

*Catherine Claire Thomson*

'My Water of Leith runs through  
a double city'

## Cityscape and Mindscape in the Poetry of Norman MacCaig and Klaus Rifbjerg

### *The Poets*

As a sixteen year-old schoolgirl, I had the privilege of attending a poetry reading by the late Norman MacCaig (1910-1996) at Lanark Library. We were tickled by his assertion that his poems were not structured, but simply 'trickled down the page'; we were also somewhat disappointed when our English teacher advised us that this enchantingly simple account of the creative process would not pass muster with the Higher English examiners.

Nine years on, and this is one school lesson that has stuck. I am still struck by the elegant simplicity and extraordinary precision of MacCaig's imagery and metaphors. He is, probably, best known for his topographical poetry of the landscape of Assynt; but, time and time again, he is drawn to explore the cityscape of Edinburgh:

To call the pier a centre  
I sit in a centre –  
of cloud-stuffs, water lispings, a huge  
charge of light and men doing things on boats  
that result in fish. Yet I am, too, a centre  
of roundabouts and No Entries, libraries,  
streets full of cafés and the prickly stink  
of burnt petrol:  
an imposition of two circles  
from different geometries  
(*'Centre of Centres', The White Bird, 1973*)

Being at home – or perhaps never quite at home? – in these two different worlds, MacCaig's greatest facility was to link the 'different geometries' of the world around him, to create perfect order from the alchemy of unlikelyhoods and impossibilities.

Another poet with a similar instinct for the unexpected metaphor is the Danish man of letters Klaus Rifbjerg (born 1931). A near-contemporary of MacCaig's, Rifbjerg has produced an average of three or four books a year since the early 1960s, works of fiction, drama, journalism, and poetry – and still shows no sign of slowing down. Rifbjerg has been described as the Scandinavian spokesman for joyful modernism<sup>1</sup>, and in this he is very like MacCaig: both take delight in the minutiae of daily life, and their delight is infectious, for they convey it through the flash of vivid image and the revelation of new camera angles on the world.

It is not so much on the basis of their status in the countries of their birth that I think these two poets invite comparison. Rifbjerg is the undisputed doyen of the Danish literary scene, in terms of sheer breadth of output, as well as in terms of popular and critical acclaim. MacCaig's profile as *primus inter pares* in Scotland is certainly more debatable, although the unshakeable grip of his poems on the Higher English syllabus is perhaps a good illustration of their accessibility and their enduring literary worth!

Rather, it is the powerful idea of 'doubling' – the striking talent for identifying unlikely likenesses and transforming them into metaphor – which most closely links the work of these two poets. As the Danish critic Jørgen Bonde Jensen argues, '[o]ppositions have to be strong enough to result in *dissonance*, if a modern tone is to be achieved. The fundament of modernity is the oxymoron, the figure of the collision'<sup>2</sup>. Jensen credits Klaus Rifbjerg with having brought this 'modern' attitude to language and poetry to Denmark. And what could be more 'modern' than some of the young Rifbjerg's wry observations:

med hjerter der suser rundt i spænding  
som vaskemaskine –

('At elske', *Under vejr med mig selv*, 1956<sup>3</sup>)

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[with hearts whizzing round all excited  
like washing machines –]

når motorcyklens udblæsning / kastes som antdiluvianske  
mammutferte / mellem husmurene  
(‘Motor’, *ibid.*)

[‘when the motorbike’s exhaust fumes / are pumping like antdiluvian  
mammoth-farts / between the house walls’]

MacCaig himself seems to have had an idealistic faith in the latent power of poetic metaphor:

Poetry teaches a man to do more than observe merely factual errors and measurable truths...it compels him to examine the emotional significance, as well as the rational significance, of whatever comes under his notice.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘impossibilities’ presented to us by the poets represent a commitment to exposing the complexities of life. They are greater than the sum of their parts, they are meant to set off a new creative dynamic in the mind of the reader, at once touching on personal memories and common experience.

I am not, of course, suggesting that MacCaig and Riffbjerg are unrecognised poetic soulmates; their respective *œuvres* have emerged from quite different national poetic traditions. They do, however, stand among the major literary figures of the twentieth century in two small northern European nations. I hope that this brief comparison of a limited segment of their works will serve to gather up some common threads.

### *The City*

Nowhere is the modern condition more acutely experienced than in the city. Both MacCaig and Riffbjerg are ‘decadent townees’ (as MacCaig puts it<sup>5</sup>), and a sizeable minority of their poems deal directly with the urban scapes of Edinburgh and Copenhagen. Although these cities can hardly be characterised as sprawling industrial metropolises, they

have their share of pollution and crime, enough to stand them in vibrant opposition to the romantic national landscapes of Scotland and Denmark which were so decisively established in literature by the early 19th century.

The idea of a 'double' city is brought sharply to bear in MacCaig's and Riffbjerg's portraits of their respective cityscapes. This can manifest itself in the depiction of aspects of the empirical city as they shift and coalesce into a new, astonishing poetic cityscape; or it can take the form of a certain ambivalence of place, a tension between the physically present city and another longed-for place or time (MacCaig's 'imposition of two circles').

MacCaig's city poetry is sprinkled more or less evenly throughout his *Collected Poems*.<sup>6</sup> Riffbjerg's, on the other hand, appears in more concentrated bursts, notably in the collections *Konfrontation* (Confrontation, 1960), *Amagerdigte* (Amager Poems, 1965), and the more recent *Byens tvetyls* (The City's Double Light, 1987), although I will also be referring to a few poems from other collections. Before examining the urban poetry of MacCaig and Riffbjerg in more depth, it is important to situate it in the context of the long tradition of literature about cities.

The city is the site of modernity; it is also the site of age-old dreams. It is a creation of human will, imposed on the world of nature. There are cities of metal and concrete, and there are cities of words, constructed in text, held together by our dreams and remembrances of the 'real' cities of our own experience. Most often, text-cities are re-presentations of empirical cities, already existing in space. Thus the text-city is – at least ostensibly – rooted in a socially or physically 'real' setting, and the shifting relationship between writer and city can be seen to mirror changing social and physical conditions in the real world, down the ages.

The most pervasive and enduring trope in literature about the city is the opposition of rural and urban life; from Virgil to Fielding, the country-city distinction has been presented as one of innocence versus decadence, pastoral tradition versus industrial progress, community versus 'paved solitude'.<sup>7</sup> The fundamental opposition has thus usually been presented not

only in physical terms but also as a moral contrast.

A second trope in urban literature established itself in the late nineteenth century. The forces of industrialisation and urbanisation in Europe were reflected in literature by a growing concern with the 'modern condition', and a tendency to social critique; the city came to be seen as an ambivalent site of scientific progress and social breakdown, a mindscape conflating the private and the public. This shift from the pre-modern city novel to the modern city novel has been well-documented<sup>8</sup>, and it has been shown to apply broadly to poetry as well as to prose<sup>9</sup>. The genealogical line can be traced roughly from Virgil's *Georgics*, through the English topographical poets, to Baudelaire and thence to T. S. Eliot.

For Riffbjerg and his contemporaries in Denmark, the crucial shift was their reaction against not only the Second World War and the occupation of Denmark by Nazi Germany, but also, in Riffbjerg's own words, against 'the arrogant feeling of certainty of the (nineteen)thirties, when it was assumed that disaster was impossible'<sup>10</sup>. For the new generation of angry young men and women – Riffbjerg, Villy Sørensen, Jess Ørnsbo, Ulla Ryum – the focus of interest was the here and now, the modern, and, of course, the city, the site of progress, and the site of their childhood. The old country-city divide dissolved, and the city came to encompass for them the natural sphere as well as the cultural one.<sup>11</sup>

The *Collected Poems* would seem to date the beginning of MacCaig's career as a poet to 1955; just one year before Riffbjerg's *Under vejrs med mig selv* stormed onto the Danish literary stage. However, MacCaig was almost 20 years older than Riffbjerg, and had already made it into print three times, first in an anthology of 1939, entitled *The New Apocalypse*, alongside other poets who, inspired by the French surrealists and by Marx and Freud, had formed the New Apocalypse Movement. The rather abstract results were later rubbished by Hugh MacDiarmid.<sup>12</sup> MacCaig's wife, Isabel, had also submitted two of his collections for publication during the war, while he was incarcerated as a conscientious objector.<sup>13</sup>

MacCaig then became a schoolmaster and could hardly still be described as an angry young man by the mid-1950s. But

he was part of the lively Edinburgh poetry scene of the time, the group of poets and writers – among them Hugh MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith and Sorley MacLean – who were regularly to be found arguing late into the night at Milne's Bar or the Abbotsford pub in Edinburgh.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, MacCaig seems to defy pigeon-holeing as a poet of the 'Scottish Renaissance'. While critics have identified a strong affinity with the classical Gaelic poetic traditions<sup>15</sup> in the structure and themes of his poems, MacCaig was by upbringing a 'decadent townie', a lowlander, who wrote exclusively in English. His Edinburgh poems subsume this Gaelic 'hinterland'<sup>16</sup> within the cityscape, in all its light and shadow.

### *The Poetic Cityscape*

To enclose places that grew two selves  
their own and the one I made of it

(MacCaig, 'Inward Bound', *The White Bird*, 1973)

For MacCaig and for Riffbjerg, the city is a very personal space as well as a public one. Their unceasing metaphysical enquiries turn cityscape into mindscape in poem after poem:

Everywhere she dies. Everywhere I go she dies.  
No sunrise, no city square, no lurking beautiful mountain  
But has her death in it.

(MacCaig: 'Memorial', *ibid.*)

Der er altid lidt rod  
med de skorstene  
der foregår noget  
man ikke har styr på.

Deres uregelmæssighed og forskellige  
størrelser deres  
utilnærmelighed og  
ubeskriverlige indre.

(Riffbjerg: 'Der foregår noget', *Byens tvæls*, 1987)

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[There's always something a bit messy  
about those chimneys  
something's happening  
we can't control.

Their irregularity and various  
sizes their  
unapproachability and  
indescribable innards.]

Nevertheless, the images of Edinburgh and Copenhagen which emerge from these poems are close-ups in full colour. The empirical cities are re-presented to us through the perceptive and precise observations of the poets. In this way, private and public cityscape merge alchemically in metaphor.

Hana Wirth-Nesher, in her recent book on reading cities in literature<sup>17</sup>, suggests that the transfer of features from the 'real' city to the text-city can be categorised into four groups: the *built*, the *human*, the *verbal*, and the *natural* environments. Each feature, or landmark, will take on a subtly different meaning for each writer and reader, according to his or her experiential, historical or literary knowledge of it. We may recognise the street names and landmarks used if we ourselves have walked those streets in real life. Of course, a city may also seem familiar to us because we have encountered its landmarks so often before in literature or in the media. Certain cities have captured the international imagination in various historical eras and have become 'mythicised' in this way: the London of Dickens or of T.S. Eliot, for example, or *fin-de-siècle* Paris. These meanings can, of course, change over time, in much the same way as, say, the Mound in Edinburgh suddenly took on a new significance when the Scottish Parliament began sitting there. The construction of the text-city, then, involves a three-way interaction of writer, reader, and empirical city.

Wirth-Nesher's model is designed for the analysis of the urban novel, and when applying it to the poetry of MacCaig and Riffbjerg two considerations, in particular, should be borne in mind.

Firstly, it need hardly be pointed out that a poem is shorter than a novel, leaving much less space in which to

build up a poetic cityscape. That said, fifty years worth of poetry from the same pen has the potential to create a very rich and detailed textual 'map' of the city, a map gradually built-up from memories and impressions transferred to text in non-chronological sequence. The resulting cityscape becomes a palimpsest of buildings, events and even people, a multi-dimensional map embellished, too, with the reader's own responses to the poet's city.

A second caveat relates to the cities of Edinburgh and Copenhagen themselves. These European capital cities are (indisputably) smaller and (arguably) less well-known – less 'mythicised' – than the more conventional urban muses of London, Paris and New York. Both poets visited New York during the 1950s and 1960s, MacCaig for a writers' conference, and Riffbjerg as a scholarship student, and both produced poems on the epic modernity of the American metropolis, MacCaig in *Rings on a Tree* (1968) and Riffbjerg, notably, in *Konfrontation* (1960). These poems are shot through with references to the sheer size and verticality of the buildings, the dizzying pace of life, the omnipresence of petty crime and serious violence.<sup>18</sup> The visions of the metropolis are juxtaposed with poems about the poets' hometowns. Rush hour on Princes Street, says MacCaig, will be 'a glade in a wood' by comparison with the New York streets ('Last Night in New York', in *Rings on a Tree*, 1968).

The reader who does not live in Edinburgh or in Copenhagen, though, will inevitably recognise few of the landmarks described by the poets. Of course, this hardly matters, because the majority of landmarks in these city poems are the poet's own private ones – the Tollcross clock and Blackford Pond in Edinburgh, for example, or a timber-yard in Amager – which may or may not be shared by a small number of readers. Riffbjerg states quite emphatically that the significance of memories and the urge to record them stem from their very individuality:

der blev jeg født  
og har siden gerne villet sætte  
dette på papiret.



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Ikke fordi kendsgerningerne er epokegørende  
men fordi jeg har levet med dem altid  
og intet mere er som før.

(Rifbjerg: 'Samosvej', *Amagerdigte*, 1965)

[I was born there  
and have since wanted to get  
this down on paper.

Not because the events were epochal  
but because I have lived with them always  
and nothing is as it was before.]

Elsewhere, Rifbjerg has explained the urge to record his own past in terms of *mapping*. It is 'in the filling out of a great, white-blotted, blind map of the past that I can fleetingly experience a total coherence.'<sup>19</sup> 'The intimacy is representative,' comments Jørgen Bonde Jensen on Rifbjerg's first collection of poems, 'directed outwards, so that we as readers can recognise ourselves in it.'<sup>20</sup> The local, after all, need not be parochial; family snapshots can spark recognition in all of us.

### *The concrete and the organic*

In fact, were it not for the occasional reference to famous city landmarks of Edinburgh and Copenhagen, it would actually be quite difficult to pin down the setting of these poems. In the poetic cityscape, we try to catch sight of the basic building blocks, the bricks, timber and metal of the built environment, but they escape us; they are constantly metamorphosing into something other than the inert materials we would expect.

According to Wirth-Nesher's model, any 'man-made' part of the city constitutes the *built environment*: buildings, roads, technology, and forms of transport all fall into this category. The *natural environment*, on the other hand, includes parks and trees introduced into the urban landscape by the city planners, as well as naturally occurring rivers, weeds and so on, which in a sense intervene unilaterally in the built environment. Thus, the essential distinction in this model is

between the concrete and the organic.

Both MacCaig and Riffbjerg refuse to play along with this distinction – although they deal with it in different ways. Space precludes a thoroughgoing categorisation of their imagery here, but we can attempt to outline how the poets integrate nature into their cityscapes.

It is important to emphasise that both Edinburgh and Copenhagen, as empirical cities, are in a sense permeated by the natural landscape. The Edinburgh skyline is dominated by the Castle crag and by Arthur's Seat, and the city is bounded to the North by the Firth of Forth. The sea also encroaches on Copenhagen in the form of inlets dividing, for example, Riffbjerg's childhood island of Amager from the main body of the city.

For MacCaig, nature infuses the built environment with movement and growth; the inanimate and static elements in the environment behave in a very organic and unpredictable way:

– buildings bulge  
like lava down the streets  
(‘Be Easy’, *Riding Lights*, 1955)

But a Spring of windows blossoms in the sky  
(‘Old Life for New’, *ibid.*)

Wheelbarrows shot up thirty feet.  
A ripped plank screamed. And, slowly, buildings  
Backed their way into the light;  
They crumbled upwards into being.  
(‘Thaw on a Building Site’, *A Round of Applause*, 1962)

The weather is one aspect of nature which has a special talent for undermining the solidity of the town:

...When the sea  
breathes gray [sic] over you, you become  
one lurking-place, one shifting of nowheres –  
(‘Drop-out in Edinburgh’, *The World's Room*, 1974)

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Another recurring metaphor compares forms of transport to animals:

...When the trams  
Lower themselves like bugs on a branch down  
The elbow of the Mound  
(‘Double Life’, *Riding Lights*, 1955)

In its own swamp  
A clanking beast, painted like a toy,  
Guzzles a ton of muck [...] A crane  
Staggers, peeps over, drops its long neck  
(‘Construction Site’, *Surroundings*, 1966)

In MacCaig’s Edinburgh, all aspects of nature seem to have more energy than the average plant or rain shower. The coxcomb on St Giles’ spire is ‘gallanting’ (‘Early Sunday Morning, Edinburgh’, in *A Common Grace*, 1960); elsewhere, ‘scents of July bogs brings [sic] down / With soft explosions this tall town’ (‘Insurrection of Memory’, in *The Sinai Sort*, 1957). His treatment of light in certain poems has been compared to impressionist art:<sup>21</sup>

Hot light is smeared as thick as paint  
On these ramshackle tenements. Stones smell  
Of dust. Their hoisting into quaint  
Crowsteps, corbels, carved with fool and saint,  
Holds fathoms of heat, like water in a well.  
(‘Edinburgh Courtyard in July’, *A Common Grace*, 1960)

MacCaig’s gift for unlikely comparisons brings all kinds of organic liveliness to the city streets. Sometimes, he goes further, and explicitly superimposes one landscape onto another, claiming to ‘wade along Princes Street through Loch na Barrack’ (‘Small Lochs’, in *Tree of Strings*, 1977), or describing how

a supermarket ghosts up  
from the shallows of Loch Fewin  
and round the foot of Suilven

go red deer and taxis.

('Centres of Centres', *The White Bird*, 1973)

MacCaig's horizon, then, encompasses Edinburgh and the Highlands simultaneously, and this quirk of memory and imagination delights him. That this is a *harmonious* fusion of two different worlds becomes obvious if we go back, for the sake of comparison, to 'Last Night in New York'. In this poem, MacCaig conflates the frantic hugeness of New York with his own physical and spiritual sensations:

I plunge through constellations  
and basements. My brain spins up there,  
I pass it on its way down. I can't see  
for the skyscraper in my eye...  
The tugs in the East River butt  
rafts of freight trucks through  
my veins.

('Last Night in New York', *Rings on a Tree*, 1968)

New York, then, is also full of 'unlikelihoods and impossibilities', but on a scale which is difficult to cope with in comfort.

In Riffbjerg's case, the rural and the urban do not fuse in the same way; the city is his natural habitat, after all. His city fulfils the dual role of childhood idyll and modern mindscape. The confrontation is not between the natural environment and the built environment. Rather, it is between the power of culture and civilisation to create order and progress, and the insuperable, primeval chaos of the forces of nature.

The geography of Riffbjerg's own particular city seems to have led to an enduring fascination with water and with bridges as emblems of journeying, whether from one part of town to another, or from one stage of life to another:

Broerne til Amager,  
hjerterklapper i mit liv,  
som stadigvæk går op og i

mens Ørstedsværkets klump  
forgæves prøver på  
at gå igennem Slusen  
ud til det frie vand i Køge Bugt.  
(‘Broerne til Amager’, *Amagerdigte*, 1965)

[The bridges to Amager,  
heartvalves of my life,  
which still go up and down  
while the lump of the Ørsted works  
tries in vain  
to flow through the Sluice  
out to the free water in Køge Bay]

så mange sommertogter  
begyndte her i broens skygge  
(‘Vilsund’, *Leksikon*, 1996)

[so many summer outings  
began here in the shadow of the bridge]

In the key poem ‘Refshaleøen’ (*Konfrontation*, 1960), Rifbjerg couches the memory of his childhood in water imagery. Amager and his childhood can be seen ‘algefarvet, hovedpinesprængt mellem bolværk’ (‘algae-coloured, rent with headaches, between the wharfs / bulwarks’). In the same poem, he writes of the ‘sea-sickness of un-experienced time’; dry land is only to be found where memory can be pinned down and ordered, perhaps.

Rifbjerg as a poet is particularly concerned with technology, and the more ‘modern’ aspects of the built environment – items such as lamp posts, parking meters and traffic lights – all feature heavily in his poetic cityscape. He is especially fond of neon lights,<sup>22</sup> and several of his poems contain references to these (‘Opskrift’ in *Byens tvetyls* for example). Transport is another recurring theme. And these tangible products of modernity can be just as nostalgically loaded as any aspect of nature, as the following recent poem shows:

...og mens den uopslidelige byprofil  
forsvandt i disen bagude begyndte

fuglene at synge og der lugtede af  
hø og stinkdyr og benzin og  
noget ubestemmeligt som viste sig  
at være vognens sæder når solen  
skinnede

('Jeep', *Leksikon*, 1996)

[...and whilst the inexhaustible profile of the city  
disappeared in the haze behind us  
the birds began to sing and there was a smell of  
hay and skunk and petrol and  
something indeterminate which turned out  
to be the car seats when the sun  
was shining]

In 'Broerne til Amager' (*Amagerdigte*, 1965), Riffbjerg explicitly links the building of the new Knippels Bridge to 'the new age', a process which he saw unfolding day by day as a child. Watching the last stages of the dismantling of the old bridge, he feels nauseous, and asks:

Hvad blev jeg syg af?  
Længslen efter noget  
som allerede var forbi  
eller var jeg svimmel  
fordi intet endnu var begyndt?

[What made me feel ill?  
The longing for something  
already over  
or was I dizzy  
because nothing had begun yet?]

Even the adult Riffbjerg admits to feeling faintly sick when faced with technology, an affliction which suggests the same ambiguous mix of excited anticipation and dread for the future; see, for example, the poems 'Jern' (*Konfrontation*, 1960), or 'Byens tvelys' (*Byens tvelys*, 1986).

This (less romantic!) trope – muck, vomit, and other bodily functions – in Riffbjerg's poetry links 'culture' and 'nature'. Again, there is the association with something more primeval, less ephemeral, than the city:

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ansigtet omskyllet af  
regnfækaler  
den brusende strøm af før  
og efter og her og nu  
(‘Derind’, *Byens tvelys*, 1986)

[his face all soaked with  
rain-fæces  
the rushing stream of before  
and after and here and now]

...i byens urinaler  
...Sødt og syrligt finder vi  
sammen og drømmer lettet  
om havet.  
(‘Pissoir’, *ibid.*)

[...in the urinals of the town  
...Sweet and sour we get  
together and dream relieved  
of the sea.]

*Byens tvelys* (1987) is a classically modernist take on the city, in that it presents the underbelly of urban life. Several poems in the collection describe sewers overflowing, public houses overflowing, and the rats and rubbish coming to the surface. It is almost a clichéd, post-*Wasteland* picture of urban life, but Riffbjerg is all too aware of the clichés: a brief human encounter in the poem ‘Nu’ ends with the comment ‘byen opsluger ham / som det hedder’ (‘the town swallows him / as the saying goes’). Death, meanwhile, is presented as a cartoonish, clichéd symbol in ‘Døden’, and the repetition of ‘der er så mange’ (‘there are so many’) in the poem ‘Der er så mange’ gives a knowing wink to T.S. Eliot’s refrain, ‘I had not thought death had undone so many’.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the self-consciousness, there is a genuine sense of decadence and disintegration in *Byens tvelys*. In addition to the constant stream of human detritus, the space of the city itself is in flux in several of the poems. Riffbjerg is playing with space, conflating cityscape with mindscape:

Der ligger du kære ven  
 med dit lagen og din udsigt  
 byen inden i dig  
 byen uden om dig

...  
 byen flyver op  
 sætter sig igen  
 kryber rundt på hånden  
 ('Fluen'. *ibid.*)

[There you lie dear friend  
 with your sheet and your view  
 the town inside you  
 the town outside you  
 ...  
 the town flies up  
 lands again  
 crawls around on your hand.]

There is, then, an apparent clash between Riffbjerg's two ways of looking at the city. On the one hand, *Amagerdigte* consists of lovingly-described pictures of his childhood idyll, poems which, as Jensen comments, actually refer directly to the concrete and social reality outside the text.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, *Byens tvæls* is a self-conscious attempt to produce the classically modern 'fragmented' and alienating cityscape; this later collection actually comes closer to MacCaig's metaphorical onslaught against the concrete reality of the city. The red thread is the idea of a 'double' city, which Riffbjerg shares with MacCaig. That is, the concrete aspects of the cityscape can and do co-exist with the poets' remembered and imagined cities.

In the city novel, the *human* environment, as defined by Wirth-Nesher, constitutes an essential element of the 'background noise' of the city. It plays the same passive role as buildings, vehicles, trees and so on and, as such, is quite distinct from fictional protagonists (or the poetic 'I'). Commuter crowds, tramps, prostitutes, ratepayers, all are featured in the poems of MacCaig and Riffbjerg. But the poetic Edinburgh and Copenhagen are first and foremost peopled by inanimate objects, because a favourite technique of both poets is to describe the qualities of the environment by personifying



objects in various ways.

Erik Frykman suggests a typology of MacCaig's vast range of anthropomorphising metaphors: objects of nature, animals, inanimate objects, and abstracts all occur as tenors. The personifying process, Frykman notes, can be achieved by portraying the object as a human 'type', or by focusing on a particular physical characteristic, or, commonly, simply by attributing some human movement or activity to the object in question.<sup>25</sup> These techniques are in evidence in the poems of Riffbjerg as well as those of MacCaig:

The High Street sprawls on his scruffy bed of shadows...

The High Street sticks his elbow in my ribs

(MacCaig: 'Out from a Lecture', *The Sinai Sort*, 1957)

The brown air fumes at the shop windows,

Tries the doors, and sidles past

(MacCaig: 'November Night, Edinburgh', *ibid.*)

Stilheden kører gennem

den nattetomme gade

(Riffbjerg: 'Søvnløs', *Byens tvetyls*, 1986)

[Silence drives along  
the night-empty street]

En tilfældig dag måske den tredje  
erobrede skyggerne med deres instru-  
menter byen pakkede dem ud og  
satte sig til at spille mere eller  
mindre tilfældige steder

(Riffbjerg: 'Musestille', *ibid.*)

[One random day, maybe the third,  
the shadows conquered the town with their  
instruments unpacked them and  
started to play in more or  
less random places]

ansigt til ansigt  
med automaternes grimasser  
datamaternes hundeøjne

(Riffbjerg: 'Byens tvetyls', *ibid.*)

[face to face  
with the cash dispensers' grimaces  
the computers' doggy-eyes]

It is also worth citing one instance where a pictorial representation of a human/divine figure is used. In 'Broerne til Amager' (*Amagerdigte*, 1965), a Chinese Buddha painted on the underside of Knippels Bridge to advertise 'Singalwatte' brand tea becomes a pivotal figure, his 'gentle countenance shining over Amager' whenever the bridge is raised.

It would, however, be fair to say that Riffbjerg generally prefers to focus on specific, if anonymous, human types, whereas MacCaig, as several critics have commented,<sup>26</sup> shies away from character sketches. Riffbjerg's *Amagerdigte* is of course anomalous in this respect, because the collection is an attempt to present a series of snapshots of a particular time and place, and as such does contain references to named individuals.

If a city is full of people, it will also be full of words. Wirth-Nesher defines the verbal environment of the text-city as any written or spoken language, including advertisements, graffiti and street names, and conversations overheard.<sup>27</sup> Both Riffbjerg and MacCaig have written poems for which the catalyst seems to have been a snippet of conversation or the memory of a public notice.<sup>28</sup> But, crucially, they are both acutely aware of the mediating role of language in the city, too (see the discussion on *Byens tvelys*, above). On the one hand, language gives names to places and creates a sense of enduring communal orientation; streets named in a poem immediately root the poetic city in the 'real' city, however tenuous the link may otherwise be. On the other hand, written and spoken language are as much a part of the city-dweller's experience as other sights, sounds and smells, and so, in the textual cityscape – in which the poet's language mediates between the reader and his or her sensory impressions – the verbal environment takes on new importance.

Street names are included under the category of the *verbal* environment because they are 'labels' for defined areas within the cityscape, seen on signposts and used verbally by people. Both poets mention specific, recognisable street names, but in

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the case of Rifbjerg's *Amagerdigte* collection (1965), street names feature to what almost seems an excessive extent. One explanation for this may be that *Amagerdigte* is essentially a series of childhood events and tableaux sketched from memory, and the use of specific street names roots the stories more firmly in the past and also in the present (where the streets still exist). For readers unfamiliar with the area, however, the profusion of street names may have another effect: it creates an artificial complicity, because the blank space of an unknown city becomes populated with viable and, perhaps, familiar street names. The following stanza is pivotal in this respect:

Hvor skulle Funkiavej,  
Dalføret, Lombardigade,  
Vatnavej, Oldenstien,  
Markmandsgade, Saltværksvej  
Herkules Allé og Peder Lykkesvej  
ligge andre steder  
end på Amager?  
(*'Lyóngade', Amagerdigte*, 1965)

[How could Funkia Road,  
Dalføret, Lombardy Street,  
Vatna Road, Olden Path,  
Markmands Street, Saltworks Road  
Hercules Close and Peder Lykke's Road  
be found anywhere else  
but Amager?]

And the short answer is, of course, that these streets *can* be found 'anywhere else'; the names may or may not be specific to Amager, but their like are to be found amongst the streets we all walk every day.

MacCaig, meanwhile, uses another dimension of Wirth-Nesher's verbal environment. We have already noted the tendency of both poets to personify elements of the cityscape; MacCaig sometimes gives his urban characters 'lines'. This can enrich the characterisation of the relevant 'type', or it can bring variety to a poem which would otherwise be a discursive monologue:

Now between the mirrors enters  
 Winter begging for a drink;  
 He coughs, and tugs my sleeve, and peers  
 To catch the frosty glasses talk.  
 ('Public Bar', *Riding Lights*, 1955)

...A newsboy  
 Gouts from his split face tortured vocables.  
 ('Bus Stop', *Tree of Strings*, 1977)

The Castle pretends No  
 ('Inward Bound', *The White Bird*, 1973)

This is perhaps the most disconcerting of all anthropomorphising metaphors, the attribution of our most human characteristic: the power of language. So we see that all the elements which go to build up a text-city are in these poems. However, the correspondence between the elements of the empirical city and the text city is less linear than it typically is in the city novel. Whereas, in the novel, the textual map of the 'real' city is often subjectively drawn, and neither accurate nor complete, in these poems the boundaries between the various elements of the cityscape seem constantly to be in flux. In particular, the tendency is for the built environment, the concrete and technology of the city, to metamorphose into natural or human features of the environment.

### *The Historical City*

But these categories do not exhaust the poetic maps of Edinburgh and Copenhagen. Just as MacCaig's Edinburgh is a double landscape, co-existing with the nature of his beloved Assynt, so too do the text-cities of the present seem to co-exist and coalesce with other cityscapes of the memory, whether the poets' memories (predominantly for Riffbjerg), or the collective memory of history. There is a definite tension between, on the one hand, the poets' recognition of linear time and technological 'progress', and, on the other, an awareness

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of the presence of past (hi)stories as an element of the contemporary cityscape. These stories and memories contribute to the communal and personal sense of place, and constitute another dimension of the urban map, a dimension which the Norwegian author and critic Jan Kjærstad calls the 'epic elements' of place.<sup>29</sup> Of course, the past is mediated by the present, as Per Øhrgaard points out in his discussion of Riffbjerg's work; what gets described, and how it is described, is determined by the interaction of the adult poet and his younger self.<sup>30</sup>

The metaphysical (history, time, space), as well as the concrete, is almost always personified in the work of these poets, or at least made to behave in an organic fashion:

The space is patient, lending itself to be  
New forms, new spaces. Growing like crystals in  
A depth of space, they order it...

(MacCaig: 'Construction Site', *Surroundings*, 1966)

But space, good space, does not desert us.  
In it the clock's voice plods on the mantelpiece  
And a petal falls on the table.

The line of its fall is a fence  
Between the millions of years that have gone  
And the millions to come.

(MacCaig: 'Foggy Night', *A World of Difference*, 1983)

mægtigt ligger låget over byen  
gult hvælver det sig  
i smog'ens kemiske tvelys  
over  
under  
inde  
ude  
men mest ind og under  
inden under

(Riffbjerg: 'Byens tvelys', *Byens tvelys*, 1987)

[great lies the lid over the city  
yellow it vaults

in the chemical double light of the smog  
over  
under  
inside  
outside  
but mostly in and under  
underneath]

Fortiden søger sin overlevelse  
bag husrækker  
(Rifbjerg: 'Refskæleøen', *Konfrontation*, 1960)

[The past seeks its survival  
behind rows of houses]

Cutting across the spatial flux of these cities is the omnipresence of the weight of history. Edinburgh and Copenhagen are both ancient cities, whose physical features can be 'read' to reveal the passage of various ages and architectural styles. For MacCaig especially, the national history of Scotland prowls the streets of the capital. Edinburgh is populated by crowds of past times, warriors, mobs, and smells of the past.

These figures can happily co-exist with the present-day activities of the city, because they are caught up in a kind of eternal return, facilitated by the historical survival of so many streets and landmarks. The stairs and closes of the Canongate 'smell of piss / that used to smell of piss and pomanders' ('Inward Bound', in *The White Bird*, 1973); and a man walking to Murrayfield for a rugby match suddenly becomes 'one of a crowd / moving in silence / to the execution of Montrose' ('Centres of Centres', *ibid.*). Rifbjerg's historical romp through the Danish capital in 'Drømmen om København' (*Fædrelandssange*, 1967) also relies on recognisable landmarks; again, not so much for the sake of spatial orientation, but rather as pointers to the Danish national history which Absalon gallops through in the poem.

But this historical continuity does not stem exclusively from the survival of historic landmarks. There is also a continuity of human life, human activity. The city is peopled by a mass of individuals not only at any given point in history (the time of writing) but also through history (past, present or

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future); events are seen to be repeated in a particular place. Riffjerg tries to describe the flux of modern life in the city by, literally, listing day-to-day activities or characteristics:

Det er blevet os pålagt  
af statistikken  
i et gennemsnitsliv  
at åbne et meget stort antal  
døre, konserverdåser,  
punge, tegnebøger...  
at køre med sporvogne  
biler, cykler, S-tog,  
at slide sko  
smøre rugbrød...  
(‘Det er blevet os pålagt’, *Konfrontation*, 1960)

[We have been instructed  
by statistics  
in the course of an average life  
to open a very large number  
of doors, tin-cans,  
purses, wallets...  
to ride buses  
cars, bikes, trains,  
to wear shoes out  
make sandwiches...]

Der er så megen usikkerhed og varme...  
så mange sammenkrøllede papirservietter...  
så mange fjerte og kløende nakkehår  
så megen snak.  
(‘Der er så mange’, *Byens tvæls*, 1986)

[There is so much uncertainty and heat...  
so many crumpled paper napkins...  
so many farts and itchy hairlines  
so much talk.]

Finally, it is perhaps significant that both poets use the imagery of film when discussing the flow of urban activity and history:

I look at Edinburgh’s High Street and a film  
starts unwinding, spool on spool  
(MacCaig: ‘Centres of Centres’, *The White Bird*, 1973)

Film aldrig oplevet og fremtiden  
oplevet som film  
(Rifbjerg: 'Refshaleøen', *Konfrontation*, 1960)

[Film(s) never experienced and the future  
experienced as film(s)]

The emergence of film as the key chronicler of life in the twentieth century is not unrelated to the impression of modern existence as increasingly fragmented – but, by extension, infinitely re-playable and accessible.<sup>31</sup> And it certainly makes the poets' sense of a double city, of two narratives playing at the same time, more feasible. The film seen in the poet's mind's eye may be a replay of his own personal memories, or it may represent a collective re-working of communal or national history.

### *Innumerable Circles*

It was the place that it was in  
And was in what the place was.

(MacCaig: 'Reclining figure by Henry Moore: Botanic Gardens,  
Edinburgh', *A Man in my Position*, 1969)

MacCaig's succinct appraisal of the oneness of the Henry Moore sculpture with its surroundings is equally apt when applied to those 'decadent townees', MacCaig and Rifbjerg. In their poems, cityscape is also mindscape; the city maps we glean from this poetry are cobbled together from flashes of metaphorical clarity and from happenings dredged up from the poets' past. These are the 'epic' elements of place. A place is constantly becoming, constantly being re-invented by the people who share it and name it. In the city, this process is of course physically manifest in construction sites and in the building of new bridges. But the city's physical continuity belies the flux of people in the city and their stories, all of them experiencing the city in their own way. It is this multi-dimensionality in the cityscape that the poetry of MacCaig and Rifbjerg addresses so effectively; but it does so without



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resorting to the modernist trope of the alienated *flâneur* in a fragmented city. Each poem is a fragment of observation, or experience, but as cityscape merges into mindscape in poem after poem, the city comes into its own as a coherent, almost organic, entity, happily coalescing with whatever place the poet is in.

Two key poems, I think, encapsulate Riffbjerg's and MacCaig's respective conceptions of how the city marries its own concrete realities with its timeless multiplicity.

In 'Til et vist punkt' (Byens tvelys, 1987), Riffbjerg takes the archaeologist's eye view and explains that cutting into the fabric of the city at any given point (in time or space) reveals a multitude of individual stories:

i de tusind gange tusind  
afslørende snit  
en iskold oplevelse af forfængelighed  
...  
og at der under de  
forgængelige og evt. synkende  
bygningsverker  
eksisterer et tvetydigt fundament  
af fremtidige fortidsminder  
og håbefuld stabilitet.

[in the thousands upon thousands  
of revealing slices  
an ice-cold feeling of vanity  
...  
and that under the  
transitory and possibly sinking  
structures  
exists an ambiguous foundation  
of future memories of the past  
and hopeful stability.]

And from the excavations, of course, it is Riffbjerg's own 'stories' that we have the privilege of examining under the microscope.

For MacCaig's own articulation of the multi-dimensionality of his cityscape, we have to return to his poem 'Centres of Centres' (*The White Bird*, 1973):

Grassblade, cathedral, hero –  
 strawberry jam pot – each  
 is a centre  
 of innumerable circles. I sit in mine,  
 enriched by geometries  
 that make a plenum of more  
 than the three dimensions.  
 I sit and stare at them  
 with a multiple eye.

Typical MacCaig, typical schoolmaster: the elusive abstractions of memory and belonging are here described in terms of the elegant order of geometry. What unlikelyhoods! What impossibilities!

## Notes

1. Jan Erik Vold, 'En dansk källa! – ad lib om Klaus Rifbjergs lyrik', *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, 1988, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 35-38.
2. Jørgen Bonde Jensen, *Klaus Rifbjergs poesi*, Babette, Copenhagen, 1986, p. 8. ('Modsætninger skal være stærke nok til at give sig udslag i mislyde for at en moderne tone kan opstå. Modernitetens grundfigur er oxymoron, sammenstødets figur.')
3. All translations are mine. I have prioritised semantic accuracy over considerations of metre etc.
4. Passim. Norman MacCaig in *As I Remember*, ed. Maurice Lindsay, London, 1979, p. 88 (originally published in *Chapman*, no. 16, Summer 1976); cited in Raymond Ross, 'Norman MacCaig: The History Man', in *Norman MacCaig: Critical Essays*, ed. Joy Hendry and Raymond Ross, Edinburgh University Press, 1990, p. 21.
5. MacCaig's poem 'Basking Shark', from *A Man in My Position*, 1969, has: 'this decadent townee / Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree'.
6. In this article, I give the title of each poem in question followed by the collection and the year in which it appeared; I have used exclusively *Norman MacCaig, Collected Poems*, published by Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press, London, 1985. Rifbjerg's poetry collections are all published by Gyldendal, Copenhagen, unless otherwise stated.
7. This expression was apparently coined by Nathaniel Hawthorne.
8. See, for example, Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1985; or Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, Princeton University Press, 1981.
9. John H. Johnson in *The Poet and the City – a Study in Urban Perspectives*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1984.

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10. Klaus Rifbjerg, from an interview, quoted in Michael Bruun Andersen et al., *Dansk litteraturhistorie*, vol. 8, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1985, p. 245.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 258, and p. 307ff.
12. For a discussion of this stage of MacCaig's career, see Marjory McNeill, *Norman MacCaig: A Study of His Life and Work*, Mercat Press, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 13ff; and Angus Calder, 'Unmoved by the Movement: Fifties MacCaig', in Hendry and Ross, op. cit., pp. 38-49.
13. These appeared as *Far Cry* (1943) and *The Inward Eye* (1946), both of which were omitted from later compilations at the request of the poet himself.
14. As immortalised in Alexander Moffat's painting of 1980, *Poet's Pub* (in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh).
15. See, for example, John MacInnes, 'MacCaig and Gaeldom', in Hendry and Ross, op. cit., pp. 22-37.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
17. Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
18. Interestingly, a recent poem of Rifbjerg's, 'Jeep' (*Leksikon*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1996), reminisces about the New York of the early 1950s as a friendly, safe place, full of possibilities, as if this lost New York was emblematic of his own lost youth.
19. Cited in Jensen, op. cit., p13: 'at det kun er "i udfyldningen af et stort, hvidplettet, blindt fortids-landkort, at jeg i visse øjeblikke kan fornemme en total sammenhæng"' (from "'Fortidens virkelighed'", alias "De glemte år"', in *Politiken*, 22.10.1967).
20. '...intimiteten er repræsentativ, stærkt udadvendt, til at genkende sig selv i som læser.' Jørgen Bonde Jensen, op. cit., p. 15.
21. See, for example, McNeill, op. cit., p. 42ff.
22. As a young journalist with the Danish newspaper *Information*, Rifbjerg wrote an article extolling the virtues of the neon lights of Copenhagen (*Information*, 18.11.1957, reproduced in *Spinatfuglen*, Klaus Rifbjerg om sit liv med pressen, ed. John Chr. Jørgensen, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1995, p. 147).
23. T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, passim.
24. Jørgen Bonde Jensen, op. cit., p. 398.
25. Erik Frykman, 'Unemphatic Marvels' - A Study of Norman MacCaig's Poetry, *Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis*, Gothenburg Studies in English, no. 35, 1977, pp. 55-6.
26. See, for example, Brian McCabe, 'MacCaig and People', in Hendry and Ross, op. cit., pp. 109-123; and McNeill, op. cit., p. 73ff, for a discussion of MacCaig's poems about women and his 'anti-academic' poems.
27. Wirth-Nesher, op. cit., p. 11.
28. MacCaig's 'How to Cover the Ground', (*A World of Difference*, 1983), for example, or Rifbjerg's 'Advarslerne' (*Amagerdigte*, 1965).
29. Jan Kjærstad, 'Menneskets felt: en omvej til Peer Hultbergs "Byen og verden"', *Kritik*, no. 111, p. 20.
30. Per Øhrgaard, *Tæt på forfatterne: Klaus Rifbjerg*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1977, p. 12ff.
31. For a discussion of various interactions of the city with the medium

of cinema, see David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.