

Skye and Raasay as Symbol in the Poetry of Sorley MacLean

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Sorley MacLean's poetry concerns itself with the starkest of questions about self-worth and the nature of time. His poetry would be painfully abstract if it was not for his use of landscape as symbol. It is the landscape that gives form and sensuousness to his ideas and that lets him communicate them as emotion. He circles between the abstract and the specific. He is at once himself and everyman. Skye is recognisably itself and a terrible roller-coaster of self-loathing, exhilaration, tenderness and despair. Reading his poetry can feel like a physical work-out. To separate MacLean's art from the landscape would be to separate form and content.

His poetry is rarely easy and never cosy. He wrestles with himself, not in the shelter of the indoors with the distraction of other people, but in the most exposed and elemental settings, on the bare rock of the Cuillin, by the ocean, or below the stars. They represent the lonesomeness of the individual, the blankness of life and the perspective of eternity. The stars are cold and indifferent for MacLean felt the presence of no benign God; it is ourselves who must rise from the morass of our compromised existence and make some worthwhile mark. The landscape is also a landscape of the mind. It is both majestic and broken, where his poems run like mad wolves in pursuit of beauty and where art, "a flower to windward", grows on the bare rock.

Air cruas nan creag
tha eagar smuaine,
air lom nam beann
tha 'n rann gun chluaine;
air mullach beò
tha treòir nam buadhan,
air àirde ghil
tha 'n lios gun luaidh air.

*On the hardness of rocks
is the ordered thought,
on the bareness of mountains
is the forthright verse,
on a living summit
is the might of talents,
on a white summit
the garden that is not named. (Craobh nan Teud/ The Tree of Strings)*

Sometimes a direct vector may be drawn between symbol and symbolised. There is an elegance to *Am Mùr Gorm/ The Blue Rampart*, in the equivalents made between the stretching sands of Talisker and the poet's expectations, between the uneven moors and

his reason, between the moods of the sea and his own moods. The symbolism is also simple in the poem *An Uair a Labhras Mi Mu Aodann/ When I speak of the Face*. The poet's vantage point on the top of the Cuillin, from where he surveys the oblique sunlight on the bogs, parallels the heightened awareness he has of human achievement and suffering through the experience of love.

Ach chunnaic mi bho àird a' Chuilitheann
gathadh glòir is breòiteachd duilghe;
chunnaic mi òradh lainnir grèine
agus bogach dhubh na brèine;
's eòl dhomh seirbheachd gheur an spioraid
nas fheàrr na aoibhneas luath a' chridhe.

*But I have seen from the height of the Cuillin
darting glory and the weakness of sorrow;
I have seen the gilding light of the sun
and the black rotting fen;
I know the sharp bitterness of the spirit
better than the swift joy of the heart.*

More often MacLean's symbolism is not so straightforward. The questions his poetry poses have no answers, only further questions. How are we to live? How can we know wholeness? What lasts of human endeavour? This dialectic accounts for MacLean's symbolism shifting, for meanings which change even within a verse, for symbols which simultaneously represent the seeker and the sought.

At the simplest level, *Coilltean Ratharsair, The Woods of Raasay* is about growing up. Firstly, the child is contained by the woods which clothe his imagination and with which he unconsciously shares a life force. Life is joyful, musical, exuberant, as is the metre of the poem.

Ùrlar frainich is beithe
air an t-seòmar àrd uaine,
am mullach 's an t-ùrlar
trom dhathte le suaimhneas:
mith-chuachan na sòbhraig,
bileag bhuidhe air uaine;
is cuilbh dhìrich an t-seòmair,
giuthas òirdhearc an luasgain.

*Floor of bracken and birch
in the high green room;
the roof and the floor
heavily coloured, serene:
tiny cups of the primrose,
yellow petal on green,*

*and the straight pillars of the room,
the noble, restless pines.*

After the carefree security afforded by the woods, the demands of the intellect appear as the Cuillin seen through the trees. The Cuillin is both a fire-dragon and a beautiful white unicorn, reflecting the double-edged sword of the intellect which brings both understanding and dissatisfaction. Likewise the moon and stars appear and the poet is exercised “to work out their genesis”. Sexuality appears as a face in the wood and as a snake, the thrust of pain in the love-making connected to the thrust of the Cuillin, the male principle penetrating the female principle, the intellect penetrating the unconscious. The poet envies the woods their unconscious, untaught existence; man, by contrast, maimed by consciousness, loses his innocent *joie de vivre*.

Chan eil eòlas, chan eil eòlas
air crìch dheireannaich gach tòrachd
no air seòltachd nan lùban
leis an caill i a cùrsa.

*There is no knowledge, no knowledge
of the final end of each pursuit,
nor of the subtlety of the bends
with which it loses its course.*

In the long poem, *An Cuilitheann/ The Cuillin*, the poet’s agitation is reflected in the fragmented and opposing meanings he attaches to the mountain. But at the end, the Cuillin rises *air taobh eile duilghe/ on the other side of sorrow*, symbolising the human spirit rising over adversity. The poem traces man’s oppression of man, in Skye and throughout the world, in the present and throughout history. The ghosts of the perpetrators of the Clearances appear in a demonic dance on the rocky pinnacles. The cries of the people cleared off the land are heard. The Cuillin responds, rocking and shrieking on its torn bedrock. Men like Christ and Spartacus, who have sacrificed themselves for their people, are seen strung up on the hill. The Cuillin becomes a castrated stallion, the bogs representing the spreading of corruption throughout the world and the drowning of every honourable initiative. But the human spirit bursts forth; the Cuillin becomes a stag, lion, dragon, eagle. In the night on the Cuillin, in the darkness of despair, MacLean sees the human spirit, aspiring to what is unreachable.

Cò seo, cò seo, oidhche chridhe?
Chan eil ach an nì do-ruighinn,
an samhla a chunnaic an t-anam,
Cuilitheann ag èirigh thar mara.

*Who is this, who is this in the night of the heart?
It is the thing that is not reached,
the ghost seen by the soul,
a Cuillin rising over the sea.*

His poems are studded with place names. Thirteen places in Raasay are mentioned in the poem *Hallaig*. Even for those who do not know these places, their names work at a symbolic level, showing these places have been significant to people. MacLean's evocation of a populated Raasay does not stop there. His love and knowledge of the place allow him to hold a vision of the trees transformed into people, the native rowan, hazel and birch transformed into bands of young girls. This rises from a pre-Christian concept of the earth as an entity from which all life springs, returns and rises again in an endless cycle. So, though Raasay was largely cleared of its people in 1851, our enduring vision need not be of the present, time need not be linear. The poet's vision of Raasay is better than reality ever was, for he sees every generation simultaneously.

Chunnacas na mairbh beò.

The dead have been seen alive.

MacLean's poetry is largely pessimistic but is made uplifting by his belief in the eventual triumph of human courage. The heroism of the heights is contrasted with the low mean path he felt he had taken himself, especially in his compromised response to the Spanish Civil war. Acting with conviction, for better or worse, would have given him the integrity which was as much a part of Gaelic heroic culture as of modern existentialist thought. In heroic culture, the hero's leap of self-sacrifice combines conviction and deed; in existentialist thought, an individual's leap of faith in claiming a subjective truth is the most we can do. There are moments in his poetry when he makes such a leap, the striving stops, and he glimpses the eternal in the transitory, holding it in a verse against "the bedraggled of time and temptation".

Nuair tha mo bhilean air a gruaidhean
boillsgidh uachdarain ra-dhorcha,
mìle solas shìos is shuas ann,
falt ruadh is sùilean gorma.

*When my lips are on her cheeks
the inter-lunar lords are shining,
a thousand lights low and high,
auburn head and blue eyes.*

(Solais/Lights)

This article owes a debt to what others have written about Maclean, particularly to John MacInnes, "The Poem *Hallaig*" in *Calgacus* 2, 1975
John Herdman, "The Ghost seen by the Soul: Sorley MacLean and the Absolute" in *Sorley Maclean: Critical Essays*, edited by Raymond Ross and Joy Hendry, Edinburgh 1986