# Richard Hugo on Skye: Tragicomic Poetry of the Self

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Abstract
*The article examines a book of poems,* The Right Madness on Skye *(1980), by American poet Richard Hugo (1923–1982), a major representative of the confessional and landscape mode in postwar Anglophone literature. In this book, inspired by a sabbatical year spent on the Scottish island of Skye, Hugo explores themes of dispossession, home-seeking, and sympathy for the underprivileged, yet there is an element of humor in the Skye poems that his earlier work does not show. The blend of nostalgia, melancholy, and tragicomedy is what makes the topographical poetry of Hugo a memorable exercise in poetic appropriation of a remote region that shares, despite the considerable cultural and geographic differences, a great deal with his native country of the Pacific Northwest and his adopted home in the state of Montana.*

Keywords
Richard Hugo, American poetry, 20th century, travel, Scotland, Isle of Skye, confessional poetry, topography, place, landscape, tragicomedy

In 1980, American poet Richard Hugo (1923–82) published two volumes of poems, *White Center* and *The Right Madness on Skye*. The former is a sequence of poems which explore the author's American hometown and his troubled memories of growing up on the outskirts of Seattle. The latter is a study in the transatlantic identification of an American writer with a remote Scottish island and its vibrant people, proud survivors who have not yielded to a history of hardship and dispossession. Both books were drafted in the little Scottish village of Uig, in the northern part of the Isle of Skye. Hugo stayed there for a year (1977–78) with his family, on a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation. As Richard Wakefield documents, writing the White Center and Skye poems at the same time proved to be a two-way inspiration as Hugo "found much new when he revisited the familiar town of his youth" as well as finding "much familiar when he journeyed to the new territory of Skye."[1] The Isle of Skye is perhaps the best-known island of the Inner Hebrides archipelago, and it became the perfect setting for a new collection of Hugo's poems about the lonely, failed, dispossessed, and mad who face the tribulations of life with toughness and perseverance. In one interview Hugo explains why the lonely landscapes and abandoned settlements of the Pacific Northwest, Montana, and the Isle of Skye suit his sensibility more than an urban setting or community:

> I find being on the edge or border of the civilized world compatible with writing. I can't involve myself in the center of things and write my best. If I could I would. I like feeling just barely a part of civilization when I write; I mean that actually or geographically more than psychically perhaps. I like to feel I'm living where finding one more friend is difficult

1 Richard Wakefield, "Richard Hugo," *American Writers*: *A Collection of Literary Biographies; Supplement 6*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1482000111&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

> and therefore very important. Soon we will run out of people. Maybe a poem will locate one more friend or even one more self before the ocean opens forever to nothing.[2]

In *The Right Madness on Skye*, Hugo adopts the voice of a sympathetic visitor to the lonely and haunted landscapes, towns, and homes of the Scottish island. From that perspective, he negotiates the space between the inner landscape of the poet's mind and the outer landscape of the world – in other words, between the self and the community and the environment. This is a mediation which makes his work transcend the limits of topographical and confessional poetry.[3] The dilemma of the American poet on Skye, for Hugo, is phrased as the question of what "to leave out of the real picture? What to add? How to lie about the world in your way in order to get at truths about yourself?"[4] Hugo's poetry of an outsider to Skye thus moves beyond a factual description of place, character, and the mood and feelings of the poet in order to achieve a level of generalization that makes persuasive rhetoric. Paul Breslin defines this element of postwar American poetry as determined by the poet's skillful manipulation of tone, which enables the poet to employ "various degrees of detachment from the damaged self revealed in the poem, and thus, indirectly, from the cultural pressures by which the self was shaped."[5] In another interview Hugo explains that "because my childhood was spent with my grandparents, who were not very adequate people to identify with, a lot of my identification was not with people but with places."[6] For Hugo, the appropriation of places of human settlement as the locus of the interaction of wounded self and the world assumes the function of a secular religion, as conventional belief in the divine order of things is replaced by a wish to merge his identity "with some nurturing Other" of the observable landscape.[7]

The opening poem of *The Right Madness on Skye*, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," explores the traumatic legacy of the Scottish Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, a period which resulted in the eviction by the landlords of many local tenant farmers, or crofters, from their rented land. The policy is attributed primarily to the infamous Duke of Sutherland, one of the richest landowners, who chose to promote sheep-based agriculture at the expense of small-scale subsistence farming. A few locals who opposed the eviction policy from Kilmuir, a tiny village on the northern tip of

2 Thomas Gardner, "An Interview with Richard Hugo," in *Poetry Criticism*, ed. Michelle Lee, vol. 68 (Detroit: Gale, 2006), http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420068193&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

3 Notable earlier topographical poems in the English language include "Cooper's Hill" (1642) by Sir John Denham, and "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798) by William Wordsworth. Although the didactic impulse of Denham and the exploration of the sublime by Wordworth are two possible tones in topographical poetry, Hugo prefers to explore the potential of place using a private, confessional mode that in American poetry reached a full realization in the 1960s with the later volumes of Robert Lowell as well as works by Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath.

4 Richard Hugo, "Problems with Landscapes in Early Stafford Poems," in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*, ed. Tom Andrews (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 113.

5 Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 45.

6 Donna Gerstenberger, "On Hills Going East: An Interview with Richard Hugo," in *A Trout in the Milk: A Composite Portrait of Richard Hugo*, ed. Jack Myers (Lewiston: Confluence Press, 1982), 208.

7 Jonathan Holden, *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 159. Hugo's negative portrayal of the church and religion in his poetry seems to originate in his defiant response to the stern upbringing he received from his grandparents, who insisted on their grandson taking confirmation as the only boy in a group of several girls: "If I didn't take confirmation I was assured I'd be thrown out of the house to make my own way in the world." Richard Hugo, *The Real West Marginal Way: A Poet's Autobiography*, ed. Ripley S. Hugo, Lois M. Welch, and James Welch (New York: Norton, 1986), 20.

Skye, are celebrated in the poem as heroes who "cheated and wandered and were loved / throughout this island."[8] The rebels, the half-mad "zany few who won't obey," are juxtaposed with the cowardliness of the poet, who argues that the orders of the landlord, however crushing, must be honored anyway for "without obedience most of us would die."[9] Having voiced his ambivalence about the rebellion, Hugo sympathizes with the evicted: "Think of losing your home / on a Duke's whim and look at the home you lost. / Imagine this lovely island warped ugly by tears."[10] The trauma of the Clearances is a wound that many Skye residents re-experienced a century later as "some magistrate in Glasgow ruled / feudal rights prevail."[11] The modern upholding of the earlier policy becomes "a cruel joke. You pay and pay and own nothing."[12] Identification with the suffering of the evicted Skye crofters comes naturally for Hugo as the perpetual search for a stable, idealized home and dramatization of the danger of losing one's home and family represent some of the most frequently used concepts in his poetry.[13] Having identified with the locals whose tragic story of futile defiance has not been forgotten, Hugo further honors their courage: "Wouldn't we welcome them back this minute, / those clowning con men from Kilmuir? / They were crazy like dolphins."[14] Hugo here celebrates what Wakefield calls "salutary insanity," a tragicomic attitude to life in the face of overwhelming outside forces of ownership, law, and authority. The poem closes with a defiant gesture that invites the use of a crazy persona as a survival strategy on Skye: "Have the right madness. This land has always passed on and, like you, is still here."[15] The way to deal with the trauma of eviction, long after it has happened, is thus to mythologize and celebrate the defiance of the evicted locals in order to retain an emotional link to the land, even if that land is no longer physically available for living and farming.

In "The Clearances," Hugo develops the eviction theme with a condensed account of the heedless cruelty of the landowner's decision:

> Lord, it took no more than the wave of a glove,
> a nod of the head over tea. People were torn from their crofts
> and herded aboard, their land turned to sheep.
> They sailed. They wept.
> The sea said nothing and said I'll get even.[16]

The sea around Skye is the omnipresent natural force to be reckoned with, here as an indifferent witness to human suffering.

8 Richard Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," in *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: Norton, 1984), 379. The poems of *The Right Madness on Skye* are reprinted in the volume in their entirety.

9 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

10 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

11 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

12 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

13 This thematic focus seems influenced by Hugo's lonely childhood, abandoned by his own teenage mother, left to grow up in the stern household of his maternal grandparents. See, for example, Hugo's own account of the influence of his family background upon his personal development and later poetry in Hugo, *The Real West Marginal Way*, 3–18.

14 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

15 Hugo, "The Semi-lunatics of Kilmuir," 379.

16 Richard Hugo, "The Clearances," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 387–88.

*The Right Madness on Skye* also includes poems that explore journeys to isolated locations, another mode that Hugo explored widely throughout his career. To call him a travel poet, however, would not do justice to the complexity of his poems set in foreign and distant places. For Hugo, the real voyage happens inside his own mind, somewhere between the dichotomy of self-deprecation and acceptance of human shortcomings. Hugo the poet thus negotiates the dangerous ground between conscious sensibility toward place, which takes the shape of identification with the other, and subconscious denial of any possibility of the pursuit of happiness. William W. Davis argues that for a poet like Hugo a common motivation for traveling is the impulse to find out about ourselves through the places we visit, a passage which is always

> an interior or imaginative journey, a matter of mind caught in a new, or newly different, landscape, with new sights to see, new people to meet, new things to do—even if it is also always a kind of repetition or a revisiting of place, of some sense of self we knew we knew but had forgotten, or of something we had hoped to find or re-find in ourselves.[17]

In "A Snapshot of Uig in Montana," Hugo explores the impulse to project his inner feelings into an outer environment via topography as he transplants the village on the Isle of Skye to his adopted home state in the United States.[18] The juxtaposition of the two settings highlights the affinity between the lonely settlements of Montana and Skye and their peoples. In both regions, however different in terms of culture and geography, "we must survive the sad moments, must go on ploughing / after the invaders sail, all we love left broken or dead."[19] Michael S. Allen claims that the way Hugo obsessively continues to evoke an imagined past of the place in a poem betrays a mentality of "a peasant American suddenly immersed in an ancient culture after generations of life in flux."[20] Moreover, the private and the public spheres influence each other as in "this shot of Uig, we can see all cause is local, / all effect."[21] Allen emphasizes Hugo's poetic embrace of the small Scottish island village as a way to fight the danger of alienation: "society ultimately is held together not by a political or religious creed but by such minimal but essential emotional bonds."[22] In "A Map of Skye," Hugo extends his meditation on the shared history of dispossession that the Skye crofters and Native peoples in Montana have in common: "Not one isolated Indian war, relatively recent / and forgotten, but Celtic memory way back, primal things to hate kept smoldering [. . .]"[23] The imaginary map becomes an authorial device to keep the sad song of the locals alive, an artifice that serves the poem but need not weigh down the reader as the poet distances himself from the trouble that interpretation of the region and its history brings:

> We need that land of slow recovery, the grief passed
> wife to daughter, some continuum of song

17 William V. Davis, "'Good Luck in Cracked Italian': Richard Hugo in Italy," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 20, nos. 1–2 (2008): 58.

18 A similar, earlier poem in which Hugo juxtaposes a foreign landscape and culture with his American home country is "A Map of Montana in Italy" in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 165–66.

19 Richard Hugo, "A Snapshot of Uig in Montana," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 380.

20 Michael S. Allen, *We Are Called Human: The Poetry of Richard Hugo* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 136.

21 Hugo, "A Snapshot of Uig in Montana," 380.

22 Michael S. Allen, "'Disconnection in Itself Is Wrong': An Overview of Richard Hugo's Poetry," in Myers, *A Trout in the Milk*, 309.

23 Richard Hugo, "A Map of Skye," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 381.

and we need bays that contain,
that promise a wider world beyond
the final promontory, as if travel
still involves the unknown. Read the roads.[24]

Ultimately, the map Hugo draws is not one of the Isle of Skye and its physical geography; rather, it provides a clue to the poet's own range of feelings about the place. Jonathan Holden explains that Hugo's appropriation of Skye is a flexible rhetorical strategy which allows him to move about the island as a juggler of tone,

> with his mordant wit and riddling style making himself at home at each site, a tiny, wise, Druidical voice speaking out of the ruins, from under the rocks, criticizing man, often playful and irreverent, occasionally wry to the point of sadness, now and then jeering when confronted with the evidence of cruelty by those who fell in warfare so long ago.[25]

The poignant image of the island is perpetuated in "Duntulm Castle." Hugo situates the poem in a scenic ruin of a castle whose founders "had an eye for strategic location."[26] As an outsider to the tragic story of the castle, he relates its dilapidation to his low self-regard, wondering

what better place to wonder
what I would have been, cook or castle clown
or knave who stole out of need, a captive in the dungeon
scratching on stone one more year of the hundreds
I lost dying of slow darkness.[27]

The poem does not, however, end with the poet's internalization of the desolation of the ruin. Hugo moves beyond pathetic fallacy by way of a wisecrack that puts a sobering perspective on the pursuit of ruined landscapes as mirrors of the self: "If you hear anything bad about me, believe it. / Given a choice, I'd be a crofter, friend to anyone."[28] Despite the dominance of melancholy in most of the Skye poems, Hugo breaks the tone with such unexpected irreverence. In "Kilmuir Cemetery: Stone with Two Skulls and No Name," an otherwise bleak meditation on death, crime, and the suffering of the innocent, is likewise leavened with an amusing one-liner: "When you're a skeleton, it's hard to find a lover."[29] In "The Braes," Hugo writes an American car-driving poem set on Skye, with similar results of identification and projection:

I'd drive this road for the same
old reason, to find a poem, drive
slowly by crofters who don't return the wave
of strangers, then use feeling alone
to follow some personal line.[30]

24 Hugo, "A Map of Skye," 381.

25 Jonathan Holden, *Landscapes of the Self: The Development of Richard Hugo's Poetry* (Milwood: Associated Faculty Press, 1986), 177.

26 Richard Hugo, "Duntulm Castle," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 394.

27 Hugo, "Duntulm Castle," 394.

28 Hugo, "Duntulm Castle," 394.

29 Richard Hugo, "Kilmuir Cemetery: Stone with Two Skulls and No Name," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 393.

30 Richard Hugo, "The Braes," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 398.

As Allen explains, the central impulse in Hugo's best poetry is an outward gesture, "the making of connections—to ourselves and to important places."[31]

In "Letter to Garber from Skye," Hugo explores the convention of the epistolary prose poem.[32] Its loose form allows for great discursive freedom of subject and logical progression. The tone is likewise varied—from conversational to introspective, sad, comic, and absurd:

> Dear Fred: I hope this finds you, Marge and children O.K.
> We're living on Skye, in Uig, in a homey cottage
> high over the bay. Below us, two rivers, the Conon
> and Rha enter the sea. Both look trouty and aren't, a trick
> peat plays staining the water dark brown and mysterious
> where the rivers begin high on the moor.[33]

In perhaps the most personal poem of the whole book, Hugo compares his native American landscape with the foreign island: "The sky, water, vegetation and wind are Seattle. / The panoramic bare landscape's Montana."[34] This comparison creates a sense of happiness that verges on the pathetic: "Don't laugh but / today I told my wife if I die here here's where I want to be buried. She said, me too. I wish I could explain."[35] The epistolary hello to a literary friend becomes a trademark Hugo celebration of a blighted landscape, rich with an understanding of the loss, suffering, and deprivation that seems palpable everywhere about the island: "There are castles of the cruel in ruin / and megalithic forts. The fate of the Gael is to lose everything."[36] The meditation on the tragic history of the Gaelic community on Skye ends on a satirical note as the poet takes pride in

> a new saying I just made up: it is the fate of everyone to lose
> the Gael. Five months to go and already I'm rehearsing
> good bye, setting my weak mouth hard in the mirror, keeping
> tears in check by thinking bad jokes.[37]

Identification with the dispossessed again becomes central for the author.

Although Hugo admits that there is a conscious strategy in his writing about places, ruins, and graves, as "the speaker in many of my poems is alone and that the people he has relations with are usually dead,"[38] *The Right Madness on Skye* also contains portrait poems that explore the poet's connection to the living. In "Villager," Hugo portrays an island neighbor who "steals to make up for the nothing he finds / every day in the sea, and to find money for drink."[39] The neighbor becomes a reflector of the poet's nervous feelings about himself: "I have much to tell him. And nothing. I'd start / with

31 Allen, "Disconnection in Itself Is Wrong," 312.

32 The prose poem came to dominate American poetry by the late 1970s. In fact Hugo devoted a whole book to the personal letter poem format, *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* (New York: Norton, 1977).

33 Richard Hugo, "Letter to Garber from Skye," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 413.

34 Hugo, "Letter to Garber from Skye," 413–14.

35 Hugo, "Letter to Garber from Skye," 414.

36 Hugo, "Letter to Garber from Skye," 414.

37 Hugo, "Letter to Garber from Skye," 415.

38 Hugo, *The Real West Marginal Way*, 6.

39 Richard Hugo, "Villager," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 415.

the sea. I'd say, there was another sea something / like this long ago, and another me."[40] The impulse of Hugo to share his story with others and to psychoanalyze himself is undercut by the realization of the futility of such a projection: "By the time / I got to the point he'd be looking away and be right. No two hurts are the same, and most have compensations / too lovely to leave."[41] Hugo's meditation on the failure to communicate his trauma to a neighbor ends on a note of communal suffering in the face of the harsh island conditions: "Love / everyone you can. The list gets longer and shorter. / We're seldom better than the weather."[42]

M. L. Rosenthal explains that although humor was widely practiced in 20th century American poetry, the comic mode in serious poetry has not been duly recognized by critics, as the poets "move back and forth between being stand-up tragics and being stand-up comics."[43] Ronald Wallace emphasizes the importance of reading Hugo as a stoic poet of loss, pain, haunted landscapes, and deserted towns who "keeps his balance with a sense of humor."[44] Hugo's Skye volume closes with the title poem, "The Right Madness on Skye." This poem is central for an understanding of Hugo's poetics of the dispossessed landscape poet and wisecracking fool for whom, as Lex Runciman claims, the "rivers, roads, towns, houses, and bars are homes only grudgingly, often indifferently, and only after struggle on the part of those who would be home there."[45] In "The Right Madness on Skye" the poet assumes the dual, tragicomic perspective of a just-deceased man who gives detailed, capricious advice as to the particulars of his island funeral:

> Now I'm dead, load what's left on the wagon
> And have the oxen move on. Tell absentee landlord driver,
> Harry of Nothingham, slow. I want my last minutes on earth
> Filled with this island.[46]

The solemn tone of the opening gradually gives way to a comic undercutting of the atmosphere that is at times associated with funeral arrangements. The instruction manual goes on to include the inscription on the speaker's gravestone as if its wording did not matter:

> Carve any lines you want on my stone. If mine
> double check spelling. I'm dumb. And triple check
> high birds. Bring them down and make them state their names.
> If none says 'Rhododendron' you know they're fakes.[47]

Hugo emphasizes his impatience with funeral conventions as he asks for the music to be minimal: "Give the piper and drum five minutes / and explain to them,

40 Hugo, "Villager," 416.

41 Hugo, "Villager," 416.

42 Hugo, "Villager," 416.

43 M. L. Rosenthal, "Volatile Matter: Humor in Our Poetry," *Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 4 (1981): 808.

44 Ronald Wallace, *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 207.

45 Lex Runciman, "A Review of 'Sea Lanes Out,'" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jean C. Stine and Daniel G. Marowski, vol. 32 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420004163&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

46 Richard Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," in *Making Certain It Goes On*, 416.

47 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 416–17.

dead, I tire fast."[48] The poem is propelled by the refrain section at the end of each stanza, which urges a speedy execution of the funeral ceremony: "Have the oxen move on. Tell Harry of Nothingham, slow." The Harry character is a blend of the poor Skye crofter who drives the hearse and the absentee landlord whose greed has harmed the whole community and is still very much alive in the haunted minds of the islanders.

The third stanza brings a refreshing jest, again in connection with the gravestone inscription: "You might note on my stone in small letters: / Here lies one who believed all others his betters. / I didn't really, but what a fun thing to say."[49] Normally a free verse poet, Hugo uses rhymed couplets in a mock-pompous way to undermine the solemnity of the final wishes. In the next stanza, Hugo reiterates his unorthodox funeral instructions to an unheeding audience:

> I told you before, five minutes for piper and drum.
> I leave vivid instructions and no one, no one listens.
> Let's try it once more. I'm dead. I want to milk that wild
> for all it's worth to the crowd already turning away.[50]

The futility of Hugo's speeches is contrasted with the serious situation of the poet, who no longer has recourse to faith in the traditional sense: "Just because / I've no religion don't say heaven can't welcome me back / under the new majority quota now in effect."[51] Thus, an absurd allusion to affirmative action policies enriches the comedy of the passage.

Any semblance of serious treatment of the funeral is shattered for good when the poet likens himself to a "fat bag of bones coming through."[52] Burial conventions are rejected as "the wrong madness for Skye," a point at which the poet identifies with the insanity of the rebellious "dispossessed crofters who didn't want me to die."[53] The resistance to the traditional execution of the funeral climaxes as the speaker even considers calling the whole thing off: "Are they really preparing a speech? / He was this, he was that, lies about me over the open dirt? If so, have the oxen reverse."[54] The tone of defiance goes on as the poet leaps back to his hometown: "The hole that's waiting can wait. / I want a last look at Seattle and the way light / subtracts and adds miles to the journey."[55] Such conceptual traveling between two beloved locations in the face of the end seems logical, as for Hugo, all "places are near and far selves neighbors. / That wouldn't set well with scholars. Don't tell Harry. / Bury my wounded knee at Flodigarry."[56] The tragedy of the 1890 massacre of Native Americans by U.S. troops at Wounded Knee is juxtaposed with the poor condition of the poet's leg and a little settlement on Skye, the latest choice of resting place in the poem. The comic use of rhymed couplets again highlights Hugo's uneasiness about the use of rhyme and formal structure in contemporary poetry. On the one hand, Hugo wants his audience to observe the social norms and pay

48 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 417.
49 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 417.
50 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 417.
51 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 417.
52 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.
53 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.
54 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.
55 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.
56 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.

their respects to the deceased; on the other, he wishes to get the ceremony over and done with, preferably cheap and fast:

> Make sure the flowers are plastic. Five minutes, remember,
> piper and drum. Tell the nearly no mourners remaining
> I was easy to mix up with weather. The weather
> goes on.[57]

The poet then blames his self-deprecation on the activity of the absent lord--evictor: "Tell the laird who tricked me into being a crofter / I never worked hard in my life except on a poem." The final stanza of the poem marks a surprising twist when the mask of the dead man is shed and the poet reveals that he is not perhaps dead yet and the burial instructions were a elaborate joke:

> Tell Harry of Nothingham stop and have the oxen relax,
> I want off at the crossroads. That's far as I go.
> I was holding my breath all the time. Didn't I fool you?
> Come on, admit it—that blue tone I faked on my skin—
> These eyes I kept closed tight in this poem.[58]

Hugo has built up the farce of arranging his own funeral, only to blow the ceremony preparation to pieces by admitting the possible artifice of the whole instruction, acquiring "the right madness on Skye," practiced to the tune of simple music and crazy dance:

> Take five days
> for piper and drum and tell the oxen, start dancing.
> Mail Harry of Nothingham home to his nothing.
> Take my word. It's been fun.[59]

The speaker in *The Right Madness on Skye* poems is typically a clown whose "sardonic humor grows out of the black tangle of the thwarted lives and ruined landscape [. . .] often to the point of confessional despair."[60] The seemingly tragic stories of the Skye evictions, loneliness, suffering, and death become important as the shared, life--affirming experiences of anyone. The "right madness" according to Hugo is a poetic mask that transcends tragedy, failure, dispossession, and death; it is a mask that fosters a tragicomic blend of emotion, place, and history.

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57 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 418.

58 Hugo, "The Right Madness on Skye," 419.

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