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INTRODUCTION TO *POETRY*

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Of Warren McCulloch's literary work only two thin volumes have been published, both by the Chicago Literary Club: one in 1945, a lecture on Edwin Arlington Robinson, and one in 1959, entitled The Natural Fit, an evening's reading to the club of his selection from his own poems dated from 1919 when he was twenty years old, to 1957. The bulk of his poetic output, the last of which was written in 1968, was lying unpublished in his house in Old Lyme. In his own introduction to The Natural Fit, McCulloch speaking of himself says, "What you are about to hear are personal communications to his friends. They were not intended for publication, nor for posterity. Judge them, not as art, but as an expression of his hot ideas."

Looking for a justification for doing what he didn't intend to do himself, namely publish, I could only find this: his poems had reached many more friends than he knew of; hot ideas are so rare that we should conserve them painstakingly for colder climates and for duller times; he will have even more friends when his poetry becomes public.

It becomes clear that as long as he lived, his poetic activities and his scientific ones ran on parallel lines, as forms of complementary thinking. As a philosopher he tended to abolish all forms of dualism, to see and experience life as a whole.

He was convinced from his early student days that mathematical formulations of spatial relations and aesthetics have a common root. "Man does live in a world of relations." He quotes his Yale teacher, Lee Hambidge, as asserting that "root rectangles and the Golden Section are aesthetically preferred by most people." McCulloch's thesis at Yale University verified this (1).

In the case of poetry he might be right also. Whatever the aims of science and poetry are, however different the means may be, I think the words of Norbert Wiener apply: "To me logic and learning and all mental activities have always been incomprehensible as a complete closed picture and have been understandable only as a process by which a man puts himself *en rapport* with his environment (2)." Thinking, whether ethical or scientific thinking, Wiener claims, tends to reduce chaos and to impose "arbitrary enclaves of order and system" in a chaotic universe.

In a poem the form is part of the content, i.e. the form is the reinforcement of the matter. The sequence of the words, their sound and rhythm, the order and number of lines should all be components of the message they want to communicate. Every poem brings home, with the force of estrangement, the familiar to the reader, who feels at one and the same time surprisingly robbed and enriched: robbed of habituation (a form of death) and enriched by cleansed restoration of the original experience. (The old wine in the new sack has to be swallowed whole, like a capsule!) In McCulloch's poetry the poems not only have the function of reducing chaos and imposing order and system in his world but also, I think, of reducing the "transiency" of everything, a theme he often writes about.

Chaos and time are the arch-enemies, they reduce and impede life. (cf., "more life, more hours before the dark.") Even when cultures and fashions change, topics disappear and reappear, philosophies and techniques alter, there seems to be a permanency in all arts that cheats time.

In his "Recollections of the Many Sources of Cybernetics," McCulloch writes about his scientific development. His "training in epistemology" started at approximately the same time as his training in poetry; that began in a small group under the severe but friendly eye of Edwin Arlington Robinson (3). He studied mathematics, psychology, medicine, he read Hegel, Kant, Aristotle, Plato, Marx; later he turned to Russell and Whitehead, Leibnitz, Descartes, always guided by specific questions he put to himself, ending up knowing about all and working with many well-

known contemporaries. For his poetry he used the Bible, Greek mythology and drama, the Norse sagas, oriental poetry, Shakespeare, Donne, and he studied the poetry of Robinson, Hopkins, Cummings, Auden and many others.

In both fields he applied himself in the same manner: by extensive reading, by learning the metier, by studying the matter and by experimenting. As a result his character shows whatever he is working at: his delight in adventure, reverence for craftsmanship, the unceasing struggle and fight for knowledge, the challenge to his peers, his fantasy and self-discipline.

As space is limited, many poems, containing lovely and compelling lines have perforce been left out. I have kept these poems more or less in chronological order. (Many poems have no dates, so I have had to guess.) The first poem (From The Natural Fit) could be called in every respect a "plan de campagne" for his life. It is called "Appointments," and it ends thus: "I shall think for myself all day long. That is why I am rubbing my hands."

It is a declaration of independence, the sound of the bugle announcing the beginning of the fight. In this early period we can witness him railing against wisdom, conventional grief, reason, peace, soberness, patience, reverence for death, etc., in fact against every constraint from outside that tends to reduce the passion, the daring, the impetus of living. But always expressed in a disciplined form and with great craftsmanship. While claiming his independence, he nevertheless values the creeds he passed by and left behind - as in the poem "the Gods are passing". In another early poem, "Great accidents of beauty" we find the motif often recurring as in this phase: "the heart, insatiate, demands of sin/the wisdom and the life to do and grow." This sentiment reminds one strongly of William Blake's proverb that says: "No virtue can exist without breaking the ten commandments." The word virtue in connection with McCulloch's mentality has for me strong associations with the Latin *virtus*, manly courage. Throughout his poetry I find three strands on which his morality is strung: 1) When you make something (whatever it is, a house, an idea, a poem, love) you must make it well. 2) If your mind contains anything of value, bring it forth and share it. 3) If you are

beaten, desperate, cheated out of your dreams, be alone, fight and start again. Fight and struggle are frequently recurring topics in his work. Not as a tendency to destroy, much more as an urge to match his strength, (see the poem of the wrestler and his lion), to be a "primus inter pares"; fighting against the Gods; the Daedalus-motif; against the currents and the waves of the sea, and struggling with language.

In his time McCulloch used almost every form of verse he could lay his hands on: vers libres, haiku, rondo, villanelle and the sonnet. This last form proved to be the most lasting and favorite. Perhaps it was the best way for him to express and at the same time restrict his abundant vitality. If he suffered - and it is plain he did - it was never from lack, but from excess. He simply had to coax his fountain into cisterns for his overflow. But when he finally claimed the sonnet as his favorite form his experimenting did not come to an end. It started inside the very poem. He wrote sonnets of one sentence, sonnets with only monosyllables, sonnets without white line (silence) between the 2 x 4 and 2 x 3 lines, etc. Let us see what he writes about this process in The Natural Fit.

> Like every man who writes English, faced with the many meanings of his words and the many constructions of his sentences, he had to train himself to speak so that, whatever sense we give to his successive sounds, his sonnets say one and the same thing to us all. He came to hate constraints of sense that written words with jots and titles put so relentlessly upon the ambiguities of sound. In spoken English, sequences of words are so familiar that, having heard some, we rightly hear the rest and understand with half a mind and half an ear. Words that he knows we have anticipated we find only when their sense is unexpected. More often we encounter something that at most recalls the words we have imagined. He means us to hear both. By this compression he can tie ever more complexities of emotions into fourteen knottier lines. His sonnets grow well nigh intolerable. His early poems fairly picture their origins in all the gratuitous particularity of sensory experience. We feel at home in them, for we know what he was doing. But this is irrelevant to the impassioned ideas which are in fact ambiguous as to their occasions. Was he experimenting? was he in love? was he thinking? was he building? when he wrote:
>
> We know not when for us to know will break
> That surest of all days of sure desire
> When certainty will flame of certain fire
> And dreams, defeated, find the dream awake.

Does it matter? It does - but not what he was doing.

As for this last line "does it matter? It does - but not what he was doing," this brings us to an important characteristic of McCulloch's poetry: he was more interested in his ideas, his wit, his procedures than in his personal emotions and situations. The sonnets become very complicated indeed, but not the sentiments. He evidently doesn't search himself for shades, sub-shades and intricacies of emotional experiences. His subtleties are those of wit. There remains a certain remoteness and crispness that keeps intimacy at a distance. As a result the reader is challenged - in order to understand the intricate castles he erects, to raid and invade them. A siege won't do. You have to attack, to search for openings, to wade in. The struggle to read his mature verse is more than rewarding, it is an education. Whoever looks for comfort, peace and drudgery in this work will have to turn elsewhere. Whoever wants "bold challenge to life's dread excess" will have his fill.

I think he attained wisdom, i.e. he reached the conclusion that one should reach after a life of hardship - in his case hard labor in the fields of science; that there is no permanent victory, the oath of the scientist being "this is the truth, nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth." The awareness of the unconquerable mystery remains. See his last verse and see also how differently shaped the earlier version of this awareness was in the poem no. 14 "as ebon clouds." And "the sphinx" - even if you give the correct answer to her riddle - remains the sphinx.

To realize this is wise, and not to refrain from answering and questioning is brave, and I trust that many scientists will recognize themselves in what he is speaking of in his poetry, young people in the joy of the fight, older men in the endurance, the long breath, the "certainty of his uncertainties," both in the accuracy of the language and the craftsmanship.

References:

1. ASC Forum, Vol. VI, No. 2, Summer 1974: *Recollections of the Many Sources of Cybernetics*, p. 8.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. *One Word After Another*. Chicago Literary Club, 1945.