STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIV, 1, 2019, p. 223 - 236
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2019.1.16

SENSE OF PLACE AND BELONGING IN SORLEY MACLEAN'S POETRY

DANIELA ROGOBETE[1]

ABSTRACT. ***Sense of Place and Belonging in Sorley MacLean's Poetry*.** Placing himself in the wake of Hugh MacDiarmid's *Scottish Renaissance*, Sorley MacLean initiated the *Gaelic Renaissance* with the same aim in view. He turned to the Scottish impressive landscape as to a rich provider of metaphorical images that spoke of tradition, continuity and national consciousness.

Keywords: *Antisyzygy, clearances, duality, Gaeldom, monolingualism, musicality, polylingualism.*

REZUMAT. ***Metafore ale spațiului și apartenenței în poezia lui Sorley MacLean.*** Urmând exemplul lui Hugh MacDiarmid și al *Renașterii scoțiene* pe care acesta o reprezintă, Sorley MacLean a inițiat la rândul său *Renașterea Galică Scoțiană* cu același scop. El și-a îndreptat atenția către peisajul scoțian impresionant ca spre o sursă bogată de imagini metaforice care vorbesc despre tradiție, continuitate și conștiință națională.

Cuvinte cheie: *Antisyzygy, Clearances, dualitate, Gaeldom, monolingvism, muzicalitate, plurilingvism.*

1. Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed the renewed efforts to assert and reassert Scottish identity, the multivocality and diversity of its cultural inheritance, even if Scotland was already in possession of a meritorious place in the European culture due to the efforts of many remarkable writers and

[1] **Daniela ROGOBETE** is a translator and Senior Lecturer at the Department of British, American and German Studies, University of Craiova, Romania. She holds a PhD in Postcolonial Studies and her published work includes such titles as *When Texts Come into Play–Intertexts and Intertextuality* (2003), *Metaphor—Between Language and Thought* (2008), *Deconstructing Silence—Ambiguity and Censored Metaphors in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (2010), numerous articles and studies on Indian English fiction, intertextuality and visual culture published in national and international journals, as well as literary translations. Contact address: <dani.rogobete@yahoo.com>

artists who promoted the values and traditions of their country. Several waves of "revivals" and various Renaissances tried to make Scottish people aware of their old, cultural traditions and of the danger of letting them die under the alluring spell of a globalising and globalised culture, and at the same time to make European people more sensitive to the undeniable, historically and culturally legitimated individuality of Scotland. Within this context there has been a continuous fight for international literary recognition undertaken by remarkable personalities who tried not only to increase awareness about the tremendous loss entailed by the demise of the native languages, of their folklore and wealth of traditions but also to promote these cultural repositories by proving they might find a proper place within the European contemporary cultural context.

This study dwells on Sorley MacLean's metaphorical use of the Scottish landscape which conveys a deep sense of belonging and identity, and emphasises the continuous connection between past and present, tradition and modernity. The multitude of tropes inspired by natural elements and the overall symbolical treatment of nature prove MacLean's mastery in bringing to life old Gaelic myths and lores, projecting them into contemporaneity so that by evoking the Scottish landscape and describing its characteristic features, he could thus comment on historical events and their consequences on people's lives, he could elaborate on his political views and declare his everlasting love for his country and its culture.

2. "There's a little island in my memory" (Glen Eyre)

Born in 1911 in a numerous family, on the little island of Rasaay, located between the Isle of Skye and the mainland of Scotland, Somhairle Macgill-Eain (Sorley MacLean) grew up in a picturesque scenery which he always cherished and used in his entire poetic work; the Gaelic tradition in which he grew up made him fully appreciate his cultural heritage and inspired him (mainly due to his paternal grandmother's beautifully singing old Gaelic songs to him, as he so warmly evoked in *My Relationship with the Muse*) to play with particular rhythms, patterns and symbolism that formed the core of his poetry. Many of the themes that underlie the traditional Gaelic poetry – heroism, bravery, loyalty to a clan, to a community and to a specific place – are also present in MacLean's poems though the tragical notes of the more recent Gaelic poems and their tendency to deplore the loss of a heroic past and the inertia of an unheroic present are most of the time attenuated by a note of optimism and nationalistic pride inspired by the early Gaelic popular songs. The oral tradition proved to be a vital source of inspiration for the young

Sorley MacLean. "In my early teens," MacLean confessed later on, "that is from about 1924, I realised that I was a traditional Gaelic singer manqué, for I was born into a family of traditional singers and pipers on all sides, and that in a Free Presbyterian community, of all the most inimical to such 'vanities'" („My Relationship with the Muse" 6).

A second major influence was that of the Free Presbyterian Church tradition in which he was raised by his family; this influence, visible in the religious terminology he frequently used and the solemn sonorities in many of his poems, speaks of three sources of inspiration: "that of the pulpit, the prayer meeting and the family worship" (MacInnes 15). It was a tradition that taught him the rhetorical power and the convincing eloquence of the Presbyterian preachers, the emotion of family prayers and the great respect for human suffering but also made him relinquish "Calvinism for Socialism at about the age of twelve" as its stern dogmatic teachings "consign all the rest of humanity, and the great majority of its own adherents, to eternal hellfire and damnation" (MacLean, *Hallaig and Other Poems* xxix). It sometimes placed him strikingly at odds with his family fondness of Gaelic songs, as the stern fatalism and determinism characteristic to the Free Presbyterians were in sharp contrast with the exuberance and joy of the Gaelic traditional songs. This tension characterises much of MacLean's poetry and comes from the dramatic opposition between the Calvinist predestination, determinism and fatalism in front of Fate, of History and Politics, might also be added, and the complete trust in the individual's capacity to transcend human limitations. MacLean never failed to express his deep admiration and respect for his Gaelic folkloric heritage and its overflowing optimism. "This popular song poetry," MacLean stated in his Talk to the Gaelic Society of Inverness delivered in 1934, "achieves the realism of joy as well as of tragedy. It is a realistic poetry because it is never far divorced from the life of the common people and, being such an expression of the joys or sorrows of the ordinary man or woman, it constitutes a very important part or perhaps the most remarkable peasant culture the world has ever seen. " (*Hallaig and Other Poems* xviii)

A speaker of Gaelic himself, MacLean advocated for the study of Gaelic and its more extensive use in institutions of education. As recorded by statistics, there has been a gradual but steady decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, from around 200.000 at the beginning of the twentieth century to 60.000, representing 23 % of the population nowadays. The survival of this language reached critical moments, especially during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when Gaelic was banned as a consequence of the Highland Clearances. Conscious of the long, troubled history of a language and culture that define the identity of many people in Scotland, Sorley MacLean

became a promoter and advocate of Gaelic and a firm believer in the revival of this language. He was not the only writer engaged in the attempt to bring back to life an almost dying language; both he and George Campbell Hay tried to revive Gaelic, its rhythms and the subtle emotions it evoked. Their poetic works made a vivid impression on Scotland's major figure of the twentieth century Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid, the poet who decided to make the literary world aware of Scotland's multivocality and its complex identity that could only be rendered, in his opinion, in its native languages: Scots and Gaelic.

Mac Lean's encounter with MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve) was an important event in his life, as his admiration for this poet and MacDiarmid's influence upon his poetic work (his most important poem, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, was primarily inspired by Diarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*) were obvious with, at times indeed, occasional moments of critical coldness. Inspired by the 1920s surge of Irish nationalism, the Scottish Literary Renaissance found in Hugh MacDiramid its most fervent advocate. He tried to connect the Scottish cultural reinvigoration to the nationalistic political struggle. The emphasis was placed upon literature and its important part played in increasing national awareness, in consolidating the sense of identity and belonging and, of course, in the revival of the regional languages of Scotland. His determination to write in Scots and to promote a highly suggestive combination of Scots and English was highly important in the redefinition of Scottish identity. That is why he got interested in MacLean's and Campbell's poems written in Gaelic and invited MacLean to contribute with his translations into Gaelic to the anthology of poems he was editing at the time, entitled *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1940).

Modernism, with its apparent simplicity and scarcity of adornments, with its concentrated metaphorical images, with its experimental treatments of language, of poetic imagery and of the self, highly appealed to MacLean. He succeeded in creating a unanimously praised synthesis of Modernism adapted to and moulded on the rhythms and musicality of old Gaelic poems. The result was an interesting combination of Gaelic and English metrical and rhythmic patterns, of original images inspired by the ancient songs of the Gaelic bardic tradition, a mixture of different dispositions of the lines that visually structure the poems into different sections with different rhythms and movements, but with an overall extreme musicality. "I could not be primarily a Gael without a very deep-seated conviction that the auditory is the primary sensuousness of poetry" ("My Relationship with the Muse" 13-14). As a firm believer in the Greek *triuna horeia*, the inseparable combination of music, dance and poetry, MacLean does not conceive poetry as separated from music and he brings once again the Gaelic tradition of old songs as the best argument:

> Very early in life I came to be obsessed with the lyric, first of all because of my unusually rich Gaelic background; with the lyric in the Greek sense of a marriage of poetry and music, and then, because I was not a musician, with the lyric in the Shelleyan and Blakeian sense of a short or shortish poem suggesting song even if it could never be sung, a concentration running or flying away from anything that could in any way be called *sermo pedestri*. (9)

The mixture of Modernist style and imagery, and the Gaelic metre and traditional forms best suited and served his preoccupation with history and contemporary politics, and their tremendous impact upon people's lives. He was deeply interested in the European political context, he adhered to Socialism and, temporarily, to the utopian principles of Communism and he expressed a strong disapproval of war, Fascism, imperialism and the all-engulfing, exacerbated form of Capitalism. His short-lived preference for Communism, which ended when the news of Stalin's atrocities committed in Russia reached Scotland, brought him various criticisms in spite of the general penchant for socialism during the 30s. He fought in WWII for the British Army though he would have also wanted to join the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

Sorley MacLean's poetry is based on a variety of themes ranging from nationalistic concerns related to Gaelic identity and tradition; from the political aspects connected to the status of Scotland within the European context, its traumatic history (he was particularly interested in the effects of the nineteenth century Clearances) and struggle for asserting its independence, its heroism and resilience, to love and the permanent conflict between love and duty. The general structure of his poems is a dialectical one, putting together two extremes and expounding on their significance. Everything thus acquires a conversational tone, allegedly coming from an old Gaelic poetic tradition where community and the chief of the clan established a dialogue and, through dialogue, settled all matters of dispute and debate. This confrontation between opposite elements, love and duty, heroism and cowardice, social engagement and passivity, tradition and innovation represents the dichotomy regarded as inherent to Scottish identity, generally known, since Gregory Smith coined it in his 1919 study, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, as Caledonian Antisyzygy. There is one common topic however that underlies his entire poetic work: his sense of place that translates his profound love for Scotland in general, and for Gaelic Scotland in particular, and finds its best expression in a rich landscape symbolism.

3. "From the depths of this old wisdom" (*Poems to Eihmir*)

Raised as a Gaelic speaker with a deep respect for the Gaelic culture and traditions, eternally in love with its music, songs, poems and lores, Sorley

MacLean came to be acknowledged as one of the most important Scottish authors of the twentieth century. Though deeply connected to his native island, Rasaay, and to its beautiful surroundings, though his poetry is firmly grounded in real and easily identifiable places, MacLean produced a poetical work that went far beyond the local interest and tackled universal problems, bringing him the puplic's general appreciation and critical acclaim as an international poet.

> I came to maturity at the time of the great symbolist movement in European poetry, which you've got in Yeats, Eliot, MacDiarmid, Block in Russia and Paul Valéry in France, and my symbols came mostly from my immediate environment, because in many ways my immediate physical environment was very varied. The Cuillins naturally became a symbol of difficulty, hardship and heroic qualities as against, as it were, the softness and relative luxury of the woods of Rasaay with all their own contradictions. (*An Cuilithionn 1939/ The Cuillin 1939 and Unpublished Poems* 122)

Gaelic landscapes, either picturesque and idyllic or sublimely wild and rugged, are constant elements in MacLean's poetry and acquire – as he suggests – different significances and connotations in different contexts, but they are always associated to the history of these places and of the people inhabiting them. Faithful to a long Gaelic tradition which "represents the oldest and richest continuing Scottish tradition, both written and oral" (Sassi 33), with tight connections with the Irish culture, MacLean mainly used landscape elements (mountains, woods, bogs, glens, rivers and burns) to emphasise the sense of permanence and continuity, and the strong attachment to a cultural tradition that showed a great respect to nature.

Maybe the most powerful symbolical association that the poet recurrently uses is the one between landscape and history – an occasion to comment on past courageous deeds, to compare the heroic moments of the past and the unheroic political turmoil of the present – between landscape and love, beauty and the status of Art. When used in association with history and historical events, landscape either acquires majestic, dignified dimensions that stress the heroism of the people and their identification to the natural elements of their surroundings, or it comes with sublime, frightening features that hint at the greatness of the obstacles that had and still have to be overcome; landscape is sometimes a silent witness to history or, some other times, a harsh, objective participant entitled to comment and criticise.

The poem that best syntheses MacLean's sense of place and history, together with his political commitment and social concern is *An Cuilithionn 1939*, generally considered to be a masterpiece of the twenty century Scottish

literature. Devoid of a linear narrative thread, the poem illustrates his author's engagement in social and political action, his attempt to "re-enfranchise Gaelic writing within the larger framework of European culture, winning back a centrality which it had been denied at least since the time of Renaissance," in political as well as in literary terms (6). A poem dedicated, in a traditional modesty topos, both to Christopher Grieve MacDiarmid and to Alexander MacDonald, declares its allegiance to both modernism and tradition and at the same time a profound love for Scotland.

In terms of landscape the Dedication establishes some of the key elements that will recurrently reappear as major metaphors in his poems: the mountains, their peaks, the island. The expressed goal of the poem is to give voice to all the turmoil and injustice that blighted Gaelic Scotland and at the same time to express the entire love for these lands.

> I would put the awful Cuillin
> in phosphorescence in the sky
> and I would make the island shout
> with a cry of fate in the skies. [...]
> I would keep our noble Skye
> head-on to the waves of Europe's battle. (5-8/11-12)

The beginning of the poem puts forth some of the topics that MacLean will repeatedly discuss in the poem: the metaphorical approach to landscape, whose suggestive description will most often be a comment in itself, the attempt to break the repressive silence History sometimes imposes upon certain spaces with "a cry of fate" that will assert the island's legitimate historical and cultural claims, and will affirm its identity. The pledge at the end of the dedication "I would keep our noble Skye..." is not only a promise to honour the island and keep it on the map of Europe but it is also a manner of placing himself within the Gaelic poetic tradition of Skye (he will allude to poets such as Mary MacPherson and Neil MacLeod) and a vow to keep it alive.

Cuillin, the key symbol of this poem and generally, a major symbol in MacLean's poetic universe, is the embodiment of ancient wisdom and a point of stability among the shaking grounds of History, a metaphor of heroism and bravery, a symbol of permanence and resilience. At the same time, the mountain also represents all the hardships and troubles Scotland had to overcome and the effort of climbing it is equated to the struggle for freedom and for asserting national identity. This is why the mountain sometimes appears with negative connotations, as a "mean mountain," "a wall between joy and my harsh little croft", "from which I would not see a freedom of grasslands" (*Glen Eyre*). In MacLean's description, Cuillin is the epitome of dignity, a metonymic

representation of Scottishness, as in most of his verses (*Kinloch Ainort*), of dynamism and frenzy suggested through a subtle movement of forms and shapes, a dance of silhouettes, of outlines and summits:

> A company of mountains, an upthrust of mountains
> A great garth of growing mountains,
> A concourse of summits, of knolls, of hills,
> Coming on with a fearsome roaring.

The mountain is a sublime appearance, inspiring sublime emotions and experiences, a space of historical and human grandeur, simultaneously seen as a site of heroism and self-sacrifice (generally associated to Christ, Spartacus and Prometheus, all of them offering inspiring examples of abnegation and self-immolation for the benefit of humankind, sometimes to Lenin, too). The mountain is often used as a point of observation ("It would become above every place/ to be on your shoulder blades", *An Cuilithionn 1939*), reached with great effort and determination, which gives the climber both an outward and elevated perspective, hence a higher degree of objectivity, upon places, people and events, and, most importantly, a historic perspective that places Gaelic Scotland within the European broader panorama: "then rises before me the fate of my people/ the woeful history of the lovely island". This higher point of observation at the same time enhances the sense of duty and responsibility towards one's fellows and the sense of solidarity with those suffering injustice and hardships:

> The lasting misery that has come
> and the misery that is to come,
> and the misery that is with us,
> the sore, killing, long misery.

In contrast with the mountain, as a place of sublime beauty, heroism and dignity, we find the image of the Morass of Mararàbhlainn, the bog that engulfs and obliterates both heroism and beauty in a metaphorical representation of injustice and corruption. In its turn, the bog becomes an ambiguous symbol which can acquire personal dimensions when it translates the fear of losing one's roots and identity, the fear of taking up action and standing up for one's rights; in this case it becomes the bog of fear and passivity, of resignation and hopelessness.

> The night of the morass is on my eyes,
> and has penetrated my vision,
> I have no hope of new bloom
> nor of new whiteness of sun. (53-54)

When projected on the great scale of history, the bog becomes a symbol of injustice and oppression and a metaphoric representation of Capitalism. The soul-wrecking bog can only be defeated through a bold rising up that could reconnect people with their heroic past (symbolised by the Gaelic voices of the past and through Clio, the Muse of History); this rising up is once again symbolised by the strenuous effort of climbing up the mountain peaks. The "lyrical peaks" of *An Cuilithionn* correspond not only to the summits that vanquish the bog and terminate its dominion of fear and dejection over the people's hearts and banish the "ultimate consequences of its filth;/ poverty, hunger and prostitution,/ fever, consumption and disease," but also to the obviously remarkable poetic skills displayed in this impressive poem. There is always the possibility of choosing between heroism and passive resignation ("I have a foot in Mararaulin/ and a foot on the Cuillin"), between futile nostalgia and revolt.

The Skye Stallion, the impressive cliff that stands for the human capacity to transcend its own limits, to fully achieve self-improvement and sum up the courage to act in the name of justice and humanity, is the one that can defeat the morass and restore a temporarily lost dignity; the "flawless Stallion," "great horse of the sea," "steed of the ocean," "great horse of the horizon," "stallion of the mountains," "love of Scotland," the Skye Stallion becomes the personified embodiment of the emblem of Scotland, of its endless struggle for freedom and its oscillation between the heights of heroism and the abyss of despair. Symbol of national pride, of great aspirations and patriotic exultation, the cliff stands for human dignity and pride, for the capacity to go beyond the limitations imposed either by personal weaknesses or by historical circumstances.

The way in which MacLean envisages nature and describes his native landscapes is illustrative for the exquisite combination of a Romantic revolutionary spirit, a metaphorical approach to Nature and History, and a Modernist construction of his poems, for the idiosyncratic use of traditional rhythms and innovatory forms. The result is a subtle connection between past and present, tradition and modernity with a significant emphasis placed upon the assertion of Gaelic/Scottish identity and upon the pride it engenders, which comes from "the gift of my environment and my heredity" (*Glen Eyre*). The Scottish landscape, its history and its tradition thus become the major dimensions of MacLean's poetic universe.

4. "Putting thoughts in a dying language" (*I Do Not See the Sense of My Toil)*

MacLean's remarkable gift of using landscape so as to inspire patriotic feelings, to evoke a heroic past, to reassert national identity, to comment on a

problematic present and expose its failures, is matched by his remarkable skill in using the same natural elements in order to evoke a Gaelic tradition and to subtly connect it to such aesthetic notions as beauty, art and love.

From this perspective, woods provide an extremely rich source of symbols and metaphors that comment on the sense of belonging to a specific place, community, tradition, and on the status of art. The woods generally offer an inward perspective that invite to self-analysis, introspection and nostalgic evocations; frequently coming back to the image of "roots", MacLean's metaphorical use of the woods renews the connection between past and present stressing the idea of ancestral heritage – the rich treasure of folk tales, myths and songs of the Gaelic cultural heritage – continuity, historical legitimacy, the sense of unity and solidarity.

A poem like *The Woods of Rasaay* makes an extensive use of metonymies and synecdoches inspired by the image of the trees which are seen as an army of "helmets", an army of faithful soldiers with proud "banners" of green foliage, valiantly defending their land. In MacLean's suggestive evocation, the forest becomes in turns a metaphor of the labyrinth of life and the complicated ways of History ("the restless intricacy"), of renewal and rejuvenation, of dynamism and exhilaration but still emblematic for an inherently divided Scottish self: torn between exuberance and despair, heroism and passivity ("the divided wood," "the wood with doubling"), at the same time a dual space where beauty and harmony on the one side coexist with the turmoils of history and death on the other side.

Vividly discussed and theorised, the Scottish "polymatic linguistic tradition" (Jack qtd. in Sassi 34) – which refers to an extreme versatility and flexibility of literary texts dating back to as far as the fourteenth century and up to the eighteenth century, when they were often written in no less than six languages including Scots, Gaelic, English, Latin, Norman French and Old Norse – has been in fact a reality that has characterised Scottish culture from early times. In the case of Scottish literature, and in the particular case of Gaelic poetry, duality is even more obvious, acquiring suggestive linguistic dimensions, as poems almost always come with double versions and translations, just in the way in which their authors use both their Gaelic names and their English transliterations. In fact, MacLean was not very fond of doubling his poems with their English versions, though he translated most of his poems for the sake of a larger circulation and a broader readership. He considered that the real measure of Gaelic poetry is given by its musicality, by the way in which images, metaphors and ideas create a harmonious entity: "Gaelic poetry that is published with English translations cannot be assessed on its translation alone even by the most honest and perceptive of critics who do not know Gaelic" ("My Relationship with the Muse" 14).

The musicality of language is emphasised by a special use of phonetic symbolism which goes together with a metaphorical use of natural elements. The apparent "silence of the woods", yet pregnant with so many stories of the past and with the inaudible voices of the ancestors, is often associated with the gradual silencing of Gaelic over the centuries, culminating with the Clearances, an event repeatedly evoked by MacLean. The close connection between the voice of the wind and of the streams, the rustling of the foliage and the murmur of the burns, and the musicality of Gaelic, a language too deeply rooted into the Scottish land to be wiped out by inimical historical and political circumstances and by people's indifference, is common in the context of twentieth century Gaelic poetry. It was professed by the most passionate supporter of the Gaelic language and literature, George Campbell Hay, together with poets such as Derick Thomas, Aonghas MacNeacail, Mary Montgomery, Iain Creitchon Smith and many others. Hay associates Gaelic with the Highlands and the rugged landscape and woods of Argyll and thus Gaelic becomes "...the ancient tongue which woke him/ from his cradle sleep; and in which he courted/ his love in the fragrant woods" (*Mokhtâr and Dougall*).

Most often, the wind is the source and carrier of the Gaelic language from a meaningful past towards a future where it runs the risk of oblivion and indifference (Hay, MacLean), where the general decay of nature and the degradation of landscape are seen as symbolical for the dying of Gaelic language and culture (Thomas, MacLean); or, contrarily, in Bateman's poetry, the soil becomes the metaphor of the resilience and the continuity of Gaelic on the Scottish land. Duality is present even in this regard, as most poets and defenders of language draw attention upon a subtle distinction that has relatively recently appeared between the "old Gaelic" of the born-Gaelic speakers who perceive it as a cultural heritage and the "new Gaelic" of the younger generation of authors who acquired it as a sign of respect for their tradition. Their joint efforts are however meritorious in the common attempt to resist *monolingualism*, an attempt which "is a key creative stand in Scottish literature" (Brown & Riach 5). This communal endeavour was officially legitimated through the 2005 Gaelic Language Act that established *Bòrà na Gàidhlig* – an executive public body of the Scottish Government in charge with implementing the Gaelic language – and ensured the preservation of Gaelic as one of the languages spoken in Scotland, both as a transmitter of a cultural heritage and as a marker of identity that simultaneous shows its allegiance to both Ireland and Scotland.

For MacLean, the woods remain a place of beauty, of music (always associated to old Gaelic traditional songs), harmony and coherence: "coille à chronain/ s' i òranach luinneagach; the humming wood/of songs and ditties"

(*Woods of Rasaay*). The tree imagery is particularly suggestive and rich in symbolism; the frequent association between people and trees sends back to the old Gaelic tradition of the medieval panegyric poetry where the dignity and strength of native trees (rowan, hazel and birch) were ascribed to important people in the clan, or where entire families or clans were symbolically represented through a specific tree. In MacLean's poems this association acquires further nuances. In *Hallaig*, for example, a poem about the effects of the Clearances on the Gaelic communities, trees completely replaced people ("she is a birch, a hazel,/ a straight, slender young rowan," "their daughters and their sons are a wood/ going up beside the stream," "the girls a wood of birches") in a landscape mutilated by History and transformed into an empty house whose "window is nailed and boarded." But it is precisely this association that dispels the poignant sense of loss and abandonment and turns it into hope of regeneration. Contrarily, in *Culloden*, even if not completely uprooted, the tree bears the marks of the indomitable historical moment: "it was a breaking/ to the race of the Gaels,/ and there grew on this slope/ only the withered tree of misfortune."

The tree becomes the perfect metaphor for Gaeldom in *The Tree of Strings* and for the qualities MacLean considers to be most representative of the Gaelic spirit: *tha Craobh nan Teud/ the Tree of Strings* stands for the old cultural heritage, the treasure of songs and poems that have offered comfort and alleviation ("a light through suffering") in front of the vicissitudes of life and preserved the identity of a people; *the craobh a' chiùil/ the tree of music*, "a flower to windward," sends once again to the association wind-music-Gaelic, an inseparable trinity which is meant to survive even if the tree itself loses its strength under the "hardships of chances and their strokes"; and *a chraobh na bàrdachd/ the tree of poetry* refers to the strength, beauty and harmony offered by art, the sense of continuity and endurance. Art/poetry, as seen by MacLean, comes from "the ordered thought" engendered by the concreteness and reliability of reality ("hardness of rocks"), from simplicity, sincerity and elevation from triviality ("the bareness of mountains") and from the author's skill ("the might of talents"). Tradition, music, language and poetry are thus placed at the core of Gaelic identity which not only offer strength against "woe and threat/ [...] and torrent of falsehood" but can also engender *the craobh àilleachd glòrmhoir/ the tree of a glorious beauty*, "the melodious, gold-yellow tree,/ high head above grief."

> MacLean did not just resurrect Gaelic poetry or reanimate what is sometimes wrongly judged to be a dead literature, ensuring that it survived into a new century – he also breathed new life into his

> tradition. If we imagine his poems as trees, it is clear that he has repopulated the wood and perhaps introduced some new varieties of flora which can exist alongside the birch, the hazel and the rowan in 'coille mo ghràidh/ the wood I love'. (Dymock 84)

5. Conclusion

From his exquisite love poems to his impressive war poetry, from poems of political engagement and social commitment, to metaphorical comments on historical events, Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean found a way to remain deeply rooted in the tradition in which he grew up and in the places he loved so much and yet to transcend the boundaries of his language and the borders of his country and get international recognition. Subtly putting together tradition and modernity, history and politics, exuberance and despair, the poet reasserted the divided Scottish self and its profound connection to places and landscapes. The sense of place and belonging becomes a permanent topic in his poems and the means he uses to illustrate it reveal him as a master of landscape descriptions and of a metaphorical approach to nature. What Sorley MacLean succeeded in creating was a highly suggestive combination of geographically recognisable landscapes, strongly attached to the concreteness and referentiality of place names, and landscapes of the mind and of the soul, metaphorically evoking and creating symbolical bridges between the old heroic times and the elusive future. "If a poem cannot in any way approach the quality of music, if it lacks the lyrical cry, then it is not poetry," MacLean used to say ("Old Songs and New Poetry" 118), and this "lyrical cry" is one of his greatest achievements as he managed not only to render the sense of place and to create memorable images inspired by Gaelic Scotland, but also to create a music of these places through a tender, respectful and creative coming back to the Gaelic tradition. In songs, family, love for his native places and the people inhabiting them, the interest in time, history, politics, and their tragic combination he was able to find a rich source of inspiration for his poems. "MacLean's debt to ancient Gaelic song and the physical woods of Rasaay and the prayers of the Free Presbyterian people and the inestimable sermons of the Reverend Ewan MacQueen and the love poetry of William Ross was great", Aongas Caimbeul argues, "but his dialectical conversation with the world was what turned these primary influences into art" (*Hallaig and Other Poems* xxi). This wholehearted embrace of a land, deeply shaped by history, language and culture, gave MacLean's poetry a nostalgic view of the past and an enduring sense of belonging and continuity that still sends powerful echoes into the way twenty first century Scotland is being redefined today.

WORKS CITED

Brown, Ian & Alan Riach editors. *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Scottish Literature.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Dymock, Emma. *Scotnotes Study Guides: The Poetry of Sorley MacLean*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow , 2011.

Jack, R. D. S. Critical Introduction in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature. 1375-1707.* Edited by R. D. S. Jack & P. A. T. Rozendaal. Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1997.

Hay, George Campbell. *Collected Poems and Songs of George Campbell Hay*. Edited by Michael Byrne. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

MacInnes, John. "A Radically Traditional Voice: Sorley MacLean and the Evangelical Background." *Cencrastus*, issue 7, Winter 1981-82, pp. 14-17.

MacLean, Sorley. *Hallaig and Other Poems / Hallaig Agus Dain Eile*. Selection and Introduction by Aonghas-Pàdraig Caimbeul & Aonghas MacNeacait. Edinburgh: Polygon & Carcanet Press Ltd., 2014.

--- . *An Cuilithionn 1939/ The Cuillin 1939 and Unpublished Poems*. Edited by Christopher Whyte, Glasgow: Bell & Bain Ltd., 2011.

--- . "My Relationship with the Muse." *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*. Edited by William Gillies. Stornoway: Acair, 1985, pp. 6-14.

--- . "Old Songs and New Poetry" in *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*. Edited by William Gillies. Stornoway: Acair, 1985, pp. 106-119.

Sassi, Carla. *Why Scottish Literature Matters.* Edinburgh: Bell & Bain Ltd., 2005.

Smith, Gregory. *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, [1919] 2010.