

*The Ghost Seen By The Soul:
Sorley MacLean And The Absolute*

Có seo, có seo oidhche chridhe?

Chan eil ach an nì do-ruighinn,
An samhla chunnaic an t-anam,
Cuilthionn ag éirigh 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.

These lines from the conclusion to 'An Cuilthionn' announce with great immediacy and directness a theme which is central to the poetry of Sorley MacLean. The heroic striving for the unattainable goal of human aspiration represents a value which underlies the love-poems and others which are thematically related to them, and expresses a temperament and cast of mind for which the absolute, and nothing less than the absolute, is the measure of spiritual worth. In this essay it is suggested that a great part of the stature of MacLean's work derives from the tension arising from the collision between the ideal and the actual, between aspiration and limitation, between the finite and the infinite. It is this conflict which is the occasion for the creative confrontation between intellect and passion which has often, and rightly, been noted as characteristic of the poet. For the author of 'Calbharaigh', 'Ban-Ghàidheal', and the great war-poems is clearly not one who merely has his head in the clouds. On the contrary, MacLean is remarkable above all for his clear-sightedness, for the straightness, realism and directness with which he fixes his gaze on whatever is before his eyes; and moreover he admits to a constitution which is naturally pessimistic. The bracing qualities of MacLean's poetry derive largely from the co-existence in tension of polar opposites, a co-existence which reflects an inherent law of nature.

In 'Gleann Aoighre' the sense of the limitation imposed by external circumstances upon the questing spirit is expressed as "a wall between joy and my harsh little croft, a boundary that would not be changed to set joy free". Yet the check upon the poet's desire, which means that "I would not get the thing I wanted", has its ultimate source within, in "the divisive passion of my spirit", for "I could not stand on Blaven and stay in the garden where fruits were growing richly". What frustrates the fulfilment of desire is, paradoxically, the limitless nature of the poet's aspiration:

Agus ged dhirichinn Blàbheinn
nach robh innte ach beinn shuarach
bho nach fhaicinn saorsa chluaintean,

agus m' ùidh air Kilimanjaro,
a' Mhatterhorn is Nanga Parbit
agus àirde Everest.

And though I were to climb Blaven,
it was only a mean mountain
from which I would not see a freedom of
grasslands,

when my desire was on Kilimanjaro,
the Matterhorn and Nanga Parbit,
and the height of Everest.

The vision of freedom evoked in the third line indicates that the scaling of the peak has an end beyond itself, and this suggestion reappears in 'Nighean is Seann Orain', a poem whose rhythms and imagery wonderfully communicate, even in translation, an intense poignancy of longing. When the girl sings the old songs which give voice to "the unattainable stricken thing / that our people fashioned in obscurity", it is

... mar gun crathteachd dhìot an sgìos ud	... as if there were shaken off you that
	weariness
Th' anns a' bheinn nach gabh a dìreadh,	that is in the mountain that may not be
	climbed,
'S nach fhaicear a mullach li-gheal	and whose gleaming white summit is not to
	be seen
Leis a' cheò air creachainn sìnte.	for the mist on high top stretched.

The poem ends with an image of unattainable rest, a ship in the sea of Canna which, like the deer in 'Hallaig', frozen by the gun of love, is fixed eternally in a voyage to no shore:

No có chi long 'sa' Chuan Chanach	who sees a ship in the sea of Canna,
Nach eil a strì ri sgrìoban geala,	a ship that does not strive with white furrows,
Nach eil ag iarraidh gus a' chala	that does not seek the harbour
Nach ruig té seach té r'a maireann,	that no one will ever reach ...

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard provides the *locus classicus* for the analysis of the spiritual state which finds expression in Sorley MacLean's love poetry. The case is that of the 'Knight' who makes the inner movement of 'infinite resignation' in renouncing his love:

Spiritually speaking, everything is possible, but in the world of the finite there is much which is not possible. This impossible, however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by waiving his claim to it. The wish which would carry him out into reality, but was wrecked upon the impossibility, is now bent inward, but it is not therefore lost, neither is it forgotten.

In 'Coilltean Ratharsair' MacLean speaks of "the single-minded love unattainable, lost, unspoiled": the love is lost, but not the wish. In this movement of infinite resignation, which "is the last stage prior to faith", "there is peace and rest and comfort in sorrow". Kierkegaard's insight strikingly illuminates the motif of self-sacrifice which is prominent in MacLean's love-poems: the waiving of the claim is an essential element in the metaphysical movement "which in its pain reconciles one with existence". In this process, a kind of resolution of intractable conflicts is achieved by re-stating them at a higher level. The specific unattainable object — in the love poetry, a woman — is assimilated to a generalized, undefined object of aspiration, as in the finale of 'An Cuilithionn'; that is, the goal is ultimately religious, though the movement of faith is not made. Psychologically this process is sublimation, and this fact is not lost on the poet:

'S gum b'e siod an aisling chonnain	That was the lustful dream
a bh' aig mo spiorad riut 'sna neòil	that my spirit had with you in the clouds,
's tu laighe mar rium anns na speuran	you lying with me in the skies
nuair thréig an tairbhe bha 'nad fheòil.	when the profit of your flesh had failed.
	('Am Mac Stròidheil').

Aesthetically, however, it involves the maintenance of opposites in a state of

tension. A synthesis is not possible in the finite world, as a stanza from *Dàin do Eimhir* XXIII (in Iain Crichton Smith's translation) strikingly states:

<p>Cha dèanar a' cho-chur de 'n chàs, glòir agus ànradh na cruinne, an éitig fhiabhrais 's Pàdraig Mór, daorsa, Beethoven 's thusa.</p>	<p>Such synthesis is dream indeed — of the planet's glory and its pain, the hero's feverish death and you, Beethoven and the slave's chain.</p>
---	---

Iain Crichton Smith, in the introduction to his translations of *Poems to Eimhir*, points out that one is aware “that this is the record of a real love-affair which confronted the poet with real choices in a real world”. That may be so, but the important point about these poems is rather their re-statement of the conflict at a higher level. We are reluctant to believe in the reality of what Blake calls “mental fight”: as Kierkegaard puts it, “People believe very little in spirit, and yet making this movement depends upon spirit”. The struggle which is expressed in the poems of conflict in the early part of the *Dàin do Eimhir* sequence arises in the mental world, however closely it may be related to choices in the ‘real’ world between, for instance, private love and social conscience. Thus the verbal mood which prevails in ‘Gaoir na h-Eòrpa’ is the conditional throughout, and the dilemma treated in ‘Reic Anama’ is, for all the passion with which it is confronted, a hypothetical one:

<p>Ach thubhairt mi rium fhìn, 's cha b' aon-uair, gun reicinn m' anam air do ghaol-sa nam biodh feum air bréig is aomadh. Thubhairt mi an deifir sin gun smaointinn gun b'e an toibheum dubh 's an claonadh.</p>	<p>But I did say to myself, and not once, that I would sell my soul for your love if lie and surrender were needed. I spoke this in haste without thinking that it was black blasphemy and perversion.</p>
---	--

In ‘Urnuigh’, the tortuous brilliance of whose language John MacInnes has shown as deriving from the linguistic traditions of the sermons and prayers of the Free Presbyterian Church (*Cenchrastus* 7, Winter 1981-82), the theme is the internal self-division of the spirit, which leaves the ‘single brain’ turning restlessly in every direction in its vain efforts to impose a synthesis upon the conflicting desires of the ‘split heart’. But although the poet condemns himself for having “preferred a woman to crescent History”, the issue is not, essentially, whether or not he should go to Spain: it is whether or not he can reach a state of wholeness of spirit in which one passion does not interfere with the other in terms of *inner* commitment. So in another poem we find him exhorting himself to exclude from his poetry the graces lent to it by his love's beauty, in order to “put the people's anguish in the steel of my lyric”. It is clear that this quenchless thirst for undividedness is another facet of MacLean's search for the absolute:

<p>Esan dh' am bheil an cridhe air ionnlaid théid e troimh theine gun tionndadh, diridh e bheinn mhór gun ionndrainn;</p>	<p>He whose heart has been washed will go through fire without turning; he will ascend the great mountain without homesickness;</p>
<p>cha d' fhuair mise leithid de dh' anam 's mo chridhe ach air leth-fhaileadh.</p>	<p>I did not get such a spirit because my heart is only half flayed.</p>

When love comes to dominate the poet's spiritual landscape without division, it is celebrated because it promises to make the ideal actual and to confer form and content upon the formless movements of inner experience:

<p>'S 'nad fhaisge tha a' chòmhail</p>	<p>And with you the meeting</p>
--	---------------------------------

a th' agam rium fhéin cho dlúth rium re smior mo chridhe 's e falbh air binnean céin.	that I have with myself is as near me as my heart's marrow when it goes on a far-off peak.
---	--

('Irisleachd')

In the poetry the tendency is, however, for the human love to become a boundless metaphysical entity, an image of the absolute which scrutiny by the intellect serves only to make more unassailably ideal. This is the theme of 'An Sgian', in which the dissection of the stone of love by the knife of the brain paradoxically results in an all-embracing and yet adamant unity, an authentic symbol of the self:

Bha a' chlach a fhuair a gearradh á m' aigne chumhang fhìn air a bearradh gus a' mhórachd a thoilleadh domhain-thìr.	The stone that was cut out of my own narrow spirit was clipped to the greatness that would contain the land of the world.
---	--

It must be of the sublimation of natural love into such a symbol that MacLean speaks in the same poem when he writes that

'S e 'n gaol ginte leis a' chridhe an gaol tha 'n geimhlich shaoir an uair a ghabhas e 'na spiorad gaol eanchainn air a ghaol.	The love begotten by the heart is the love that is in free chains when it takes, in its spirit, a brain love of its love.
---	--

In the poems just discussed it is the intellectual vitality, the vigorous tension of the ideas and (the non-Gaelic speaker must rely here on the testimony of others) the richness and complexity of MacLean's resources which provide the bones of the poetic structure. In more lyrical poems, something more is needed to counteract the tendency of MacLean's subject-matter to encourage abstraction of language, and two main elements are decisive here, both drawing their strength from the poet's topographical and cultural roots: the imagery of landscape, and the concept of the hero and the heroic. These factors (which are moreover related, since the landscape of Skye and Raasay on which MacLean mainly draws for his images and symbols is itself a heroic landscape, both by its physical nature and through its cultural associations) serve to mediate between the finite realities of the physical world and the ideal realities of the spiritual. Mountain, loch, glen and wood, sea, shore and headland, the rhythm of the tides, the action of wind and weather, the movements of the heavenly bodies: these natural things by their solid physical presence anchor the poetry to the finite and to the natural world, but by their infinite symbolic suggestiveness they point towards the ideal and towards metaphysical and spiritual truth. The idea of the heroic, similarly, which bears witness to the continuity of MacLean's poetry with a traditional society in which an ideal value was the yardstick for moral choice and moral judgement, tends constantly towards penetration of the mundane by the ideal.

The function of the imagery of the natural world in the love-lyrics is most often to evoke the enormity of the sublimated love. This can be done in a number of different and sometimes contrasting ways. In 'Liòn-mhoireachd' (which takes up an idea found in the first stanza of 'Am Buairleadh') it is not the vast "golden riddle of millions of stars" with their cold, distant and impersonal beauty which lights up the interior universe of the poet's mind, but the human miracle of the loved one's face. In 'Camhanaich', however, instead of putting nature in the shade, the girl *becomes* the beauty of the material world:

Bu tu camhanaich air a' Chuilithionn
's latha suilbhir air a' Chlàraich,
grian air a h-uilinn anns an òr-shruth
agus ròs geal bristeadh faire.

You were dawn on the Cuillin
and benign day on the Clarach,
the sun on his elbow in the golden stream
and the white rose that breaks the horizon.

'Am Mùr Gorm' gives us another variation: here the existence of his love alters the poet's relation to the natural symbols that are all around him, imposing upon them "an edict above my own pain".

Mur b'e thusa bhiodh a' ghaineamh
tha 'n Talasgar dùmhail geal
'na clàr biothbhuan do mo dhùilean,

But for you the sand
that is in Talisker compact and white
would be a measureless plain to my
expectations
and on it the spear desire would not turn
back.

air nach tilleadh an rùn-ghath.

'Tràighean' employs a marvellous sequence of conceits to put love into relation with eternity by imagining the poet and his loved one standing together for ever amid the space and solitude of the shifting scenes which are evoked — all of them actual shores in the Hebrides and on the west coast of Scotland. MacLean's conceptual inventiveness and powers of sensuous evocation are at their most miraculous here, as repeatedly he finds in the imagery of sea and sand and rock a fresh and vivid metaphor for limitless ideality. It is seldom in Sorley MacLean's poetry that natural features stand for nothing beyond themselves; an exception is 'Ceann Loch Aoineart', really a verbal sound poem, but even here we feel that the thrusting mountains are striving towards consciousness, or at least towards animation:

Onfhadh-chrios mhullaichean,
confhadh-shlios thulaichean,
monmhar luim thurraidean màrsail,
gorm-shliosan Mhosgaraidh,
stoirm-shliosan mosganach,
borb-bhiodan mhonaidhean àrda.

A surge-belt of hill-tops,
impetuous thigh of peaks,
the murmuring bareness of marching turrets,
green flanks of Mosgary,
crumbling storm-flanks,
barbarous pinnacles of high moorlands.

This poem has something in common with 'Coin is Madaidhean-allaidh', the eerie dream-poem in which MacLean's as yet unwritten poems are imagined as lean, questing beasts surging across the snows of eternity in pursuit of "the deer of your gentle beloved beauty". It is through a landscape of wintry and forbidding grandeur that "the mild, mad dogs of poetry" take their relentless course, and such a heroic landscape is perhaps most typical of MacLean's use of natural imagery. Sometimes, though, by contrast, he will produce an image from nature of the most delicate poignancy, like that of the spring, in the poem of that name, whose waters retain for ever the likeness of his love who had once bent her head to it; or, conversely, the smells of honeysuckle and bog-myrtle which remain in the poet's memory when her words have vanished ('Abhainn Arois'). The imagery of nature thus enacts a kind of dialectic, an argument between finite and infinite in which neither has the final word, the creative dynamics of the poetry being most intimately involved in the tensions between them. When, rarely, MacLean draws his metaphors from another source we are somewhat taken aback, for instance at the technological weapon-imagery of 'An Ceann Thall' (which is daringly juxtaposed with the traditional image of a mountain journey and an analogy with the story of Deirdre and Naoise):

Cha d' rinn tancan do dhualchais
no gunnachan móra do rùin
no luingeas-adhair do dheagh-ghean
an éifeachd bu neoinithe do d' dhùil.

Neither the tanks of your heredity
nor the big guns of your desire
nor the aeroplanes of your goodwill
had the most infinitesimal effect on your
expectation.

The poems in which a symbolism of natural features is most schematically developed are the conclusion of 'An Cuilithionn' and 'Coilltean Ratharsair', and it is here too that the theme of the striving for the unattainable is brought to its most complete development. I have discussed these poems at some length in *Lines Review* 61 (June 1977) and here I must limit myself to emphasising the central place which they occupy in the history of Sorley MacLean's 'quest of the absolute'. The two works were composed only a few months apart and are closely linked in both theme and imagery. Compared with a poem of mental struggle like 'Urnuigh' both have great emotional lucidity, but of the two 'Coilltean Ratharsair' is considerably more complex. The Cuillin symbol in the poem which bears its name (or rather in the finale, which apparently stands rather apart from the unfinished and largely unpublished long poem which it nominally brings to a conclusion) represents a trinity comprising "the blue Cuillin of the island, . . . the Cuillin of ancient Scotland and the Cuillin of mankind". In its last-named function it stands essentially for the heroic values which rise triumphant above human misery, imaged as a "black ooze on the rock face". These values appear first as "the red rose of hero courage aflame above the mountain summit", but they soon emerge as attributes of the mountain itself:

Neòr-thaing chithear an Cuilithionn
'S e 'g éirigh air taobh eile duilghe,
Cuilithionn beadarrach nan saor,
Cuilithionn togarrach nan laoch,
Cuilithionn na h-inntinne móire,
Cuilithionn cridhe garbh na dórainn.

Nevertheless the Cuillin is seen
rising on the far side of agony,
the lyric Cuillin of the free,
the ardent Cuillin of the heroic,
the Cuillin of the great mind,
the Cuillin of the rugged heart of sorrow.

It is however the impassable distance which separates the poet from the longed-for peak which lends the symbol its numinous power. For the Cuillin lies "beyond the seas of sorrow, beyond the morass of agony", and between him and it lie "the lochs of the blood of the children of men" and the swamps and pitfalls of every human evil and wretchedness. The lonely "journeying one" is ever seeking that distant summit and never reaching it, for it is indeed but "the ghost seen by the soul", a spectral projection of the ardent longings of the human heart. As an ideal spiritual construct it forms a bulwark against despair, but the poet's realism involves the clearest recognition that it does not belong to the finite world.

In 'Coilltean Ratharsair' the ideal concepts emerge slowly and inevitably from the world of nature. It is the poem's great strength that it is grounded in the natural world, the symbolic meaning taking shape from the gradual, animistic evolution of the natural images into intellectual and spiritual forms, a development analogous to a psychological movement from unconscious to conscious life. The wood, mysterious, beautiful, ambiguous and paradoxical, is at one level a symbol of the unconscious, a role which it takes in several other MacLean poems, notably 'Eadh is Féin is Sàr-Fhéin' and the lyric beginning "She to whom I gave all love . . ."; as such it also represents Nature and the feminine principle. Over against it stands the Cuillin, which in its massive thrustingness, its singleness and definition, stands for

the differentiating consciousness, and hence for the spiritual and the male principle. Beyond that, of course, it symbolizes once more the aspirations of the poet and their unattainable ends, and, as with 'An Cuilithionn', it is in the nature of the symbolism that the seeker and the sought are not clearly distinguishable. This is psychologically correct, for what is sought is finally the inner wholeness of the individual, of which the external goal is only a projection.

In 'Coilltean Ratharsair' there is held out for a fleeting moment the vision of the unreachable thing all but within the grasp:

'S e bhith creidsinn le feòil	To believe with flesh,
le eanchainn 's le cridhe	with brain and heart,
gu robh aon nì coimhionta	that one thing was complete,
àlainn so-ruighinn.	beautiful, accessible.

This thing is love, and the heart of the poem is reached with the question "What is the meaning of giving a woman love . . . ?" Receiving no answer, the question moves out of the finite and into the infinite. The perfection of this love, "unhesitant, undoubting, hopeless, sore, blood-red, whole", indicates to us that by its nature, by the very necessity to believe in it, it belongs to ideality and cannot be realized in the finite world:

ged bheirtheadh an gaol do-labhairt	though the unspeakable love were given,
cha bhiodh ann ach mar gun cainte	it would be only as if one were to say
nach b' urrainn an càs tachairt	that the thing could not happen
a chionn gun robh e do-labhairt.	because it was unspeakable.

This is exactly the situation of Kierkegaard's knight, who has "no need of the intervention of the finite for the further growth of his love", precisely because "from the instant he made the movement the princess is lost to him". Thus the "single-minded love" is "unattainable, lost, unspoiled": unspoiled just because it is lost and unattainable. However, it is the inescapable nature of humanity to cling to the finite. Even when we seek to make it infinite, we nonetheless desire, paradoxically, to retain the thing under its finite form. This paradox is expressed in lines which bring us to another major theme in Sorley MacLean's poetry:

nì a sheachnadh allaban	a thing that would avoid the travail
na colainne 's a' chruaidh-chàis,	of the flesh and hardship,
nach milltheadh le meapaineadh	that would not be spoiled by the
	bedraggledment
time is buairidh.	of time and temptation.

This is the theme that is developed at length and with extraordinary poetic inventiveness and intellectual passion and tenacity in 'An Tathaich'. The face of a girl says to the poet's heart "that a division may not be sought between desire and the substance of its unattainable object"; in other words, as I understand it, the object of desire must be stripped of its finitude and made infinite as the desire itself is infinite. The problem is the one that Hopkins confronts in 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo': how to find the means "to keep back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away". For like Kierkegaard's knight again, the poet is "too proud to be willing that what was the whole content of his life should be the thing of a fleeting moment". MacLean's answer is to invoke the philosophical idea that what has once been is preserved for ever in eternity:

a chionn gum bheil i 'n dràsda	because it now is
--------------------------------	-------------------

gum bi 'cruth 's a bith gu bràth ann
agus nach urrainn caochladh
a h-aonachd a mhàbadh.

that its form and being will always be,
and that change cannot
maim its unity.

The tension and greatness of the poem arise, however, from the fact that the poet cannot wholly believe this: arise, that is, from the conflict between his belief and his unbelief. Not trusting his subjective intuition that finitude is annihilated by the relativity of time, he casts around this way and that without rest in his efforts to find some way of perpetuating the beauty of his love's face, of "checking this hour and holding it in the sand of change with the fluke of an anchor". All of his imaginative invention, however, cannot establish such a certainty:

O aodainn a tha 'gam thathaich,
a mhìorbhail a tha labhar,
am bheil aon phort an tìm dhuit
no balla-crich ach talamh?

O face that is haunting me,
O eloquent marvel,
is there any port in time for you
or march-wall but earth?

The poem ends where it began, with the eloquent triumph of the girl's face still putting its eternal question.

The preoccupation with time and eternity recurs in 'Nighean is Seann Orain', in 'Ard-Mhusaeum na h-Eireann' — which ends by asserting that the heroic life of James Connolly is not bounded by mortality:

Tha an curaidh mòr fhathast
'na shuidhe air an t-séithir,
ag cur a' chatha 'sa' Phost-Oifis
's ag glanadh shràidean an Dùn-Eideann

The great hero is still
sitting on the chair
fighting the battle in the Post Office
and cleaning streets in Edinburgh

— and above all in 'Hallaig', which once more has its life in the tension between the vision of past time subsisting in eternity and the fear that this idea is purely subjective, contained within the poet's imagination and hence limited by his own mortality. The poem establishes this tension in the opening lines, which bring together present desolation and the continued presence of the past within the context of the poet's own life:

Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig
troimh 'm faca mi an Aird an Iar
's tha mo ghaol aig Allt Hallaig
'na craoibh bheithe, 's bha i riamh.

The window is nailed and boarded
through which I saw the West
and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig
a birch tree, and she has always been.

In the vision of the cleared township which follows, where "the dead have been seen alive", the past generations somehow have their present being in the unchanging features of the landscape which they once inhabited, and which is animated by their having lived in it. When time, the deer, is struck by the gun of love and his eye frozen in the wood, this is equivalent to saying that time is annihilated by the eternalizing action of the loving will. This is not, however, an aesthetic event. It is not in art or through art that the moment is eternalized; the poem merely records a mystery which occurs within the human mind itself. Hence "his blood will not be traced while I live": the poem will survive the poet's death, but the vision, it is perhaps being suggested, may not.

We have seen how the heroic ideal functions in a general sense in several of MacLean's major poems as one of the ways in which the absolute can find expression in human terms. There are also, however, a considerable number of

took a *little* weeping to my eyes”: the lament for Alasdair of Glen Garry which it echoes makes no such qualification.

This theme has at any rate remained of great importance to MacLean in his later poetry (‘Dà Dhòhnallach’ provides an obvious example), and it is prominent in the unfinished long poem ‘Uamha ’n Oir’, in which the figure of the second piper who goes into the cave, not expecting ever to return, embodies the value of self-sacrifice. Where it differs from the early poetry is in its pessimism, the sense of the loss of what MacLean often calls ‘expectation’, and especially the loss of social hope. The piper sees “the great horse of his aspirations bridled and tethered by the past”, “his loved stallion a poor gelding under the whips of the unseen lord”, and “the old community broken”. Yet though he goes into “the mouth of death” believing his sacrifice to be unavailing and indeed no sacrifice at all, he still values “the courage that would not willingly surrender” and remembers that “he would not be the worse of leaving the name of hero in Borreraig and the Dun”. There is a suggestion, too, that the by-products of the quest can compensate for its failure, for the piper understands

ged nach robh feum san t-sireadh	... though the quest was useless
Nach biodh an ealain gun treòir	that the art would have its strength.

The destruction of the roots of political and social hope overshadows the later poetry, and personal aspiration no longer mitigates the agony of the times.

‘Twenty-Five Years from Richmond 1965’ (*Contemporary Scottish Verse*) expresses an acceptance learned painfully on the field of battle and in the defeat and despair which followed victory, and gives us perhaps the saddest lines in MacLean’s poetry:

Ma théid mi lath-eigin a Richmond	If I go someday to Richmond
’S gum faic mi ’n Caisteal cuimr làidir,	and see the shapely strong Castle,
Cha toir e orm ach snodha-gàire	it will only make me smile
Mas cuimhne liom idir mo chràdhlot.	if I remember my agony at all.

It is a certain, bleak, clear-sighted purity of acceptance which makes the black pessimism of some of the later poetry sadly moving rather than intolerably depressing: poems like ‘Eadh is Féin is Sàr-Fhéin’, which mourns the loss of the symbols and images on the great plain; ‘A’ Bheinn air Chall’, “lost in the wood that is lost” when the horrors of contemporary civilization can no longer be synthesized with the glories of the natural world in any “eternity of the mind”; ‘Creag Dallaig’, which begins “Expectation and hope are changed, and there is not much hope”; and ‘Screapadal’, which envisages the destruction of the beauty of the beloved Raasay landscape by the hydrogen and neutron bomb. For all that, even in ‘Uamha ’n Oir’, the old images reappear and reassert their power, stating that only in the spirit can the evils of the world be overcome and despair made good:

Agus an teine tha san spiorad	... the fire that is in the spirit
A’ streap ri mullach reòta ghràidh,	climbers up the frozen summit of love,
Far an loisgear iomadh miann	where many a desire is burnt
A th’ ann am binneinan na colainn	that is in the peaks of the body
Gus am bi an spiorad fhéin	until the spirit itself is
Air a’ bhiod nach ruig an aiteamh.	on the pinnacle unreached by thaw.

The piper is therefore a true mythological hero in the sense indicated by Jung in *Symbols of Transformation* when he writes: “The hero is a hero just because he sees

THE GHOST SEEN BY THE SOUL

resistance to the forbidden goal in all life's difficulties and yet fights that resist with the whole-hearted yearning that strives towards the treasure hard to attain and perhaps unattainable — a yearning that paralyses and kills the ordinary man.

The quest of the absolute which this essay has attempted to chart is a Promethean undertaking, for as Thomas Merton once wrote, "The longing of the restless spirit man, seeking to transcend itself by its own powers, is symbolized by the need to scale the impossible mountain and find there what is after all our own". In So MacLean's case this deeply rooted and unappeasable longing has expressed itself in the work of a spiritual grandeur which is possibly unmatched in modern poetry.

JOHN HERDMAN