegy, MacCaig not only recognises the older poet's influence on him but stages a representation of it. He begins by first stating the debt in lines 6 down to 8, then showcases his use of what he inherited from MacDiarmid in his own verse – "pantile" and "corrieneuchin" acting as a metonymic shorthand for the whole of his poetic influence. This seems to act out the process of appropriating the poetic legacy of a predecessor, which is what Booth reflecting on Bloom phrases as "the psychological work of mourning becom[ing] the literary work of asserting one's unique artistic identity" (173). In doing so, MacCaig subscribes to the same elegiac schema as Milton or Shelley.

The “Poems for Angus” (and MacCaig’s practice of elegy in general) situating themselves in an old canonical tradition of masculine elegy, the common elegiac movement from lament to praise of the deceased to consolation of the mourner[s] should be reflected either in each individual poem or in the sequence as a whole. I aim to show that this is true only to a certain point. Firstly, expressions of grief in MacCaig’s poems have to contend with his own characteristic restraint. In rejecting the “confessional” label, he also generally abjures direct declarations of feelings, which leaves him to devise oblique strategies to convey any strong emotion. He does so in the “Poems for Angus” whose deeply melancholic tone hinges on a rawness of expression brought about by MacCaig’s tightly controlled lexical and syntactic choices:

The sea was boring, as grief is,
but beautiful, as grief is not.
Through grief’s dark ugliness I saw that beauty
because he would have (“Highland Funeral” *CP* 334).

“Boring,” “grief,” “beautiful” or “beauty” and “ugliness” are all innocuous, relatively common words, simple enough that they can be found in children’s literature. They are what McCabe refers to when he notices in the “Poems for Angus” “a laconic, plain-speaking vein, avoiding the clever comparisons, metaphors and paradoxes we find in much of his other work – avoiding such devices perhaps for the reason that they simply can not help him to describe the stark, incomprehensible fact of death and the experience of grief” (120). And yet they also suggest vaster, more complex notions, thus creating a simultaneous and paradoxical sense of opacity and transparency in this stanza. The speaker’s grief, then, is both impenetrable and inescapably *there*. This effect is supported by the child-like

syntactic simplicity of the first two lines, with the purposely repetitive phrasing of the developed comparison between sea and grief. It must be noted, however, that while the speaker defines grief, there is no explicit, literal link between this definition of grief and his own state of mind at first. Only in the second half of the stanza does the “I” come in contact with grief portrayed as a curtain, or glass pane between the subject and the world (“through grief’s dark ugliness I saw”). As predicted, lamentation for the dead in “Highland Funeral,” while present, is restricted to a characteristic obliqueness by MacCaig’s typical reticence. “Angus’s Dog” (*CP* 337) evidences this even more clearly. The expression of mourning is deflected in two different ways: instead of lamenting the loss of the dog’s master, the speaker evokes nostalgically the dog himself and its place in the dead man’s life, in a form of metonymical mourning. The loss experienced by the speaker, however, is erased from the poem, but its emotional impact is shifted onto the dog.

The use of pathetic fallacy is another, more common type of transference used by MacCaig in his oblique approach to funeral lament. Smith’s remark about pathetic fallacy in the elegiac mode in general could easily apply to his poems: “when mood and season coincide, the one is a reinforcement of the other – the mourner allies himself with that power he is trying to fathom, and ‘pathetic fallacy’ in one form or another may arise, as in the recurrent image of Nature mourning, in season or out of season” (Smith 7). Winter, the season during which nature apparently dies or at least enters dormancy, is threaded intimately through the “Poems for Angus.” It resurfaces at the beginning of “A.K. MacLeod” (*CP* 333) where “the beautiful landscape was under snow” (l.4), in “Highland Funeral” with

“the frozen air” (l.2) and discreetly in “Praise of a Man” (CP 336) where “you can see / his tracks still, in the snow of the world” (l.15-16). The liminal poem of the sequence, “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” (CP 333) sets the tone with a sunny but frozen scene: “The snow's almost faultless. It bounces back/ the sun's light but can do nothing with/ those two stags, their cold noses, their yellow teeth.” Retrospective interpretation of these three lines in light of the last stanza could perhaps allow the reader to consider this ineffective sunlight “bounced back” by the snow as an echo of the speaker's journey, unaware, met with a cold and immovable obstacle in the form of death upon his arrival. Over the course of the poem, winter becomes more threatening, “clos[ing in] on the “I.” “On the loch's eye a cataract is forming,” evokes ominously the approach of old age, progressive blindness, and death as going into “that blank no-time, no-place” where there is nothing to see.” The last stanza completes the foreshadowing identification of death with the wintry landscape: “I didn't know it, but when / I got there a death waited for me – that segment / shut its fan: and a blinding winter closed in.” However, this trope is subverted in “A.K. MacLeod” (CP 333-4). “Crofters and fishermen and womenfolk, unable / to say more, said, / ‘It's a grand day, it's a beautiful day’” underlines instead the discrepancy between the weather and the speaker's mood. This dissonance foregrounds the sense of wrongness tied into the speaker's grief and in doing so, shifts back the upholding lamenting function solely to his subjectivity. The expression of it, however, is no less indirect for this subversion of the pathetic fallacy schema.

An oblique form of lamentation is also occasionally encoded within the

structure of the poem in a manner reminiscent of Sacks' observation that

the repetition of words and refrains and the creation of a certain rhythm of lament have the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion. It is as if the grief might be gradually conjured forth and exorcised. This returns us to the idea of ceremony, and to the idea that repetition may itself be used to create the sense of ceremony (23).

This idea would account for the peculiar tendency to repetitive use of certain words or even whole phrases that can be observed in almost all the "Poems for Angus." In the last stanza of "A.K. MacLeod," the speaker recalls: "And I thought, 'Yes it is.' / And I thought of him lying there." The repetition of the very neutral phrase "I thought" produces a sense of careful blankness – one is reminded of MacCaig's lines in "Visiting Hour" (*CP* 178): "I will not feel, I will not / feel, until / I have to" (l.9-11). In both cases, the repetition appears to work as a way of maintaining control, like a mantra. This is not however, the only way MacCaig uses repetition tropes. He also occasionally employs them in a completely different manner so that the harmonious effect of the refrain-like repetition emphasises the melancholy side of grief rather than the more violent aspects of it – the rejection and incomprehension that are part of loss. "Dead Friend" (*CP* 337), with its triple anaphora exemplifies this:

How do I meet
a man who's no longer there?
How can I lament the loss
of a man who won't go away,
How can I be changed
by changelessness? (l.1-6)

In similar fashion, most of "Praise of a Man" (*CP* 336) consists in echoing expressions that seem an attempt on the speaker's part at lulling his grief into quiet

acceptance as he eulogises the friend he has lost:

*He went through a company like a lamplighter –
see the **dull** minds, one after another,
begin to glow, to shed
a **beneficent light**.*

*He went through a company like
a knifegrinder – see the **dull** minds
scattering sparks of themselves
becoming **razory**, becoming useful;*

*He went through a company
as himself. (...)*

*The **beneficent lights** dim
but don't vanish. The **razory** edges
dull, but still cut (...) (my emphases)*

MacLeod is compared to “a lamplighter” who makes “the dull minds, one after another,/ begin to glow, to shed/ a beneficent light” and “a knifegrinder” that has “the dull minds / scattering sparks of themselves, / becoming razory, becoming useful.” The whole poem is built on these two extended comparisons relying on the implicit conventional conceptual metaphors of intelligence as physical sharpness and as visible light, with the effect of injecting a certain levity in MacCaig’s eulogy of his friend through the punning interplay of literal and metaphorical meaning in the expressions I have emphasised in bold type. The anaphoric repetition acts as a ritual rather than song-like refrain. With each iteration, the process of enlightenment the eulogised figure sparks is advanced in small increments, paralleling the way the speaker slowly works through his memory of him as he processes his grief over his loss. This poem illustrates particularly aptly the intimate linking of lament and praise in elegy proposed by Clymer. Its encomium of A.K. MacLeod, echoing the general oblique portrait of him the various references scattered through MacCaig’s poems

provide, centres on what seems to be the highest cause for praise for the poet, that is the ability to entice other people to look at the world with a fresh outlook and in doing so to elicit both wonder and reflection on their part. MacCaig's admiration for other men in his writing always takes Socrates-like figures as its object³⁷. His eulogy of MacLeod is no exception to this as it foregrounds his ability to sharpen the minds of others: in "From his House Door" (*CP* 336), the speaker remarks "I say to myself, How he enriched my life" and earlier, in "Highland in Funeral," he observed: "through grief's dark ugliness I saw that beauty / because he would have." The role MacLeod takes on in these poems is that of a mediator between reality – the presence of beauty to haze of grief – and the subject.

"Praise of a Man" concludes on a more optimistic note than the rest of the "Poems for Angus," with the thought that, though the man himself is gone, the thoughts he has inspired in the people around him and in the poet in particular remain as a legacy of sort: "you can see / his tracks still, in the snow of the world." There is some measure of consolation in this for the grieving speaker, and this illustrates the close link between praise and consolation in elegy. Indeed, for the "compensatory mourning" (Ramazani xi) effected through traditional elegy to take place, some measure of consolation needs to be found in the poem. Here, in detailing the effect the departed had on those around him, the poet comes to a somewhat comforting conclusion – the process follows by what Potts calls the phenomenon of anagnorisis in elegy:

the very goal of elegiac poetry, determining the procedure. (...) The usual symbol of such poetry is light out of darkness. (...) elegy is the

³⁷ See "A Man I Agreed With" (*CP* 363) for instance

poetry of sceptical and revelatory vision for its own sake, satisfying the hunger of man to see, to know, to understand. Whether the reader be purged or indoctrinated, he must be enlightened. In its latest as in its earliest guise elegy labours towards human truth as its end in view (37).

“Praise of a Man” is however an isolated case. Generally this movement towards a positive revelation is either absent or muted in the “Poems for Angus.” “Highland Funeral,” for instance, seems to suggest that the personal loss suffered by the speaker has a transfiguring effect on the landscape: “Can the dead / help? I say so. Because, a year later, / that sanctimonious voice is silent and the pagan / landscape is sacred in a new way.” There is a possibility that this stanza exemplifies the elegiac topos of time as healer, but if that is the case, the trope is included at best as a fleeting allusion.

This moment of anagnorisis in which a consolation can be found often arises from the poet’s subscription to an idea of greater scope than that of the individual self – art, politics, or spirituality. Hamilton develops this idea in the context of “two of the most prominent examples in the English canon,” “Lycidas” and “Adonais” (94-95) where “the compensation of Milton’s Christianity and Shelley’s Platonism coexist with a political conclusion” (ibid). MacCaig’s elegies do not find consolation in “absorption into an ideal” (Hamilton 94). Indeed, as he does not subscribe to a form of religion that would promise salvation after death, religious hope in the form of reunion after death or a “better place” where the departed has gone is inaccessible. The type of politically optimistic ending Hamilton sees in “Lycidas” and “Adonais” is similarly impossible for MacCaig who thinks man is “on a suicide course” (“A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” 111) – his poems often evinced a deep distrust of politicians and ideologies³⁸. It seems in fact that it is at least in part MacCaig’s

³⁸ See for instance “Leader of Men” (CP 153) or “Smuggler” (CP 150).

humanistic views that bar him from the rising moment of anagnorisis often present at the end of traditional elegy. Indeed, injustice and tolerance of suffering are the two things he rejects most violently in organised religion and human politics. The wariness of systematic thought and rhetoric his “simple man” persona insists on is related to this position in the sense that he perceives both as dangerous tools in the hands of mankind whom he strongly distrusts as a whole. This seems to indicate a fundamental incompatibility between MacCaig’s world view and personal position and the consolatory aspect of traditional elegy – the latter requires a measure of belief which the “simple man” persona of MacCaig’s poems would be likely to view as self-deception. As it stands, the positive note “Praise of a Man” ends on is the only type of survival after death MacCaig recognises. It does not lie in the writing of elegy as a memorial to the individual mourned which will ensure his survival after both he and the author are long gone. Instead, the lost friend remains present in ideas he has communicated or inspired to others and which will live on in them after his death. It seems very characteristic of MacCaig that this is the type of survival he acknowledges as the “ineducable me” (*CP* 351) who favours common sense over elaborate speculation ultimately places it on something that can be verified empirically: the minds and everyday discourse of the people around him.

B - The inadequacies of elegy – anti-elegiac writing

Grief can conceivably stifle expression. That is what Samuel Johnson's comment plays off when he affirms that "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief" (qtd in Booth 176). Booth judges this assessment "naive in the extreme" but recognises its ability to "grasp the fundamental truth that mortality humbles our words into meaninglessness. Elegy readily becomes self-referential, uneasy with the artifice of its empty verbal gestures. It acknowledges that in the face of death words are always ineffective. The paradoxical plight of the elegist is to be eloquently at a loss for words" (Booth 176). MacCaig acknowledges this problem by underlining the artificiality of elegy. He does so notably in presenting the reader with realistic descriptions of death that contrast starkly with the peaceful cessation of existence generally found in canonical elegies. The actual event of death in his poems is indeed not represented in a euphemistic, soothing way, as in Shelley's "Adonais," in which the impact of the arrows goes unmentioned in favour of a static, peaceful image of Adonais "[lying], pierced by the shaft which flies / in darkness" (823 l.11). In the "Poems for Angus," the loss of the speaker's friend is brutally revisited several times. Its evocation is markedly jarring in its rawness in "A.K. MacLeod:"

Next morning, the man who had greeted me
with the pleasure of pleasure
vomited blood
and died (l.6-9).

There is no decorous ellipsis of the unpoetic physical aspect of death – in the harshly direct description of symptom, the reader can feel the speaker's revolt against this

turn of events incompatible with the auspicious beginning of 1.6-7. These first two lines are also phrased in such a way as to produce a jarring contrast with the next two: their more elaborate syntax creates an expectation as the reader waits for the verb which is brutally denied with the stilted alliteration in dentals and stark simplicity of the verb-complement then the coordinated construction of an intransitive verb: “vomited blood / and died.” These lines moreover become progressively and somewhat threateningly shorter until death, the definitive silencing event, appears in the last one. “Sea Change” (CP 339) similarly undermines the trope of aestheticised death in mourning. It is not one of the “Poems for Angus” and the individual mourned in it is not A.K MacLeod. However, it is not by chance that it follows them almost directly in the *Collected Poems*. The poem appears to act as a commentary upon the value of elegy in which MacCaig underlines the gap between death as it is represented in elegiac poetry and death in real life. To do so, he inscribes himself into the – English – elegiac tradition only to better challenge it from within by writing “Sea-change” as an anti-elegy: this is effected through a comparison between the drowning of Lycidas in Milton’s poem and that of a figure given a name but no specific description, “Roddy.” Interestingly, this response to Milton’s 1637 elegy is MacCaig’s only reference to another elegiac poet. The fact that he chooses an English writer to represent the whole of the elegiac canon he seeks to react against argues further in favour of considering MacCaig in the vaster context of English-speaking literature rather than as a specifically Scottish poet. In writing “Sea-change” as a parallel with Milton’s poem, MacCaig aims to pit the idealised, harmonious evocation of death in “Lycidas” against the harsh,

unglamorous reality of actual dying. MacCaig's tendency is not to sweeten the idea of death, as the previous example has shown, a bent which goes against the grain of the elegiac tradition. It is this convention that "Sea Change" seems to be responding to. The title refers of course to Ariel's elegiac song in *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange (I, 2, 1.395-400)

In choosing this title, MacCaig links the depiction of decorous death in "Lycidas" to the elegiac tradition at large, thus foregrounding the fact that it is a topos and not a poem which he is targeting in this text. The "sea-change" of *The Tempest* is not truly death but fantastical transformation into precious objects, a state of affairs the song makes seem peaceful and almost desirable. MacCaig calls out elegiac tradition on this tendency by opposing to it a mercilessly realistic perspective in his extended parallel between Lycidas' and Roddy's deaths: the comparison is rigorously structured, with the anaphoric lines beginning the first and the second stanza strictly and simultaneously separating and correlating the two events ("I think of Lycidas drowned (...)And I think of Roddy drowned"). The contrast between the two visions of death already appears in MacCaig's onomastic choices as he opposes to Milton's Hellenic, cultured "Lycidas" the informal, local nickname of "Roddy." It is taken up with the locations selected: while Lycidas dies "in Milton's mind," with the harmonious alliterations in nasals and dentals underscoring a decorous and fantasised, because only in the mind, death scene, Roddy drowns "off Cape Wrath," perhaps dashed against rocks by the waves as the harsh, halting pronunciation of the

toponym could suggest. The style in which they are written is another contrasting point between the two accounts. It follows the same harmony/harshness dichotomy by shifting from a more flowing elevated style with visible rhetorical skill (the binary repetition of the structure “how + adverb,” the alliteration in liquids in the third line, the emphasis on the artistic status of the description – more ekphrasis than factual account – implied by the phrase “baroque currents”) to a relatively more casual second stanza – “No elegance there” (l.11) – which juxtaposes asyndetically short, violent adverbial phrases, a chaotic effect which is compounded by the presence of alliterations in harsher consonants. To further his strategy of calling attention to the de-realisation of Lycidas’ death, MacCaig uses the past tense to relate it, placing it firmly in the past and thus, at a distance, while Roddy’s is made present through the use of gerund s: “gulping,” “bursting,” “thrashing.” Also, unlike the first stanza, the second one depicts physical suffering through these three verbs, stressing the breach of the integrity of the body, and imagining it maimed and unrecognisable through the metaphor of “bursting” for eyes that are bulging in terror, far removed from the pearls of Shakespeare’s “sea-change” even as Roddy’s violent struggles undercut Lycidas’ “langorous” death. Green remarks that

when someone drowns, misplacement and bereavement do coincide: the drowned are doubly lost – temporarily misplaced as well as permanently absent. Only when the elegist has located the body and brought it home to a recognisable landscape (in Milton’s case, to the landscape of pastoral) can the funeral rites be conducted (137).

Conversely, MacCaig’s poem does not transport Roddy back to a familiar, reassuring place. Instead, the end of the poem leaves the dead body to “the silent welcome / of conger and dogfish and crab,” with the disturbing implication that the drowned man

will now become food for his new companions. MacCaig goes explicitly against the traditional elegiac movement of return towards the familiar in this poem and in doing so foregrounds its artificiality and impotence to act upon reality – returning an imagined body to a literary shore has no impact on the actual location of the dead.

The fact that none of the clearly elegiac “Poems for Angus” are actually entitled “elegy,” as McCabe remarks (120), or even contain the word can also give an indication of MacCaig’s opinion regarding the genre. The last poem of the cycle, “Defeat” (*CP* 338), provides the poet’s conclusion on the success of his enterprise of poetic mourning. “Defeat,” of course, can represent the stage of grief psychologists call acceptance, but it is also an acknowledgement of the defeat of elegy as a mode. MacCaig articulates in this text the futility of being “eloquently at a loss for words” in the face of the incommensurability of poetry, even language, with the human feelings arising from loss that can not be given voice to other than in an anecdotal, desultory fashion.

What I think of him,
what I remember of him
are gifts I can’t give
to anyone.

For all I can say of him
is no more
than a scribble in the margin
of a lost manuscript.

The polyptoton gifts/give underlines the painfully paradoxical nature of remembrance when it comes to the beloved dead. The memory of the departed is something the speaker feels compelled to share – “*all I can* say of him” (my emphasis) implies multiple and varied efforts, hinting perhaps at the twelve “Poems

for Angus” which are in essence different takes on the same subject, successive attempts to communicate grief and commemorate the dead. The conclusion of the cycle, however, is that the complex affects given rise to by the loss of a dear friend are incommunicable through the medium of poetry, a fact that has the speaker resignedly pronounce the whole elegiac enterprise he is just concluding to be “no more / than a scribble in the margin / of a lost manuscript.” All “Defeat” can do to celebrate the lost friend is to repeatedly highlight the pronoun “him” by isolating it as a lone stressed syllable at the end of an hypermetrical line. This gives it pride of place, but fails to communicate any information about the one being mourned other than the importance he takes for the speaker.

C – The art of losing

The type of elegy MacCaig criticises implicitly in “Sea-change” does not however correspond to what elegy has become at the time of the “Poems for Angus.” What is denounced in “Sea-change” is the traditional elegy of mourning, eulogy and consolation found in “Lycidas” and “Adonais.” In the twentieth century, modern elegy branches into a different path, choosing to “rage against the dying of the light” to put the problem in Dylan Thomas’ words as Booth does (qtd in Booth 174):

The elegiac mode is not a new type of traditional elegy, but rather a new type of poem bearing only a slight resemblance to its ancestor. It is more romantic, more personal and more despairing. It is self-directed for the most part, rather than socially directed. It brings little or no comfort and is often mired in despair. By contrast, the traditional elegy is not personal nor despairing nor lost (Bloomfield 155-156).

I aim to show that this modern elegy is radically different in aims and manifestations from its traditional counterpart accounts more adequately for MacCaig's own elegiac writing which is similarly "more personal and more despairing" than the traditional type of elegy he criticises in "Sea-change."

According to Ramazani, "modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits. They conjoin the elegiac and the anti-elegiac, at once, appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure and imagery of the genre" (1). The anti-elegiac strain evidenced in "Sea-change," in "A.K. MacLeod" and in "Defeat" already illustrate this, but there are other, more pervasive discrepancies between the conventions of traditional elegy and MacCaig's interpretation of it which further support this idea. The "Poems for Angus," I argue, though they do display some very traditional elegiac traits, as has been shown earlier, also correspond to the criteria of the "anti-elegiac," "anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary" modern elegy put forward by Ramazani (2).

Compared to "Lycidas" or, even more conclusively, to "Adonais," the "Poems for Angus" dedicate a relatively small number of lines to the encomium of the dead friend, most of them to be found within one poem, "Praise of a Man" (*CP* 336). Indeed praise of A.K. MacLeod himself and not of the effect he had on the poet is concentrated in this one text while everywhere else, the grieving speaker becomes the centre of attention. "Comforter" (*CP* 336) is a particularly apt illustration of this: "I'm grieving, not for him, / but for my loss," the poetic voice admits. "My grief is

also / his celebration of me” he adds. In openly acknowledging the grieving process and through this, the elegiac writing dramatising it to be concerned not with the deceased so much as with the mourner, the speaker turns around the traditional elegiac eulogising scheme in which the writer celebrates the departed. The assertion is somewhat ambiguous, however, and leaves the reader to ponder how grief can be thought of as the deceased celebrating the mourner – which keeps his or her attention on the latter. The lost friend may be designated explicitly as “the dead centre of it all” (“A.K. MacLeod” *CP* 333), yet it is the mourning writer who seems to occupy this central position for most of the “Poems for Angus.” With the exception of “Praise of a Man,” the one poem entirely devoted to eulogising the dead friend, the “I” is always, in one form or another, very present in each of the “Poems for Angus.” In “Angus’s Dog,” where it does not appear directly, for instance, the poetic persona is still the first element of the poem to be noticed. Though its discourse focuses on the dog, the implicit “I” remains the origin of the voice that can be heard in the second-person direct address to the animal that constitutes the poem. Illustrating the same point in a different fashion, “Comforter” contains only three forms of the third person pointing to the lost friend but five references to the “I” in the space of seven lines.

This increased focus on the speaker’s reaction to loss is one of the ways modern elegy differs from its more traditional incarnation. While elegy has a

dual role (...) “as memorial and self-expression” (Smith 11), the attention of the reader is directed ever more towards the poetic voice and away from the deceased. As a result of this, “the elegiac poem represents a mode, not a genre, and reflects a psychological state rather than a social or historical occasion. The purpose of the elegiac is the total expression of a personality, whereas the traditional elegy is rather an answer to a

social and national need” (Smith qtd in Bloomfield 156).

Modern elegy, then, differs enough from its traditional counterpart that critics feel it can no longer be classified as an elegy *per se*. Because its focus turns itself ever more towards the mourning subject, “sadness, depression, and grief rather than praise, lamentation, and consolation receive the chief emphasis” in modern elegiac poems (Bloomfield 155). This shift is accompanied, according to Ramazani, by a tendency “to resist consolation, (...) not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (xi). In this process, the elegiac trope of identification with the dead, “a feature of grief that involves identification with that which is lost in the effort to avert a change which in reality has already occurred” (Smith 3), is diverted from its traditional consolatory intent. Instead of a brief identification with the departed followed by the “assert[ion of] a triumphant independence” (Ramazani 38), modern elegy may choose to pursue the identification to the death of the poet, as is the case in “Triple Burden” (*CP* 335). “Now I have another death in me: yours. / Each is the image of the other,” the speaker declares, establishing his death and the one that has already occurred as interchangeable. The parallel is kept up in the last three stanzas of the poem with the metaphor of the two boats, one already sailed “into the sea of unknowing” with the departed friend on board, the other awaiting the speaker to take him “where he’ll never know [him] again – / a voyage / beyond knowledge, beyond memory.” The same parallel appears, though less explicitly, in “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” (*CP* 333). Indeed in the lines “when I got there a death waited for me (...) and a blinding winter closed in,” winter can be understood as a metaphor of grief, but conserves the traditional connotations of old age: the death of

the speaker's friend becomes a reminder of the poetic voice's own susceptibility to time and mortality.

That "time [in elegy] is a seemingly interminable interval before the lover and beloved are, in the conventional phrase, united in death – which may be a blessed reunion or at the least a cessation of sorrow" (Smith 3) is another consolatory trope the "Poems for Angus" decline to use. Traditional religious consolation being pre-empted by MacCaig's extremely vocal atheism, the poet is brought to envision death as the annihilation of consciousness. This point of view is outlined very clearly in the second half of "Triple Burden":

For a boat has sailed into
the sea of unknowing;
you are on board.

And somewhere another boat
rocks
by another pier.

It's waiting to take me
where I'll never know you again –
a voyage
beyond knowledge, beyond memory (*CP* 335).

MacCaig depicts his vision of the afterlife in precise yet impressionistic touches: the indeterminacy of "a boat" (my emphasis), "sea of unknowing," "somewhere" replaces the certainty of a traditional elegiac apotheosis of the deceased and the prospect of a post-mortem reunion. The trope of Charon's boat waiting to convey the dead to their final abode is recycled to fit the post-religious conception of death. There is no one manning it and its destination "beyond knowledge, beyond memory" is no place but a spatial metaphor of death echoing the "black no-time, no-place" where in "Angus' Dog," Meph "can't even greet [his] master / though he's there too"

(CP 337). No consolation is possible as death is not conceived as a passage towards another mode of existence, but as a definitive cessation of being. MacCaig's depiction of death as nothingness in this poem bookends and defines a particularly hopeless take on life: correlating "I know I had my death in me/ from the moment I yelled upside-down / in the world" with the way the poet isolates the word "rocks" in a one-syllable line yields the image of the dead being rocked in the funeral boat like a child in a cradle – a life that "has [its] death in [it]" from birth. The inevitability and harshness of human fate is underscored by the connotations provided by the word "rocks" through its hard sonorities and its homonymy with mineral rocks. MacCaig's choice of direct address to a dead man who is explicitly beyond hearing gives the poem the poignancy of any emotional discourse going unheard. The finality of the last line reinforces this impression, as the binary repetition of the prepositional phrase "beyond + abstract noun" ends the poem on an unfinished touch, as if the speaker's words were trailing off into the ether in the same way he envisions himself drifting away into nothingness after his death. This is the end to grieving which is proposed in "Triple Burden" when the speaker declares: "only the death I was born with will destroy the other." There is no consolation to be found in it and little relief, far from the traditional aims of elegy.

The death of the lost friend as an event is presented in a jarring manner, as previously discussed. In fact, the sudden and unexpected character of this loss is a recurring theme in the cycle of elegiac poems devoted to A.K. MacLeod. "Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote," the speaker's expectations for his journey are not met even before his friend is taken ill. The hotel "that should be a bang of light,/ is

crepuscular,” for instance. This first unanticipated element foreshadows the startling abruptness of MacLeod’s death, made explicit in “I didn’t know it, but when/ I got there a death waited for me.”

Instead of smoothing over the speaker’s grief, the elegy repeats the shock of the unexpected loss and thus works as a preserver of grief, as Ramazani intimates is the case in modern elegies. This is definitely the case in MacCaig’s elegies: the obsessive repetition of the signifiers death/dead/die in the “Poems for Angus” appears in “A. K. MacLeod” (“vomited blood and died. (...) the dead centre of it all” with the alliteration in dentals emphasising the repetition), “Highland Funeral” (“over the dead man’s house”) and in the title of “Dead Friend” (*CP* 337).

Death is omnipresent in the “Poems for Angus,” and so is the dead man as a spectral figure haunting the speaker and the text. “Dead Friend” articulates the difficulty of grieving, but also of writing in the elegiac mode:

How do I meet
a man who’s no longer there?
How can I lament the loss
of a man who won’t go away? (*CP* 337)

The impossibility of letting go underscores nearly all the “Poems for Angus,” a reality of which the speaker shows himself to be painfully aware, revealing in “Triple Burden”: “it’s a heavy knowledge that tells me / only the death I was born with / will destroy the other.” The metaphor in absentia of the lost friend as a dead branch which “though its leaves/ are withered black among the green/ the living branches/ Won’t let (...) fall” in the short poem “In Memoriam” (*CP* 338) is a variation on this theme, but it is in “A Month After His Death” that the permanence of loss is evoked more descriptively as the living’s rejoicing is tainted by the

haunting absence of the dead:

The laughter and the singing are paper flowers
laid on a wet grave in an empty darkness.
For we all know we're thinking
of the one who can't be here,
not even as a ghost smiling through the black window" (CP 334).

Letting go of the dead appears impossible, but also undesirable. Ramazani remarks that "if the traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is what Elizabeth Bishop calls an 'art of losing' The one art of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of the loss but immersion in it" (4). All the "Poems for Angus" suggest this, but it becomes most obvious in "Comforter," a text in which the speaker rejects explicitly the idea that the unnamed addressee could advise him to move on from his form of *delectatio morosa*:

Thank God you don't tell me
to stop thinking of him –
that I'm grieving, not for him,
but for my loss
– for, though that's true,
my grief is also
his celebration of me. (CP 336)

"Modern elegists neither abandon the dead nor heal the living," Ramazani writes (4), and neither does MacCaig in his elegiac poems. After examination of both traditional and modern elegy, it appears that his mourning poems are closer to the latter than to the former. However, this does not account for the fact that MacCaig's elegiac poems are not restricted to his single elegiac cycle or even his other death poems. It is this broader sense of elegiac modulation in his writing which I will be considering now.

D – the limit experience of death in MacCaig’s poems

Elegiac modulations in MacCaig’s poems do not necessarily hinge on the same problems as his mourning elegies. The scope is wider: firstly, the loss regretted is not obligatorily that of loved one but can refer to a place, an era, a culture, an opportunity real or imagined – physical death is not always involved. In a sense, this broadening scope of elegy is very symptomatic of modern poetry. MacCaig, whose mature writing is entirely produced after the Second World War, belongs to a generation that is deeply marked by the atmosphere of the postwar period and reflects it into a foregrounding of elegiac writing. Brannigan writes: “the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, John Betjeman and particularly Philip Larkin had helped to secure the central place of the elegy in contemporary English literature” (85). In his study of English postwar literature, Brannigan insists on the literary obsession with the England of the past during this era (86), something which, perhaps, is mirrored in MacCaig’s own concern with it in his pastoral renditions of Highlands life in an undefined past. Larkin, a contemporary with whose poetry MacCaig’s possesses a number of similarities, declared: “Everything I write, I think, has the consciousness of approaching death in the background” (qtd in Booth 172). My point in this section is that, as with much of modern poetry, MacCaig’s writing is essentially elegiac. In examining several specific elegiac modulations in his poems, I aim to underline the manifestations and possible reasons for this.

The Gaelic culture MacCaig’s ancestors come from and which he admires is portrayed in his writing as waning in the post-Clearances modernity. The poems evoking it are generally elegiac in tone and there is a constant tendency in his writing

to blur the limit between elegy for the culture and elegy for its individual people. This trope of cultural death encapsulated within personal elegy is visible in the “Poems for Angus.” In his eponymous elegy for A.K. MacLeod (*CP* 333), MacCaig writes: “I went to the landscape I love best / and the man who was its meaning and added to it met me at Ullapool.” The first stanza of “A.K. MacLeod” transfigures the departed friend into a human embodiment of “his landscape” (“Highland Funeral” *CP* 334, l.1). His funeral is a “Highland Funeral” and MacCaig parallels him with his landscape: “the frozen air” is “as pagan as he was.” Compounding this effect, the “crofters and fishermen and womenfolk” attending the event seem drawn from the past rather than contemporaries of the writer due to the deliberate quaintness of the expression. “Aunt Julia,” a poem in which personal elegy meets the *ubi sunt* motif, is similarly removed from modernity:

She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.
She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends.
She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepennybits
in a teapot (*CP* 189).

MacCaig’s Gaelic-speaking Aunt Julia is mythologised into a personification of essential rurality. She becomes an apparently younger and more developed figure of the “Old Highland Woman” (*CP* 417) who

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.

The text inscribes death in its portrait of her, however: “funerals” and “bones” herald

the impending death of this “old” highland woman and with her the decline of “her people” “assembled in her bones.” MacCaig’s elegies for Gaelic culture offer no consolation. Aunt Julia’s “seagull voice,” even as she lies “silenced in the absolute black / of a sandy grave” is still “getting angry / with so many questions / unanswered.” The linguistic divide between her nephew and herself remains as she died before she could make herself understood. On a more general level, the poem symbolises this fading away of the older generation and with them of their way of life. The traditional “old Crofter” of the eponymous poem (*CP* 295) is presented as an ageing man whose decline is reflected in the increasingly poor quality of his work. The poem ends with the same image MacCaig will later apply to A.K. MacLeod:

One day the rope he [the crofter] has tied
will slither down the rock
and the boat drift off idly
dwindling away into the Atlantic (*CP* 295 l.9-12)

This idea of “dwindling away” suggests the same disappearance into nothingness which precludes consolation in the “Poems for Angus.”

MacCaig’s tendency to effect the elegiac modulations concerned with the slow decline of Highlands Gaelic culture through personal elegies of named or unnamed Gaels seems to intimate that death rather than modernity or the Clearances is the agent of this progressive disappearance. Elegy for Gaelic culture in MacCaig’s works yields an example of unsuccessful mourning. Elegiac modulations targeting the poet’s central concern with language and reality do not however, as I will now show. The difference between the two types residing in the fact that the former is linked with death suggests that, perhaps more than merely a characteristic of the

times, this transformation of elegy into an “art of losing” in MacCaig’s funeral elegies has to do with the way he relates to death in general but also in relation to his personal poetic project.

As intimated earlier, MacCaig’s frustration with the limits of language gives rise to another type of elegiac modulation in his poems. The intimate link between the inadequacies of non-cratylean language and lamentation for the Fall which symbolically cuts man off from a purely and perfectly denotative language ensures that most of the texts in which MacCaig considers the questions of naming, metaphor, language in general and its impact on our perception of reality are to some extent elegiac. “A Sigh For Simplicity” (CP 322), from a direct affirmation of preference – “I like *so* and *therefore*” (l.1) – transitions into a lament with the refrain-like repetition of the typical formula of regret: “if only” lines 3, 5 and 9: “If only I were Adam, to whom everything was exactly his own name” (l.9), he complains. “No Consolation” (CP 163), which articulates the impossibility of rendering things as they are, dramatises the poet’s attempts to make peace with this: the poem starts as a narrative: “I consoled myself by (...),” but the two attempts at finding a compensation to this “loss” of direct contact with reality both fail as the title already predicted. “But how hard it is / to live at a remove / from a common wall (...)” (l.8-10) develops what exactly is lost to the subject with the inadequacy of language. As was concluded earlier, because Man can not access the world around him directly due to this, he can not obtain proof of the existence of lack thereof of this world – this too is a loss, which the speaker of “No Consolation” acknowledges and judges impossible to compensate. However, the tone of the last stanza in which

MacCaig exposes the fundamental breach of veracity in metaphor³⁹ is more puzzled than lamenting. “How odd,” the poet muses almost distractedly (l.19). This is again the previously noted idea that in considering “the riddle of the observer” and judging it unsolvable, MacCaig is not truly worried or disconsolate at his conclusion. In writing poetry, he makes up for the impossibility of accessing reality directly by “describ[ing] only his own inventions” (“No Consolation” l.17-18). The WORLD IS WORD network of metaphors, as discussed earlier, uses linguistic elements as a source domain for the reality that remains out of the subject’s grasp. This phenomenon could be seen as a variant on the process which sees the “replacement of the lost object by the sign of it” (Sacks 6) to allow successful mourning in elegy. I advanced earlier that MacCaig, though aware that reality is inaccessible to him, chooses to indicate this through his poems dealing with his frustration with this state of affairs, but ultimately moves on to continue writing, a process in which the WORLD IS WORD metaphors are central as they symbolise his choice to work from what he can actually access: the signs assigned to the elusive referents. His writing about language in this respect has similarities with the work of mourning in psychology. MacCaig’s attitude to the problem could in fact almost be said to be displaying at one point or another all five stages of grief to some extent. The “loss” or rather the realisation that reality is inaccessible is taken into account in his poems and recognised as problematic with regards to his project of faithfulness to the object. It does not prevent him from pursuing said project regardless. A poem is produced that creates a simulacrum acting as compensation for the lost object – here,

³⁹ See chapter 3 section A.

the impossible adamic language the poet aspires to. This appears as a form of successful mourning, which produces an important distinction between MacCaig's elegiac modulations when they are concerned with language and the nature of reality as opposed to his funeral elegies and the related elegiac modulations concerning the Highlands of the past. I propose that, because physical death is not involved in the former, a form of compensation remains possible as the poet is not confronted to the absolute Otherness of non-existence.

MacCaig's poetic agenda arises from a deep awe for the fact of existence itself. As discussed earlier, this is where he locates his sense of the divine. From this, the project he conceives is one of celebration of the forms existence takes in general, and of nature in particular. In these conditions, death as the negation of existence appears as a threat to this project and the mode it sparks off, elegy, represents an entirely diverging strain in MacCaig's writing.

It must be noted that his representation of death does not remain the same over the course of his career. Earlier poems seem more accepting, less viscerally shocked by the notion of the cessation of existence. MacCaig himself recognises a turning point in his life corresponding with his first personal experiences of death as a jarring, unique event. He explains in "A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" that his closest friends having passed away over the course of the seventies and early eighties changed his understanding of death. He develops:

Until these friends started dying, (...) I've had such a lucky life. (...) Death to me was only a concept. I didn't know what death *meant!* (...) I love life, and death to me was just something ends, and I wasn't taking into account *really* the sufferings. So when I wrote about death it was generally about animals or plants, and flowers and the grasses in the canal, rotting and rotting and – but they're only going to come up in

some other form (102-103).

The “Poems for Angus” are the product of this realisation, which is why I chose to focus on them in this chapter, as they represent MacCaig’s truly mature works in this domain. The haunting presence of death is a characteristic of postwar poets, as remarked earlier. This appears to be true for MacCaig only from the time he starts losing friends, which argues against the idea that his concern with death in the second half of his poetic career would be influenced by the postwar context. Instead, I would propose that this realisation of what death truly represents has a deep structuring effect on his poetry from then on. Death, as the definitive cessation of existence, of what is at the root of his writing – both in terms of the subject’s ability to write and what he writes about – becomes the utterly unthinkable. The cataract forming “on the loch’s eye” in “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” seems to symbolise this, blankness and blindness corresponding to death erasing both the perceiver and his subjective world which is all any of us can know according to MacCaig’s conclusions on the matter. Considering his well-documented relish in perception and description, this would be for MacCaig an unbearable thought. This is why I would like to try and think of the way he relates to death and loss caused by death in terms of relation to trauma by considering death as the other limit-experience in his poetry – as ineffable as the “meaning” at the root of existence which he chases across his poems because it is its exact antithesis.

Firstly, the non MacCaig-specific problem of “being eloquently at a loss” must be considered. He is far from the only poet to have written anti-elegiac verse proclaiming the unsuitability of the mode to properly render feelings of loss.

Weisman articulates this as the fact that

elegy pushes against the limits of our expressive resources precisely at the very moment in which we confront our mortality, which is as much to say that it throws into relief the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it most. (...) It follows naturally that the limits of poetic utterance have surfaced as recurrent motifs in elegy throughout its history, certainly well before the various manifestations of twentieth-century rhetorical theory conceptualised the sorry fate of the signifier (1).

This is what MacCaig confronts in “Defeat.” Despite the pessimistic evaluation of poetic discourse offered in this poem, MacCaig has taken steps to try and circumvent this problem. For instance, the first of the “Poems for Angus,” “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” presents itself as an oblique elegy: the death of MacLeod is not explicitly spelled out and indeed, has yet to come to pass at the moment evoked in the poem, but the landscape MacCaig described already bears the mark of it in a form of retrospective pathetic fallacy as has been discussed earlier.

This is one way for the poet to try and evoke the experience of mortality in spite of the limits of language. However, death in MacCaig’s elegiac poems, as the moment when being collapses into nothingness is also the moment when meaning similarly fails. The “Poems for Angus” are deeply influenced by this idea, to the point where the application of the concept of trauma narrative as defined by Anne Whitehead in *Trauma Fiction* becomes an apt interpretive tool with which to engage with them.

“Trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities,” Whitehead writes (5). The oblique elegy “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote” creates such a disruption of chronological order as the death to come is not only projected onto, but woven into the landscape

the speaker travels through and his impressions of it. Images of degeneration such as “the horrible marzipan” of soiled snow and the cataract forming “on the loch’s eye” can bring to mind the corruption of the body post-mortem in general, and the milky white eyes cadavers are usually represented with, an association that was definitely premature at the time the speaker was passing by the loch.

Chronological order is also altered in the opposite direction in MacCaig’s elegiac cycle, a fact that can be accounted for in the following way:

[Caruth’s work] suggests that if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence. The irruption of one time into another is figured by Caruth as a form of possession or haunting. The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present (Whitehead 6).

The broken branch that is not allowed to fall in “In Memoriam” (*CP* 338) functions as such a ghost, a persistence that is already announced in the poem preceding it, “Dead Friend,” with the speaker asking “How can I lament the loss / of a man who won’t go away?”

With the foreshadowing in the first poem of the “Poems for Angus” appearing as an attempt at making sense of sudden absence – death as limit of comprehensible meaning – failure of meaning translates through contrasts so extreme they appear as non sequiturs. The rupture between two statements mirrors the rupture created by death in the normal fabric of life: in “A.K. MacLeod,” (*CP* 333), the juxtaposition of a beautiful landscape with the uncompromising narration “next morning, the man who had greeted me / with the pleasure of pleasure / vomited blood / and died” jars the reader in a manner intended to re-create on a smaller scale the feeling of absurdity that strikes the speaker when he thinks of the event itself.

In “Notes on a Winter Journey, and a Footnote,” the tone of the poem is curiously detached – stanzas numbered 1 to 5 circle around the unspoken centre of gravity of the poem, as if in an attempt to delay broaching the subject or avoid it altogether. The form of the poem – the way it uses numbers – could be taken as sign/symptom of this almost shell-shocked detachment: numbers in this instance are purely abstract concepts and “the adjective abstract, according to the *OED*, has as its most prominent meaning ‘withdrawn, drawn away, removed, separate’ with the corollaries ‘withdrawn from the contemplation of present objects’ and ‘withdrawn or separated from matter, from material embodiment, from practise, or from particular examples’” (Perloff 74). The numbering of the stanzas in this poem could perhaps be seen as an effort to break away from reality with each shift back and forth from an emotionally charged evocation of the landscape and, obliquely, of death to abstract numbers. It is interesting to note that Perloff also mentions a coping mechanism adopted by people in shock who count to ground themselves (74). This idea of a mild state of shock induced by the confrontation with death is significant when considering passages such as this:

Crofters and fishermen and womenfolk, unable
to say any more, said
‘It’s a grand day, it’s a beautiful day.’

And I thought, ‘Yes it is.’
And I thought of him lying there,
the dead centre of it all (*CP* 334).

These two stanzas suggest that not only vocal speech, but also mental discourse is impeded, even precluded by the shock of confronting absence in the shape of an object that is present and was until recently a subject. Re-employing the same neutral

phrase “And I thought (...) / And I thought” suggests a form of thoughtless, almost mechanical repetition. The two instances of direct speech report bland, everyday remarks completely unrelated to the underlying emotional context, as though death had created a blank space in the thoughts of the speakers, cutting him off from his words, and perhaps even preventing articulate thoughts in the face of a tremendous and shocking event. “Him lying *there*, / the dead centre of it all” (my emphasis) insists on this presence in a way that could allow the reader to understand the lines in an abstract manner. The speaker could be seeking to convey the enormity of the loss looming inescapably in his mind, but could also be alluding more concretely to a traditional wake. The repetitive syntax in these two stanzas (“unable to say any more, said” and the anaphora “And I thought (...) And I thought”) and the lexical choices made by the poet – mostly monosyllabic or disyllabic words – give rise to a sense of shocked child-like simplicity⁴⁰ that reads like a baring of the simplest processes of the mind caused by the confrontation with something the speaker can not bring himself to comprehend.

Death as it is conceived of in MacCaig’s poems can be described as the cessation of its existence hard-coded into every being even as it is brought into the world – “I know I had my death in me / from the moment I yelled upside-down / in the world. (“Triple Burden” *CP* 335). This vision of human condition could be the starting point of an existentialist philosophy *à la* Camus, but in MacCaig’s elegiac verse, the speaker does not manage to transcend this awareness of a gaping void, a breach within reality as he knows it, and the result of this is the sense that the

⁴⁰ the same device is employed in “Highland Funeral” with “but beautiful, as grief is not,” where the inclusion of “but” already intimates an incompatibility between grief and beauty, making the epanodos expliciting the parallel purposely redundant.

essential part of his reaction remains unexpressed and incommunicable in the face of that “blank no-time, no-place” which he too can not escape: the “Poems for Angus,” poignantly as they portray the loss of a cherished friend are not only mourning elegies. They can also be linked to the other two modes of elegy listed by Booth, meditative elegy and self-elegy (172). According to his definition, “it is mortality as our common fate or more immediately his own death” which the poet contemplates in “the less-theorised genres of meditative elegy or self-elegy” (ibid.) MacCaig’s, I would argue do both simultaneously. In the shift towards the subject which was discussed earlier as a variation on the elegiac practice of having the mourner identify with the departed, one could also read the acknowledgement that the fate of the lost friend is one the speaker will ultimately share. The recurring image of the boat “waiting to take” the poet onto “a voyage / beyond knowledge, beyond memory” in the last lines of “Triple Burden” is the repetition of the metaphorical boat that has taken his friend in the preceding stanza. In this sense, MacCaig’s elegies which, as the focus on the subject’s grief suggests, are centred on the grieving self rather than the one who has been lost, actually appear to concern themselves with “mortality as a common plight” in priority which, as Booth writes, “could be argued, makes the reflective elegy more centrally *about* death, more intrinsically elegiac, than the mourning elegy, with its focus on the grief of the living survivor” (176). This seems to be important in MacCaig’s case. Death in his poems appears as a double threat. As antithesis to existence, it haunts his writing as a lurking threat to the things he lovingly describes – it might account for the constant impression of vulnerability he

writes within his evocations of animals, for instance⁴¹. Death is also that which will definitely silence his poems, and this may weigh more heavily on MacCaig's mind as he grows older than might be expected: the very last poem on the last page of the *Collected Poems* ends on a self-elegiac note:

Scotland, I rush towards you
into my future that,
every minute,
grows smaller and smaller ("London to Edinburgh" *CP* 448).

The note is resigned rather than consolatory. The spatial metaphor of the future growing "smaller and smaller" calls up the idea of running out of room rather than that of decline of the self. This in itself is a small revolt against oblivion as it implies a certain arbitrariness of death rather than the organic machine running down after decades of use. It may also, and this is perhaps stretch, evoke the image of the pages left to read in a book or to write on in a notebook, whose volume grows smaller as one reads or uses them until one runs out of pages.

E – Conclusion

This central place of death as radical Otherness and second pole of the structuring dichotomy in MacCaig's poems is not necessarily obvious to a first-time reader. However, once established, it does account for the oft-remarked coexistence of pervasive, deeply melancholy strain with a definitely admiring, celebratory tone in his writing. This primary tension between existence, which MacCaig never stops to marvel at and death as the constant threat to it underlies the entirety of his works.

⁴¹ See chapter 5.

Death lurks constantly, especially from the seventies onwards, in the background of his poems. It threatens his poetic project as its forced end, but also as loss, through the fact that, while his celebratory writing upholds a sense of communion with existence and nature in particular, loss and grief cut the subject off from the rest of the world, as the separating pane of glass around the speaker of “Highland Funeral” suggests. Death, as will be seen in the following chapter, also influences heavily MacCaig’s engagement with the two other modes that will be examined, the pastoral and the love poem, the pastoral because of the crucial role of Gaelic-speaking, Highlands culture in it, and the love poems in the form of a constant, essential separation from the beloved. It may be thought that, to MacCaig, this threat of death invalidates in a way any human pursuit as no consolation nor survival can be found in religion or memory. This, as intimated earlier, may be related to his “simple man” persona and distrust of systems, and through this to his tendency to engage with various modes and traditions only to a point, as with elegy. This same phenomenon of tension between a tradition and an answering opposite current undercutting it will indeed resurface in the next two chapters with the coexistence of pastoral and anti-pastoral, Petrarchan and anti-petrarchan discourses.

This presents a particularly bleak take on MacCaig’s world view which is not however entirely exact. Though there is a deep melancholy in his poems and they do end on a subdued note with the last stanza of “London to Edinburgh,” there is however a quality of simple, quiet enjoyment in his poetic world, which has already been remarked in his relish in perception, and which will surface again in the Epicurian undertones of his pastoral writing. Reflecting this more positive side of his

attitude, there is one counterpoint to the unsuccessful mourning and awareness of his own mortality that has been discussed at length: in “Two Skulls” (*CP* 370-371), MacCaig proclaims a possible triumph over death:

He'll be no friend of mine, as long as I'm still
(...)
(...) a man, whose skulls contains
ideas death never thought of.

They'll cheat him, for they'll lodge in another skull
– or become nothing, that comfortable absolute

This is the same type of survival MacCaig obliquely grants A.K. MacLeod in his recurring praise of him as someone who taught him to see differently, whose “beneficent lights dim / but don't vanish” (“Praise of a Man” *CP* 336 l.13-14). In a private individual, this can be effected through the legacy of friends and family, but a writer like MacCaig can touch a larger audience, and this possible way of cheating death by having his “ideas” do so for him is a resurgence of the topos of immortality through art with a small twist on it. There is however a characteristic MacCaig shift in its articulation. Where the written word remains long after Ozymandias' statue has fallen to ruins and Keatsian odes portray a certain jubilation over the survival to this day of the scenes depicted on the Grecian urn, MacCaig remarks offhandedly after a casual dash on the hit and miss nature of the method. MacCaig's typical modesty may be at work here and in the assumption the poem makes that it is neither his art nor his mastery of it that is liable to survive, but merely “ideas.” In this, perhaps, the writer pictures himself as a Socrates-like figure, which is actually striking: MacCaig's poems have often been considered somewhat superficial in the sense that their virtuosity in description and articulation of his thought is not apparently

accompanied by any political or ethical guiding thought underscoring his poems. That MacCaig considers his ideas might survive him, rather than the impressions he shares in his verse, or his verse itself intimates that ideas are in fact being conveyed to the reader in it. There is a little-explored ethical dimension to MacCaig's works – ethical rather than political as he is very pessimistic regarding Man as a species – which will become evident as the next chapter explores his engagement with the pastoral mode.

V – Pastoral MacCaig

The prominent place of nature in MacCaig's poetry automatically calls up the question of pastoral. Its treatment is complicated by the fact that there are several different definitions of the term. Gifford gives three, one of which recalls the often maligned status of this literary tradition. He describes it as

a sceptical use of the term – “pastoral” as pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country. Here what is “returned” by retreat is judged to be too comfortably complacent to qualify as “insight” in the view of the user of the term “pastoral” as a pejorative (*Pastoral 2*).

MacCaig is aware of this definition. In his poem entitled “Pastoral” (*CP 389*), he evokes a purely descriptive scene and does not appear to “return” any notion other than the quiet comfort and familiar beauty of country life (passim, but most strikingly 1.8-9 “in the blue scent a peat fire makes / in the cosy noises the brown hens make”). Nevertheless, the choice of title can not truly be called “pejorative.” It may be argued that it displays a defiant intent similar to the one behind Wordsworth's subtitling of *Michael* as “A Pastoral Poem” (Marinelli 4). Interestingly, the element afforded the longest description in MacCaig's characteristically short “Pastoral” is treated with gentle derision, which deflates any possible caricaturing idealisation of the scene – this concords with his insistence on realism in nature poetry. The title “Pastoral” may then be thought to refer to a sceptical outlook on this mode, which implies a measure of distancing irony. To a certain extent, “Pastoral” could in fact be considered as a manifesto for MacCaig's nature poetry. The question, however, is

whether the poet holds himself to it throughout his career.

Gifford's answer would be an emphatic no. He delivers in *Green Voices* a particularly harsh assessment of MacCaig's poems:

despite a few poems of whimsical uncertainty about his relationship to the natural world, his poetry celebrates the unproblematic relationship of an escapist to "glacier, water, bread, wood." In MacCaig's poetry these doubts and celebrations are two sides of the same pastoralist coin: his poetry fails to transcend the reality of his working in Edinburgh and his holidaying at his cottage in Assynt (154-5).

He cites as "the definite example of MacCaig's form of escapism" (ibid) "The Pass of the Roaring" (*CP* 278) in which he reads "the perverse idea that there is no history in what is likely, in this poem, to be Sutherland" which, to him, "can only come from an escapist weekender" (ibid. 155).

This appraisal echoes the criticisms of shallowness MacCaig's poetry has received over the years. In this instance, his nature poems are targeted for portraying – allegedly – a simplistic take on the pastoral tradition. Arguably, the pastoral rests on an idyllic, idealised view of the rural sphere. While MacCaig's countryside is undoubtedly depicted positively as per his utilisation of the Eden myth in his poetry, his concern with faithfulness to his subjects ensures a certain amount of realism. Idealisation of the natural world remains limited in his poems, which already contradicts Gifford's assessment of them. Considering this, my aim in this chapter is to show, in complete opposition with Gifford's dismissively brief treatment of the subject, that MacCaig does engage fully with the pastoral tradition and brings to it his own personal favoured problematics. To this end, I will first be observing how this is effected. Then, because there are diverging undercurrents in his works that the pastoral may not necessarily account for, I will examine how MacCaig's poems

question and subvert the pastoral tradition, using as a frame of reference Gifford's own definition of anti-pastoral and post-pastoral writing.

A – MacCaig's pastoral

Pastoral being a mode, it prescribes no formal features and is "a broad and flexible category that includes, but is not confined to, a number of identifiable genres" (Alpers 44). MacCaig's love poems occasionally present pastoral modulations, as do his elegiac texts – MacCaig's poems in fact generally avoid committing fully to a specific form, with the notable exception of the "Ballade of Good Whisky" (*CP* 118). The pastoral, in the absence of defining formal features, possesses several characteristic thematic elements which however register a certain evolution over time. In its historical form, it can according to Gifford be identified by the presence of shepherds – he quotes Leo Marx's pronouncement of "No shepherd, no pastoral" (qtd in Gifford 1) to support this statement. Considering this to be the definition of strictly traditional pastoral obviously disqualifies MacCaig's poetry. Though shepherds sometimes appear in his writing, the texts they populate are far removed from the highly conventional world of historical pastoral. The focus is different. The shepherds featured in "Sheep Dipping" (*CP* 63-4), and "Sheep Dipping, Achmelvich" (*CP* 137) are only one amongst several elements of the scene evoked. The shepherds of the historical pastoral, however, are significant as the speakers of a discourse divorced from that of the city, which they are able to hold as denizens of a fictional second Eden. In modern pastoral, the shepherds have disappeared, but this "form of retreat and return," "the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the

text” in a physical return to the pastoral space by the characters “or in the sense that the pastoral ‘returned’ some insights relevant to the urban audience” (Gifford *Pastoral 2*) remains central to the mode, or as Lerner phrases it, pastoral texts are “poems that long to escape from the centre to the simpler world of Arcadia. And Arcadia, in this sense, need have neither sheep nor shepherd” (35). This movement towards the pastoral space is characteristic of the mode, as becomes apparent in the definition Gifford gives of it:

beyond the artifice of the specific literary form, there is a broader use of “pastoral” to refer to an area of content. In this sense pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban (...) A delight in the natural is assumed in describing these texts as pastorals. Here a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude towards what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be (*Pastoral 2*).

This definition seems strikingly reminiscent of several key aspects of MacCaig’s poems which have been explored earlier. The Eden myth, with its attendant city-country dichotomy is a structuring influence in MacCaig’s writing, but is also at the centre of the pastoral tradition. Marx identifies at the heart of the pastoral a “symbolic motion away from centres of civilisation toward their opposite, nature, away from sophistication toward simplicity, or, to introduce the cardinal metaphor of the literary mode, away from the city toward the country” (10). This is essentially a fantasised movement from the postlapsarian present to a prelapsarian space, as Marinelli outlines:

The omnipresent desire to escape from the town is really the desire to escape from the circumstances into which we were plunged by the fall and of which the city is (...) really the result. Ultimately, therefore, the dominant idea of pastoral is a search for simplicity away from a complexity represented either by a specific location (...) from which the refuge is in a rural retreat to Arcadia; or from a specific period of

individual human existence (adulthood), from which the refuge is in the visions of our childhood (11).

But the garden of Eden is lost to Man after the Fall, and so the pastoral Arcadia is a fiction to which no true return is possible or even actually considered. This fiction however is held up to our fallen present as a mirror, allowing writers to foreground a contrasting lifestyle following allegedly unfallen values. I argue that this sense of the pastoral, and not the pejorative use of the term ascribed to his works by Gifford characterises MacCaig's nature and countryside poems. To demonstrate this, I will start by establishing that his writing creates a personal pastoral space – a Scottish Arcadia of sorts.

Pastoral as a historical form is highly codified. Because of the structuring influence of the Eden/Golden Age myth on this mode, the pastoral space is almost always a form of highly idealised *locus amoenus*. Fields, forests – the less threatening ones, where man does not lose his way – and pastures come to mind immediately when thinking of pastoral. Mountains yield harsher living conditions, are harder to present as hospitable and are thus less favoured, if not excluded. This stipulation, that the pastoral space be welcoming, may already be problematic for the assessment of MacCaig's nature as pastoral. He is moreover “not a mountaineer” but “a fisherman” (MacCaig “Foreword” in *Poems of the Scottish Hills* v) and as such frequently writes about seascapes, and the people associated with them. These poems, though they do not fit the image most readily associated with pastoral are not nevertheless entirely disqualified. The mode is indeed not limited to inland rurality considering that the founding texts of pastoral itself, Theocritus' *Idylls* has mentions of “fisher-folk” (Marinelli 29) and “pastoral life may reserve (...) a small place for

the fisherman, if he does not risk his life on the high seas, but throws his net not too far from shore or sinks his line into a nearby pond or brook” (Poggioli 7). MacCaig’s seaside poems bring to life people who fit that description, like the eponymous “Uncle Roderick” (*CP* 213) of his childhood.

MacCaig, as stated earlier, describes what he knows. The nature he knows, however, is very different from the one pastoral clichés would evoke. The classical avatar of the pastoral space, due to the Greco-Latin origin of the mode, is often described in terms reminiscent of Mediterranean landscapes. MacCaig’s poems, however, depict an essentially Scottish nature – this is one degree of sophistication over the purely mechanical practice of the pastoral Gifford appears to charge him with. It must however be said that the mode evolves in time towards a more personal approach as, “from the Romantics thenceforward (...) all pastoral myths are essentially private pastoral myths” (Marinelli 5). This seems to mark a shift towards a certain realism. The pastoral space for “the modern author” is, according to Marinelli, based on “a particular environment” (56). The writer works, through “an artful selection of details” (*ibid*), to conflate the actual landscape and its literary double. This is what happens to the Scottish landscapes and countryside scenes in those amongst MacCaig’s poems that could be associated with the pastoral tradition. They become simultaneously “places of the mind, as well as places rooted in geographical reality” (*ibid*). This self-contradictory status is effected through “a choice of details (...) of so individual a nature that we may not recognise it as the product of selection at all” (*ibid.*) resulting in “an internal world projected into a familiar landscape and utilising all the values of that particular environment but

ordering them as reality is never ordered” (ibid.). In order to gauge MacCaig’s reliance or lack thereof on the topoi of the pastoral, it is necessary to determine what type of pastoral space is delimited by his nature poems.

As stated earlier, the modern pastoral writer develops a personal, particular pastoral space based on a chosen landscape. For MacCaig, it would be that of Scotland, and his “pedantism” entails that animal species and plant life will be named whenever possible, and named accurately. His mode of description favours juxtaposed vignettes and separate details over general statements, which allows for a particularising of his landscapes compatible with the “artful selection of details” Marinelli insists upon. Also specific to his chosen space, rivers, lochs and streams are frequent, as is the sea. Most landscape poems, in fact, contain some reference to water and, while citing them all would take too long, a few examples dispersed throughout the *Collected Poems* can yet be noted: “Moor Burns” (CP 48, “the hilarity of these streams” 1.1), “Loch Roe” (CP 162), “Gulls on a Hill Loch” (CP 250), “Tighnault – the House of the Small Stream” (CP 340) and “Mountain Streamlet” (CP 415). The vegetation moreover implies a certain type of ecosystem – “Bell Heather” (CP 361) prefers acidic soils and “rowan” trees (“Dunvegan” CP 107 1.13) occur generally in cool temperate regions. MacCaig’s personal pastoral myth is far removed from Mediterranean Arcadias, then. It is a rough landscape which the poet does not seek to soften, and in so doing sets apart from traditional Edenic spaces. His personal pastoral space is further particularised through being firmly anchored not only into a geographical context, but also in a tradition. The poems display an obvious relish in the frequent use of local toponyms (often Gaelic)

– to give only a few examples, “Uncle Roderick” (CP 213) navigates “[r]ound Rhu nan Cuideagan” (l. 13). Keeping to a nautical context, the “*Eilan Glas*” of “July Landing” (CP 246) “slavers through the sea” (l.2) between “Stoer Points” (l.21) and “Lochinver” (l.4), apparently passing “Clashnessie” (l.15) on its way, while the speaker of “Moment Musical in Assynt” (CP 251) takes obvious delight in the rough musicality of “Coigach” (l.4), “Cul Mor” (l.5), “Cul Beag” (l.6), “Stac Polly” (l.7), “Quinag” (l.9) and MacCaig’s often-stated favourite: “Suilven” (l.15). Through these toponyms, the poet underlines the fact that the history and culture of the Scottish Highlands contribute to its creation in equal part with their fauna, flora and geology – especially considering the influence the Clearances had on the shaping of the landscape itself.⁴²

The pastoral is characterised by a specific type of space, but also by a certain point of view, which is that of an outsider reflecting on a world he is not truly a part of. This is the case in modern pastoral as it was already with the shepherds of the historical mode whose discourse and activity related them more to the life of the court than to that of the country. I argue that, as a “first generation townee” (MacCaig “Foreword” to *Poems of the Scottish Hills* v) MacCaig is in a similarly interesting position when he writes of the countryside and its inhabitants. Born and raised in Edinburgh and having lived his whole life in this city, he corresponds to the outsider status of the pastoral poet. In “Sheep Dipping, Achmelvich” (CP 137), the poetic persona takes no part in the tasks described. Childhood visits to his mother’s family in Harris and regular sojourns in Assynt as an adult have nevertheless made

⁴² See chapter 2.

MacCaig familiar with country life. His poems often describe crofters, shepherds and fishermen at work, and his speaker-persona is sometimes involved in their everyday tasks, for instance in “Fetching Cows” (*CP* 125). He remains however an outsider.

Another property brought on by the status of the pastoral speaker is that, his discourse originating outside the scenes he evokes, it is “written from a point of view that we may call sophisticated. (...) Essentially the art of pastoral is the art of the backward glance, and Arcadia from its creation the product of wistful and melancholy longing. The pastoral poet reverses the process (and the ‘progress’) of history” (Marinelli 9). From his position of outsider with an insight into the world he recreates, MacCaig seems, in accordance with this description of the pastoral, to bring to life a space and culture that does not necessarily correspond to the contemporary realities of the Scottish countryside in the second half of the twentieth century. His personal pastoral myth is the Gaeltachd of his childhood, which was already fading at that time. This is not a unique choice amongst twentieth-century Scottish poets. For instance, George Mackay Brown’s poetry, according to Gifford, contains “the most consistent and classical Arcadia constructed in the works” (*Pastoral* 40) of the pastoral poets he observes. Gifford comments:

His poetry is actually set in an Orkney of the past. “Modern Orkney,” [MacKay Brown] has said, “has little of the stuff of poetry (...) Too many machines, pre-packaging etcetera. Also newspapers (...) T.V.” In a remarkably revealing statement he located his personal Orkney as a nostalgic construct: “When I write of the present it is always thirty or forty years ago or set in my childhood (Gifford and Mackay Brown qtd in Gifford *Pastoral* 40).

Similarly, MacCaig’s pastoral space avoids modernity. While names of real-life people who inhabit the region at the time MacCaig writes, such as his close friend

A.K. MacLeod occasionally make their way into his poems, there is very little to anchor them in time. In the whole of the *Collected Poems*, there is a single occurrence of mechanised farming with a harvester in “Seasonal Note – June” (*CP* 438). Outside of this, the countryside and its dwellings seem to contain no television set, no radio, no cars. In these conditions, the haycart in “Fetching Cows” (*CP* 125) brings to mind an old-fashioned horse-drawn cart. Delmaire notes that, “[j]udging from almost randomly chosen titles such as ‘Shadow in summer’ (*CP* 14) or ‘False summer’ (*CP* 21), nostalgia for the lost past and distrust of the future loom especially large in the background of many poems (“The ‘Zen Calvinism’ of Norman MacCaig” 147). This nostalgic way of looking back to the past that is an intrinsic component of the Eden myth resonates through MacCaig’s poems, to the extent that even the flora of the poems often reflects back a sense of decay, of human sadness. MacCaig’s distaste for the pathetic fallacy has been stated earlier; in this instance, he is not entirely free of it: the trees of “Shadow in Summer” (*CP* 14), for instance, “fall like weeping” (l.1); roses in particular conform to their traditional role as symbol of the transience of life: “the doomed rose” (l.7) of “Edinburgh Spring” (*CP* 20) is echoed in the “flowerbeds that have blazed and dazed and wilted” (“Nude in a Fountain” *CP* 68 l.8) and “Standing in my Ideas” (*CP* 77) creates a written *vanitas* by bringing together the flower and mortal remains: “The gorgeous rose is sibling to the bone” (l.6). Natural mortality is however far from the only threat to nature in MacCaig’s poems; in a number of them, man’s relationship to it contains an element of callousness and violence. “Maiden Loch” (*CP* 43) has “an oar flash[ing] like a knife” (l.12) taking up the ominous connotations of “the glinting rod-tip” (l.9) and

the “brief struggle” – a fishing scene that does not explicitly reference the activity, or fish, for that matter and as such appears to imply other kinds of violence.

Pastoral in general and a significant portion of MacCaig’s poems are built on a nostalgic gaze back to a fictionalised golden age. This idealised era may be placed at the level of society as a whole, or may be centred more particularly on an individual. This is the case with childhood pastoral, a subcategory of the pastoral mode which appears frequently in MacCaig’s writing. “Aunt Julia” (*CP* 189) relies on childhood memory of the titular character. The poem displays several elegiac traits, as observed in the previous chapter; but its most striking aspects are the emphasis it lays on the otherness of the character and the language barrier between the child speaker and his aunt. She is doubly removed from him by the text, first through the impossibility of communication between them, then, when this might have been corrected at least in part, by the passing of time:

By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave
at Luskentyre.
But I hear her still, welcoming me
(...)
and getting angry, getting angry
with so many questions
unanswered (l.26-31, 35-37)

The elegiac undertones of the poem stem from the sense of inevitable loss of the culture Aunt Julia embodies. She lies in an actual “sandy grave,” considering the geological properties of the region, yet the “sand” signifier also creates associations with the idea of time passing inexorably, like sand running through one’s fingers, or with the ephemeral character of all human things with the image of building on

sandy ground and seeing the construction crumble. As such, childhood pastoral in MacCaig's poems works on the double level of the individual and society. The sense of Edenic innocence and absence of cares in childhood is of course present, but finds itself qualified when it conflicts with the impossibility of communication with that other Golden Age, MacCaig's personal myth of a Gaelic pastoral. Ultimately, the poem does not limit itself to nostalgic evocation of this supposedly ideal past and this is not the unproblematic pastoral (in the pejorative sense) of an "escapist weekender" (Gifford *Green Voices* 155).

His writing however evinces a strong sense of nostalgia whenever MacCaig returns to his personal pastoral space, which further ties him to this mode as it is, according to Lerner, "the basic emotion of pastoral" (41). The trauma of the Clearances is strongly present in his nature poems, as Ross remarks: "the Clearances haunt his meditations as does the continuing depopulation of Assynt" (20). This "haunting" presence and the affinity of MacCaig's nature poems with the elegiac mode is such that one might in fact consider them to act collectively as an elegy for the disappearing culture and people of the Highlands. MacCaig's personal history also seems to have some bearing on this phenomenon as well. Reflecting on the death of Angus MacLeod, he explains:

He was part and parcel of that landscape to me and when he died, of course, the landscape was altered. It always was a sad landscape because of the Clearances. Ruins of houses everywhere, you know. Hints of the day when the Glens were filled with people. Now they're just a wilderness. It's a sad, beautiful place and you can't escape the recognition of the sadness, but if you actually know people who live there and are close, close friends and they die, then, of course, the abstract idea of death becomes a very immediate thing (Degott-Reinhardt 314-315).

MacCaig's *Collected Poems* are not the work of a young man – he is already forty-five when the first volume he acknowledges, *Riding Lights*, comes out – and the passing of time and friends leaves its mark on them in the form of a sense of progressive loss as previously discussed. Symptomatic of this the “old crofter” of the eponymous poem (*CP* 295) could be seen as metonymic of the traditional rural culture he belongs to. The mood of the piece is melancholy as the speaker depicts the decline of the unnamed crofter in his old age. The elegiac tone is rendered through the asyndetic construction of the poem. Each element – gate, oar and hammer being afforded exactly two lines at first before haycocks and lamp see their allotted portion reduced to one line each. This results in a fast-paced text that gives the impression of speeding up in the second half of the second stanza, which mimics the subjective impression noted by psychologists that time passes more quickly as one advances in age. In contrast, the last stanza flows uninterrupted throughout its two coordinated independent clauses, suggesting a peaceful passing. This impression is reinforced through the verbs employed: “slither” (l.14) evokes a smooth, continuous movement with no indication of speed. “Drift off” in the next line lacks the conscious intent implied by “slither;” it is an involuntary, slow type of movement, which gives off a sense of decrease, of decline between line 14 and line 15 until finally, the last line introduces “dwindling away,” indicating that what movement “away” implies gradually negates itself as it fades. Similarly melancholy, the *ubi sunt* motif is called up in “Two Thieves” (*CP* 373), in which the contemporary landscape is overlaid with what it was when the grandmother of “old Flora,” elderly herself as the designation suggests, lived. The first line provides the location with a peculiar

English name: “Place for Pulling up Boats.” Naming is reduced to describing a function and capitalising nouns in contrast with the parenthesis in line 2 (one word in Gaelic). This might read as the landscape becoming ordinary through translation into modernity parallel with the waning of Gaelic language and culture among the newer generations. The space is described as “this small dying place / whose every house is now lived in / by the sad widow of a fine strong man” (l.10-14), its exact but demystified translated name rendered tragically ironic in the last two lines: “by the Place for Pulling up Boats / where no boats are.” The *ubi sunt* question regarding those who lived there is implicit in the statements “There were fine strong men in the Duke’s time. / He drove them to the shore, he drove them to Canada” (l.14-16). In fact, the poem being built on resentful, melancholy repetitions takes the air of an old-fashioned song, perhaps dating back to the time of the Duke evoked in the text and, with an ironic twist, laments the abandonment of the submerged tract of land, once a pastoral “smooth green sward,” in the style of a time when the traditional countryside was not yet threatened by rural exodus and the encroaching exogenous culture. In the same spirit, the chieftain of “Highland Games” (CP 346), a poem saturated with modernity, ironically “leans his English accent / on a five-foot crook and feels / one of the natives” (l.9-11). This last example contrasts starkly with the two poems quoted beforehand. While “Old Crofter” and “Two Thieves” represent the elegiac bent of MacCaig’s poetry and accordingly reintroduce once again the ordinary tragic to be found in the passing of time, a theme MacCaig favours throughout his career, “Highland Games” presents a starkly contrasting satiric modulation. This dissonance is not an entirely isolated case in his works, and ways

to account for it will be considered later in this chapter.

Pastoral writing displaces a sophisticated point of view into a supposedly simpler, but also more virtuous space. In doing so, it proposes to the urban, modern – by comparison with the timeless pastoral frame – reader a different set of values for pastoral man. In considering that MacCaig only engages with the pastoral on a superficial level, Gifford may be reacting at least partly to the fact that his poems displaying pastoral modulations seem to offer very little overt political or social criticism. Gifford's stipulation that "whatever the locations and modes of pastoral retreat may be, there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood" (*Pastoral* 81) definitely supports this idea in making a commentary on the non-pastoral space a capital element of the pastoral. As such, it becomes somewhat problematic to note that city and country are rarely contrasted in a single poem in MacCaig's works and that modernity is mostly absent from his natural landscapes. It is of course possible to play separate poems off one another and, considering MacCaig's *Collected Poems* as a single text, to foreground his implicit promotion of "natural" values – the supposed values of prelapsarian Man. From this perspective, MacCaig's nature poems provide a discreet counter-model in comparison to more urban texts such as the highly critical "Street Preacher" (*CP* 129) or "Leader of Men" (*CP* 153). The reader must however keep in mind that MacCaig does not conceive of his poems as a system, but as separate and unrelated texts which may happen to contain similar themes occasionally. Moreover, the *Collected Poems* consist in distinct slim volumes published over the course of a little more than four decades, which makes treating

them as a continuous text a delicate strategy.

Nevertheless, it is possible to argue against Gifford that MacCaig's use of pastoral conventions is no mere "inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment" (Marx 5) which, left unchecked, would "result [in] a simple-minded wishfulness, a romantic perversion of thought and feeling" (Marx 10). A more complex approach to pastoral suggests "implicitly or explicitly, a critical exploration and counterbalancing of attitudes, perspectives and experiences" (Cullen 2). There is "a note of criticism (...) inherent in all pastoral from the beginning of its existence. It is latent in the form in its very desire for movement away from an unsatisfactory time and place to another time and place that is imagined to be superior. Satire, moralising and allegory are merely the inborn tendencies of pastoral rendered overt and explicit" (Marinelli 12). This is conveyed in MacCaig's poems, though it may not always be obvious at first glance, through the depiction of a pastoral ethos that contrasts implicitly with modern and generally urban lifestyles. In order to demonstrate that MacCaig engages fully with the pastoral tradition, I will now discuss these characteristic values of the pastoral and their treatment in his writings.

Because the figures inhabiting the pastoral space are closely related to the denizens of Eden, they assume a particular ethos of simplicity and frugality Marinelli and Poggioli both outline as a key trait of the mode in their definitions. Marinelli remarks about the Golden Age he considers to be the model of the pastoral ideal: "Two elements predominate: a lack of ambition and aspiration, which implies a virtuous lack of the avarice and pride which are their source; and a desire for sinless pleasure, which in turns implies a virtuous lack of the passion of lust"

(Marinelli 15). Poggioli delineates the pastoral ethos as “primarily negative:”

Its code prescribes few virtues, but proscribes many vices. Foremost among the passions that the pastoral opposes and exposes are those related to the misuse, or merely to the possession, of worldly goods. They are the passions of greed: cupidity and avarice, the yearning after property and prosperity (...) The bucolic considers the pursuit of wealth – *auri sacra fames* – as an error as well as a crime, since it makes impossible “the pursuit of happiness” (4).

According to these two accounts, pastoral man appears to find his lifestyle on moderation and sedate enjoyment in a fashion not dissimilar to the values proposed by classical Epicureanism, as Faggen suggests: “the philosophical stance of pastoral poetry has often been associated with Epicurus and Epicureanism, a life of unreflective and simple pleasure free from torment and fear” (55). To some extent, MacCaig’s potentially pastoral poems do, upon closer examination, conform to this model.

The figures populating MacCaig’s pastoral spaces seem, as has been previously discussed, to have been drawn from a pre-industrial rural past. Their farming activities appear therefore quite modest in scale, suggesting the type of pastoral economy delineated by Poggioli:

pastoral economy seems to realise the contained self-sufficiency that is the ideal of the tribe, of the clan, of the family. The pastoral community produces all it needs, but nothing more, except for a small margin of security. It equates its desires with its needs; it ignores industry and trade (4-5).

MacCaig’s pastoral figures seem similarly isolated economically: the old woman “leading a cow by a rope / all the way round the mountain /to Tarbert” (1.5-7) in “Below the Clisham, Isle of Harris: After Many Years” (*CP* 384) does so on foot, “trudg[ing on],” we are told – this is no eccentric walking a pet cow as one would a

dog. She is followed by a single cow leashed on an all-purpose, rustic rope. The image suggests the economical status of a very small nineteenth or early twentieth century farm entirely disconnected from the realities of contemporary livestock farming.

In an apparent departure from the pastoral model, these frugal characters do not, however, enjoy the conventional pastoral *otium*. They are in fact most of the time depicted performing – often in the traditional non-mechanised fashion – various farming tasks. The ageing figure in “Old Highland Woman” (*CP* 417) is accompanied by “scuffling hens and the collie / dreaming of sheep” (l.4-5), which similarly suggests a modest country household and all its attendant duties – and the mention of the hens may point to the rustic self-sufficiency specified by Poggioli.

These farming tasks taken on by MacCaig’s pastoral characters are however comparatively light and not wholly unpleasant. The figures at work are not alienated from the result of their efforts. “Old Crofter” (*CP* 295) presents the decline of its central figure through the dwindling quality of his work, but what is of interest at this point is the self-sufficient, individual nature of his tasks: “the gate he built last year” (l.1), “the oar he shaped this summer” (l.2). Both represent autonomous work whose results are tangible and directly usable to the worker, as opposed to a modern farming situation in which the farmer uses store-bought objects in tasks which, though they do yield a concrete result, are not taken to their conclusion. Instead of the entirely transformed end-product, it is a monetary profit that comes out of the production process. The “old crofter” instead can see and use the finished product of his work. This isolated, self-sufficient abstraction from modern capitalistic economy

may read as a remnant of a past way of life – the artisan and the crofter as opposed to the modern industrial and agricultural workforce

As posited earlier, MacCaig's pastoral poems adopt an ethos of moderation in all things, which is coherent with an Epicurean outlook. There is indeed the same sense of reasonable enjoyment of life as can be found in classical Epicurean doctrine. For instance, the "Old Highland Woman" (*CP* 417) "laughs a wicked cackle / with love in it" (l.14-15), and the speaker emphasises her anaphoric "relishing" of her neighbour's conversation and "the life in it" (l.17-18). The "Crofter" (*CP* 432) who, "last thing at night / (...) steps out to breathe / the smell of winter" (l.1-3), who "listens / for small sounds" (l.7-8) and whose "eyes are filled with friendliness" (l.8-9) reflects this model of moderation and enjoyment of the simple things as well. There is a strain in MacCaig's poems which maintains and nourishes the idea of the wisdom of simple folks, of country folks. While his evocations of city-dwellers tend to satirise or foreground pathos, his tone when he talks of the people of the country is always one of praise.

This, in correlation with the form of prelapsarian innocence it places in its denizens would call to mind Poggioli's characterisation of the pastoral figure as "the shepherd" who, "unlike the saint or the monk, is obsessed by neither temptation nor guilt, and is free from the sense of sin" (8). This shepherd, "as a conscious or unconscious philosopher" is explicitly described as an Epicurean who "observes the ethics of that school" (*ibid.*). MacCaig creates pastoral figures that become poets and philosophers reminiscent of the archetype portrayed by Poggioli. Notably, "Two Shepherds" (*CP* 162) concludes of its two portraits:

Two poets –
Dionysian,
Apollonian
and the sheep in the pen.

In conclusion, the charge that MacCaig's is a merely superficial engagement with the pastoral does not appear to hold. The central characteristics and aims of the pastoral are indeed present in his poems: there is in his nature writing a pastoral point of view which looks back on a personal pastoral space peopled with pastoral figures. These characters, while they talk little, unlike the shepherds of the historical mode, are nevertheless made to outline a certain philosophy which contrasts with the commonly deplored failings of modern society. MacCaig's practice of the pastoral is not limited to an aesthetic choice, as Gifford reproaches, nor do his poems entirely ignore social and historical issues despite many critical claims to the contrary.

B – Beyond Pastoralism

This study has shown that MacCaig fully engages with the pastoral tradition, but there are diverging undercurrents in his nature poetry which the pastoral cannot explain. In this part of the chapter, I will argue that calling up notions of anti-pastoral and post-pastoral which, by contrast with the pastoral, evince a more realistic approach to nature and the country, allows the reader to account for these dissonances. To this end, I will begin with a short case study of "A Man in Assynt" (*CP* 224-231), the longest and most complex structurally of MacCaig's poems.

There are clear pastoral traits in the poem. As observed earlier, the pastoral

space is always a lost Eden, and so the decline and slow death of Gaelic Highlands society is at the centre of “A Man in Assynt.” The seventh stanza memorialises those who were dispossessed of their land during the Clearances. While a critical or satiric tone is not infrequent in MacCaig’s poems, the vehement indignation in this excerpt is a rare occurrence, and all the more surprising when one keeps in mind a parenthesis inserted by the poet in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things:” “I have to borrow a rage because I don’t have one myself” (118). The whole stanza is composed of a single run-on sentence:

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 (1.59-72).

The sentence would have been grammatically complete at the end of line 59, but MacCaig tacks on a forceful development on the situation after the deictic “this,” underlining the decline of traditional Highland society through the emphatic polyptoton of “this dying landscape” (1.60) echoing in “the dead” (1.61). The rhetorical interrogation closes with a question mark, but the sentence marches on, its two parts linked through a cavalier dash highlighting the emotional quality of the speaker’s discourse. This syntactic choice appears significant in regard of MacCaig’s usual predilection for shorter sentences. Here, it gives the stanza the appearance of

an inflamed tirade during which the speaker does not stop for breath. Though the “dying”/ “dead” polyptoton suggests an elegiac tone, the violence of the images seems to imply a measure of anger rather than resignation: the metaphors in line 65 and 66 are reversals of the usual power balance between animal and man: instead of herding them, men are “trampled under the hoofs of sheep,” and, while in a hunting scene deer would be driven to a certain location by the hunters so that they can be killed, it is men that are “driven by deer to/ the ends of the earth.” The implied absurdity is reinforced by the simultaneously pathetic and indignant emphatic repetitions of “to men” (as heads of relative subordinate clauses) and of the damning “their own betrayal / by their own chiefs” (l.67-68), the pathos of which is highlighted by the foregrounding effect of having “loyalty” and “betrayal” echo and contrast one another in closing position in two consecutive lines. Taking up the *ubi sunt* motif, the speaker asks mournfully: “Where have they gone, the people /who lived between here and / Quinag (...) ?” (l. 73-75).

MacCaig’s treatment of the notion of ownership in this poem is similarly tied into the pastoral. The question of ownership acts as a refrain of sorts in this poem – “Who owns this landscape?” repeated in lines 10, 32 and 36 – and is raised on an implicit background of Marxist theory: does the capital or the people who work it own the land? “The millionaire who bought it or / the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning / with a deer on his back” (l.33-34) places the speaker’s sympathy with the poacher: his description is allotted two lines when the millionaire receives a terse, dismissive treatment. Moreover, his “staggering downhill” may be thought to imply an effort on his part, suggesting that his poaching, however illegal, is a form

of work and as such not wholly morally condemnable. The fact that the speaker asks the question, however, places him outside of the pastoral space, which it relegates to a past which he attempts to return to intellectually in a pilgrimage of sorts in the central returning movement of the pastoral: an attempt at escape as well as a comment on modern capitalistic notions of ownership.

The pastoral writer is of course at all times aware of the impossibility of a true return to the Eden avatar that is the pastoral space. However, expression of this awareness in the text itself tends to be limited and generally muted. In this MacCaig goes against the grain in “A Man in Assynt”:

And the mind
behind the eye, within the passion,
remembers with certainty that the tide will return
and thinks, with hope, that that other ebb,
that sad withdrawal of people, may, too,
reverse itself and flood
the bays and the sheltered glens
with new generations replenishing the landscapes
with its richest of riches and coming, at last,
into their own again (*CP* 231 l.260-274).

A rarity in MacCaig’s works, these lines deliver a hopeful take on the problem of post-Clearances depopulation in the Highlands. There are mentions of figures that would attempt through a relocation to the countryside to return to what they see as a golden age. Still in “A Man in Assynt”, MacCaig writes:

they exchange the tyranny of the clock
for the natural rhythm of day and
night and day and night and for
the natural decorum that binds together
the fishing grounds, crofting lands
and the rough sheepruns that hoist themselves
towards the hill (l.160-166).

To make it clear that there is no possible return to a prelapsarian pastoral innocence,

rationalist MacCaig specifies that the transplanted city-dwellers make this “exchange” in vain:

From these places [Glasgow, London, Edinburgh]
come people tired of a new civilisation
to taste what’s left
of an old one. They outnumber
the locals – a thing
too easy to do (l.153-158)

Firstly, the city-dwellers only come for a “taste” of this natural lifestyle. They come as tourists, for a short period, and MacCaig himself only one generation removed from this type of life as a “first-generation townee” would not make such a relocation permanent. He writes: “I think my ideal life would be to spend the six winter months in the city and the other six in the Highlands – particularly the North West and, even more particularly, the Gairloch to Kinlochbervie bit of it” (“Foreword” to the *Poems of the Scottish Hills* v).

Secondly, the experience of the countryside is viewed in terms of consumption – “taste” – and its lifestyle is only “what is left of an old [civilisation]” The phrasing makes it clear that no revival is possible. The tourists “outnumber” the locals, as though the pastoral space were a battlefield. It is, however “too easy to do” – the optimistic outlook outlined earlier is quietly discarded. As Lindenbaum observes: “Pastoral writing need not, often does not, take any stand on the simplified life it pictures; it does not necessarily exhort us to leave our centrally heated homes to take up residence in thatched cottages” (ix). MacCaig takes this one step further by repeatedly affirming the futility of a fantasised return to the pastoral space.

This tendency to an occasionally grim realism – the opposite of what Gifford criticises – goes against the traditional bent of pastoral. It is in some of MacCaig’s

poems pushed to a point where it renders the pastoral “return” impossible and creates instead an anti-pastoral modulation.

This is what happens in “Highland Barbecue” (*CP* 420). Uncharacteristically, this poem evokes a very modern country lifestyle. The situation it describes cannot be said to correspond to a pastoral ideal: the “holiness” (l.20) of “the youngsters of the village” (l.6) having a small festive gathering is only “short-lived” (l. 20). Ominous images creep into the description of their merry-making: the first stanza implies images of death, injury and imprisonment:

Darkness has come
snuffing the candles of distance,
binding the legs of the tall ash trees,
with black bandages.

The bonfire itself is fed with “broken fishboxes” (l.9) – consumables damaged and discarded, like the “Coca-Cola tins” (l.19). Despite the cheerful movement of the flames that anaphorically “jig /to the jigg^{ing} of Jimac’s accordion” (l.9-10), the scene seen “from a distance” (l.21) degenerates into a witches’ sabbath: “it looks like / a tiny, mediaeval hell – all that red, / those figures in the flicker” (l.11-13). Even though if you “come close,” the potential demonic figures become “young seraphs” (l.16), its proximity with “Coca-Cola tins” (l.18) relates their “jewel heap” (l.17) to a rubbish heap. Finally, “the gull over the bay” (l.21) to which “they pay no heed, in their short-lived holiness” can be given a double meaning: it can signify a lack of appreciation for the beauties of nature – the pastoral poet is an outsider or thinks like one. Alternatively, images of death and decay and traces of modernity infuse the poem and the writer emphasises several times the youth of his revellers. The “rejected spirit” that is the gull, separated from the rest of the poem and the

evocation of the party and the “youngsters” by a dash at the beginning of line 22 might be the speaker himself, an older man cut off from the “short-lived holiness” of youth. In either case, the poem is no pastoral. In fact, by undermining consistently the idealisation necessary for the pastoral to exist, MacCaig produces what could be termed an anti-pastoral.

According to Gifford,

the anti-pastoral tradition might appear to be based simply upon exposing the distance between reality and the pastoral convention when that distance is so conspicuous as to undermine the ability of the convention to be accepted as such. But that distance can be caused, not only by economic or social realities, but by cultural uses of the pastoral that an anti-pastoral text might expose (*Pastoral* 128).

MacCaig’s “Birds All Singing” (*CP* 19), with its ironically idyllic title, displays a distinct anti-pastoral strain – it belongs to *Riding Lights*, his first post-surrealist period collection and is as such an early poem, which allows the reader to conclude that it is not over time that MacCaig becomes disenchanted with the pastoral ideal. The seeds of unease are there from the start, which hardly corresponds to Gifford’s very critical assessment of his nature poems.

The first stanza exposes the illusion perpetuated by the pastoral tradition by rephrasing it in terms befitting courtly love poetry: “they woo no sweet and fair” (l. 2). The realistic interpretation of the birds’ song is formulated with truculent humour: “coarse descriptions of any other cock bird / That dare intrude a wing / In their half-acre.” In Crichton Smith’s assessment of the poem, “the birds turn out to be not romantic lovers but screaming fish wives (...). The protection of property is the meaning of these songs. There is an ‘economic’ rather than a ‘romantic’ basis to this world” (“Birds All Singing” 52). This is made very clear in the poem through

the discrepancy between manner and matter in the juxtaposition of “tumbling-down sweetness and ascending bliss/ Elaborat[ing] unrepeatable ancestries” (l.8-9) or in the laconic “no passion but possession” (l.13). The latter, even as it states the difference between the two reminds the reader of the frequent confusion between the two through the alliterations in [p] and [f] – so striking that they border on paronomasia. The illusory nature of pastoral convention is bound through the use of similar stylistic devices to the wilful self-deception man clings to when it comes to himself: the erroneous identification between wealth and self-worth (“A miserly / Self-enlargement that muddles mine and me” l.13-14) and the aspiration towards an idealistic conception of life and self – symbolised by the subverted pastoral interpretation in this poem – as opposed to the “economic basis to the world” Crichton Smith points out.

In the sense that it accounts for some of the instances where MacCaig leaves behind the conventions of the pastoral, implying them to be unsuited to nature poetry in the modern age, the anti-pastoral is then a useful concept in considering his nature writings. It is not however sufficient to account for the occasions where MacCaig moves beyond rather than against pastoral conventions. In these cases, another notion, that of the post-pastoral, may reveal itself to be more instructive. Gifford in *Pastoral* sees the need for

a new term to refer to literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language (149).

With this concept, pastoral and anti-pastoral modulations in MacCaig’s works could

be reconciled in a more complex system of thought. To argue, in contradiction with Gifford's own assessment of it, that MacCaig's poetry can be read as post-pastoral at least to a certain extent, I will be leaning on Gifford's definition of this concept, which he bases on six criteria. These six traits share a common rejection of complacency in the face of nature's complexity. They result in a certain realism avoiding easy literary aggrandisement – Nature is neither Eden nor Hell in the post-pastoral. There is no firm divide between the human and the natural either. Two of the defining traits of the post-pastoral – the third and the fourth – posit correspondences between the world of Man and the world around him, suggesting a definite fluidity of the supposed limit between the two.

This lack of separation does not however truly imply familiarity. The first trait of the post-pastoral is “an awe in attention to the natural world” (Gifford *Pastoral* 152) coming from “a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things” (ibid) and “not just from a naturalist's intimate knowledge or a modern ecologist's observation of the dynamics of relationships” (ibid). This actually mirrors MacCaig's own celebration of the world⁴³, which in his poetic universe ensures that a sense of the sacred remains even as religion fails – there is in his poems a sense of awe at existence which has already been discussed at length earlier in this thesis.⁴⁴

The second post-pastoral trait brings to mind MacCaig's strategy to steer clear of the motherly or destructive clichés of nature. Instead, he stresses an absolute impartiality in the life and death cycle.⁴⁵ This correlation of purity and callousness is

⁴³ Detailed in the first chapter of this thesis.

⁴⁴ See chapter II, C – Conclusions for the sense of “grace” to be found in nature in MacCaig's poems.

⁴⁵ See chapter I, C, p.85

occasionally transferred from nature to figures that could be termed pastoral. The eccentric character at the centre of “Far Gone in Innocence” (*CP* 285) is introduced in a moment of subverted pastoral activity. The speaker, evoking this alien figure which seems a cross between a pastoral element for his innocence and a poet-dreamer avatar recounts: “He sows seedpackets and throws away the seeds. / But what imaginary gardens flourish where / He takes the evening in his gaudy air.” This character, however, is a menacing presence: “He has a fault, the fault true innocence / Can’t know about, in its oneness: / He’s full of love and yet is pitiless” (l.13-15). Nature in MacCaig’s poems displays this same seemingly paradoxical mixture of utter innocence – in its unthinking purity – and necessary cruelty. This corresponds perfectly to Gifford’s assessment of “the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution” as characteristic of the post-pastoral (*Pastoral* 153). “One More” (*CP* 364) illustrates this aptly with its juxtaposition of death and the creation of new life:

That’s it, said the stag
and buckled his front legs and fell over (l.1-2)
(...)
The small burn gabbled by and in the Red Corrie
another stag mounted a hind among the small flowers (l.11-12)

The first five couplets of the poem are devoted to the death scene of the first stag, until the sixth provides a reaffirmation of life, the briefness of it stressing the contrast and complementarity between the two opposites. In most of MacCaig’s poems presenting this type of counterpoint, time appears as an inexorable, apparently malicious presence: in “One More,” “the minutes filed by, all anonymous, / each

with a gralloching knife in its belt” (l.13-14) while “Summer Drowse” (*CP* 198), which depicts the evolution and development of vegetation in a specific location offers up an extended metaphor in presentia: “time, the marksman, sleeping on the hill” (l.24). Life in the poem is however invaded by uneasy signifiers: “bracken’s slow invasion will creep down” is not a jubilant affirmation of existence and the recurring images of seeds show them “shrapnelling” – a war-like image uncomfortably close to the marksman metaphor – or “frail,” which may suggest either the fragility of new life, or, conversely, its inexorable power as it can subsist and thrive from such small and precarious vessels. Ultimately, however, the time-as-marksman metaphor dominates the poem by returning at the end of half its stanzas, captured in the moment before a shot – “time hangs fire behind his aiming gun” (l.4), “when time’s long finger squeezes on the trigger” (l.15) – or after “when time stands up to cart his quarry home” (l.20). This last occurrence suggests hunting rather than war and, with this precision, reiterates the juxtaposition of life and death as unlike war, death as the result of a hunt has a further aim of nourishment – the food chain is after all a simple but powerful example of life thriving on death. “Drenched Field and Bright Sun” (*CP* 166), for instance, begins with one such image as the speaker remembers: “I saw a crow swallow a silver worm,” and the wounded crow addressed in “Gin Trap” (*CP* 364) is foretold in the last lines of the poem: “a gliding fox will tear you apart / with his flashing, beautiful smile.” Death there nourishes life. While MacCaig was rather critical of the violence of Ted Hughes’ animal poems (MS “Ted Hughes”), the image of the knife that appears in filigree behind the word “flashing” and the beauty ascribed to it would not be out of place in one of them. In fact, this is

not an isolated case; the same alliance between vitality, beauty and destructive power animates “the last wolf in Scotland” of “Survivors” (*CP* 307).

It seems then that despite the unease perceptible in “Summer Drowse,” the complementarity of life and death in nature is in these cases accepted unequivocally. “Where we are” (*CP* 374), a short poem whose thrust is the creative power of death, is built on binary structures: its stanzas are couplets, the first four of which depict a first element dying to allow another to come into existence. Furthermore in the first two couplets, this process is underlined through the repetition of the same signifier referring first to the parent-object then to the one that is created from its destruction, the effect rendered even more striking in the almost perfect epanalepsis “a yellow flower dies giving birth to a yellow flower” (l.1). However, this acceptance is not necessarily the dominant attitude towards the question in MacCaig’s works. Gifford cautions however that “to say ‘all destruction is really creation’ is to come close to reverting to pastoral complacency in the face of the realities of decay, ageing, illness and death” (*Pastoral* 156). This is one pitfall which MacCaig generally avoids: for one “Where we are” which foregrounds the idea of death as a creative power, directing the reader's sympathy towards the quintessential universally reviled figure of the Reaper – “And death smiles ruefully, thinking / how little she is understood” (l.9-10) – the opposite stance which has time and decay intrude disturbingly on life is infinitely more common in his poems. “Two Skulls” (*CP* 370) marks the inevitability of death and the passing of time as the one great injustice and source of anxiety in MacCaig’s poetic world: MacCaig and MacDiarmid find the skulls of a dogfish and a pigeon. “After death the one is as beautiful as the other / (but not to a pigeon, not to

a dogfish)” (l.9-10). The parenthesis provides a muted commentary subverting the double idea of beauty born from destruction and death as the great equaliser. It is the change of perspective which creates this shift from a contemplative mood to a rising bitterness – the repetition of “not to a” implies a stronger emotion than mere aesthetic contemplation. It might furthermore be relevant to note that, as a human and thus uninvolved observer may find beauty in the mortal remains of an animal, a parallel can be drawn with a strictly human situation: a poet or philosopher may find consolation in art or wisdom, may create beauty in an elegy on the occasion of a death by being either uninvolved from the start or by abstracting themselves from the situation. People close to the departed or strangers who consider it from the human angle will see first and foremost an uncomfortable *memento mori* and a reminder of loss. This is the attitude MacCaig displays in this poem; and because his friend Hugh MacDiarmid is mentioned by name, the reality effect allows the reader to identify the speaker as the poet here when he bites out:

I hate death, the skull-maker, because he proves
that destroying and making happen together.

He’ll be no friend of mine, as long as I’m still
a feathery pigeon or a scrapeskin dogfish.

– I mean a man, whose skull contains
ideas death never thought of.

Again, this word, “hate,” under the pen of customarily peaceful MacCaig. The creative-destructive role of death, while acknowledged, is openly resented, thus preventing any accusation of facile pastoralism; and this resentment is born from a refusal of consolation. MacCaig affirms the human point of view as opposed to abstract intellectual contemplations and makes this uncommonly explicit for him

through his elucidation of the extended metaphor of pigeon and dogfish: the dash at the beginning of the line marks a break; draws the reader's attention for the clarification further underlined through the paronomasia: "I mean a man."

The third defining trait of the post-pastoral according to Gifford replaces Man not only in nature, but reinstates him as an intrinsic part of it. It corresponds to the ability to "[learn] that what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature (...) the recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (Gifford *Pastoral* 156). MacCaig in his animal poems often displays a keen empathy and a sense of acute kinship with his subjects. They regularly become allegorical representations of the speaker through which the poem can transition to consideration of his own situation. "Swimming Lizard" (*CP* 12) illustrates this. After three stanzas in which he describes affectionately "The tiny monster, the alligator / a finger long" (l.4-5), the speaker concludes: "And I, like it, too big to be noticed, / Hung over him in pity, and my help, too, was / No reaching hand, but a loving and helpless will."

McCabe notes that

[t]he poet's empathy with the "tiny monster" is quite remarkable, for it does not consist only in the pity he feels. (...) The lizard's ignorance of its own position in relation to its element, the water, is likened to Man's own helplessness, for just as the man's pity does nothing to help the lizard, his "loving and helpless will" is akin to the lizard's unhurried swimming and is also governed by an "unknown Cause" (113-114).

"Porpoises" (*CP* 149) similarly ends on a parallel between the self and its animal subject:

I, myself
(...)
have been drawn over metaphorical waters

by these curving backs, till,
filled with elation
I don't want to have explained to me,
I lifted a pagan face and shouted
audible nonsense.

The infectious playfulness of the animal spreads to the speaker, creating a continuity between man and animal to the extent that the physical expression of this “elation” mimics the porpoises’ characteristic laughter-like calls. A similar phenomenon occurs in “On Lachie’s Croft” (*CP* 422), which stresses the similar positions of speaker and rooster by multiplying parallel structures: the latter “[is] bedraggled” (l.2), and the former in the next stanza echoes: “I, too, feel bedraggled” (l.6) until the limit between animal and human dissolves in identity: “I look at that rooster, I look at me” (l.8), the speaker claims. Backing up the metaphor, signifiers that are or could be employed literally in the evocation of the rooster – “rumped feathers,” “cosy brown hens,” “clucking” in the last stanza – are used figuratively in first-person statements characterising the human “I,” signifiers and semantic traits being passed back and forth between bird and man as though they were interchangeable.

Writing of human mores through the transparent stratagem of animal substitution is a staple of fables. That is not however the technique MacCaig employs when his observations of animals yield conclusions regarding human behaviours. Far from taking liberties with realism, he underlines the continuity of animal instincts within Man as he teases out the similarities between animal activity and conducts observable in society. “Birds All Singing” (*CP* 19), already discussed earlier, extends its analysis of birds singing as “something to do with territory” to man: “The man, / caught up in the lie the bird began” (l.26-27) constructs himself as

an economic being and the poem in its last line unites animal and human in their shared mortality: “Time topples bird and man out of their myth.” Rather than presenting an idealised model of pastoral bird-life, “Wild Oats” (CP 232) shares this same post-pastoral trait of paralleling human life and external nature to such an extent that the lines in this poems become blurred: it takes some reflection to decide whether the text presents pigeons as humans or dresses up human figures as pigeons in the manner of fables. “Wild Oats,” while it gives a humorous spin to the mating rituals of pigeons, is equal parts a statement on human courtship and its attendant drama. The lexical choices keep the poem balanced between the human and the animal world: the setting and *dramatis personae* are explicitly not human – they are “pigeons, up on a roof ledge,” “males” and “females,” with pigeon anatomies. However, the newcomer pigeon is an ambiguous “stranger” (l.4) with “a snowwhite / pouting fantail” like a pouting mouth, a “Mae West in the Women’s Guild.” This is the portrait of a *femme fatale* rather than a bird and the peculiar juxtaposition of the literal and the metaphorical in the poem blurs the line between the two. Even more strikingly, the males despite their “demented pirouetting” (l.8) are not merely similar to human suitors. The difference is perceived not in terms of something that should be added to make the metaphor perfect, but as something missing: “what a lack of moustaches to stroke” (l.9). Through this phrasing, the poet suggests the vehicle of the metaphor to be the actual nature of the object being observed. The same device is used in the last two lines where the females “went dowdily on with whatever / pigeons do when they’re knitting” – “when” and not “in lieu of” erases the animal/human divide and implies a perfect equivalence between the behaviours of

both groups.

In making use of animals to foreground human behaviours, MacCaig does appear to enact the idea that “our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature” (*Pastoral* 156), as Gifford intimates. Man for him is not radically separate from the animal realm, though he does in “A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things” insist on the superior value of human life over animal existence (103). This is a characteristic MacCaig trait; his dislike of inflated lyricism and sentimental aggrandisement tie into it – in a poet who considers that human courtship is not entirely unrelated to animal mating behaviours, the flippancy he notes in himself is definitely unsurprising.

The fourth trait outlined by Gifford evinces a similar continuity between Man and nature in the apparently paradoxical apprehension of “both nature as culture and of culture as nature” (Gifford *Pastoral* 162). Gifford explains:

To see culture as nature is to shift from Thoreau’s “I wish to say a word for Nature” (culture representing the voiceless nature), to Aldo Leopold’s “Thinking like a mountain” (culture empathising nature), to Snyder’s *No Nature* (all culture is nature). To Gary Snyder, the making of a satellite is of the same order as the making of a bird's nest (ibid.).

The speaker in MacCaig’s nature poems is not indeed a mouthpiece for nature. He talks to her, with her, about her, but not for her, even when he imagines what “the last wolf in Scotland” (“Survivors” *CP* 307) would ask. In “A Man in Assynt” (*CP* 224), the “I” and “this landscape” at times “have quarrels” (l.13). The rebuffs endured by the speaker do not come in the form of any human language, but are his interpretation of “a wind like a hand” (l.15), “a quaking bog or a loch / where no loch should be” (l.17-18) – a language in itself that he lends a human meaning to, though

he does not do so in earnest. The tone is flippant, a natural tendency MacCaig recognises in himself.⁴⁶ The landscape and the “I” “have a love-affair, so nearly human / [they] even have quarrels” (l.12-3). “Nearly” and “even” reveal the speaker’s only partial commitment to the image of the love-affair and, by extension, to the extended metaphor of the landscape-as-woman. “The rouged rocks, the mascara / under a dripping ledge, even / the tossed, the stony limbs, waiting” (l.20-23) present a caricature of sophisticated femininity with “mascara” and “dripping” suggesting abundant crying while “rouged” calls up the idea of artifice and, perhaps, meretricious womanliness. In this metaphor, vehicle and tenor are mixed and the former remains unnamed, which has the effect of undermining the grounds of the figure even as the reader understands them on an intellectual level. It is a reading of the landscape, but not an earnest one. The speaker admits in the next line:

I can’t pretend
it gets sick for me in my absence,
though I get
sick for it (l.23-26).

Because, as he writes, he “can’t pretend,” he does not, cannot speak for nature

(...) for
this landscape is
masterless
and intractable in any terms
that are human (l.39-43).

Instead, while the figures of the nature poems cannot be said to comprehend their landscapes intellectually, they exist in sympathy with them and each is part of the other. Picot underlines the specificity of country life, which he associates with “lifestyles which accommodate themselves to the universe, instead of demanding

⁴⁶ MacCaig in Degott-Reinhardt 311

that the universe be rebuilt to make room for them” (17). These people of the Scottish countryside such as the titular character of “Crofter” seem to enjoy a different relationship with Nature in MacCaig’s poems. Where city-dwellers spoil their natural surroundings, MacCaig’s writings suggest that the denizens of the country belong to a different breed, to use Gillies’ phrasing (154). Their relationship with their surroundings seems to be symbiotic, as the slippage between natural and artificial world whenever MacCaig writes about them seems to indicate, especially when human artefacts created in response to a vital need – agriculture and fishing tools, habitations are mentioned. To a certain extent, the Gaelic culture of the Scottish countryside is portrayed as a part of nature itself. “Half-built Boat in a Hayfield” (*CP* 67) illustrates this idea: the unfinished boat is a “cradle,” but it is also “a carcass rotted and its bones picked clean.” It has become an organic part of the food chain integrated within the cycle of life and death. “A.K.’s Summer Hut” (*CP* 297) which, though built by and for men “clamps itself to a rock, like a limpet” (l.1) is another instance of this type of slippage:

The starry revolutions around it,
 The deer circling in new foundations
 Of old worlds, the immortal noise
 Of the river ghosted with salmon

Are a bloodstream it’s a blood-drop in. (l.5-9)

The metaphor is double: in a first stage, it carefully posits a straightforward NATURE IS BLOODSTREAM specific metaphor in presentia with a form “A, B and C are D” and only afterwards inserts the HUT IS BLOODDROP metaphor. In this second part, the tenor – the hut – has not been named since the title of the poem, with the effect of making it only vaguely present in the reader's mind while the

vehicle – the blood-drop – is foregrounded by its proximity with the first half of the metaphor and the visual and audible reminder generated by the repetition of the signifier “blood” in both vehicles. Moreover, the image itself conveys its message in a particularly striking way. The representation of nature as a gigantic body it creates may be understood to refer to a human body as the term “bloodstream” is more frequently heard in a medical than in a veterinary context. The organic unity of the human body being something that is perceived unmediated in that of our own bodies, the inclusion of the titular hut in an all-encompassing and indivisible nature gains the status of undeniable fact.

In addition to depicting the traditional country-dwelling lifestyle as natural, the biblical imagery injected in the poem brings together the hut and the stable in Bethlehem: it is “a pilgrimage place where all hymns are jubilant” (l.4) and “the starry revolutions around it” (l.5) suggest it to be at the centre of a miraculous happening. Stanza four explicitly transforms it into the birth place of a new, non-violent and non-fanatic religion: “If I were a bethlehemish star I’d stand fixed / Over that roof, knowing there’d be born there / No wars, no tortures, no savage crucifixion.” The poem mixes its images, joining the unity of nature, the holiness of religion and traditional Gaelic culture (l.11 “That silly chaffinch, practically talking Gaelic”). As a result, all three appear interchangeable and the reader, unable to pick apart where nature ends and traditional rural lifestyle begins finds him or herself conflating them together as the source of “a rare, an extraordinary thing – / An exhilaration of peace, a sounding / Grace with trinities galore” (l.13-15).

Parallel to this idea of a blurring between natural and artificial sphere, the

very selves of the countryside dwellers in MacCaig's nature poems seem to draw characteristics from their native landscape in much the same "way in which a culture (and its conscience) can become defined by nature" (Gifford *Pastoral* 163) outlined by Jim Crumley in *Among Mountains*:

we, the race we call Scots, *are* the mountains. Their landscape is what others judge us by, and whether we think of ourselves as Highlander or Lowlander or Islander of something else, we all look to them as the unyielding granite in the backbone of our nation. We are shaped by them. They have given us our stoicism, our reputation for hospitable shelter, our temperament of storms (qtd in Gifford *Pastoral* 163).

The city-raised MacCaig visiting his mother's family in "Return to Scalpay" (*CP* 280) reflects: "half my thought and half my blood is Scalpay" (l.35). In "Below the Clisham, isle of Harris: After Many Years" (*CP* 384), he meets "an old woman / darker but only just / than the bad weather [they] were in" (l.2-4). The people of the countryside, even the half-outsider speaker, grow to resemble their landscapes. The "hardheaded innocence" (l.36) of the local people in "Return to Scalpay" echoes the "comfortless places" of "The Pass of the Roaring" (*CP* 278), the inhospitable landscape of "A Man in Assynt" (*CP* 224-230) which, however harsh is "this most beautiful corner of the land" (l.253).

Because the nature/culture dichotomy does not truly hold, post-pastoral Man has a responsibility to the environment he belongs to. Consequently, the last post-pastoral quality which can conceivably be applied to MacCaig's nature poems illustrates the idea that "with consciousness comes conscience," that is "our ability to take responsibility for our behaviour towards the other species of the plain and towards the plain itself" (Gifford *Pastoral* 163), which Gifford illustrates through an analysis of D. H. Lawrence's "Snake":

in this poem, consciousness (“the voice of my education”) is transformed into conscience (“I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!”) as awe is transformed into humility and then into guilt at the speaker’s barbarous behaviour in throwing a log at the visiting snake.

The poem ends:

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.

And I have something to expiate;

A pettiness. (Gifford and D.H Lawrence qtd in *Pastoral* 163)

This sense of responsibility towards nature and animal life in particular is a strong undercurrent in MacCaig’s nature poems. “Interruption to a Journey” (*CP* 149) captures the speaker’s regret and guilt over the accidental running over of a hare, but more importantly, man’s disregard of the significance there is in extinguishing its life. The hare in the poem is a sense of tension and movement. Even dead, it “bounced (...) / on the springing curve / of its spine” (l.2-4). The thread of its existence, to be cut by the Moirai in classical literature, becomes “a bowstring” (l.12), underlining the dynamic quality of the animal in the text. The image is redoubled in a rephrasing of the animal’s death reiterating that same image: “and a bow broken for ever / that had shot itself through so many / darkneses and cornfields” (l.12-14). The bow calls up several associations: the tension of its string, the power in it, “the springing curve of [the hare’s] spine” as it runs through the field – The contrast between this dynamic vitality and the apparent stillness of “cornfields breat[ing] in darkness” (l.5) or the blandness assigned to the car’s movement – “we were going through the darkness” (l.6), with no associated meaning beyond displacement through space – already suggests regret and guilt for stopping definitely a life that was pure movement. The second half of the poem insists on the finality of the event that, in the ending of an existence, however small “made that

place, for a moment, / the most important place there was.” The image of the cut string, mournful assonance in long /o/ sounds in “a bow broken for ever” reinforce the impossibility of taking back the act. However, it is the title of the poem that foregrounds the speaker’s guilt on behalf of all mankind: the death whose irreversibility he underlines solemnly and the precious vivacity of the hare are, to most drivers only an “Interruption to a journey” – an anthropocentric point of view which only considers the comfort and practical needs of man and disregards life and its value in its other, non-human manifestations.

This idea may perhaps account for a tendency regarding the treatment of animals in MacCaig’s poems. Nairn remarks:

[i]f MacCaig writes both objectively and affectionately about animals, it is worth noting that in many such poems the animals have a pretty hard time of it because of us: frogs and hares are flattened or battered on the roads, stags are shot. The criticism is implicit. In “Responsibility” (*Surroundings*), an injured horse is allowed to wait in agony for two days until a vet will sign a death warrant (81-82).

“The last wolf in Scotland” of “Survivors” (*CP* 307), while it died long before the time of writing, is brought back in the speaker’s words. In its direct questioning – “Why am I / the last wolf in Scotland?” – a sense of unease makes itself known: the poem opens on this definition that is also naming, “the last wolf in Scotland” (l.1). From then on, the nomenclature goes unquestioned by the reader – it is a fact. Having the animal put it into question introduces an instability in the text mirroring the rising uncertainty on the reader’s part regarding human attitudes to the natural world: was the hunting to extinction of wolves an absolute necessity? The vivid evocation of the living wolf in stanza three depicts a powerful but still graceful creature – “put one paw / delicately in a mountain torrent” (l.9) brings to mind a

dancer, a dainty housecat – regret at the destruction of a form of beauty is implicit but very perceptible. More than this, however, it is the very principle of extinguishing life which is put into question in the poem. Line 14 and 15, the poem places human beings in the same situation as the last wolf in Scotland: “for I am the last of my race / as you are, and she, and he” Obviously, this can be accounted for by the idea that each man and woman is unique and as such the first and last of his or her race, but perhaps it can also, by making this parallel, grant a similar value to the animal's life. Wolf and speaker, at least, are explicitly depicted as doubles when, symmetrically to the former “put[ing] one paw / delicately in a mountain torrent,” the latter “put[s] one foot / dangerously into the twentieth century,” with the exact same enjambment and syntactic structure in both sentences highlighting the comparison. “Whales” (*CP* 201) or “Invasion of Bees” (*CP* 371) similarly deplore the human practice of sacrificing nature in general and animals in particular to man's interests and comfort through juxtaposing fondly detailed, celebratory evocations of the whales or the bee swarm with their dispassionate killing. The “peaceful, clownish monster” (*CP* 202 l.20) – there is an undercurrent of nearly childlike fondness in the poet's description of it – with its cheerful endurance as it “slid[es] / through the harshest of waters and / toss[es] up over them / playful plumes” (l.22-25) – is dismembered through “a sad / transmigration of bodies” (l.18-19) into trivial, unpoetic everyday items: “hairbrushes, margarine, oil, / fertiliser, / perfume” (l.17-18). The phrasing “transmigration of bodies” is interesting as it diverts from the expected idea of transmigration of souls into new bodies. The material transformation into inanimate objects acts as a parody of the spiritual process which,

from death, creates new life. Because all these items respond to human wants rather than essential needs – are unessential – this phrasing betrays the speaker’s disgust with what is perceived as thoughtless exploitation of nature by Man. This markedly post-pastoral concern inscribes him in a modern context; he does not, unlike what much of the criticism levelled at him suggests, ignore contemporary problematics. They are however less obviously present in his works than more abstract common themes such as time, death and love.

C – Conclusion

The rejection of compartmentalisation between Man and the world around him is a problematic question in MacCaig’s poems. Close observation of them has shown that, to an extent, his approach to nature follows this schema. However, MacCaig’s speaker remains a marginalised centre – in conformity with his customary ambiguous position, he delivers a similarly ambivalent version of the post-pastoral aesthetics of unity. Man in general and the poetic persona in particular can be presented as an element of the natural world, in continuity with it, but this uniting process fails when it comes to human society and the concerns that became more widely publicised in the second part of the Twentieth century. Of the sixth trait of post-pastoral writing, which is the “ecofeminists’ realisation that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities” (Gifford *Pastoral* 165), MacCaig’s works provide no example. The problem of social exploitation, though it is addressed, is referred to mostly indirectly and to a limited

extent. This is perhaps what prompts Gifford into delivering such a harsh assessment of MacCaig's engagement with the pastoral. It is not, however, sufficient reason to justify it. As has been shown in the first half of this chapter, MacCaig makes a very personal use of the themes and issues characteristic of this mode. This is enough to discount Gifford's appraisal of his poetry.

More interestingly, MacCaig does not entirely commit to the pastoral mode, however. His engagement with it is both undermined and furthered through the occasional anti-pastoral and more pervasively, the post-pastoral modulations in his poetry. This appears to signal a trend in the way he inscribes himself in and against literary tradition. A similar phenomenon has already been shown to occur in regards to elegy, and I will seek to show in the next chapter that amatory verse displays this same tendency.

VI – The problematic mode: Norman MacCaig’s love

lyrics

Scholarship on Norman MacCaig’s love lyrics tends to be particularly rare and fragmentary, the longest work about them being a brief section of a chapter in Frykman's 1977 study of MacCaig’s poetry. His assessment of the love poems, which he criticises for containing “a good deal of sometimes embarrassing flirtation with words, phrases and situations” (39), covers a few devices – the geographical landscape mirroring the speaker’s inner landscape, for instance – and topics he considers characteristic of MacCaig’s amatory verse. The limited critical attention paid to his love poems is however somewhat puzzling as, in terms of volume, a good portion of MacCaig’s poems, even when they are not straightforward love lyrics do contain some modulations of amatory lyricism. This phenomenon is one of the elements that can justify asking what place the theme of love holds in MacCaig’s writing. The poet’s attitude towards it only supports this, in fact. MacCaig himself appears very phlegmatic in regard to his love poetry as a 1986 interview with Degott-Reinhardt demonstrates: MacCaig avoids her attempts to get him to elaborate on his love poems⁴⁷ and steers the conversation to the fact that they are emphatically not confessional poems. This reaction can be interpreted as proof of a limited interest for the question, in which case the love poems appear to hold a minor place in the poet’s regard, but it also once again brings to the fore MacCaig’s well-known

⁴⁷ Degott-Reinhardt (286): “A question about love poems. There is a kind of conversation between the I and the you. The you seems to expect things and the I usually wants to have a change, but at the same time needs the you.”

reticence in the face of overt displays of emotion, which is particularly visible in his love poetry: Nairn remarks in regards to the poem “Sounds of the day” (*CP* 150):

a poem which seems unusually close to autobiographical or “confessional” (for the MacCaig of 1966), he still sustains an aesthetic distance. The detachment derives from the technical complexity of the metaphor, counterpointing the same conceivably romantic/emotional subject matter while at the same time the poem is effectively decontextualised (85).

There appears to be a first problematic tension between the amatory verse – the traditional devices of love lyrics and MacCaig’s own writing. Amatory verse deals primarily with the expression of emotion, often in hyperbolic terms, as will be discussed later. MacCaig, on the other hand, is a typically guarded poet, an idea Nairn’s assessment supports. MacCaig declares that “if [he] writes a poem about an emotion, [he doesn’t] inflate it” (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 303) and insists: “I hate emotional inflation. (...) I hate emotional inflation because it’s lies. I dare say there were times when I fell into the opposite error, shrinking the emotion rather than inflating it. I think, that’s one of my risks. But I’d rather fall into that error than the other” (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 278). There is moreover another related but not entirely identical site of tension in MacCaig’s amatory verse: upon being asked if poetry “can be seen as a balance between the emotional and the rational,” MacCaig declares with his usual sardonic wit: “I don’t like a poem to be purely one or the other. It ought to be a balance of both, with the elements of both. If it’s purely rational, it should be in prose. If it’s purely emotional, have your hysterics in another room” (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 288). For him, poetry in general rests on an essential tension between heart and mind, to simplify – which would be particularly pertinent in love poetry. This chapter will explore these two sites of tension in MacCaig’s

poems and how they influence his inscription in the European tradition of amatory verse in order to determine what place the theme of love and the poems dealing with it occupy in his works as a whole.

It will be helpful to start off this discussion of MacCaig's love poems by a general characterisation of them. Love appears in his works as a modulation⁴⁸ – there is no set form attached to this theme in his works. His amatory verse often contains secondary elegiac modulations as in the poem “Nausicaa” (*CP* 441) which conflates loss and lover's discourse in the princess' wistful reflections on her lost lover. The poems are generally articulated by an unnamed male speaker who appears to be middle-aged – he “blunder[s] towards a winter” (“Still Two” *CP* 12) – and addresses in the first person his feelings for a nameless woman. There are a few exceptions to this schema, such as “Nausicaa” and “Circe” (*CP* 441 and 378), but this situation remains the prevalent template for MacCaig's love poetry throughout his career. Consequently, I will be focusing in this chapter on the corpus defined by this enunciating situation as it allows more insight into the construction of MacCaig's poetic persona and its relationship to its specific object in the love poems, another subject. The evocation of the latter in MacCaig's amatory verse is problematic: as per his stated poetic project, he seeks to present his object without distorting it. However, the depiction of the beloved in the European tradition of love poetry is historically dictated to a great extent by a number of *topoi* associated with the mode. As has been discussed in the very first chapter of this thesis, MacCaig seeks in his evocations of natural scenes to rid himself from cultural mediation in the guise of

⁴⁸ As for elegy, I am using Fowler's definition of a mode.

pictorial tradition, or recurring imagery borrowed from the canon of nature writing. I will show however that, in contradiction with his avowed project, MacCaig relies largely on traditional representations in recreating the beloved, to such an extent, in fact, that this chapter will need to ask what, if anything, differentiates this idealised figure from the pre-determined place-holder Chloris of tradition. Regardless of the answer to this question, the fact remains that, in his love lyrics, MacCaig appears to depart from this overarching project the rest of his poems generally follow – a closer examination will seek to determine whether that impression is valid.

MacCaig's love lyrics owe much to the Petrarchan tradition, though his imagery can seldom be called "extreme" or "hyperbolic" and does not feature the wound of love nor the frequent military metaphors which Ward deems characteristic of Petrarchan writing (29). That his amatory verse nevertheless inscribes itself in the European tradition of the love lyric is however apparent, and the first aim of this chapter is to highlight the rhetorical devices and specific traits of the poetic persona and its relationship to the beloved object that are inherited from his literary forebears. Yet, as I intimated earlier, the codification of love and its objects in amatory verse is by definition problematic in the context of MacCaig's personal poetic project, which translates into the text as a pervasive unease with tradition. I will show that this manifests itself in MacCaig's writing through recurrent Petrarchan counter-discourses.

This unease with tradition does not mean MacCaig abstracts himself from it, however, which is why I will analyse an often noticed but rarely truly explored aspect of MacCaig's amatory verse, that is the sense of distance that arises from

them. This sense of distance can be attributed in part to MacCaig's characteristic restraint. It also arises from the elegiac modulations of his love lyrics – their thematic focus on loss and separation – as well as from the characteristic depiction of the relationship as singularly abstract. I argue that this specific trait allows MacCaig to connect this particular subset of his poems to his general project, if only indirectly.

A – MacCaig's problematic inscription within the European tradition of the love lyric

To establish the grounds necessary for a discussion of MacCaig's love poems, I will first show that, though they do manifest the same characteristic MacCaig tone as his other texts, they nevertheless owe much to the European tradition of the love lyric. For instance, the reader can find correspondences between Latin love elegy and his amatory verse. While the prosodic constraints of the genre – the elegiac distich of Ovid's *Amores* and *Heroides* – do not apply to English verse, a distinct affinity exists in particular between MacCaig's and Tibullus' styles, notably in what Lee refers to as “the circularity of Tibullus' poetry, its lack of closure and its failure to do anything” (197) and “Tibullus' strange kind of withdrawing into his own subjectivity and away from the world” (198). “Horace describes Tibullus as *plus nimio memor*,” he remarks “‘mindful more than too much,’ a repetition past what was already enough. The pleonasm of the phrase itself seems to recognise a circularity in Tibullus' thought, and suggests it is problematic: Tibullus is overmindful” (197). This observation is strongly reminiscent of Wells' seeing in MacCaig's verse “the ‘I’-poet [as] a solitary

figure (and it must be admitted the poetry is highly egocentric).” “I find it difficult to recall another poet that is so self-conscious,” he adds. “Every other page we notice him observing himself over his own shoulder with a wry and detached good humour” (Wells 32). This self-consciousness is compounded by a withdrawal from factual reality which is also a characteristic trait of Tibullus’ writing:

the work [of Tibullus] is structured around the subjective rhetoric of the existential concerns of the poet, as much as around external events. [...] From a narrative perspective Tibullus’ poetry can be read to represent a project of working in, folding in, the real events of the world, into the world we experience as subjects. Tibullus creates a narration, ultimately, not only of events with a plot, but more impressively, more poetically – a narration of subjectivity, that is, being for us in the world (199).

MacCaig not only evinces this same abstraction from the real world, but furthers it as his love poems have no real factual content. Systematically, the speaker briefly delineates an initial situation in a relationship, as happens most strikingly in “You went away” (*CP* 7) where the role of setting the scene falls solely on the title. There is a marked tendency to use the past tense to situate the moment and occasion of writing by alluding to one defining element that sparks off the poetic process. The laconic “when I met you,” while giving nothing away since it only sets up the necessary and unqualified beginning of the relationship, fills this role in “Something Still” (*CP* 59) as the only factual element framing the lover’s discourse. Similarly, the situation can also be defined through the future, mostly by referring to an unspecified time at which an event – generally the dissolution of the relationship – will inevitably occur: “Too Bright a Day” (*CP* 39) yields “when I leave you, I’ll commit such darkness,” and “Private Diary” (*CP* 55)

you won’t be there (...)
Your name in days and months will be

a monument of your absence; through
the window of a word your hand
Will wave perpetual goodbye (l.15 and l.17-20)

The present tense, whenever it is used, is lasting and iterative. “Gifts” (*CP* 42), where the reader finds “you read [...] and complain” and not “have read” which would have referred to one particular event, is an apt illustration of this. The present also often characterises the essence of objects and people, as though in an attempt at tropological naming. This may be the case in “Stone Pillow” (*CP* 55) with “you’re the dull fact” or “Roses and Thorns” (*CP* 41): “you are secret.” The frame of the amatory lyric in MacCaig’s writing becomes as completely non-specific as possible, being defined only by the enunciative situation: an “I” addresses a beloved “you.” The only thing that is known to the reader is the existence of romantic feelings and possibly a relationship with no indication of time, place, events or identity of the lovers. Having thus cursorily alluded to this initial situation, MacCaig generally concentrates on rendering the subject’s feelings in his love poems. This characteristic absence of factual information could perhaps be part of a strategy designed to enable readerly emotional investment by evacuating biographical details that might impede it, but it might also constitute an avoidance technique of sorts, with the aim of avoiding the “confessional” type of poetry MacCaig has repeatedly rejected.

His love poems also owe much to later traditions of the love lyric. Notably, the way MacCaig articulates the speaker’s feelings displays distinct similarities with the wit of the Metaphysicals. The specific significant influence on his love poems seems to be John Donne – who himself frequently calls upon Petrarchan motifs in his verse – a similarity that is highlighted by their being the targets of similar

criticisms. Dryden in the dedication to his 1693 translation of Juvenal reproaches Donne for “affecting the metaphysics” “not only in his satires but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign” (Gardner 3). The same idea echoes with Frykman condemning in MacCaig’s love poems “the abundance of clever and sometimes far-fetched imagery [that] seems a doubtful substitute for the expression of genuine feeling” (39). Similarly, Press pointing out “the danger of his method which leans so heavily on the riddling paradox” can not fail to bring to mind Austin describing Donne’s “complex, riddling style” (10) – it is perhaps the impossibility of denying it that made Donne one of the rare influences explicitly admitted to by MacCaig despite his being so notoriously tight-lipped on the subject. MacCaig often structures love poems around a specific image, a trait he shares with the Metaphysical tradition. “The conceit, as it is distinctive of an exemplary metaphysical poem, (...) a single extended metaphor comprising the whole poem” (Unger 21) is a favourite device of his, as appears in “Venus Fly-trap” (*CP* 224) where the beloved becomes a carnivorous plant and the speaker’s experience as an unhappy lover is metaphorised as an insect being devoured. Pinpointing a more decisive correspondence, Hendry moreover comments upon MacCaig’s “Something Still” (*CP* 59) having a “discernible resemblance to Donne’s “The Sonne Rising” (64). “Give or Take” (*CP* 246) offers evidence of the affinity between the two poets with an image that can be seen as an inversion of Donne’s twin compasses. MacCaig writes: “But what’s comical / in a mobile whose two parts / threaten to, but never kiss?” (l.10-12), displaying the same sense of a constant, essential link between the lovers as parts of a single mobile, mirroring the two points of Donne’s compass.

There is a specific MacCaig twist on the image, however, as, unlike the compass, which in closing reunites them, the mobile keeps the speaker and his beloved forever separate, a pervasive idea which will be investigated in depth later in this chapter. Another parallel can be drawn between Donne's "Love's Usury" and the capitalistic imagery deployed by MacCaig in several of his love poems. The monetary trope, for instance, is employed to evoke love in "Numismatist" (CP 207) where the speaker explains:

I think of you
in gold coins.
My thoughts of you, each one,
is a gold coin –
I am their miser but
they belong to you. (l.1-6)

On a literal level, the vehicle of the metaphor forms a paradox with a miser amassing coins for the sake of another. This type of riddling formulation is typical of Metaphysical wit, thus compounding the debt this poem owes to this particular tradition. In his very obvious use of them, MacCaig always makes the favoured devices of the Metaphysicals his own, however. For instance, his capitalistic spin on the idea of offering oneself to the beloved appropriates the imagery of the economic trope not in the sense that buying the other's heart at the price of one's own is a new idea – if anything, it is a cliché – but in the way it is expressed: "I make you the hardest offer of all I can, / The good and ill that make of me this man" (l.5-6), he writes in "Gifts" (CP 42). "Making an offer" displays more prosaic, legalistic connotations than what the reader may be accustomed to. Love in this poem is represented as a business venture, the pros and cons of which need to be calculated beforehand. "Cupid" (CP 356) employs related imagery: the speaker outlines the

godling's genealogy, citing "[his] father – slippery Mercury, god of debit and credit and inventor of double-entry bookkeeping" (l.7-9) to prepare for an evocation of love as a shady business transaction in which Cupid "juggle[s] / the rate of exchange," resulting in one of the lovers, the speaker, making "fat profits" – the image referring perhaps to an asymmetry in the strength of the couple's feelings. However, the commercial extended metaphor is soon subverted by a reversal from buying and selling to gift-giving as the "fat profits" the speaker makes in "Cupid" are used to

buy little presents for the lady
who, wounded by [Cupid]
gave them to [the speaker] in the first place (l.14-16).

The same shift occurs at the end of "Gifts" where the "I" concludes:

I had no praise
Even of your kindness, that was not bought
At such a price this bankrupt self is all
I have to give. And is that possible? (l.21-24)

Here as in "Cupid" the capitalistic love imagery is deployed only to be undermined later by the reverting of the love rhetoric to its traditional notion of giving.

His use of conceits is not MacCaig's only common point with metaphysical poetry, and Donne's in particular, nor is it the most pervasive.

As a characterization, wit, of course, remains more general than conceit. If the poetry is to be distinguished by structural device alone, one may mean simply that the conceit is a device of wit. One can also mean that there are in metaphysical poetry the conceit and other wit devices comparable to it (Unger 21).

Hendry identifies several such devices in MacCaig's "Particular you" (*CP* 39) which, she writes, "shows even more clearly the mark of Donne, the playing with abstract universals, with numbers, puns" (65). To these can be added paradoxes and adynata,

two figures that can be found in abundance in MacCaig's poems. An instance of the former has already been noted in "Numismatist," and the speaker of "Sure Proof" (CP 209) ponders

put[ing] a thing for the first time
where it already is (l.2-3)
(...)
mak[ing] a ladder of light
or comb[ing] the hair of a dream girl with a real comb
or pour[ing] a table into a jug (l.4-6).

The reasoning behind these expressions is the measuring of the speaker's love against the degree of impossibility of what he is prepared to do for – or to impress – his beloved. The same device appears in "Cliff Top, East Boast" (CP 210), where adynata and boasting go hand in hand as the poet promises:

Girl,
I'll write you a poem
that praises you so well
it'll glow in the dark (l.20-23)

thus conflating a type of hypallage – the girl or the poet being liable to glow with pride over the poem – and an adynaton.

As Hendry points out, puns are another favoured figure of MacCaig's. The speaker of "Names" (CP 196), for instance,

wonder[s] how it is
that the weight of [her] name, the most ponderable
thing [he] know[s], should raise [his] thoughts up (l.17-19).

Through the play on the Latin etymology of "ponderable" (*ponderare*, with its abstract meaning of "weighing something in one's mind," derived from *pondus*, the weight), the weight of the woman's name becomes a physical weight, allowing for a pseudo-paradox born of a voluntary confusion between abstract and concrete senses

of the word: something heavy, instead of sinking downwards prompts an upward movement. “Venus Fly-trap” (*CP* 224) supplies another pun based on the conflation of the material and abstract senses of a word in the hemistich “one of your true converts” (l.14). The allusion works on two levels: in the physical realm, it points to the biological process of the carnivorous plant converting flies into nourishment. Its victims becoming fuel for cell renewal can be seen as the plant converting prey into itself. Yet, in the spiritual sense, the phrase can also be taken to suggest the speaker converting to a religious cult of the beloved. While the actual image of slow digestion by a bigger organism and forced cannibalism are, when considered earnestly, gruesome, the presence of a paronomasia such as is used in nursery rhymes, “loving fumbling bumble” (l.6), indicates horror is not the intended effect there. This somewhat jocular tone evinced in the poem is characteristic of the flippant self-awareness MacCaig maintains as a safe-guard against the possibility of falling into sentimentality, with which he professes he “won’t put up” (qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 289).

MacCaig’s love poems are also strongly dependent on Petrarchan themes, especially for the way they structure the relationship between speaker and beloved: Petrarchism posits a disparity of status between the persona and the beloved which can lead to two different attitudes. The first has the lover offering his humility and service to his beloved who is conversely idealised, even to the point of being treated as a divine instance in certain cases.

The lover’s proclaimed unworthiness in comparison to his lady is a staple of Petrarchan love rhetoric. While it is originally through “parallels between courtship

and courtiership” that “a number of new historicists have identified the Petrarchan lover with the subservient and often unsuccessful candidate for patronage” (Dubrow 10), this traditionally self-deprecating lover’s discourse is not dependent on the courtiership system and still features in twentieth-century amatory verse such as MacCaig’s. In “Numismatist” (*CP* 207), the speaker appeals to the beloved’s clemency by presenting himself as a “blackjawed mediaeval smalltime crook” (l.11) compared to an ant she could squash underfoot, an effect compounded by the self-deprecating connotations of his metaphorical “blunder[ing] towards a winter” (“Still Two” *CP* 12 l.9). The lover’s humbling of himself is hard-coded more subtly into the text of “Too Bright a Day” (*CP* 39): “I live invisible” the speaker begins, and the assonance in [i], a short, thin vowel sound, seems to further shrink the space occupied by the “invisible” speaker. Conversely, the evocation of his “whole sky” in the next line and a half makes quasi-exclusive use of long vowels and lofty diphthongs, in a bid to symbolise the metaphorical space taken up by the beloved as the speaker’s everything. Another striking contrast is sparked by the juxtaposition of the brief, simple independent clause and the long parenthesis containing one subordinate clause: “I live invisible (in my whole sky / that is the light of where you are).” The same discrepancy appears as MacCaig returns to the invisibility image at the beginning of the second stanza, evoking the dissolution of the speaker into the beloved’s “light,” or rather his love for her: “Light so engrossing can not show / More than itself. I fade in it.” The sentence devoted to the “I” counts four syllables (two feet), while the beloved is allotted twelve syllables (six feet). Interestingly, “I fade” scans as a spondee for added emphasis on the speaker's gradual disappearance

from his own discourse.

The poet's sense of inadequacy in comparison with his idealised beloved is similarly central to "No Wizard, No Witch" (*CP* 220): the speaker compares his inability to put his intentions into action with the miraculous feats she accomplishes effortlessly by simply existing. The corollary of this trope is the notion of the lover's service to the woman – as his lady – and indeed the poetic voice complains: "My brain cracks trying to please you." Pleasing the object of the speaker's affections is not the only dimension of this service, however. The traditional preoccupation with immortalising the beloved – making a monument of the poem – appears in "Non Pareil" (*CP* 52) where the speaker states: "you're not eternal – yet" (l.17). In "Stone Pillow" (*CP* 54), he worries: "How could I bear to be destroyed through and through / My falling forces see you pass, no more / Immortal than before?" (l.28-30).

The "I" tends to give off a sense of helpless, desultory good will. This is particularly apparent in "Gifts" (*CP* 42): "All I know is what / Darkens and brightens the sad waste of my thoughts / Is what makes me your wild, truth-telling fool" (l.8-10). The stanza starts with a totality – "all I know" – that acts as a restriction. The speaker's self-characterisation as the beloved's "truth-telling fool" is however ambiguous. Through "truth-telling," it harks back to the image of the all-licensed fool and, when considered in conjunction with the possessive, the courtly jester awaiting the pleasure of his royal mistress – or the Tibullan motif of slavery to the *domina* (Lee-Stecum 50-51), perhaps. Yet, it also calls to mind the idea of "being a fool for love," a connotation which has the speaker looking back onto his besotted self and referring to it with gentle irony and thus somewhat subverts the traditional

lover's discourse by branding his devotion to his beloved as "foolishness."

The counterpart of this humility is the idealisation of the beloved woman. Praise of the beloved constitutes a large part of love poetry, perhaps owing to the process Stendhal calls "crystallisation," "that process of the mind which discovers fresh perfections in its beloved at every turn of events" (6). Indeed, Stendhal observes that

we take a joy in attributing a thousand perfections to a woman of whose love we are sure; we analyse all our happiness with intense satisfaction. This reduces itself to giving ourselves an exaggerated idea of a magnificent possession which has just fallen to us from Heaven in some way we do not understand, and the continued possession of which is assured to us (5).

As such, "the tradition of the courtly lover inherited by Petrarch, in which the lady is a superior being of angelic purity and beauty, as is the lady in Spenser's sonnets" (Martz 38) may seem a hyperbolic manifestation of this phenomenon. MacCaig's speaker does not list and analyse separately the "thousands perfections" of his idealised beloved. In fact, perfection seems to be an ineffable quality that both gives rise to the speaker's feelings and arises from them – beauty in the eye of the beholder. The woman praised in MacCaig's amatory verse would be aptly characterised by Barthes' definition of the beloved's ineffability:

The other whom I love and who fascinates me is *atopos*. I cannot classify the other, for the other is, precisely, Unique, the singular Image which has miraculously come to correspond to the specialty of my desire. The other is the figure of my truth, and cannot be imprisoned in any stereotype (which is the truth of others). (...) Being Atopic, the other makes language indecisive: one cannot speak *of* the other, *about* the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is *unqualifiable* (this would be the true meaning of *atopos*) (Barthes transl. Howard *A Lover's Discourse* 34-35).

This may play a part in the depiction of the beloved as a perpetual mystery the

speaker constantly seeks to comprehend, asking helplessly: “Can you tell me / how you manage to be an apparition / all the time?” (l.10-12) in “Nothing so Memorable” (CP 156) or remarking resignedly: “you have selves as secret from me / as blenny or butterfly” (“Names” CP 196 l.12-13). “Roses and Thorns” (CP 41) plays on the implicit reference to the expression *sub rosa*, as the speaker defines love as the attempt to “explicit” the beloved, to know her secret, that is her elusive self:

you are secret – (...)
(...)
and showing nothing of yourself.
(...)
it [love] finds at last a crime it can commit.

And that is murder, of your secrecy.
Then you become explicit and not lonely,
Forced to admit my share of you.

This last line brings to mind the successive trials undergone by the knight-hero of medieval *lais* to gain the favour of the lady at the end of which honour *forces* her to accept him, as the addressee of MacCaig’s poem is “forced to admit [his] share of [her].”

“Inarticulate” (CP 124) addresses the difficulty of putting the beloved’s ineffability into writing as MacCaig comments in a metaphor linking traditional flower-giving lover’s discourse and meta-poetic discourse:

How to give you, with only this to give,
One flower that would be one and include
(Even though it should die) in its strict sculpture
All the wild roses in the wilder wood? (l.8-11)

The flower the poem is metaphorised as, a human creation limited by prosodic rules and the constraints of language, is opposed to the vital, organic quality of emotion

and the atopic nature of the beloved: the harsher sonorities of “strict sculpture,” two voiceless [s], several unvoiced consonants [t] and [p] present a stark contrast with the last line, made gentler and more flowing by the alliteration in liquids and semi-vowels [w], as well as the voiced [z] and [d], softer versions of the previous [s] and [t]. This disparity betrays the sense of inadequacy felt by the speaker in relation to the beloved which prompts his humble stance.

“Between” (*CP* 201) depicts the beloved as the central thought in the speaker’s mind:

But tonight
she will be with me whose name
outsings in my mind
all the waterfalls in Scotland (l.9-12).

This stanza is densely packed with praise of the unnamed lady: in a hyperbolic comparison, the speaker declares the utterance of the beloved’s name to be figuratively louder than the sound of “all the waterfalls in Scotland” to him, indicating her unrivalled place in his life. Separately, by selecting the verb “outsing,” MacCaig appends the characteristic “melodious” to the lady’s name and, metonymically, to herself. This lexical choice, coupled with the alliterations in [w], [m] and [l] connotes a sense of harmony, a gentleness that comes across as an attribute of the beloved. Additionally, the structure “she [...] whose name” employed here registers as a faintly archaic, solemn phrasing. It lends the sentence an air of dignity which transfers to the woman herself, elevating her to a character not unlike the lady of medieval romances.

Replacing the beloved in the tradition of the love lyric is a concern that

appears notably in “No End, No Beginning” (*CP* 216).

Your face,
girl in my mind, is the heir
of all the beautiful women there have been.
I look and dazzle with the loveliness
of women I’ve never known (l.38-42).

With this stanza, the poet simultaneously acknowledges and appropriates the tradition of amatory verse he writes in. The text points out that his praise of the woman he is evoking encompasses and builds upon all the encomiastic discourses that writers have directed at beloved women in the past. The same phenomenon occurs without being remarked upon when MacCaig calls upon images of the beloved common in amatory verse. The traditional WOMAN IS FLOWER metaphor, for instance, occurs several times in his works. “Flowers need no fantasy, stones need no dream,/ and you [the beloved] are flower and stone” in “Gifts” (*CP* 42 l.13-14) and “Roses and Thorns” (*CP* 41) elaborates: “you are secret – flowering wildly in / The space between us, blinding the air with colour” (l.7-8); “wildly you display / a daze of blossoms, a disguise that only some winter night will wither” (l.22-24). By having “the jagged little word” (l.10) transgress the established order of the relation between woman as tenor and flower as vehicle, the poem tightens the link between the two, attenuating the tropological aspect of the figure. “Thorn,” which logically should have been the corresponding vehicle for the tenor “word” is passed over in favour of the non-literal phrasing, yet is not erased completely as its associated epithet, “jagged,” remains. MacCaig also favours the love-as-shelter image, another amatory topos he shares with Donne: “Donne was amongst the earliest and most powerful proponents of love as a shelter and defence against the

world which is an idea or an assumption about love that, over succeeding centuries, has come to dominate our thinking and behaviour” (B. Saunders 49). MacCaig’s “Truth for Comfort” (*CP* 185) is particularly indebted to this tradition when he writes: “where things crowd close she is a space to be in” (l.2). “Comfort’s / what I won’t need until she has to go” (l.14-15), he elaborates.

In his idealisation of the beloved, MacCaig also calls upon another traditional figure of the beloved by lending her demiurgic powers, a frequent trope in love lyrics. MacCaig’s literary forefather, Donne, for instance, has been noted for his “heretical metaphysics of earthly love:”

For Empson, Donne’s flirtations with blasphemy in his secular verse are more than isolated and hyperbolic compliments to his lady and more even than compelling revisions of the familiar trope of love as religion; they are in fact evidence of a larger project to elevate earthly love to the status of a new religion, one in which it is Donne’s ambition to serve as a kind of proto-Lawrentian priest/martyr to the cause of Eros (B. Saunders 29).

In this almost devotional mode of amatory verse, the woman is described as a superhuman creative power on par with God and sharing at least some of his attributes. “You Went Away” (*CP* 7) offers an apt example: in the lines “Suddenly, in my world of you, / you created time” (l.1-2), the beloved, through the subtraction of her presence, precipitates the speaker from edenic achronicity to a world where time passes – into historical time, the locus of conflict and disharmony. In this new state of things, the speaker speaks of being shown “gardens rotting in air” (l.7) and of birds “sing[ing] still in the apple trees, but not in [his]” (l.9-10) – two clear allusions to the garden of Eden. Considering that the loss of God’s presence was an aspect of the Fall as punishment, the parallel with the poem’s addressee is striking. In “Water

Tap” (CP 105), the beloved similarly stops time, but through congenial laughter rather than abandonment – suggesting that the lady, rather than grief, holds power over time. Significantly, the beloved is “she (...) who could not be the cause of lies” (“Truth for comfort” CP 185 1.13-14). The Bible stating that “God is not a man, that he should lie” (Numbers 23:19), this truthfulness creates another point of comparison.

The beloved’s god-like feats always occur abruptly, like a divine *fiat* effective in a single thought. “You Went Away” (“suddenly, in my world or you / you created time” CP 7 1.1), in “Information” (“with a word” CP 8) or in “No End, No Beginning,” where her presence creates an effect as sudden as a divine apparition illustrate this:

When you, in your unimaginable self,
suddenly were there,
shut boxes opened
and worlds flew out like picture books (CP 216 1.50-52)

The case of “Information” (CP 8) is particularly representative as it is “with a *word*” (1.3, my emphasis) that the beloved “destroyed a long year’s gloom.” Canonically, the word that destroys the darkness (polysemy of “gloom”) is the divine Word: “Let there be light.” The woman, then, is also a bringer of light and a miracle worker, as in “Something Still:”

But when I met you, curtains parted,
Suns were announced and weeks went by
All made of Saturdays. And we
Walked heart and soul into tomorrows (CP 59 1.9-12)

The adynaton “weeks (...) of Saturdays” conveys what is felt to be the thaumaturgic power of the beloved – an ability which may provide a second reason for MacCaig’s

marked predilection for adynata and paradoxes.

Still exercising her demiurgic powers, the beloved “makes a marvel where a nowhere was” in “Truth for Comfort” (*CP* 185 l.3) and, in “Turned Head” (*CP* 72), forces the world – and thus time – to a stand-still by reversing the order of chronological events:

The rose creeps in its thorn.
The bird flies into its egg and waits to be born.
The sun hauls in his rays, hand over hand.
You turn your head and stop the world from turning (l.1-4)

Significantly, the impossible feats performed by the beloved are always actualised with a present tense while the speaker either wishes for or fantasises miracles of his own, as in “Gifts” (*CP* 42), but ultimately concludes in “Sure Proof”: “I am not good at impossible things” (*CP* 209 l.7) highlighting the sense of inadequacy discussed earlier.

If this humble and admiring attitude is a topos of love poetry, so is the opposite stance in which the speaker, unhappy in love, is either overly or implicitly hostile to the beloved whom he depicts in less than flattering terms. “Separate” (*CP* 28), a poem evoking a souring relationship, offers an oblique example of this by coming across as somewhat passive-aggressive. The juxtaposed anaphora “I can’t (...) I can’t” with which the poem begins can be construed as conveying a sense of irritated weariness: “I can’t help you. I can’t reach out / And pin a miracle on your dress” (l.1-2). The brief – one hemistich – unadorned first sentence of the poem contributes to this sense of curtness and impatience through its phrasing itself, but also by being a beginning *in medias res* of sorts and answering a question that remains outside the frame of the text. The second line does not let up on subtle

demonstrations of hostility: “pin a miracle on your dress” unobtrusively conflates and contrasts the priceless and intangible “miracle” and the prosaic image of a brooch to be pinned on the woman’s clothing. The discrepancy between the two suggests an implicit attack on the clichéd frivolousness of females and it becomes apparent that, while speaker and addressee share the same distress at the turn taken by their relationship, as evidenced by his assertion that “all [he writes] is darkness” and her untranscribed plea for help, only the beloved is truly blamed for it, having become in the speaker’s eyes “a certain black and crooked witch” – a throw-back to the traditional derogatory image of the poisonous woman.

A more disturbing case presents itself in “You Went Away” (*CP* 7), where the speaker develops a typically irrational lover’s discourse, complaining: “you stole yourself.” The statement implies discreet resentment, and is compounded in the last stanza in a violent fantasised killing of the anthropomorphised poem that could possibly be seen as a transfer of the speaker’s anger at the lost love object to this non-sentient, more acceptable outlet:

If I could kill this poem, sticking
My thin pen through its throat,
It would stand silent by your bed
And haunt your cruelty every empty night

An interesting ambiguity appears there, however. The pen is stuck through the throat which corresponds to a symbolical silencing of the poem and thus of the speaker. In this case, the stanza lets through an oblique manifestation of the forsaken lover’s death drive, though it still includes a passive-aggressive revenge fantasy with the image of “stand[ing] silent” by the inconstant beloved’s bed – perhaps threateningly. Donne’s “The Apparition” (94) might have contributed to inspiring this part of the

poem:

When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead
And that thou think'st thee free
From all solicitation from me,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed

It appears to be a more straight-forward example of the blackmail trope analysed by Barthes as “Comportement hystérique de deuil, impliquant aussi chantage à l’être aimé : voilà ce que tu as fait de moi. Car, le sujet collant à l’image (à l’autre), tout ce qu’il fait de plus solitaire, secret, intérieur, est toujours fait *sous le regard et à l’adresse* de cet autre. » (*Le Discours amoureux: Séminaire à l’Ecole pratique des hautes études 1974-1976, suivi de Fragments d’un discours amoureux: inédits*⁴⁹ 98 – “hysterical mourning behaviour that also implies blackmailing the beloved: this is what you’ve done to me. Indeed, the subject adhering to the image (to the other), all that he does in the utmost solitude, secrecy and within his inner self is always done *within the view* of this other and *addressed to* them” my translation). Another example of the blackmail trope in MacCaig’s poems occurs in “Too Bright a Day” (CP 39): “When I leave you, I’ll commit / Such darkness on myself you’ll stare / At the great conflagration there” (l.10-12). “Stare” however implies curiosity or fascination but neither pity nor sympathy, which suggests that it is not guilt, but admiration the speaker seeks to arouse in the beloved. In a poem from which the speaker systematically erases himself as previously discussed, this appears as a way to bring the focus back on the speaking subject, whose centrality to the poems is a defining characteristic of MacCaig’s writing.

Some of MacCaig’s earlier love poems also display a faint undercurrent of

⁴⁹ Though the title is very similar to *A Lover’s Discourse*, translated by Howard, this is a different book which only exists in its original French version.

somewhat sadistic enjoyment and *schadenfreude*. “Not Yet Afterwards” (CP 5) develops a vision of the passive, suffering beloved woman whose beauty is augmented by grief. The poem takes the form of a riddle in which the poetic voice wonders about its influence on the beloved: “Can this be I that made your beauty greater?” (l.1) giving successive descriptions of what “this” might be over the four next stanzas. While the riddle is eventually answered with “grief,” there remains a second level of equivocation for the reader to try and elucidate. Elements belonging to the lover’s discourse such as “eloquent flowers I gather in your looks” (l.8) make it reasonably clear that the speaker is the male lover of the addressee. However, the “I” claims for himself an abstract identity as “grief” and through this renders the question problematic: the reader could choose to understand that the abstract idea of grief is presented under the guise of a human lover through a metaphor in praesentia. In this case, the focus of the poem would be the somewhat misogynistic topos of unhappiness always enhancing female beauty – an attenuated version of Poe professing the aesthetic value to be found in the death of a beautiful woman. Or, if the “I” is intended as a human speaker, the poem becomes a semi-explicit fantasy of domination over the beloved through becoming the bringer of grief. The third stanza names grief as the necessary condition for love: “Can it be I that hustles dreams away / Out of the room, that filled it with sad stories, / That made love possible, that heard you cry?”(l.10-12). The repetitive syntax (“I that (...) that (...) that (...) that”) reinforces the sense of equivalence between the different clauses, unobtrusively discouraging the reader from questioning the statement. Nevertheless, the self-representation of the speaker remains ambivalent: while he claims to be “grief,” he is

also associated with Spring, light and warmth in the first two stanzas while the woman is depicted as a wintry landscape before his intervention:

Can I be suns swarming on the cold roofs
And with bright shots and snapping flares investing
The streets and shining on faces, hands and scarves?

Can I be March and drive away the winter ,
That lay so long white on your cold cheeks
And made shine there what's lovelier than crocus
Oh, eloquent flowers I gather in your looks? (l.2-8)

The white cold cheeks bring to mind a corpse, underlining the renewal of life brought by Spring and apparently by the lover. That, strictly speaking, it is grief caused by the speaker which induces this flowering into life remains however perplexing.

The subject becomes somewhat more vengeful in "Bluestocking" (*CP* 269). Evoking a woman whose learning makes her impervious to his attempts at wooing her, the speaker is perceptibly frustrated with the titular bluestocking, to the point that the third stanza reads: "Even her tears, I think savagely, / will drop from each eye in pairs, / quoting her nose" (l.12-14). The speaker's mind, wanting to express that the bluestocking's feelings have become conditioned by her scholarly proclivities, turns automatically to negative emotions and fantasises the woman's suffering as a form of indirect violence against the less than tractable object of his affections – the qualification of the thought as "savage" evidences the speaker's awareness of this. Beyond the use of the adverb "savagely," what is perhaps more significant is the presence of a future "will drop," instead of a more innocuous – less threatening – conditional "would." The idea of "bluepencil[ing]" (l.15) the woman to "get down to the original script" (l 18-19) also contains its share of casual violence

as it implies the idea of editing – cutting away at – the personality of an individual to suit one's needs. This violence can be seen as the speaker acting out the counterpart of the traditional figure of the cruel mistress. This topos finds its origin in Roman love elegy notably, in which the mistress has been described as “that extraordinary mixture of cruelty and sympathy, refinement and vulgarity, unlimited capacity for love and hatred which we find, for the first time, in Catullus’ Lesbia and which is, henceforth, inseparable from the *domina*” (Luck 45). In “Bluestocking” (CP 269), the speaker’s display of hostility towards the woman is sparked by his vexation with her refusal to respond on an emotional level to his lover’s discourse. He complains:

Anything I say
she judiciously considers with
quotations and references (l.1-3).
(...)
Such a length of learning!
I can no more approach her
than one bookend
can approach the other (l.7-10).

The nature of the beloved’s cruelty in MacCaig’s poems remains mostly implicit, but the reader can legitimately infer that, for the woman reproached for “[her] cruelty” in “Bluestocking” or “You Went Away” (CP 7), it resides in her indifference to a past or unrequited lover. “Roses and Thorns” (CP 41) on the other hand, proves more ambiguous; only stating: “in your cruelty lies your truth” (l.13) – suggesting that this callousness is the defining essence of the beloved, but not how it manifests.

This traditional figure is incarnated notably in the carnivorous woman of “Venus Fly-trap” (CP 224) who is presented as an inhuman vampire – perhaps as a nod to the figure of the Hollywood vamp? – who “suck[s] the rank soil in” (l.4). She is a “trap” so alien to the speaker that, once he shrugs off the traditional lover’s

discourse, “ridding [his] mind of cant,” he declares: “I find you less animal than plant” (l.3) implying her absolute otherness. More interestingly, however, “the rank soil” calls to mind echoes of Eden via Hamlet’s vituperations against female frailty:

‘Tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed.
Things rank and gross in nature.
Possess it merely (Hamlet I, 2, 135-137).

The image of Eden becomes neater with “the lively signal of a sense of sin” (l.6) whose alliterative sibilants hiss like the serpent of the Genesis book. In this case, the woman is presented as the temptress who punningly makes “true converts,” drawing the men-flies of the metaphor into her idolatrous cult.

The two poles of love poems, the speaker and the beloved, are then heavily conditioned by the Petrarchan tradition in MacCaig’s writing and even his choice of favoured rhetorical devices is influenced by literary precedents. Consequently, if there is an actual situation the poet seeks to portray, it is entirely overwritten by predetermined literary constructs. If there is not, the poem creates a fiction, which is something MacCaig declares himself against when he explains in a somewhat simplistic manner his distaste for both the early Yeats and Romanticism, which he charges with similar failings. He reproaches the latter for “its falsity and its overblown rhetoric for feelings that are trifling in the first place. Its sentimentality.” “It’s too far removed from reality” (Degott-Reinhardt 303), he criticises. His charge against Yeats’ early poems similarly criticises their being “based on feelings he didn’t really have” (Degott-Reinhardt 305). This post-Romantic demand for sincerity and truthfulness in literature is the more abstract counterpart of MacCaig’s resolution to only write about things he has personally seen in his nature poems. In this context,

his extensive reliance on the topoi of amatory verse is problematic. MacCaig, I argue, is aware of this tension between the traditional motifs of love poetry and his own poetic project, which leads him to frequently point out and contest the influence of Petrarchism on his works, thus producing a sort of second fragmentary manifesto in much the same way as he does for his descriptive lyrical verse in general and his nature poems in particular.

While MacCaig's speaker tends to follow the Petrarchan tradition of idealising the beloved, a significant number of poems either hint at or develop counter-discourses undermining this tendency. In them, MacCaig moves away from distortions – positive or negative – of the relationship and the two involved parties towards a more down-to-earth and thus realistic approach. To do so, he re-appropriates the very rhetorical devices Petrarchism favours by having them undercut it. In "Incident" (*CP* 267), for instance, he employs adynata, which are frequently used to suggest the extent of the speaker's devotion by correlating it with the magnitude of the tasks he sets himself in the name of love, as previously discussed, in order to subvert his Petrarchan lover's discourse by creating a sense of ironic distance. The speaker mentally urges his beloved to "ask [him] / to do something impossible, / something freakishly useless, / something unimaginable and inimitable" (l.4-6), "like making a finger break into blossom / or walking for half an hour in twenty minutes / or remembering tomorrow" (l.7-9), thus multiplying variations on a traditional theme. However, his aspiration to heroic feats in service of his lady is already contrasted by the very prosaic setting specified in the first line: "I look across the table." This effect is compounded in the second stanza by the

comical discrepancy between the expectations engendered by the speaker's ardent lover's discourse and the actuality of the beloved's bathetic request when it comes – she asks for a cigarette. The jarring juxtaposition with reality of a discourse constructed from literary traditions implies its unsuitability to a faithful evocation of a realistic relationship. The same type of parody can be found in “Gone are the days” (*CP* 292) where MacCaig lampoons the elevated style of courtly love poems (“the towering landscape you live in has printed/ on its portcullis *Bed and breakfast*”). The poet juxtaposes humorously medieval elements and prosaic modernity: “My shining armour bleeds when it's scratched” (l.3) calls up the image of the “knight in shining armour” rescuer of distressed damsels, and undermines its traditional faultless heroism by highlighting the vulnerability of the subject, a clear plea with the “lady with no e” to see in her suitor a fellow human being and not a faultless stock character. The delicate variation on the “tread softly because you tread on my dreams” moment is immediately disrupted with the distancing comic relief of “I blow the nose that's part of my visor” (l.4), recreating the exact same effect that closes “Incident.”

The same bid for realism and sense of ironic distance goes into MacCaig's references to classical myths, which Petrarchan tradition often recycles into praise of the beloved. “Turned Head” (*CP* 72), for instance, tries on and rejects the image of Daphne pursued by Apollo, an interesting choice considering the latter's function as god of poetry and the conclusion of his pursuit of Daphne. As Apollo failed to possess the nymph and subsequently made a wreath out of her newly sprouted laurel leaves which he then declared his emblem, the reader might infer that MacCaig's

refusal of the image equals a refusal of amatory verse which distorts the woman into a mere accessory to poetry.

MacCaig's poems repeatedly liken the beloved to Helen of Troy. He is perhaps thinking of Yeats' treatment of this figure, in which case his subversion of the comparison takes on a value of response to Yeats' more aristocratic approach, defending through this a more realistic take on love poetry, and perhaps on love itself as in "Stone Pillow" (*CP* 54) where the speaker declares his ordinary beloved liable to make the Trojan War more believable than the semi-divine Helen:

For all the Helens made golden by a word
Are your projection on the marvellous screen (l.13-14),
(...)
You're the dull fact, the mortally absurd
That gives sense to all Troys and makes them fall
Into the possible (l.16-18).

The reference to Helen in "Two Ways of It" (*CP* 78) similarly subverts the traditional comparison in an axiological reversal which prefers ordinary human affection to the heroic, usually tragic love of the high world presented in Greek epics:

The duller legends are what you live in,
The girl who knew a man who once saw Helen (l.1-2)
(...)
I, knowing you, live in a larger one. (l.4)
(...)
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 (l.7-12).
(...)
And worlds and wits wake to a mundane glory
That, being its source, you can know nothing of.
This is the largest legend, that need not stress
A more than human distance or be fiery
With a god's grace that kills to keep its love (l.14-18).

The somewhat curt initial assessment “you are no Helen” is clarified mainly through connotations: “dazing wisdom” may bring to mind notions of violence as one can be dazed from a blow or by a drug – or poison. “Death blooming” hijacks and redirects the image of the woman as flower, suggesting the idea of the poisonous woman whose seductive power equals death. The “more than human character” of Helen and such women makes them into deadly *femme fatales* starkly contrasted with the “ordinariness,” “mundane glory” and “the decent clarity [the beloved] bear[s]” The portrait these attributes paint evokes a celebration of modern bourgeois lifestyle and the quiet, uneventful love associated with it rather than the aristocratic conception of love in Greek legends and Petrarchan discourse, the passionate warlike lover of courtly love being exchanged for a peaceful speaker who puns inoffensively “I will kill / nothing but Time.” In spite of this, however, the last stanza, even as it keeps up a Petrarchan counter-discourse, returns to Petrarchan codes, celebrating: “A legend, this, with no curmudgeon plot / To make a martyr of a slave to passion – / Who am no slave, but freeman of your grace” (l.34-36). The elevated position of the beloved as a superior being who grants freedom is a definitely Petrarchan trait, especially considering the potential religious connotations of the ambiguous “your grace” that compound the idea of physical grace, moral graciousness and the deferential form of address “your grace” reserved for high nobility and clergy.

Ultimately, MacCaig’s love poems create the same type of fragmented *ars poetica* he scatters across his nature and landscape poems, outlining very similar guidelines for his writing: in “Fiat” (CP 13), the “I” could be admitting his inadequacy as speaker of a lover’s discourse – a variation on traditional Petrarchan

humility: “I cannot *stammer* thunder in your sky / Or flash white phrases there” (my emphasis). It becomes a quality in an axiological reversal: “I (...) cannot *vilify* / my dulcet world” (my emphasis). Moreover, “stammer thunder” (l.1) evokes a fragmented but brief event, a brevity that appears also in “flash white phrases there” and contrasts starkly with the sense of duration and stability underlined from line 5 on. The rhyme scheme reflects this shift in perspective: the first quatrain of alternate rhymes creates a sense of expectation, the last word of each line seemingly waiting for an echo. Conversely, the second part, a rhyming couplet, delivers said echo immediately, reinforcing the impression of stability and inevitability. Moreover, the lines “But gently speak and, gently speaking, prove / the everlastingness in which you move,” through their lilting repetition of “gently speak/[ing]” and their harmonious alliteration in liquids as opposed to the abundance of dentals and [r] sounds in line 1 down to 3 illustrate the incompatibility of the speaker’s “dulcet world” with the bombastic style rejected in line 1. The poem “Tree Hung With Fairy Lights” (CP 260) parallels the decorated tree and the woman with all the trappings of femininity contrasted with the tree in its natural state and the unadorned woman, ruling in favour of the latter:

decoration contradicts the tree.
 I love you best (and know
 It’s love not lust)
 When clothed in nothing but your altered dust (l.5-8).

More importantly, the poem also functions on a meta-textual level as part of this *ars poetica*, explaining the writer’s choice to dispense with “decorative” rhetorical devices. “Gifts” (CP 42) conveys the same message: the speaker rejects “the greedy vanity that disfigures [the beloved]” and claims he “will not spoil [her] power by

adding one/ Vainglorious image to all [they]’ve said and done” (l.11-12). “Last Word” (*CP* 237) is another similar manifesto: “I don’t want to puff you up / with verbal inflations and gassy metaphors” the poet declares. The colloquial “puff you up” contrasts ironically with the convoluted rhetoric expected of the lover’s discourse, emphasising the speaker’s scorn for the “gassy metaphors.” This declaration of intent is notably put into practice in “Reversal” (*CP* 286) with the poetic voice saluting the beloved as “[his] homely nobody” and concluding: “And you and I will, in that artful wildness, / Come into harmony out of tune” (last two lines).

If MacCaig seeks a certain straight-forwardness in his love poems as opposed to the highly rhetorical articulation of the lover’s discourse in the Petrarchan tradition, it is then somewhat intriguing that the word “love” itself appears rarely in his poems and never in a straight-forward declaration unless it is addressed to a landscape (“A man in Assynt” *CP* 225), a concept (“Horoscopes:” “But my pretty Now, I love her, I love her” *CP* 290) or firmly set in the past, as in “Spilled Salt” (*CP* 218). Set in the future – and as such still not actualised, the traditional “I love you” is subverted by its transformation in “I will love you for my ever” in “Sure Proof” (*CP* 209 last line), where, instead of the canonical “always” or “forever,” a possessive is interpolated to allow the speaker to appropriate the hackneyed utterance. “A Man in My Position” (*CP* 210-211) deploys a different avoidance strategy by containing the initial admission of love through the use of a double: “Yet he loves you also, this appalling stranger/ who makes windows of my eyes.” The conspicuously unsaid “I love you” is then taken up with the understated “my love for

you,” in which the presence of the possessive “my” implies an anaphoric quality. The reader does not question it as he has already encountered an unqualified occurrence of “love” with the verb (l.9). This verbal sleight of hand allows the poetic “I” to get away with avoiding a direct admission since he has managed to appropriate the initial confession made by the “man in [his] position.”

This avoidance of explicit declarations is however counter-balanced by oblique suggestions such as can be found in “Truth for Comfort” (CP185). The “I” of the poem reflects that, even in the absence of his beloved, his feelings for her imprint her on his surroundings: “This chair, this jug, this picture speak as her,/ if in a muted way” (l.10-11). Antithetical characterisations of the beloved also become oblique declarations of sorts by implying that she is literally everything to the speaker. Paradoxically this circumvention of traditional explicit declarations can result in the same sense of raw directness as can be found in the previously discussed elegiac “Poems for Angus.” This impression of directness in the last stanza of “A Difference” (CP 177) is also partly induced by MacCaig’s choice to use mostly monosyllables with only one Latinate adjective, making for a more natural-sounding diction:

What it does is not
trivial, when I
remember you –
my sore journey, my draught
of pure being (l.15-19)

This marked reluctance to employ the most direct and oft-used staple of the lover’s discourse somewhat sets MacCaig’s poems apart from the love lyric traditions he engages with and suggests a more self-conscious quality to his writing. This

awareness of the literary context he writes in also takes into account the impossibility of an innocent lover's discourse free from historical and literary precedent. This appears clearly in "Roses and Thorns" (*CP* 41), for instance, where MacCaig acknowledges: "Roses and thorns the threadbare image is" (l.1). He does however structure the whole poem around that selfsame "threadbare image" and attempts to revitalise it by reversing the positions of roses and thorns, claiming: "but it's the rose that hurts, the thorn that pleases." MacCaig's most frequent strategy is nevertheless avoidance and replacement of the utterance by a tropological stand-in, as previously remarked, such as happens in "Emblems" (*CP* 436), where he elects to use

Emblems. Something that stands for something else that it doesn't resemble at all. [...] In that poem, [he] used swifts as an emblem of Isabel's recovering from her illness. "They tie together / the bright light." That's [his] happy life as she does. "They nest / in secret places" because what [they] are to each other is a very secret thing. So they stand for Isabel's recovering (MacCaig qtd in Degott-Reinhardt 299).

There can be a double interpretation for this writing choice, the first relying on MacCaig's characteristically restrained manner, which prefers indirect lyrical expression. The second, however, would advance that this very obliqueness is MacCaig's solution to his literary self-consciousness – in the same fashion as his "metaphorical way of seeing things" allows him to reach a certain original metaphorical truth in his nature writing, he seeks through tropological expression ways to re-articulate love and the lover's discourse that would be if not independent at least less influenced by literary tradition.

B – A study in separation: poetry of the mind?

MacCaig's reluctance to use the word "love" is symptomatic of a pervasive tendency in his love poems. With few exceptions, they evince a sense of distance between the lovers as well as in the restrained modes of expression adopted by the speaker. This section seeks to determine the causes of this phenomenon – whether it arises from the psychological reality of love, from a historical sociological change in the twentieth century or, perhaps, whether it has to do with a specific aspect of MacCaig's worldview and how he articulates it.

Firstly, I will observe the thematics of distance and separation in his love lyrics. In his project to render reality faithfully, MacCaig encounters a problem that ties directly into the very nature of the lover's discourse and amatory poetry, the fact that the beloved is inscribed in the poems as an absence. Barthes describes the lover's discourse as discourse in which a first person subject-speaker addresses an object-you. "Who speaks, in the matter of love," Barthes asks, "who *holds* the lover's discourse? By essence, statutorily (...), the *subject*. The lover's discourse is unadulterated discourse of a subject who is in love (the discourse of a single individual)" (my translation of « qui parle, dans l'amour, qui *tient* le discours amoureux? Essentiellement, statutairement (...), le *sujet*. Le discours amoureux est *pur discours du sujet amoureux* (discours d'un seul). » Barthes *Le Discourse amoureux: Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1974-1976, suivi de Fragments d'un discours amoureux: inédits* 55). As such, the beloved is only secondary in the

lover's discourse. The centre, the locus of the love lyric is the speaker's consciousness, "the place of someone speaking within himself, lovingly, facing the other (the object of love), who doesn't speak" (my translation, « la place de quelqu'un qui parle en lui-même, amoureusement, face à l'autre (l'objet aimé »), qui ne parle pas » Barthes *ibid.* 56). This is a first incompatibility with MacCaig's poetic project. As he aims to respect the specificity of the object *qua* object, he should be looking to render the beloved – the object that is also a subject – with the same intent not to distort her. That, by definition, she has no voice in amatory verse because the love poems, as lyrical poetry, focus on the thinking and feeling speaker, rather than the object is problematic in regards to what MacCaig professes poetry should be⁵⁰. Observation of his works however shows that this is what happens in his love lyrics: the beloved almost never speaks. She is evoked laughing in "Water Tap" (*CP* 120), but the poet keeps coming back to her silence: a parallel is drawn between her and non-human creatures in "Near Midnight" (*CP* 158), underlining the distance between the speaker and the object of his affection. The poem ends on an ominous note:

though they seem half
 reptile, half angel
 they are closer to me
 than you.
 Their silence frightens me
 less than yours (l.16-21).

The mystery of the beloved woman becomes opacity, less glamorous and more of a barrier setting her apart. "I know your name and who named you" (l.11), the speaker declares in "Names" (*CP* 196), but despite all the factual data he possesses about the beloved he "sit[s] by [her] and see[s her] / with eyes ignorant as glasswort" (l.14-15):

⁵⁰ See chapter 1.

“you have selves as secret for me as blenny or butterfly,” he concludes.

There are very few exceptions to the woman’s persisting silence: one is “Song Without Music” (*CP* 199):

I heard a water sliding over stones.
I heard your voice in its sweet overtones.
I heard your voice, but saw you none at all,
Not even as a ghost in the white waterfall (1.5-8).

Firstly, while there is a “voice,” nothing indicates it forms actual speech. A wordless song or laughter would be described in similar terms, an impression which is only supported by the abstract sound of water evoked just prior to the feminine voice. Female laughter is commonly compared to the tinkling of water over rocks in a river, and the implicit presence of the simile here might imply that the female voice heard in the poem creates no more meaning than the waterfall.

Another exception, “Mirror Talk” (*CP* 250) puts the woman at a distance by speaking of her in the third person. She remains unnamed, her naïve and repetitive words reported as indirect free speech by a disdainful speaker. It is moreover striking that the one woman whose voice is actually heard is not the speaker’s beloved but a type of albatross strung about his neck, as though only silence were the necessary condition of love.

Deprived of voice to allow the poem to focus on the subject, the beloved is moreover reduced to a radically opaque, impenetrable other. “Nothing so Memorable” (*CP* 156) robs her of movement:

Time is that unavoidable process
you disqualify, when
you startle me
to an apprehension of your *still* self
by an unbroken presence

of suddenness:
stills
of your *stillness* (l.21-27, my emphasis).

while the beloved is the grammatical subject of active verbs such as “you disqualify [time],” “you startle me,” it is her self – who she is – and not her actions that are responsible for the effect evoked: she is a subject without agency. The obsessive repetition of “still” completes her transformation into a voiceless, motionless and perhaps non-sentient picture of herself. “Two Ways of It,” posits her as the object observed and deprived from any awareness of herself or how she appears: “a mundane glory [...] that, being its source, you can know nothing of.” Her lack of awareness is made to seem natural, logical even through the use of the explicative gerund. The possibility itself that she could become conscious of herself is denied as she not only “know[s] nothing of” it, but “can know nothing of” it. This reduces the woman-subject to a pure object – in this sense what is being evoked in the poem is not so much distorted as entirely remodeled. While this is far from uncommon in amatory verse, it becomes highly problematic when considered in correlation with MacCaig’s agenda of faithfulness to the object evoked. There seems to be a radical incompatibility between what he intends his poetry to do and the very nature of amatory verse, as evocations of women deprived of voice, agency and self-awareness are after a fashion highly traditional:

as Anne Mellor has observed, “when we look closely at the gender implications of romantic love in the principal male poets of the Romantic period,” we discover that rather than embracing the female as a valued other, the male lover usually effaces her into a narcissistic projection of his own self (Mellor qtd in McSweeney 12).

This phenomenon is furthermore not limited to the Romantic period, which further

points to this being a defining characteristic of amatory verse: “The Petrarchan love poem is a theatre of desire – one in which men have the active roles and the women are assigned silent, iconic functions, and are notable primarily for their absence in the script” (Waller qtd in Dubrow 10). In this sense, love poetry is by essence set apart from the rest of MacCaig’s works because it not only deviates from his stated intent, but cannot but deviate from it. However, while MacCaig’s tendency to conjure up silent, unnamed and undescribed women is not uncommon in love poetry, it is not universal. McSweeney, from “a close look at the central male love poets of the Victorian period” (12) concludes that there is a distinct trend to embrace the point of view of the beloved and adds

There are exceptions of course. In Arnold’s lyric poetry, for example, the female other exists only as “a sort of mournful cosmic last resort” (to cite Anthony Hecht’s parody of “Dover Beach,”17). And Dante Rossetti’s love poems are like the portraits of the painter in his sister Christina’s sonnet “In an Artist’s Studio:” the face in all of them is the same face with the same meaning, “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream” (McSweeney 12).

MacCaig’s love poems, written in the second half of the twentieth century and as such counting the Victorians amongst their literary predecessors, outline female figures more akin to the exceptions than to the rule, his beloved being never presented as a separate subject. This seems to indicate that this dissonance with his stated poetic project is not inevitable but rather that the poet chooses to let his love poems stand apart from the portion of his works governed by this agenda of faithfulness to the object.

The fact that desire and the physical body are nearly absent from MacCaig’s love lyrics also appears to be a specific writing choice. Indeed, there seems to be a

contradiction there as love poetry is often strongly tinged with sensuality. Donne's love poems, for instance, have been said to display a "strong clinging to the physical" (Martz 46) and Petrarchism, traces of which abound in MacCaig's amatory verse, does not shrink from carnality either. In fact, it has been written that "in some respects, Petrarchan desire is recognisably 'modern.' Indeed, two terms, 'sexuality' and 'desire,' have almost entirely displaced 'love' from what we like to call our 'postmodern discourse'" (Low 28) – on this point, MacCaig's verse deviates from the Petrarchan model significantly and does not correspond to more contemporary evocations of love either since "sexuality" and "desire" are at the very least not readily apparent in his amatory verse. This absence of eroticism remains consistent over the course of MacCaig's career. The following lines will provide an example of this type of love lyric divorced from eroticism:

I draw you, so,
in the empty air before me.
The thin line goes unbrokenly
till it joins itself again and completes
the lineaments
of my ungratified desire (*CP* 236)

This stanza might evoke a sensual reverie, were the poem not entitled "Portrait." A portrait being loosely defined as a type of pictorial work generally focusing on the subject's face, in which the body is often reduced to an abbreviated representation of the shoulders and perhaps the bust, there seems to be a discrepancy between title choice and content. Indeed, the title may suggest a reading in which the speaker merely pictures his beloved's face in her absence. "So," emphasised through its isolation between commas, underlines the careful precision of the mental image, while the idea of the line "unbrokenly" "join[ing] itself and [completing]" the image

conjures up a sense of the woman's perfection. The words "ungratified desire," however, are more ambiguous and would suggest a less disembodied conception of the speaker's feelings, at which point the title of the poem becomes problematic. Carnal love is indeed only directly evoked once: "Too Cold for Words" contains the lines "when we from nakedness/ put on our fleshly appetites again" (*CP* 76 l.13-14). However, physical love is evoked in terms of religious guilt: "the brimstone stink that haunts your holiness" calls to mind fire and brimstone preaching in keeping with traditional Presbyterian austerity. The poem being thus firmly rooted in a specifically Scottish cultural context may moreover signal that it crosses over from pure love lyric to a type of historical social commentary. Consequently, the exception becomes less significant, especially considering how general the reference seems to be as "fleshly appetites" presents desire as a bodily function independent from individual romantic feelings. It is to be noted that MacCaig ignores rather than rejects eroticism in his love poems. This complete lack of acknowledgement of what is generally an important component of amatory verse in the European tradition is arresting. I propose that it could be interpreted as a sign that the poems' focus in MacCaig's love lyrics is not truly on love, an idea which could account for the mixed feelings his amatory verse arouses in the critics quoted earlier.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that the beloved indeed has no physical presence in his love lyrics, which is coherent with this absence of physical desire in them. There are no blazons among MacCaig's poems, not even ironical instances of the genre such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). Indeed, the "you" is, as a rule, disembodied, or at best,

possesses non-eroticised body parts (hands in “No escape CP 9-10 1.6-7, face in “Party” CP 15, cheeks in “Not yet afterwards” CP 5 and eyes). There may be a passing allusion to a dress (“Separate” CP 28) but in the most perfunctory manner and without reference to its covering a desired body, just as the mouth in “No escape” (CP 9) is cited as the source of speech. In “Estuary” (CP 192), the physical presence of the beloved at the speaker’s side is evoked for the first time in the *Collected Poems*, but it is in desexualised terms: “I see the blue of your eyes,” “your brow shines” “Let me take / your hand, cold as eel grass”.

Even when, exceptionally, the poet mentions the body of his lover, as in “It’s hopeless” (CP 208), it is to fantasise the removal of that bodily presence as the “I” imagines reducing the female body to mathematical abstractions. The evocation of the deleted physical presence is phrased in a negative ternary rhythm: “no legs,/ no breasts, no voice” (l.9-10) and the order in which the terms are placed suggests a valiant attempt at envisaging the beloved as object of sexual desire. This endeavour ultimately flows back into MacCaig’s apparently purely intellectual conception of love in poetry as the physical presence is replaced with the intangible “voice”, potential vehicle of meaning and rational thought – emphasis on “potential,” considering earlier observations. Moreover, it seems that mentions of the attractive female body are always underscored by a humorous value, as in “It’s hopeless,” where the speaker imagines “[lying] in bed fondling an equation” (l.12) or in “Dumb blonde” (CP 269).

Laughter – humour – is impossible without the subject feeling him/herself distanced from the object under scrutiny. Consequently, an evocation of fervent

romantic love cannot easily coexist with it, which strongly tones down the depiction of romantic love in MacCaig's poetry. This may be part of what Whyte means when he writes: "when he writes 'love,' the term is peculiarly unrealised and the poetry slips into sentimentality too frequently" (94).

Between this enterprise of erasing the body and the absence of any true rendering of a mind or will behind the beloved, the second pole of the love relationship in MacCaig's poems becomes an absentee presence haunting the text – there is a greater sense of kinship with the animals evoked in the nature poems than with the beloved⁵¹ – thus compounding the problematic relationship of the love poems with his central poetic project.

The beloved being stylised into this place-holder figure contributes to the characteristic sense of distance arising from MacCaig's love poems. I argue that this distance also hinges on two distinct but related problems. Firstly, MacCaig's typical restraint coupled with the previously discussed tendency to undermine the traditional love rhetoric creates a sense of holding back, which is perhaps what the critics who find these texts less than credible, such as Wells⁵², have been sensible to. Secondly, there is no true togetherness for the lovers, as in the previously quoted image of the mobile in "Give or Take" (*CP* 246 l.10-12), where they can never be united. The speaker seems isolated, a trait which appears to hark back to an earlier tradition as a shift occurred during the nineteenth century when "unlike Romantic poetry which was 'inspired by the idea of an autonomous self, an independent adventure not a

⁵¹ See chapter 5.

⁵² "I am never quite able to bring myself to believe in his love, especially love-loss poems and I think perhaps his unrelenting self-awareness and his consistently if gently ironic tone accounts for it" (32)

shared expedition' (...) In Victorian poetry, love [became] known not as it appears in a vision, but 'the dramatic actuality of a relationship'" (McSweeney and Patricia Ball qtd in McSweeney 8). Donne sets an even older precedent with his emphasis on togetherness as, while the collective "we" is rarely encountered in MacCaig's writing, Donne "explores the mutual emotions of lover and beloved and this necessitates the use of the inclusive pronoun" (Austin 30). Instead, MacCaig's amatory verse deals mostly with love that is unhappy because unrequited or no longer mutual or because an irremediable distance separates the lovers. "The sense of absolute togetherness" in "True Ways of Knowing" remarked upon by Frykman (40) is definitely a rarity in MacCaig's poems. Considering that "to speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say 'I am loved less than I love'" (Barthes transl. Howard 13), it could be argued that this distance is constitutive of love poetry. However, I would argue that there is a resonance more specific to MacCaig at work in this case, involving his long-standing concern with postlapsarian language and its inability to truly grant access to reality. A remark written about Tibullus, with whom MacCaig's affinity has previously been noted, could also apply to the Scot's poems: "the poet seems to be haunted by an ever present loss, of having been robbed of some irretrievable happiness. Neither country life nor love is ever felt as a secure possession" and there is a constant "note of longing in his description"; "he longs for the Age of Saturn, when the world was innocent," Luck remarks (72-3). MacCaig similarly regrets a fantasised non-tropological Eden of language as the lost condition for happiness. His love poems often deal with the speaker being left, as in "You went

Away” (*CP* 7), “Poem for a Goodbye” (*CP* 51) and “ Private Diary”:

Your name in days and months will be
A monument of your absence; through
The window of a word your hand
Will wave perpetual goodbye (*CP* 55 l.17-20)

All are poems about the impossibility for the lovers to coincide or truly communicate. Even when a sense of togetherness is achieved – for instance in “Turned Head” (*CP* 72) as the beloved is, for once, shown turning towards the speaker. The lovers seem to converge in a positive, hopeful manner:

You turn your head and stop the world from turning.
All meaning breaks off short, its last word ‘and’ (l.4-5).
(...)
When you (no god pursuing) turn to me.

And everything begins
To be a beginning (l.11-12).

However, the speaker evinces anxiety at the thought, already fearing the end of love:

Will a time come when,
Used to its reckless rolling to a future,
I shall forget when the world turned again?

Adam was grave, and I
Laugh with the substance of his gravity.
My beasts and flowers make Edens in my mind
And with you I will name them, not forgetting
The gate, the flaming sword and human kind (l.18-25).

The poem ends on an ominous note: “grave,” the homonym of tomb, the ill-fated outcome of Man’s experience in Eden, and the awareness of that myth – nothing good ever lasts as subtext – hover over the last stanza. Compounding this negative impression, “not forgetting” is emphasised through its position at the end of the line, isolated behind a comma and furthermore appears at first glance to be employed absolutely, which lends it a sinister air. These examples suggest two further reasons

for this sense of distance between the lovers, the looming threat of death, which surfaces frequently in the speaker's discourse as the irremediable and unavoidable end of love after the Fall, and the barrier postlapsarian language creates in the apprehension of the other – "Private Diary," in metonymically referring to the beloved as her name, exemplifies a tendency to refer to the name instead of the person in the love poems, both in the case of the speaker and of the woman, as though all that can be accessed is a linguistic label rather than the actual subject. In "Names" (*CP* 196), for instance, the poet muses: "I know your name and who named you, but you have selves as secret from me / as blenny or butterfish" (l.11-13). This mirrors the previously discussed conclusions MacCaig draws about the relationship between language and reality – postlapsarian language which can not express the object-in-itself is no more suited to the apprehension of a subject, however beloved. The poet in "No Consolation" (*CP* 162) contemplates "how hard it is / to live at a remove / from a common wall" (l.8-10) because he can "only describe [his] own inventions" due to the inadequacies of language. It might not be excessive as such to summarise MacCaig's love poems as a gloss of this statement regarding the specific subject-object relationship where the object is another subject.

This type of distance replaces MacCaig in his twentieth century context despite the influential traces of older traditions in his works. The fact that he writes in this specific period also means that a complete consideration of the problem needs to take into account the sociological changes that characterise it. Simmel's take on "modern love" may provide another possible reason for this particular trait of MacCaig's love poems:

Inasmuch as the real goal of modern love is reciprocal love, in relation to which everything else only follows as something secondary and accidental, modern love is the first to recognise that there is something unattainable in the other: that the absoluteness of the individual self erects a wall between two human beings which even the most passionate willing of both cannot remove and that renders illusory any actual “possession” that would be anything more than the fact and consciousness of being loved back. This is the consequence of that ultimate deepening and individualisation of the self-feeling. What this leads to is a becoming rooted in oneself and an isolation within oneself which turns the wish to “possess” into a contradiction and a grasping into the void (Simmel 246).

Perhaps this might explain the disturbing dissection of the woman the speaker refers to as “[his] pretty girl” in “*Cold Song*” (CP 258). The systematic taking apart of the girl’s body, reduced to a “sack of guts,” a “ringless finger” then “eyes quick with intelligence” depicts a fragmented perception of the woman that only considers the aspect/portion of her relevant to the area of life appropriated by the owner of the gaze (doctor, lawyer, professor). The similarities between the structures of the first three stanzas give the poem a sense of nursery rhyme light-heartedness which, combined with the fragmented evocation of the woman creates a somewhat uncanny effect. When, in the fourth stanza, the “song” reaches the point where the “I” describes his vision of his “pretty girl,” the repetition of disquieting viewpoints has created an expectation that the speaker alone will see the individual that is the woman. However, the phrasing: “saw an intelligent /sack of guts with / a ringless finger” is merely the assembling of the fragments. The individual being more than the sum of its parts, the impression produced leaves the reader perplexed. The title “Cold Song” implies this to be the intended effect, but its interpretation remains problematic. Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn is that all one can ever perceive of another, however loved, is fragments, in which case the beloved’s actual self is, as

Simmel intimates, inaccessible and all lovers can ever turn on each other is the speaker's disquieting "cold" gaze.

This once again ties into MacCaig's concern with perception and the subject-object relationship, as have most of the remarks made about his amatory verse in this chapter up to this point. It seems that his love poems, which by definition deal with the feelings of the subject are singularly concerned with the mind rather than the heart. I propose that amatory modulations, rather than being the focus of what is perceived as MacCaig's love lyrics, often appear as a secondary mode in meditative poems engaging with linguistic and metaphysical issues. This, I argue, is what links the apparently diverging corpus of MacCaig's love lyrics to the rest of his works and his general writing project. In support of this idea, it can be noted that MacCaig's love lyrics apparently seek to engage the mind more than the heart. Just as desire and the body, which would be expected in love poems, are entirely absent, the sphere of the feelings and emotions is less often referred to in his amatory verse than the mind and the intellect. In this too, MacCaig goes against the reader's expectations of love poetry. This paradoxical primacy of the intellectual sphere over emotion in MacCaig's love poems appears explicitly in the poet's lexical choices: while the word "mind" is often employed to evoke romantic feelings in the poems, "heart" is conspicuously absent. Indeed, the speaker of "Memorial" (*CP* 267) muses "no crocus is carved more gently/ than the way her dying/ shapes *my mind*" (l;11-13, my emphasis). Critics have pointed out this primacy of the intellect in MacCaig's amatory verse: Press describes MacCaig's love poems as being "primarily, metaphysical inquiries into the essence of love and into the painful intricacies of a unique

relationship between two people” (176). Whyte suggests a possible interpretation for this trait, explaining that “MacCaig focuses on epistemology rather than emotion. The intellectual pyrotechnics of the love lyrics may even strike one as a kind of defence, a barricade against involvement” (93). “This tendency to see love as a philosophical, rather than an emotional problem (or perhaps as the resolution of a philosophical problem) is typical of MacCaig’s *pudeur* and one has the impression that he would draw back with an ironic grimace, when faced with any too open or substantial outpouring of feeling” (100). Without rejecting this reading, I would additionally propose a re-interpretation of MacCaig’s love poems as a specific modulation of his meditations on the “riddle of the observer” (Crichton Smith “A Lust for the Particular” 22) – the nature of subjectivity, the limits of language and perception and the mediation of culture. The poems in which MacCaig grapples with these questions very often assume the undefined beloved of his amatory verse as an addressee. The majority of his most significant remarks on metaphor, for instance, can be found in texts that, if they are not pure love poems at least feature this modulation heavily. “No Choice” (CP197), for instance, alternates in its four stanzas the speaker’s attitude towards his beloved and towards metaphor. Poems about naming similarly often feature the woman as object of meditation, as in “Names” (CP 196), already quoted earlier. This entails that the beloved appears as a muse, but not, with the exceptions of “Reversal” (CP 286) and “Cliff Top, East Coast” (CP 210), as a traditional muse. As a singular “you” conjured up by the poem, she represents an idealised audience for the poet’s reflections, but more than this, I would like to show that the beloved is represented in MacCaig’s amatory verse as a

muse of knowledge, of sorts, who acts alternately as an interpreter of reality and as a guide in the poet's meditations.

Throughout the volumes, the poetic "I" returns consistently to the meaning of the woman, or the meaning she imbues objects with. In "No wizard, no witch" (*CP* 220), beyond the traditionally celebrated transfiguring power of love, the "you" mediates the poet's apprehension of his surroundings: "It's your transfiguring innocence that tells / A stone to be a bird – or a stranger thing, / the actual air to be the actual air" (l.16-18). This conception of the woman as both text to be deciphered and the source of an interpretative power becomes particularly apparent in "Bookworm" (*CP* 243) or "Understanding" (*CP* 293-4):

The praise is yours, girl: for you made
everything braille for my blind fingers.
Everything spoke you; for you are the word
to which all other words are a footnote (l.9-12).
(...)
when your meaning was all the others (l.14).

The beloved is an interpretative instance, but also an object for interpretation, as the speaker's desire to categorise her indicates in "Non Pareil" (*CP* 52) :

If I could match you with an image found
Wedged amongst the measurable shapes
Embroiled in being by the four elements,
Or met like a possibility in dreamscapes,
Or figured in the motion of a mind –
Or anywhere – it's the last thing I would find (l.1-6).

This is a specific case of the descriptive efforts discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. MacCaig seeks to render the object without distorting it and in this love poem, attempts to find an image that would "match" her since names in postlapsarian language cannot describe their referent. The poem later highlights the essential

falsity of metaphor, as discussed previously, showing that language fails to describe the object. Here, through contemplation of the beloved, the subject moves on to a more general reflection about language and reality. This is a common trend in MacCaig's poems: in his hyperbolic praise of the beloved, the speaker repeatedly blurs the boundaries of her self, resulting in a fluid exchange of essence between her and the rest of reality. He calls her attention to that phenomenon in "Not yet Afterwards" (CP 5): "See, all the world trembles in you and lies / Safe in your hands, escaped from its own self" (l.13-14). Conversely, "Truth for Comfort" (CP 185) has the rest of the world metaphorically reflecting the woman in her absence ("this chair, this jug, this picture speak as her / If in a muted way" l.10-11) while in "Understanding" (CP 293) the "I" elaborates on this in the lines 9 down to 12 cited earlier, remembering many evenings "when [her] meaning was all the others" (l.14). This movement from contemplation of the meaning of the beloved to apprehension of reality and its problematic relation to language may call up the passage from the contemplation of the beautiful being to that of the Beautiful and the Good in Plato's *Symposium* – the woman-as-muse in MacCaig's love poems plays a similar role. However, MacCaig's keen awareness of the limits of language means that she can not lead him to the Truth of immutable Ideas, but only to the aporetic realisation that he can not find the tropological substitute to prelapsarian exactness he was seeking – the beloved in particular and reality in general remain inaccessible in their essence as subject or thing:

Identity with you? – no chance of that:
No more than you can give me images for
Any experience other than yourself.
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 (“Non Pareil” *CP* 52 l.7-12).
Her role as muse of knowledge is ultimately discarded – she can not account for
“any experience other than [herself].” What she does, however, is reconcile the
speaker of “Particular You” (*CP* 39) with this aporia as “the lesson of [her] hand”
leads him to “find the language of disguise / says all [he] want[s] and bear[s] to
know” (l.24).

C – Conclusion

For the majority of MacCaig’s career, his amatory verse is defined by alternating borrowings from and rejection of tradition and a sense of distance in the relationship which allows him to cast the beloved in the classical role of the muse, with a specific MacCaig twist on it: because he is most concerned with the nature of perception and language and meaning, he draws her back into the central questions and aims of his works. His muse is a muse of knowledge whose powers of inspiration are hermeneutic in nature, though the postlapsarian context robs her of the Platonic success that would allow her to lead the speaker to an immutable “Truth.” Her status as a muse in meditative poems contributes in part to the sense of distance which characterises MacCaig’s love poems, but the reasons that can be given are multiple and ultimately impossible to untangle from one another. The nature of amatory verse, the historical and sociological context, and limit of language all contribute to the impossibility for the speaker to be truly united to the beloved who, as recipient of a written discourse, is actually physically absent in addition to being erased from the

text as anything more than a shadowy figure to which the lover's discourse is addressed, has been discussed at length. This lack of definition of the beloved and the strong influence of traditional conventions are in definite contradiction with MacCaig's personal poetic project. The focus of the love poems being shared between the self and the epistemological or metapoetical questions often at the centre of the love poems deviates further from this agenda which would make the object the focal point of the poem, thus granting MacCaig's love poetry a specific place in his works as wholly separate from his main project.

More strikingly, the love poems do not form an entirely homogeneous corpus. There is a distinct sense of appeasement later in MacCaig's career, though death remains a constant threat to it, as "Truth for Comfort" (*CP* 185), one of the rare poems about happy love – absence without anxiety – suggests in its bittersweet but still serene last sentence: "comfort's / what I won't need until she has to go," with "has to" underlining the external necessity rather than the voluntary departure of earlier poems such as "You Went Away." The shift towards this new take on love already appears earlier in the collection with "Two Ways of It" (*CP* 78), written in 1958 and even the prospect of the inevitable ending is disregarded in favour of a more hopeful outlook in "Estuary" (*CP* 192, written in 1966): "a world of beginnings, a world of possibly / desperate ends, but a world of beginnings". Moreover, in "Consequences" (355, written in 1976), an actual brief dialogue with the "you" is staged in answer to the speaker's musings in the first stanza – implying that the "you" is actually addressed and not the silent audience of a monologue:

If you say (smilingly), 'Ah,
but you're neither of these gentlemen,'

I can only reply (weakly), 'Nor are you
an apple or a kettle' (1.6-9)

The parentheses in this theatrical passage are essentially stage directions. Because this generic modulation is seldom encountered in MacCaig's writing, the fact that this particular love poem is a dialogue with two participants whose physical presence is implied by their specified tone and expression is brought to the fore. Consequently, the place of the "you" as partner and no longer merely object of the poem is highlighted, though it must be kept in mind that this is the only example in the *Collected Poems*, and occurs quite late in the collection. MacCaig nevertheless seems to be moving towards a more realistic approach as he gets older. The Tibullus-like withdrawal from reality remarked at the beginning of this chapter starts giving way to more specific scenes and moments as the poet matures, as in "A Difference" (CP 177), "Nothing so Memorable" (CP 156), "Water Tap" (CP 105) or "Truth for Comfort" (CP 185). One of the most visible manifestations of this evolution can be found in "Between us" (CP 361, written in 1981), where, instead of the customary distance, the speaker concentrates on projecting a sense of togetherness: "There's no wall here – / not even a grating, not even a fence. // I'm speaking of the space between us" (1.1-3). Ultimately, the space between is not an emptiness as in other love poems, but a continuum of shared memories that unites the lovers. This change to a more hopeful tone is however put into perspective considering how few poems can attest to it as, in the later short volumes, the place of amatory verse declines steadily until it disappears nearly completely.

Though these poems of appeasement that concentrate more centrally on love and the lovers are rare, and thus form too limited a corpus to enable the teasing out

of general tendencies, it seems that, as he gets older, MacCaig's love poems tend to deviate more fully from tradition and, conversely, to rejoin the majority of his writing in following his central poetic project of faithfully evoking his object – here, no longer only the lover or the beloved, but the love that unites them.

Conclusion

The central project of this study was to try and find a way into MacCaig's works through the various sites of tensions that characterise his works. The goal was to provide a unifying account of his poetry, something that has not been done to this day. The reason for this blind spot in the critical field focusing on MacCaig can be guessed at: there is on the one hand an unanimously recognised MacCaig voice that connects the entirety of his works – though critics do not always consider this a virtue, as shown with Frykman's less than complimentary description of the poems as "repetitive artistry" or Wells who sees in *Old Maps and New* an "unadventurous spirit" whose "range is limited" and in whose writing "growth and development are absent" (33). However, the different themes populating his poems as well as his takes on them are often – most of the time – in tension with one another. To give a few examples, we can remember the apparent tension between a sense of grace, of the sacred and MacCaig's vocal atheism discussed in chapter 2 or the way he seemingly defends both empiricist and idealist epistemological positions, as was discussed in chapter 3. The way the speaker seems to adopt – sometimes in the same sentence – ostensibly opposite views appears to preclude finding a set of underlying ideas and principles that would act as the unifying framework of the poem. This may give a casual reader the false impression of a fragmented body of works operating on a level of somewhat superficial stylistic mastery most of the time and made up largely of "jokey, wee poems," as MacCaig would dub them ("A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things" 117).

A more in-depth acquaintance with his writing, however, brings out the deeper structuring role taken on by the tensions I have highlighted in this thesis. The worldview created in MacCaig's works is the product of these in the sense that his speaker is always aware of both opposite poles. He awards them due consideration without either ignoring them or attempting a synthesis that cannot be operated without modifying the definitions he is taking as a basis for his reflection. This has been interpreted as unconcern and shallowness by some critics, as has been discussed earlier. I propose to read this instead as a form of lucidity – the opposites between which the tensions MacCaig evokes exist are often irreconcilable, therefore he does not seek to reconcile them. This attitude is, to my sense, what unifies his works. The central tension in his works is the most radical of all and the one he least attempts to overcome, declining to develop the traditional compensatory theme of art being *aere perennius* – more durable than bronze: the life and death dichotomy. The absolute awe of existence at the core of his works conflicts with the constant certitude of mortality and provides a basis for the other sites of tension structuring his works, not the least of which being the oft-remarked upon intermingling of elegiac and celebratory modes in most if not all his poems.

As discussed at the beginning of this dissertation, MacCaig follows a poetic project of celebrating the object by “letting things be,” that is by describing it poetically without distortion, or rather, because he is well aware that one can not get away from subjective associations, with as little distortion as possible. This poetic agenda arises from the nearly religious sense of wonder he finds in contemplating the world – existence in the broad sense of all that exists. This resolves one of the

tensions perceptible in his works as his atheism is not incompatible with the presence of the sacred since he does not place it in a god. The corollary of MacCaig's writing project is that the question of language and its limits is extremely influential in his poetry, as it conditions not only description, but perception – thus feeding into MacCaig's pervasive questioning of “the riddle of the observer” – and, by casting doubt on the possibility of perceiving reality as it is, simultaneously puts in peril his whole poetic project. His wonder at existence and the experience of communion with nature it engenders also gives rise to his deeply ingrained respect for life in all its manifestations and to his sense of the interconnectedness of all things, which translates into a discreet but present concern with Man's often destructive influence on his environment. This too ties back into MacCaig's characteristic lucidity: though his poems are often tinged with pastoral nostalgia, he does not engage with the mode on a merely superficial level as the “escapist weekender” he has been charged with being. Instead, he recognises the ways the pastoral cannot evoke the reality he writes about, thus supplementing his more traditional pastoral writing with anti-pastoral and pastoral modulations. The concerns touched upon in these modulations draw seemingly frozen in time pastoral space of the Highlands into MacCaig's present – they introduce death as a reality of natural life in this space.

These modulations exist along the line of tension between the celebration and awe at existence, at life of MacCaig and the other pole of the dichotomy, death. This first world view comes to an impasse when MacCaig considers death – the threat of non-existence rendering moot his writing project. For atheist MacCaig, the immanent sense of life as an “unemphatic marvel[]” has no continuation in a

“beyond.” Death, in these conditions, represents the complete antithesis and ultimately the destruction of his world view as it robs the subject of the world he takes such delight in and silences the speaker, thus threatening the whole enterprise of writing with meaninglessness through its constant menacing presence. Because the threat is always present, even celebratory poems contain touches of elegy, as has been discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation – MacCaig’s speaker is always aware of mortality and this, perhaps, is why his poems are “the poems of a lonely man,” as Crichton Smith pointed out. For all the presences in his works, the anthropomorphised plants and mountains and landscapes, the animals he shows such sympathy with, the speaker is always confronted to his own mortality in his environment and faces it alone as the woman of “Visiting Hour” (*CP* 178).

MacCaig’s poetry faces a double threat: death and the impossibility of apprehending reality-as-it-is. Confronted with these two problems which would deprive writing of its meaning, the poet adopts, though he would probably resist the label, an attitude strongly reminiscent of Camus’s brand of existentialism – Camus who, like him, resists being labelled in general and whose proposed response to the absurdity of mortality is to persevere and refuse to give into an easy nihilism that would accept the loss of all meaning and values. MacCaig acknowledges the danger repeatedly – though often in an oblique fashion – in his poems. He nevertheless moves past it by resolving to keep producing poetry without however ignoring its problematic aspects. Indeed, his works reflect the instability created by this double threat of impermanence and incertitude in several manners. His reluctance to adhere to any systematic thought, for instance, translates into his always problematic

engagement with literary traditions and his careful avoidance of labels: though the ethics he proposes in his pastoral modulations are visibly Epicurean, the term is never actually mentioned. The sense of instability that threatens his writing may also contribute to his choice of establishing for himself the ethos of a simple man who claims to reject the jargon of specialists and any philosophy other than the popular wisdom he sees in his shepherds and crofters, though there is no definite evidence to support this theory.

This “simple man” ethos is however a very old rhetorical device used abundantly in Classical texts, which MacCaig would have known well. Additionally, because so much of his poetry concentrates on an idealised past with the pastoral modulations of his Highlands poems, MacCaig’s writings appear difficult to place in a particular period at first glance. He engages with atemporal themes – life and death, love, the passing of time – and Wells has complained that “we [the readers] are hardly aware of the 20th century existence at all” (32) in MacCaig’s poetry. However, in the way he articulates his concern with language and the nature of the self very much a man of his time and, in his considerable self-consciousness and his distaste for confessional histrionics, quite representative of his generation – men who try in the post-war context and beyond, to articulate their subjective experience and feelings in a world where Man has shown himself capable of unprecedented destruction and where traditional modes of expression appear insufficient. Flippant though he admits himself to be, MacCaig manages however to avoid giving into the temptation of cool, uninvolved irony and presents his readers with a very personal as well as profoundly humane and humanistic poetic legacy.

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Appendix: The WORLD IS WORD tropes network

The first group of tropes features the replacement of real-world object by elements linked to language and its uses.

Nature and human sounds

Title	Page	Trope
“Double Life”	<i>CP</i> 11	“No double-going stream would sing counties and books in the symbolic air”
“Thaw on Building Site”	<i>CP</i> 113	“A concrete mixer cleared its throat / For a boring speech, all consonants”
“Hill Streams in Abruzzi”	<i>CP</i> 159	“I listen and understand that watery Esperanto”
“On a Croft by the Kirkaig”	<i>CP</i> 416	“and the river bundling its sweet vocabulary / towards the swarming languages/ of the sea”
“On the North Side of Suilven”	<i>CP</i> 418	“I drink/ its freezing vocabulary / and half understand the purity / of all beginnings”

Letters and symbols

Title	Page	Trope
“Boats”	CP 21	“They make a hieroglyph on the sea”
“Sad Cunning”	CP 48	“This light discloses you as if it were death’s hardest hieroglyph and you its meaning”
“Frost and Thin Fog”	CP 61	“The cold and melancholy sun hangs his red O above suburban gardens”
“World’s Centre”	CP 75	“The crimson curl, O of its natural graph”
“Sandstone Mountain”	CP 141	“Hinds raised their heads in V’s”
“Brooklyn Cop”	CP 182	“With two hieroglyphs in his face that mean trouble”
“One of the Many Days”	CP 214	“A parcel of hinds/ gave the V-sign with their ears”
“Caterpillar”	CP 263	“he makes a row of upside-down Us”
“Understanding”	CP 293	“And there was an O in my graph”
“Understanding”	CP 293	“for you made everything braille for my blind fingers”
“Understanding”	CP 293	“and love and pity were the O in the graph / of the world’s loneliness”
“Landscape and I”	CP 294	“Lock Rannoch lapses dimpling in the sun./ Its hieroglyphs of light fade one by one / But recreate themselves, their message done,/ for ever and ever.”
“Drifting in a Dinghy”	CP 296	“I am my monotonous single, / black breve / on a shining manuscript.”
“Two Thoughts of Macdiarmid in a Quiet Place”	CP 400	“where a pantile branch hangs its S”
“By the	CP 408	“and always, the beach is oghamed and cuneiformed / By

Graveyard, Luskentyre”		knot and dunlin and country-dancing sandpipers”
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The materials of reading and writing

Title	Page	Trope
“Still Two”	CP 12	“Time will lift his lawyer’s pen”
“In a Level Light”	CP 98	“Angels bank / over the sea: and its crisp texts unfold / silvering the sand's ecclesiastic gold”
“Sun Blink”	CP 117	“And the air opens like a book. Its blinding pages ...”
“Sun Blink”	CP 117	“Time stirs his fire, and here and every where begins to write another paragraph in the open air”
“Environment”	CP 138	“The air is pale (...) his shaking fingers twiddle the hawthorn like a ragged pen”
“A Corner of the Road, Early Morning”	CP 141	“The ditch ran ink”
“Flooded Mind”	CP 158	“no wonder his eyes were/noticeboards saying <i>Private. Keep out.</i> ”
“Among Scholars”	CP 168	“Read the landscape as I read a book”
“Among Scholars”	CP 168	“Took itself off, a text, a chapter and verse, into its gospel”
“Bookworm”	CP 243	“the second volume /of a rose”
“Bookworm”	CP 243	“the waves of the sea (...) why aren’t they divided / in paragraphs ?”
“Bookworm”	CP 243	“I look at the night / and make nothing of it – / those black pages/ with no print”
“Bookworm”	CP 243	“the library of everything”
“Sparrow”	CP 249	“that blackbird writing / pretty scrolls on the air with the gold nib of his beak”
“Failed Occasion”	CP 284	“I feel/ I’m a black smudge on a precious manuscript/ not the exclamation mark I’d like to be”

“Understanding”	CP 293	“and human fingers/ touch human fingers in immortal braille”
“Understanding”	CP 293	“for you made everything braille for my blind fingers”
“Understanding”	CP 293	“you are the word/ to which all other words are footnotes”
“Backward Look”	CP 430	“if only I come to be, in its long story, / a word with brackets round it, / a word drowned in a footnote, / a word / whose meaning has been forgotten”

The literary and grammatical forms of language and discourse

This trope is composed of two subcategories: the first presents objects of the world as aspects of the forms that structure language into discourse (in the case of a subset, into certain types of literary discourses).

Title	Page	Trope
“No Escape”	CP 9	“Bury my name in the ground and watch it grow”
“Dream World”	CP 9	“Syllables of your breath compose / Arctic wind and desert rose”
“Boats”	CP 21	“Pooled in iambs or tossed on hexameters”
“Early Summer”	CP 27	“The morning’s lettered like a calendar”
“Charlatan Summer”	CP 29	“In the death of roses every season reads its epitaph”
“Lies for Comfort”	CP 37	“The long streets are our heart’s grammar”
“Golden Calf”	CP 37	“The Sinai sort (...) made alphabetic in a stormspout”
“Ego”	CP 45	“A text composed of earth and sky”
“Private Diary”	CP 55	<i>Extended metaphor throughout the poem</i>
“Creator”	CP 67	“The poem he’s in keeps producing stanzas”

“Explicit Snow”	CP 68	“And the hill we’ve looked out of existence comes / Vivid in its own language; and this tree / Stands self-explained, its own soliloquy”
“Among Scholars”	CP 168	“Took itself off, a text, a chapter and verse, into its gospel”
“The root of it “	CP 209	“On the rug by the fire / a stack or vocabulary rose up, confidently / piling adjectives and nouns and/ tiny muscular verbs, storey by storey,/ until they reached/ almost to the ceiling. The word at the bottom was love.”
“Praise for a Thorn Bush”	CP 321	“you are/ an encyclopaedia of angles”

The second subcategory substitutes a linguistic sign – word(s), text – for the object.

“Swimming Lizard”	CP 12	“he twinkled his brief text through the brown and still.”
“Ophelia”	CP 26	“Scatter there/ a wild vocabulary of flowers”
“Roses and Thorns”	CP 41	“I touch the little jagged word and my torn skin carries your signature”
“Ego”	CP 45	“What reason to believe this anymore / than that I am myself a metaphor ?”
“Names and Their Things”	CP 194	“Pointing to names I knew that became birds ... I stood with you / watching a familiar word turn into a hickory tree.”
“Aesthetics”	CP 289	“words with Greek roots / and American blossoms have taken over the pretty garden”
“Aesthetics”	CP 289	“the ground rustles/ with centipede nouns. That soft green adjective devours / its leaf/ with lateral jaws.”
“Backward Look”	430	“if only I come to be, in its long story, / a word with brackets round it, / a word drowned in a footnote, / a word / whose meaning has been forgotten”

Codes and languages – the difficulty of interpretation

This second group of tropes is partly a subcategory of the letters and symbols trope. It hinges on the problem of interpretation and its difficulties. It contains in particular the subgroup whose connotations of religious mysteries have been evoked in chapter 2.

Pictograms, hieroglyphs and cypher-like writing

Title	Page	Trope
“Boats”	<i>CP 21</i>	“They make a hieroglyph on the sea”
“Sad Cunning”	<i>CP 48</i>	“This light discloses you as if it were death’s hardest hieroglyph and you its meaning”
“Brooklyn Cop”	<i>CP 182</i>	“With two hieroglyphs in his face that mean trouble”
“Landscape and I”	<i>CP 294</i>	“Lock Rannoch lapses dimpling in the sun./ Its hieroglyphs of light fade one by one”
“By the graveyard, Luskentyre”	<i>CP 408</i>	“and always, the beach is oghamed and cuneiformed / By knot and dunlin and country-dancing sandpipers”
“Understanding”	<i>CP 293</i>	“and human fingers/ touch human fingers in immortal braille”
“Understanding”	<i>CP 293</i>	“for you made everything braille for my blind fingers”

Other languages

“Explicit Snow”	<i>CP 68</i>	“And the hill we’ve looked out of existence comes / Vivid in its own language”
“Among Scholars”	<i>CP 168</i>	“They spoke like a native the language they walked in”
“Prism”	<i>CP 248</i>	“The whole city/ is a code in a foreign language”