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***“This Inherited Life”:* Alistair MacLeod and the Ends of History**

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I was interested [in “The Boat”] in the idea of choice, of the price we all have to pay for the choices that we make; in the idea that sometimes people choose to do things that they don’t want to do at all, somewhat like the father in that story. This is a man who is caught up in a kind of hereditary pattern, where people fish, and the only son inherits the father’s boat – that kind of life. But what I was getting at with the father was that here was a person who maybe didn’t want to do that at all, but who is just caught up in this inherited life.¹

Both in his interviews and short story writing, Alistair MacLeod explicitly invites his audience to focus hard upon the determinant status of history, memory and caste in the formulation of human experience. His short story collections, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (1986), constitute complex meditations on the nature of origin and belonging; and they clearly engage tightly with the kinds of issues that the historian Francis Fukuyama, for example, wished to highlight in 1989 when he declared that late twentieth-century culture must confront “the end of history” – the collapse of an hitherto key metanarrative with the onset of an age of urbocentrism, technological totalitarianism and commercial commodification. However, unwilling to have History overshadowed by the imperatives of the Shopping Mall, MacLeod chooses to concentrate upon this strategic cultural construct not only as an *unexhausted* narrative of meaning, but also in terms of its authority over human experience as a cultural directive. In this context, the *ends* of history may suggest both closure and objective.

Francis Berces has stressed that “in a single story, MacLeod’s characters frequently span several generations, thus establishing historicity as a human value”.² Indeed, it becomes increasingly apparent from these short stories that in his Maritime communities the legacies of received thinking, myths of belonging and possibilities of an organic social vision are being corroded

remorselessly; as a consequence, his characters are forced to negotiate the conflicting demands of historic obligations and self-realization. In succeeding narratives, his readers are compelled to revisit the painful dilemmas associated with identity construction in settlements marked by economic deprivation and cultural ex-centricity. The energetic Canadian promotion of itself in terms of cultural mosaic disintegrates when applied to MacLeod's Nova Scotian fishing and agrarian communities, communities frequently traumatized by their encounters with temporary exiles from the "global village".

The questioning of personal and collective narratives of experience can operate as a point of departure for self-creativity in MacLeod's writing, but can frequently lead to the collapse of the narrator's emotional and moral certainties. The past remains unfinished and his narrators are awkward participants (all too often self-condemned traitors) in its grubby resolutions:

[...] "Here", she said, sliding a glass towards him across the table and seating herself opposite him. "Here, have a shot of this. It will put lead in your pencil," and then after a pause, "although from what I've *heard* there's no need of that."

He was taken aback, somehow imagining her and his twin brother lying side by side at night discussing his physicality.

Heard *what?* he wondered. *Where?*

"Yeah," she said. "There's not much need of you being up here on this mountain by yourself and me being by myself farther down. If you don't use it, it'll rust off".³

Recurring instances of narratorial alienation, in this case occasioned by the sexual advances of the wife of a dead brother, regularly punctuate MacLeod's texts and point carefully to the thorny problems involved in deploying the family as a prime site for identity construction in these Maritime worlds. The urgent business of formulating myths of belonging for his narrators leads to a textual investigation into their cultural schizophrenia as they are forced to masquerade a whole sequence of identities in their homecomings and departures from the Maritime communities. His narrative voices indeed become a focus for slippage between two contradictory discourses of cultural engagement:

And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my *summa cum laude* loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze where you may sleep till ten of nine. And I will show you the elevator to the apartment on the sixteenth floor and introduce you to the buzzer system and the yards of the wrought-iron fences where the Doberman pinscher runs silently at night. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my collecting and my most successful life? Or shall I wait to meet you in some known or unknown bitterness like Yeats's

Cuchulain by the wind-worshipped sea or as Sohrab and Rustum by the future flowing river?

Again I collect dreams. For I do not know enough of the fog on Toronto's Queen St. West and the grinding crash of the pickup and of lost and misplaced love.⁴

Frank O'Connor persuasively argued in his generic study of the short story that the novel "[adheres] to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community [. . .]; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent [. . .]. [. . .] there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness".⁵ MacLeod's short stories may be found to articulate forcefully O'Connor's concerns here: they return obsessively to the formidable authority of the cultural archives and obligations rooted in Maritime communities and then detail the narrator's melancholic, guilt-ridden acknowledgement of their inadequacy to provide a wholly satisfying purpose and meaning to his unfulfilled sense of potential. In the typical MacLeod narrative, we are introduced to narrators at a watershed moment in their lives when they can no longer acquiesce in the demands which their societies place upon them and so consign the organic unity of home to a realm of past experience which can no longer be sustained or retrieved. On occasions, we may indeed be invited to believe that such an organic unity is part of a grand operation of fictionalization: a strategic deployment of memory which does not simply involve remembering and embellishing, but also, and perhaps most importantly, a process of selective forgetting.

A whole range of anxiety-ridden narratorial negotiations with the ordinary community are constantly being rehearsed in MacLeod's stories and they constitute one of the dominant tropes of his writing. The melancholia resulting from these confrontations clearly suggests archetypal motifs, widely available as cultural referents, of the wanderer's or voyager's departure from/return to the primal scene of affective ties. However, it has also encouraged critics to identify traces of a potentially Romantic nostalgia for a purer, more integrated pattern of existence (here of Old World clan social structures with their bodies of mythic knowledge) in opposition to the fractured identities necessitated by participation in a disorienting urbanized environment. Colin Nicholson has proposed that "alongside the informing lyricism, there is also in MacLeod's writing an abiding note of loss and of regret, with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of choric threnody".⁶ Most frequently, MacLeod's narrators impose upon themselves an anguished experience of cultural bereavement prompted by the realization that ties of kinship and ethnic allegiance must be neglected in order to fully recover an authentic sense of selfhood. Nonetheless, the thematic

thrust in these short stories gravitates irresistibly towards questions of legitimacy and origination as axes of meaning; and the ensuing textual debates are played out against the backdrop of the dilemmas of the Gaelic diaspora: for example the social ruptures occasioned by the decay of traditional working practices and the resulting migration of labour; the disintegration of ethnic certainties and concepts of sanctity; and the necessary interrogation of the family as a basic social (and personal) building block.⁷ MacLeod himself, born in Saskatchewan and raised in coal-mining communities of Alberta, returned at the age of ten to the agricultural settlements of his forefathers in Nova Scotia: “My ancestors left Scotland for Canada in 1791. They left from the Isle of Eigg and went to Nova Scotia on a ship under the command of somebody called Colonel Fraser. They’ve been in Nova Scotia ever since.”⁸ His short stories insistently underline that whatever the differences which separate the inhabitants of his fictionalized Maritime communities, they share the traumas of the rootless:

The houses and their people, like those of the neighbouring towns and villages, were the result of Ireland’s discontent and Scotland’s Highland Clearances and America’s War of Independence. Impulsive emotional Catholic Celts who could not bear to live with England and shrewd determined Protestant Puritans who, in the years after 1776, could not bear to live without.⁹

As his short stories unfold, the acknowledgement of migrant identities can constitute the raw material for narratorial self-invention, but more generally it emerges as a valuable marker of social difference in a world gravitating towards frightening uniformity. Even when the linguistic ties of Gaelic may be lapsing amongst his characters, MacLeod is keen to indicate the ways in which they may maintain a dialogue with their cultural inheritance:

Hundreds of miles hence when we stop by the roadsides in Quebec and Ontario we will find small sprigs of this same spruce still wedged within the grillework of our cars or stuck beneath the headlight bulbs. We will remove them and take them with us to Africa as mementos or talismans or symbols of identity. Much as our Highland ancestors, for centuries, fashioned crude badges of heather or of whortleberries to accompany them on the battlefields of the world.¹⁰

The textual representation of Celtic origin (and perhaps celticity) as an organizing principle for identity construction and cultural control permeates the whole of MacLeod’s *oeuvre*. Scholarship on MacLeod’s short stories has been keen to draw attention to the strategic deployment of the Gaelic language and mythology in his thematic probings into possibilities of human belonging: Arnold E. Davidson, for example, has illuminatingly explored the Gaelic symbolism in MacLeod’s writing of *Da Shealladh*, second sight;

buidseachd, an evil spell; the *cù mòr glas à bhàis*, the great grey dog of death; and the title of *Mac am Amharuis*, son of uncertainty. He comes to the persuasive conclusion that “in a number of the stories we even see a clear connection between physical displacement, impending linguistic dispossession, and the origins of the story itself”.¹¹ MacLeod’s finely-wrought stories can draw the reader convincingly into a Romantic landscape apparently pulsating with invisible or supernatural forces like the great grey dog of death in “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun”, or the eerie landscape of “In the Fall”: “Each day dawns duller and more glowering and the waves of the grey Atlantic are sullen and almost yellow at their peaks as they pound relentlessly against the round smooth boulders that lie scattered as if by a careless giant at the base of the ever-resisting cliffs”.¹² However, MacLeod is equally interested in the ways in which late twentieth-century societies process these Celtic habits of thinking whilst negotiating the profoundly volatile patterns of their everyday lives: “‘The MacCrimmons were said to be given two gifts,’ she says, ‘the gift of music and the gift of foreseeing their own deaths. Those gifts are supposed to follow in all their bloodlines. They are not gifts of the ordinary world.’” In this instance, the wry narrator concludes, “vaguely I think that they do not look much like people who are supposed to have the ‘gift’ of foreseeing their own deaths”.¹³

MacLeod’s readers are repeatedly invited to scrutinize the reasons why his heroes are held in captivity by narratives of the past. Nicholson stresses that “[...] one of the things [MacLeod] is doing is memorializing an immigrant culture from the Highlands and Islands at a time when its historical purchase in Nova Scotia begins to slip: both memorializing and, since he is writing in English, enacting that moment of slippage”.¹⁴ The irrepressible determination on the part of many of MacLeod’s narrators to articulate their creativity in terms of exits from communities leads to an anguished process of self-analysis and recrimination. Nevertheless, on certain occasions, MacLeod’s readers may also be encouraged to believe that his narrators acknowledge fully the desire for change, but are paralysed mentally by their ingrained commitment to the burden of historical obligations – and even to exult in them for all their constraints. In this way, his narratives can appear at points to chronicle the evolution of a death instinct:

[...] Sometimes when seeing the end of our present our past looms ever larger because it is all we have or think we know. I feel myself falling back into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future. My twenty-six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little.

[...] And now, strangely enough, I do not know if that is what I hate and so must leave, or if it is the fact that now there is not even that mine,

awful as it was, to go to, and perhaps it is better to have a place to go to that you hate than to have no place at all.¹⁵

Frank O'Connor has proposed that such narrative foci upon cultural marginalization and heroic/destructive individualism are the proper territory of the short story:

[. . .] the novel and the short story, though they derive from the same sources, derive in a quite different way, and are distinct literary forms; and the difference is not so much formal [. . .] as ideological. I am not, of course, suggesting that for the future the short story can be written only by Eskimos and American Indians: without going so far afield, we have plenty of submerged population groups. I am suggesting strongly that we can see in it an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time – tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests.¹⁶

This mechanism of cultural affirmation and critique is crucial as a structuring device in MacLeod's work. The pre-migratory pattern of existence for his communities is apprehended through textual and/or oralized relationships with myth, song and family lore; and they express a yearning for an organic unity which is constantly being unpicked and reinterpreted by the younger generation:

The darkness of the midnight phone call seems somehow to fade with the passing of time, or to change and be recreated like the ballads and folktales of the distant lonely past. Changing with each new telling as the tellers of the tales change, as they become different, older, more bitter or more serene. It is possible to hear descriptions of phone calls that you yourself have made ten or fifteen years ago and to recognize very little about them except the undeniable kernel of truth that was at the centre of the messages they contained.¹⁷

A fellow Canadian writer, Hugh Hood, has proposed that "story is very close to liturgy, which is why one's children like to have the story repeated exactly as they heard it the night before. The scribe ought not to deviate from the prescribed form. That is because the myths at the core of the story are always going on [. . .]. [. . .] Myth exists to give us this reassurance of the persistence of some of the fundamental forms of human action."¹⁸ However radical the interrogation of the relevance of pre-migrant cultural forms to the reality of Canadian life at the end of the twentieth century may be, MacLeod's narratives clearly return to the customs and mythologies of a Gaelic past in order to posit an experiential alternative to that of the urban refugee. Gaelic referents furnish MacLeod's narrators with the possibilities of self-evaluation and spiritual meditation. In direct comparison with Hood's line of vision on the significance of story, the short story theorist Charles E. May has argued "tentatively" that "in their very shortness, short

stories have remained close to the original source of narrative in myth, folktale, fable, and fairy tale".¹⁹ Interestingly MacLeod in his writing can both rehearse highly ritualized narratives of archetypal homecomings and departures, and also ironize the Romanticized search for myths of belonging:

Many of the letters in the later years came from the folklorists who had "discovered" him in the 1960s and for whom he had made various tapes and recordings. And he had come to be regarded as "the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers". He was faithfully recorded in the archives at Sydney and Halifax and Ottawa and his picture appeared in various scholarly and less scholarly journals; sometimes with the arms of the folklorists around him, sometimes holding one of his horses and sometimes standing beside his shining pickup truck which bore a bumper sticker which read "Suas Leis A' Ghaidlig". Sometimes the articles bore titles such as "Cape Breton Singer: The Last of His Kind" or "Holding Fast on Top of the Mountain" or "Mnemonic Devices in the Gaelic Line" – the latter generally being accompanied by a plethora of footnotes.²⁰

In the typical MacLeod narrative, the older Nova Scotians in the community are compelled to respond to the ominous return of the narrator and his threatening experience of cultural difference. In the majority of cases, they do this by affirming cultural fixity, securing their tenuous economic place on Cape Breton with the authority of practices and habits of thinking articulated by generations of Maritimers. Nonetheless, the homecoming ritual which is so frequently enacted in MacLeod's work is not only about the return to the primal scene of knowledge, it focuses equally upon the relentless human endeavour to rewrite the past, to confer new meanings upon it, and to render the home environment more tractable to personal development. The various human desires that MacLeod chronicles to reconfigure the cultural expectations in Cape Breton are intimately linked to the narrators' desperation to consolidate a present or future identity – even if it involves investing the Maritime scene with ambitions and appetites which have no reality outside the narrator's ego. MacLeod clearly exploits the extended family unit of his Cape Breton as a prime textual space in which contradictory discourses of subjectivity can be pounded out. His narrators are most frequently found to be products of cultural cross-pollination occasioned by changes in patterns of labour, marriage or education. As the various intrigues unfold, these narrators are shown to attempt (for the most part unsuccessfully) to tinker with inherited narratives of personal and communal history, so that the discrepancies between a *seemingly* innocent, Edenic clan culture and the potential offered by urban patterns of existence can be realigned in a more sympathetic manner, sympathetic that is to the narrators.

[. . .] It is a strange and lonely thing to lie awake at night and listen to your parents making love in the next room and to be able even to count the strokes. And to know that they really do not know how much you know, but to know that they do know that you know; and not to know when the knowledge of your knowing came to them any more than they know when it came to you. And during these last four or five years lying here while the waves of embarrassed horniness roll over me, I have developed, apart from the problems of my own tumescent flesh, a sort of sympathy for the problem that must be theirs and for the awful violation of privacy that all of us represent.²¹

The textual representation of alienation in which MacLeod's narrators engage at such moments links closely with the Bakhtinian construct of the grotesque, whereby the intimated display of the body and its needs is associated with the transgression of prevailing social conventions. In this context the human body becomes a focus in the erosion and displacement of cultural boundaries and expectations.²² The bodily motions of the familial members in MacLeod's congested homestead are no longer contained and articulated within established modes; instead we are drawn into a world of excess, in this case in which the child is negotiating his anxiety-ridden entry into the realm of adulthood. The coupling of the parents constitutes an initiatory spectacle involving forbidden knowledge and places the narrator in yet another culturally liminal position – a threshold area (*limen*) leading to a definitive dislocation from the family in this particular short story. The creative energy stimulated by such knowledge acts as a trigger mechanism for the narrator's departure. Appositely in this context, Bakhtin reminded his own readers that "the better a person understands the degree to which he is externally determined, the closer he comes to understanding and exercising his real freedom".²³ MacLeod's chastened heroes return to and redigest the scenes of their entry into adulthood for a variety of reasons: perhaps to exorcize persisting feelings of guilt; to express a yearning for reappropriation by the originary culture; or to complete the creation of the urbanized identity, for example.

For I must not become as my father whom I now hear banging the stove-lids below me as if there were desperate rush about it all and some place that he must be in a very short time. Only to go nowhere. And I must not be as my grandfather who is now an almost senile old man, nearing ninety, who sits by the window all day saying his prayers and who in his moments of clarity remembers most his conquests over coal, and recounts tales of how straight were the timbers he and my father erected in the now caved-in underground drifts of twenty-five years ago when he was sixty-two and my father twenty-five and I not yet conceived.²⁴

Michelle Gadpaille justly argues that "MacLeod uses the seemingly commonplace dialectics of loss and recovery, giving and receiving, vision

and blindness, to structure his first-person narratives, but he vividly reanimates old concepts of blood and family and belonging.”²⁵ Indeed, the detailed depiction of the determinants which govern the subject’s experience of life in society is a realist undertaking which is foregrounded throughout MacLeod’s collections of short stories. Persistently, he chooses to focus upon members belonging to the lower economic social strata and often at a clearly defined chronological point. Moreover, MacLeod’s careful particularization of a given social reality through narrative is important in that it serves to convince his reader of the verisimilitude of his textual visions, even if the accumulation of detail in itself is not integral to the furthering of the intrigue:

On the twenty-eighth day of June, 1960, which is the planned day of my deliverance, I awake at exactly six A.M. to find myself on my eighteenth birthday, listening to the ringing or the bells from the Catholic church which I now attend only reluctantly on Sundays. “Well,” I say to the bells and to myself, “at least tomorrow I will be free of you”. And yet I do not move but lie quietly for a while looking up and through the window at the green-poplar leaves rustling softly and easily in the Nova Scotian dawn.²⁶

MacLeod repeatedly employs mimetic devices of realism which, for example, may reproduce the cadences of Maritime speech, chronicle minute changes in social relations and psychological motivation, textualize external details of the Maritime historical development and economic decline into order to anchor his short stories firmly within a plausible reality.²⁷ It has become a critical commonplace in MacLeod scholarship to draw attention to the sustained deployment of a present-tense first-person narration in the majority of his short stories as one of his principal techniques for securing profound engagement on the part of the reader.²⁸ MacLeod himself acknowledges the prime significance of this narrative line of vision in his work: “In that mode you can be tremendously intense. I just like that. I think that individuals are very interested in telling their own stories, and to adapt this persona is very effective in just riveting the listener.”²⁹ One of the reasons for “riveting” the reader in this way is to sharpen our awareness of the individual, human implications of social and economic collapse. Social critique forms an integral part of these narratives; and specificities concerning diasporic experience or economic recession are intimately linked with the narrators’ disaffection and understanding of the trajectories which their lives have taken. The transformation of the mining industry, for example, in his native land has clearly affected MacLeod deeply (“My father and his five brothers all worked in the mines at one time or another, and every one of them was mutilated – lost one eye, lost a hand, had their bones calcified.”³⁰); and profoundly marks the worlds of many of his short stories: “The little mine paid very low wages and was poorly equipped and venti-

lated and since it was itself illegal there were no safety regulations.”³¹ Repeatedly, his narrators choose to detail the destructive ways in which large industrial concerns and the pressures of urban markets are corroding the infrastructures of his Maritime communities:

[. . .] The boats presently riding on the Gulf are after a variety of “ground fish”, with some few after salmon. They are getting six cents a pound for hake and twelve for cod and no one has seen a haddock for a long, long time. In the cities of Ontario fresh cod sells for \$1.65 a pound and the “dried cod” upon which most of us were raised and so heartily despised has become almost a delicacy which sells for \$2.15 a pound.³²

Accounts of the embittered struggles and defeats surrounding both the mining and fishing industries in the Maritime provinces are carefully used to feed the larger textual debates focusing on questions of cultural legitimacy and ownership: “The heat has been bad for fish and wells and the growth of green but for those who choose to lie on the beaches of the summer sun the weather has been ideal. This is a record year for tourists in Nova Scotia, we are constantly being told.”³³ Again and again in MacLeod’s short stories, the economic precariousness of Maritime communities is counterpointed with the cultural fragility of a Gaelic diaspora grafted onto a land now succumbing to vigorous urbocentrism:

[. . .] Twice the big boats have come from forty and fifty miles, lured by the promise of the grounds, and strewn the bottom with their traps and twice they have returned to find their buoys cut adrift and their gear lost and destroyed. Twice the Fisheries Officer and the Mounted Police have come and twice they have asked many long and involved questions and twice they have received no answers from the men leaning in the doors of their shanties and the women standing at their windows with their children in their arms. Twice they have gone away saying, “There are no legal boundaries in the Marine area”; “No one can own the sea”; “Those grounds don’t wait for anyone”.

But the men and the women, with my mother dark among them, do not care for what they say, for to them the grounds are sacred and they think they wait for me.³⁴

The profound implications of capitalist greed, urban condescension and cultural alienation upon MacLeod’s Maritimers are accentuated by the grim resentment expressed within the communities themselves as they respond to the revisions in gender and class expectations occasioned by encounters with city dwellers: “[. . .] I could never see myself being owned by my woman’s family”; “Well, time for the working class to go to bed. Good-night all”.³⁵ A topos of MacLeod’s short stories is the detailed investigation of the human cost for the extended Maritime family of the sprawl of urban values and prejudices: “‘Ten years,’ she snaps at my father, ‘ten

years I've raised this child in the city of Montreal and he has never seen an adult drink liquor out of a bottle, nor heard that kind of language. We have not been here five minutes and that is the first thing he sees and hears."³⁶ Similarly, MacLeod is frequently found to organize his narratives around encounters with grotesques who initially aggravate and then scramble the cultural expectations which the novice narrative voice had attempted to retain for his voyage of experience into an extra-Maritime "New World":

"Lots of people around here marry niggers", says the voice. "Guess they're so black underground they can't tell the difference in the light. All the same in the dark as the fellow says. Had an explosion here a few years ago and some guys trapped down there, I dunno how long. Eaten the lunches of the dead guys and the bark off the timbers and drinking one another's piss. Some guy in Georgia offered the ones they got out a trip down there but there was a nigger in the bunch so he said he couldn't take him. Then the rest wouldn't go. Damned if I'd lose a trip to Georgia because of a single nigger that worked for the same company. Like I say, I'm old enough to be your father or even your grandfather and I haven't even been to Vancouver."³⁷

Such characters may belong to an external world of experience, like this anonymous driver in "The Vastness of the Dark". On other occasions, MacLeod can draw attention to the moral coarseness and stunted emotional life at work within the Maritime communities themselves, embodied in the actions of Carver and Sal in "The Tuning of Perfection", for example, or the McAllesters in "Vision". The deep discomfort involved in encounters with these characters in many ways operates as a catalyst for the narrator to review the nature of cultural obligations being placed upon him. In a typical narrative of familial alienation in "The Vastness of the Dark", the narrator, teetering on the edge of departure from the community, chooses to dissect the daily routines of bodily movements which structure home life. His chronicle exposes the disintegration of language as a meaningful human resource and the reduction of the economically depressed to automata:

[...] After he has gone downstairs to start the fire there will be a pause and perhaps a few exploratory coughs exchanged between my mother and me in an unworded attempt to decide who is going to make the next move. If I cough it will indicate that I am awake and usually that means I will get up next and follow the route of my father downstairs. If, on the other hand, I make no sound, in a few minutes my mother also will come walking through my room.³⁸

The textual rhythm of silence and inadequate gesture which regularly punctuate a MacLeod text may clearly be interpreted in several ways. Janice

Kulyk Keefer affirms, for example, that “MacLeod’s Cape Bretoners possess a tragic knowledge of self and world that is all the more profound for the fact that they cannot speak it.”³⁹ The very act of volubility is regarded with intense suspicion by the Maritime communities that MacLeod describes. The figure of the raconteur (like MacRae, the destroyer of horses in “In the Fall”) becomes a symbol of a vulgarity, and also that of a more brutal and yet nevertheless more potent mode of human self-assertion than is conventionally expressed in this society:

“How’d you like to have a pecker on you like that fella,” shouts MacRae into the wind. “Bet he’s had his share and driven it into them little heifers a good many times. Boy you get hung like that, you’ll have all them horny little girls squealen’ for you to take ’em behind the bushes. No time like it with them little girls, just when the juice starts runnin’ in ’em and they’re finding out what it’s for”. He runs his tongue over his lips appreciatively and thwacks his whip against the sodden wetness of his boot.⁴⁰

Focusing upon the question of narrative structure, Gadpaille positions MacLeod within a larger grouping of Canadian short story writers who “after 1961 [...] adopted modernist narrative strategies, writing realistic stories with a limited point of view that leads the narrative through a series of pointed moments – in which psychological truths outweigh the events of plot – to the achievement of revelation.”⁴¹ Clearly, there is a modernist emphasis in MacLeod’s work to the extent that he concentrates on the dilemmas of the single subject attempting to engage with and to assimilate the challenges posed by the collapse of cultural and epistemological certainties. Moreover, the narrative motifs which are constantly rehearsed in his short stories have indeed encouraged critics to label his work with both “realist” and “modernist” tags... and most recently “post-modern” stickers have begun to appear. Umberto Eco has invited us to believe that “the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently”.⁴² And this train of thought has been taken up vigorously by the Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon: “This is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of architectural forms.”⁴³ There is clearly an irrepressible determination on the part of MacLeod’s narrators to revisit the past and to maintain a dialogue with it; and it becomes increasingly apparent that at strategic points in his short stories this textual motif can indeed be parodied and ironized in a variety of ways. MacLeod’s irony is most frequently reserved for those cameo roles of the urban folklorists wandering in a foreign land – the would-be cultural trappers:

The tourists were equipped with tape recorders and my father sang for more

than three hours. His voice boomed down the hill and bounced off the surface of the harbour, which was an unearthly blue on that hot August day, and was then reflected to the wharf and the fishing shanties where it was absorbed amidst the men who were baiting their lines for the next day's haul. [...] In the winter they sent him a picture which had been taken on the day of the singing. On the back it said, "To Our Ernest Hemingway" and the "Our" was underlined. There was also an accompanying letter telling how much they had enjoyed themselves, how popular the tape was proving and explaining who Ernest Hemingway was.⁴⁴

However, MacLeod is generally reluctant to place the Maritimer under such a comic lens; indeed, when this subject is under textual inspection the most frequent gravitational pull is towards that of sentiment.⁴⁵ The post-modern label is perhaps the least adhesive of those deployed so far in MacLeod scholarship. With reference to the questions of loss and nostalgia in our encounters with the past, Jean-François Lyotard underlined in his essay *The Postmodern Condition* that "turn-of-the-century Vienna was weaned on this pessimism [...]. There is no need to start all over again. [...] Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity."⁴⁶ Whilst much post-modern writing exults in the experience of cultural plurality and hybridization, the dominant narratorial responses in the encounter (or re-encounter) with Cape Breton society are those of nostalgia, guilt and betrayal. MacLeod's readers may like to identify (potentially post-modernist) realms of transculturation, contact zones in which very disparate cultural influences collide and negotiate with each other in highly unstable, if not reversible, hierarchical relationships. However, instead of emphasizing the possible empowering and dynamic nature of these contact zones, MacLeod invariably favours a more modernist emphasis upon melancholia and longing for a lost cultural unity of experience in the denouements to his texts.

The cycles of narrative grieving which unfold in a large number of his short stories act frequently as stimuli to an important phase in narratorial self-knowledge, reminiscent of the staging of the epiphany in the modernist short story. Keefer argues persuasively, for example, that "the characters driven from the coal towns and fishing villages MacLeod so powerfully evokes are never identified as writers-in-embryo, but they all possess the education and sensibility to be accomplished tellers of their own stories".⁴⁷ In this way, the revisiting of scenes of formative experience engenders the possibility of accessing new bodies of knowledge and securing new and richer identities:

By noon after a succession of short tides in a series of oddly assorted vehicles I am finally across the Strait of Canso, off Cape Breton Island and at last upon my way. It is only when I have left the Island that I can feel free to

assume my new identity which I don't like carefully preserved new clothes taken from within their pristine wrappings. It assumes that I am from Vancouver which is as far away as I can imagine.

I have been somehow apprehensive about even getting off Cape Breton island, as if at the last moment it might extend its gigantic tentacles, or huge monstrous hands like my grandfather's to seize and hold me back.⁴⁸

The intertextual referents in many of MacLeod's short stories constitute one of the most significant ways in which history is reconsidered in his narratives. In establishing such narrative liaisons with legacies from a collective, indeed pan-cultural past, MacLeod can be seen variously to scrutinize, appropriate and interrogate the very concept of creativity, cultural innovation, and the construct of the nation through literature: he himself declares that "[...] there is the feeling that regional writing is not good enough, but [...] most of the world's great literature begins in the regional; [...]. So if you look at Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens – though that's the big city – it's still a regional world. Jane Austen is regional. [...] It's an issue that arises naturally with the idea, for example, of a Maritime literature; there's a current notion that this kind of writing gives people a confidence in themselves, that they can see themselves out there in the literature".⁴⁹ MacLeod's reader may often discern an ironic dialogue with the past in his careful configuration of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, for example, within his own narratives. In "The Vastness of the Dark", *Great Expectations* is found to be lying strategically on the family table. Elsewhere, in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood", the alienated narrator confides to the reader that "[...] the room is full of sound. Like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window although I hear no voice. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in." In the forbidden zone of the pool hall in "The Golden Gift of Grey", the narrator feels "[...] a strange sensation and kinship with those boys in the F. Scott Fitzgerald stories who practice and practice but never play until a certain moment comes along in their lives and changes them forever."⁵⁰ Nicholson convincingly argues that "[MacLeod's] literary accomplishment in giving line and form to the people of Nova Scotia is disconcerted by the fact that his mastery of English literary discourse itself marks a process of change and slippage from historic origins. So it is hardly surprising that the echoing resonances which characterise his writing prevent any easy assimilation into the present which his stories adumbrate."⁵¹ Like his narrators, MacLeod proposes that one of the principal ways in which we make sense of ourselves is through the creative interpretation of our textual relations with the past. The anxiety-ridden encounter of the Maritimer child in an economically depressed area with the print culture of "great literature" is constantly re-enacted in MacLeod's stories and generally serves to aggravate further the already embittered

family unit: "I never thought a son of mine would choose useless books over the parents that gave him life":

By March we were very far behind and although I began to work very hard in the evenings I knew it was not hard enough and that there were but eight weeks left before the opening of the season on May first. And I knew that my mother worried and my uncle was uneasy and that all of our lives depended on the boat being ready with her gear and two men, by the date of May the first. And I knew then that *David Copperfield* and *The Tempest* and all of those friends I had dearly come to love must really go forever. So I bade them all good-bye.⁵²

The most common locus of intertextuality in MacLeod's stories is the narratorial engagement with the textual world of Thomas Hardy – a figure who has loomed large in MacLeod's interests as an academic.⁵³ In "The Boat", for example, the narrator's mother reminds him explicitly "of the women of Thomas Hardy, particularly Eustacia Vye, in a physical way".⁵⁴ Joyce Carol Oates has affirmed that if she were "to name a single underlying motive for MacLeod's fiction, I would say that it is the urge to memorialize, the urge to sanctify".⁵⁵ One of the ways in which MacLeod may be seen to "sanctify" the past and its textual remains is by mythologizing the present: he does this by tapping and celebrating the authority of cultural legacies with the vocabulary of literary referents, folkloric archetypes and the textual voices of legend: "Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea. And the man had a dog of which he was very fond"; "My grandmother is very tall with hair almost as white as the afternoon's gulls and eyes like the sea over which they flew"; "He thought then of the awful violence that was within his father; a something that rumbled deep below like some subterranean mountain stream of roaring white water, splashing and pounding dark rocks within deep unseen caves."⁵⁶ This narratorial instinct to monumentalize the parental figure which is widespread in MacLeod's work emerges ultimately as a *salt gift*, for it serves to magnify radically the personal experience of perceived treachery when the narrators attempt to sever ties of kinship.

However, returning to the particular stylistic influence of Hardy upon MacLeod: in direct comparison with those of the Victorian novelist, MacLeod's narratives are organized in such a way that their dominant reflex when confronted with the onset of the sprawl of urban value systems and the violation of the nurturing Maritime environment is to exploit the device of pathos. A notable example of this occurs in the early story "In the Fall": "They are talking about old horse Scott who has been with us all of my life. My father had been his driver for two winters in the underground and they had become fond of one another and in the time of the second spring, when he left the mine forever, the man had purchased the horse

from the Company so that they might both come out together to see the sun and walk upon the grass.”⁵⁷ Indeed, on some occasions, the familiar nineteenth-century textual resources of sentiment, melodrama and the pathetic fallacy can come a little too readily to MacLeod’s pen and, as a result, potential narrative tensions are squandered in the descent into Hardy-esque excesses:

[. . .] At that time and in those sounds she realized that life for her and for her children would never be the same. She was twenty-six and expecting her seventh child.

Later she and her older children hitched the best of their brown-dappled horses to the wood sleigh and went forth to meet their husband and father for the last time. The children cried and the tears froze to their reddened cheeks. The horse began to snort and tremble long before he reached the rigid, log-like figure and then to rear and plunge. Finally he lunged to the side, breaking the shafts of the precious sleigh and adding another stick of destruction to the steadily mounting pile. They had had to abandon the sleigh then and return with the horse and then come back again with the children’s coasting sleigh and lengths of rope with which to bind the grizzly burden it was to bear.⁵⁸

In the heated debate over critical labelling, MacLeod *could* be seen to transport his readers into (potentially post-modernist) realms of intertextual figurings, ruptured chronologies and assaults upon the metanarratives of Truth, Progress and Logic: there are indeed metatextual moments in MacLeod’s work in which he encourages us to reflect upon the constructiveness of narrative itself. Nonetheless, convinced of this writer’s realist credentials, Elroy E.E. Deimart is most persuasive in his assertion that MacLeod “is really using the technique not to undercut the verisimilitude or to draw attention to the artifice, but contrarily to strengthen the mimesis, the believability, and the reliability of the narrator as an unprofessional confessional story-teller”.⁵⁹

One final context in which we may like to consider MacLeod with reference to an end of history is that of existentialism. There has been a degree of critical readiness to inscribe MacLeod’s short stories within a grand philosophical narrative: Berces, for example, affirms that “the nature of MacLeod’s thought can be readily identified as existential by the author’s repeated concern with several aspects of the human condition, in particular with choice, freedom, becoming, alienation, exile, other people, and death. [. . .] The very harshness and simplicity of [MacLeod’s characters’] living conditions, the physical demands imposed upon them by their work, a sense of standing still or losing ground in a changing world, all provide – to use the mythic symbolism of Albert Camus – a Sisyphean context in which the human spirit is seen striving to affirm its most basic values rather than submitting to the weight of necessity.”⁶⁰ MacLeod’s com-

mitment to the dignity and integrity of the creative human subject attempting to forge his or her own destiny by disengaging from ties of received thinking and dependent identities is clearly relevant here. His readers are not primarily invited to look for the hand of God in the daily cycle of Maritime experience; and his narrators are confronted with a sequence of thorny dilemmas prompted by shame, suffering and a growing knowledge of mortality which complicate and enrich their understanding of the human condition.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Albert Camus contends finally that “il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux”. MacLeod offers no such comfort.⁶¹ Very few, if any, of his narrators light upon an authentic sense of self unhampered by past illusions and obligations; in fact, they may seem to write themselves relentlessly into an undying narrative of History which chronicles the embittered struggles of the Gaelic diaspora in the Maritimes:

The reality of where I am and of what I think he is going to do seems now to press down upon me as if it were the pressure of the caving-in roof which was so recently within my thoughts. Although it is still hot I roll up the windows of the car. The people on the street regard me casually in this car of too bright red which bears Ontario licence plates. And I recognize now upon their faces a look that I have seen upon my grandfather's face and on the faces of hundreds of the people from my past and even on my own when seeing it reflected from the mirrors and windows of such a car as this. For it is as if I am not part of their lives at all but am only here in a sort of movable red and glass showcase, that has come for a while to their private anguish-ridden streets and will soon roll on and leave them the same as before my coming; part of a movement that passes through their lives but does not really touch them.⁶²

Indeed, rather than Camus' existentialism, it would seem that Julia Kristeva's construct of abjection might yield a much more persuasive theorized reading of MacLeod's two short story collections:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. [. . .] The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. [. . .] It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.⁶³

Lyotard declared curtly in *The Postmodern Condition* that “simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives”.⁶⁴ MacLeod chooses not to position his narrating heroes in the midst of a

fully-fledged post-modern environment of relentless social fragmentation, unstable utterance, vigorous self-referentiality and the collapse of historical fixity. His stories may be seen to greet the metanarratives of God and Progress, for example, with “incredulity”, but those of Self, Meaning and History, amongst others, still prevail as organizing (if not comforting) principles for human existence:

“I know, Ma,” says my father, “I know that and I appreciate it all, everything. It is just that, well somehow we just can’t live in a clan system anymore. We have to see beyond ourselves and our own families. We have to live in the twentieth century”.

“Twentieth century?” says my grandmother spreading her big hands across her checkered apron. “What is the twentieth century to me if I cannot have my own?”⁶⁵

NOTES

- 1 Alistair MacLeod cited in Colin Nicholson, “Signatures of Times: Alistair MacLeod and His Short Stories”, *Canadian Literature*, 107 (1985), 94
- 2 “Existential Maritimer: Alistair MacLeod’s *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 16, 1 (1991), 115
- 3 “The Tuning of Perfection”, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992 p. 93. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- 4 “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989 p. 69. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- 5 *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*, Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963, p. 21.
- 6 “Alistair MacLeod”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 21, 1 (1986), 197.
- 7 Exploring the larger implications of the diasporic experience, MacLeod affirms that “I think the world is full of exiles – you meet them all over the place – people who would really rather be back in Greece, back in the former Yugoslavia or wherever . . . but who are unable to be where their hearts might lie.” See Laurie Kruk, “Alistair MacLeod: The World is Full of Exiles”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 20, 1 (1995), 157.
- 8 See Nicholson, “Signatures of Time”, 91.
- 9 “The Boat”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 108.
- 10 “The Closing Down of Summer”, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, p. 11.
- 11 “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun: The Elusive Art of Alistair MacLeod”, *Canadian Literature*, 119 (1988), 41.
- 12 *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 7.
- 13 “The Road to Rankin’s Point”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 139, 147.
- 14 “Alistair MacLeod”, 197.
- 15 See respectively: “The Road to Rankin’s Point” and “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 153, 32.
- 16 *The Lonely Voice*, pp. 20–21.
- 17 “The Closing Down of Summer”, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, pp. 14–15.

- 18 Cited in Charles E. May, ed., *The New Short Story Theories*, Athens: Ohio UP, 1994, p. xx.
- 19 *ibid.* p. xxvi.
- 20 “The Tuning of Perfection, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, p. 92.
- 21 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 27.
- 22 See, for example, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984, pp. 19–26.
- 23 *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 139.
- 24 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 30.
- 25 *The Canadian Short Story*, Toronto: OUP, 1988, p. 106.
- 26 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 24.
- 27 See, for example, the reproduction of Maritime speech structures in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 66. When asked whether he would consider himself a realist writer, MacLeod answered, “Yes, I think so. What I think of, in terms of realistic writing, is: telling the truth as I happen to see it”. See Kruk, “Alistair MacLeod: The World is Full of Exiles”, 159.
- 28 See, for example, Nicholson, “Alistair MacLeod”, 191: “While the verbal unspooling of first-person narration counteracts a relative paucity of dialogue, the cross-weaving of time past with time present signifies the presence of history everywhere in his writing, as narrating memory speaks.”
- 29 Cited in Nicholson, “Signatures of Time”, 92.
- 30 Cited in Nicholson, “Signatures of Time”, 91.
- 31 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 31. See also, for example, “The Closing Down of Summer”, in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, p. 9.
- 32 “The Road to Rankin’s Point”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 126–7.
- 33 “The Closing Down of Summer”, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, p. 7.
- 34 “The Boat”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 124.
- 35 “The Return”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 77.
- 36 *ibid.* p. 74.
- 37 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 46–7.
- 38 *ibid.* p. 25.
- 39 *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987, p. 183.
- 40 “In the Fall”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 15.
- 41 *The Canadian Short Story*, p. 99.
- 42 “Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable”, anthologized in Jencks, C., ed., *The Post-Modern Reader*, London: Academy, 1992, p. 73.
- 43 “Theorising the Postmodern: Towards a Poetics”, *ibid.* p. 77.
- 44 “The Boat”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 115–16.
- 45 Reluctantly, Keefer concedes that “occasionally, [MacLeod] slides into sentimentality; most often, he achieves that haunting and powerful resonance characteristic of the Gaelic music which is his characters’ best means to self-expression and communication”, *Under Eastern Eyes*, p. 182.
- 46 Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989, p. 41.
- 47 *Under Eastern Eyes*, p. 234.
- 48 “The Vastness of the Dark”, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 40.

- 49 Cited in Nicholson, "Alistair MacLeod", 196.
- 50 See respectively, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 33, 67, 95.
- 51 "The Tuning of Memory", *Recherches Anglaises et Nord-Américaines*, 20 (1987), 92.
- 52 "The Boat", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 118–19.
- 53 See John Ditsky, "'Such Meticulous Brightness': The Fiction of Alistair MacLeod", *The Hollins Critic*, 25, 1 (1998), 9.
- 54 "The Boat", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 108.
- 55 See "Afterword", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 159.
- 56 See respectively: "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun", *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, p. 118; "The Return" and "The Gold Gift of Grey", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, pp. 76, 98.
- 57 "In the Fall", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 9.
- 58 "The Road to Rankin's Point", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 131.
- 59 *Canadian Voices from the Region: W.O. Mitchell, Buckler, MacLeod, and Vanderhaeghe*, Ph.D. thesis, 1994, University of Alberta, p. 182.
- 60 "Existential Maritimer", 114–16.
- 61 *Le Mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'Absurde*, Paris: Gallimard 1942, p. 168.
- 62 "The Vastness of the Dark", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 48.
- 63 *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia UP, 1982, pp. 1, 4.
- 64 *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.
- 65 "The Return", *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, p. 79.