

THE ONE AND THE MANY

English-Canadian Short Story Cycles

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OVER THE PAST HUNDRED years the short story cycle has become something of a sub-genre within the Canadian short story.¹ This is not to argue that the story cycle has been ignored by American and British writers (or by French, Australian, and Russian writers, or, for that matter, by the writers of any other national literature) — it hasn't — only that the form has held a special attraction for Canadian writers. Doubtless there are shared reasons for the story cycle's current popularity internationally and in Canada, even such commercial reasons as its attraction for publishers who assume that readers are more comfortable with the linkages of the cycle than with the discontinuities of a miscellany. But such matters are not within this paper's literary-historical and theoretical scope. The present study sketches the history of the story cycle in Canada, gives an idea of its diversity and continuing popularity, considers some of the fundamental questions about this comparatively new form, and concludes with an illustrative analysis of the function of one important aspect of story cycles, their concluding stories.

Although the short story is the youngest of genres, beginning only in the early nineteenth century, literary historians and theorists often begin their discussions by casting back to the Story of Job, even to pre-literate oral history, so that the epic poems of various cultures are made to seem proto short story cycles.² Thus academics dress their new subject in the respectable robes of a literary history. Those interested in the English-Canadian short story cycle can hesitantly claim predecessors in the works of early writers of epistolary novels, collections of letters, and books of loosely linked sketches: Frances Brooke's *A History of Emily Montague* (1769), Thomas McCulloch's *Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure* (serialized 1821-23), Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (1836), and the writings of Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie. Such writings may indeed anticipate the story cycle, but only to the extent that the political speeches of Joseph Howe to Mechanics' Institutes in eastern Canada in the mid-nineteenth century and, a little later, those of Sir John A. Macdonald on the necessity of Confederation can be said to constitute the beginnings of the essay in Canada. Moreover, much of the serially published and sequentially organized writings of the nineteenth and early-twen-

tieth centuries had to have been influenced by Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *Pickwick Papers* (1837), and Dickens' first books were a seminal influence not only on the English-Canadian short story cycle — especially on Susanna Moodie and Stephen Leacock — but on the English story cycle generally. A similar claim can be made for the importance of Ivan Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852), the book that Sherwood Anderson, author of the first modern American story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), considered "one of the great books of the world,"³ and which Frank O'Connor described as perhaps "the greatest book of short stories ever written." O'Connor goes further: "Nobody, at the time that it was written, knew quite how great it was, or what influence it was to have in the creation of a new art form."⁴

But earlier writings are too often called upon to perform distorting turns of anticipation and fulfilment, and, intertextual critics to the contrary, it is wise to be wary of committing what Northrop Frye has described as a kind of anachronistic fallacy. For example, to call something "'pre-romantic'" has, according to Frye, "the peculiar demerit of committing us to anachronism before we start, and imposing a false teleology on everything we study."⁵ It is safer to observe that, to the extent these pre-Confederation writings *can* be said to anticipate the story cycle in Canada — apart from what they are as fictional letters and sketch-books — the form comes to fruition in Duncan Campbell Scott's story cycle of a town in Western Quebec, *In the Village of Viger* (1896), and, a little later, in Stephen Leacock's classic treatment of small-town Ontario, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). *Viger* and the *Sketches* were the first to weave for literary artistic purpose the various strands of nineteenth-century short narrative forms — gothic tale, nature sketch, character sketch, anecdote, tall tale, local colour writing, fable, and romantic tale — that formed the modern story cycle. (Scott's *Viger* is a *tour de force* of nineteenth-century story forms,⁶ while Leacock's sketches parody many of these same forms.)

The story cycle continues to be well suited to the concerns of Canadian writers intent on portraying a particular region or community, its history, its characters, its communal concerns, regions and communities as diverse as Viger at the turn of the century, the dust-bowl prairies of Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (1968), the eccentric west coast islanders of Jack Hodgins' *Spit Delaney's Island* (1976) and the impoverished Cape Bretoners of Sheldon Currie's *The Glace Bay Miner's Museum* (1979) in the 1970s, the Albertan Pine Mountain Lodge of Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (1981) in the 1980s.⁷ Other story cycles such as Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House* (1970), Clark Blaise's *A North American Education* (1973), Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), and Robert Currie's *Night Games* (1983) focus on the growth of a single character in a particular community, thereby illustrating in the story cycle the interest in individual psychology that characterizes modernism.⁸

In addition to providing opportunities for the exploration of place and character, the story cycle also offers formal possibilities that allow its practitioners the freedom to challenge, whether intentionally or not, the totalising impression of the traditional novel of social and psychological realism.⁹ Canadian writers who are inspired to compose something more unified than the miscellaneous collection of stories and who do not wish to forego the documentary function of the realistic novel (whose fictional strategies will likely continue to have relevance in a relatively young country), but who are wary of the traditional novel's grander ambitions, often find in the story cycle a form that allows for a new kind of unity in disunity and a more accurate representation of modern sensibility. Even such early cycles as Scott's *Viger* and Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* portray the struggles of small communities for coherence and survival under contrary pressures from metropolitanism and modernity, and do so in a form that mirrors the struggle between cohesion and a kind of entropy, or between solidarity and fragmentation, between things holding together and things pulling apart. Later, such writers as Laurence and Munro explore the formation of fictional personality in this form that simultaneously subverts and sustains the impression of completion, of closure and totality, suggesting that psychic coherence is as much an illusion in fiction as it may be in fact.

Forrest L. Ingram, still the foremost theorist of short story cycles,¹⁰ offers a workable definition of the form: it is "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts."¹¹ Ingram's definition emphasizes the constitutive dynamic of the short story cycle: its unique balancing of the integrity, or individuality, of each story and the needs of the group, and vice-versa, what Ingram calls "the tension between the one and the many."¹² Interestingly, Robert Kroetsch has observed of Canadian writing generally a characteristic similar to the distinguishing feature of the story cycle described here — its unique balancing of the one and the many. "In Canadian writing," Kroetsch notes, "and perhaps in Canadian life, there is an exceptional pressure placed on the individual and the self by the community or society. The self is not in any way Romantic or privileged. The small town remains the ruling paradigm, with its laws of familiarity and conformity. Self and community almost fight to a draw."¹³

Kroetsch's observation is based, I suspect, on perceptions familiar to numerous other Canadian writers: in the attempt to find that elusive balance between the one and the many, Canadians, unlike Americans, traditionally have been more willing to sacrifice the gratifications of individualism for the securities of community. Why? The attempt at a complete and convincing answer to that question would require a book. But such an answer would begin with considerations of physical and ideological environment (a geography that isolates, a philosophical tradition of humanism and conservatism) and of broadly historical determinants

(the psychic sense of beleaguement, a feeling of being coerced to choose between opposing positions). Such influences in national character led eventually to various, yet consistent, positions: to the enthronement of compromise as *the* political ideal, to the positing of the middle way as the best mode of figurative travel, and even to finding in the image of the peacekeeper — the one who literally stands between opposing forces — an international *raison d'être*.¹⁴ It was not by chance that Ernest Hemingway declared the first distinctive work of American fiction to be Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*: a first-person episodic novel whose title is the name of its highly individualized hero, a satiric novel from the point of view of an outsider ingenuously castigating his community. The closest Canadian equivalent is Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*: a book whose title focuses attention on the community and whose viewpoint is very much that of the ironic insider, and a book whose form, the story cycle, manages to balance the needs of the one and the many in a manner that may suggest further a geo-political appropriateness of this popular sub-genre in Canadian writing.

Forrest Ingram has also described a system of categorizing story cycles according to the ways in which they were conceived and compiled. He types them as 1) "composed," that is, story cycles which "the author had conceived as a whole from the time he wrote its first story," a cycle such as *Sunshine Sketches*; as 2) "arranged," that is, ones which "an author or editor-author has brought together to illuminate or comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association," a cycle such as *In the Village of Viger*; and as 3) "completed," that is, "sets of linked stories which are neither strictly composed nor merely arranged," but ones which were completed when their author recognized the links within a group of stories, a cycle such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*¹⁵ This method of categorizing has been generally accepted.¹⁶ But Ingram's landmark study goes only so far in coming to an understanding of this form that occupies the gap between the miscellany of short stories and the novel, between the discontinuous and the totalising form.

Perhaps a more useful method of categorizing story cycles is the simpler one of identifying what lends the cycle its coherence. Many story cycles are unified primarily by place: such influential classics of the genre as James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*; or such Canadian examples as Scott's *Viger*; George Elliott's *The Kissing Man* (1962), which is set in an anonymous town based on Strathroy, Ontario; Hugh Hood's *Around the Mountain* (1967), set in Montreal; Hodgins' *Spit Delaney's Island*; and Sandra Birdsell's *Night Travellers* (1982) and *Ladies of the House* (1984), both of which are set in the fictional community of Agassiz, Manitoba. The other major category would be cycles unified primarily by character, such as Laurence's *A Bird in the House*, Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* and Isabel Huggan's *The Elizabeth Stories* (1984). Two minor categories can be added to these major ones of place and character. Some miscellanies are unified by a central thematic concern — any of Charles G. D.

Roberts' volumes of animal stories, Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Man Descending* (1982). Other collections seem unified by a consistent style or tone — any of Munro's miscellaneous collections, for example. I am wary, though, of including collections from these two minor categories in my definition of the short story cycle; in fact, I exclude them, because on such a basis claims for inclusion could be made for almost any miscellany of stories.¹⁷ That said, if the presence of a dominating theme or a consistent style alone cannot be the defining characteristics of a story cycle, it would be mistaken not to take account of the role those aspects play in strengthening the coherence of cycles unified primarily by place and/or character. And, it needs to be added, what is true of any system is true also of the system being proposed here; namely, that these two major categories overlap, that, for instance, Hanratty, Rose's hometown, serves also to unify Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* and that *A Bird in the House* is unified by a combination of the character of Vanessa MacLeod and Manawaka, or, as in Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, both the character of Arla Pederson and the setting of an old folks' home lend unity to that cycle.

BUT EVEN IF THIS alternative system of classifying story cycles according to what contributes most to their coherence — what in fact makes them linked series — goes further than does a system that must often speculate on the principles that governed the cycle's composition (Ingram's distinction), it still betrays the spirit of the story cycle, and does so fundamentally. In this regard, categorization is a way to begin discussing a diverse form, not an end in itself. Making recourse to place and character (let alone a single theme or consistent tone) will lead inevitably to the view of story cycles as failed novels, that is, as something which fails within what is an inappropriate category. The traditional novel, from Richardson to Richler, presents a continuous narrative of character, place, theme and style, however scrambled the chronology of that narrative. And, of course, the novel coheres most obviously in being an extended narrative: it comprises a plot that unfolds over a comparatively lengthy period of time. Short stories, because they so often describe only climactic actions, are distinguished for their concision. Even in the linked series, they will always lack the traditional novel's chief advantage as a unified, continuous, totalising narrative form. Something essential to stories is decidedly un-novelistic, something, as Edgar Allan Poe realized, that is closer to lyric poetry — the illuminating flash rather than the steadily growing light.¹⁸ But reviewers and critics too often persist in approaching story cycles with an inappropriate aesthetic, with the wrong focus. The series of flashes signals a different code altogether from the steady beam: the world as seen by stroboscope, held still momentarily, strangely fragmented at other times, moving unfamiliarly

in the minds of readers accustomed to novels. The steady beam, itself an illusion, is here broken up, perhaps intentionally disrupted.

The success of a story cycle should not be judged, therefore, for its approximation of the achievement of a novel.¹⁹ Its success should not depend upon the extent to which it is unified by place, character, theme or style, nor, for that matter, should it be judged finally by any aesthetic grounded in the desire for a continuous and complete unfolding. Although the story cycle accommodates writers who wish to examine particular places and characters, the form is also unique for the way in which it often reflects the exploration of the *failure* of place and character to unify a work that remains tantalizingly whole yet fundamentally suspicious of completeness. *Place*, *Viger* for instance, does not hold together Duncan Campbell Scott's *In the Village of Viger*. Or place does and does not unify, for place in that story cycle also fails to lend coherence because *Viger* is about the ways in which the things of *Viger* are threatening to fall apart before the onslaught of modernity. Perhaps this suspiciously neat paradox can be stated in terms of the outer and inner dynamic of the form, with *Viger* the setting of the stories, the literal place, representing the outer force that obviously lends coherence to the stories of this cycle, and with *Viger* the figure of Scott's vision of a communal ideal representing the inner force that is being destabilized and, consequently, destabilizes. Similarly Rose does not ultimately unify Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* That story cycle is about mistaken notions of coherent personality and character — how they are formed and represented — as whole entities in both life and fiction: with Rose, the representation of the destabilized self, as a covert power threatening ideas of coherent personality, and with Rose as the character who knits the fictions together as the ostensible figure that satisfies expectations of coherent character development in extended works of fiction. Often each story of a cycle raises such problems of continuity and coherence only to defer their desired solutions to the next story in the cycle, whose conflict resembles its predecessor's while yet being different, until we reach the final story of the cycle, which, as one result of its cumulative function, now returns us to the preceding stories in the context of the cycle as a whole. Story cycles viewed with regard to both their outer and inner dynamic, whether cycles of character or place, seldom achieve a satisfying "presence."

It is understandable, then, that this form came into its own in the late-nineteenth century and is in the main a twentieth-century form. (And for once in Canadian literature there is no time lag between its practice elsewhere and its accomplished handling here, as witness Scott's *Viger* in 1896). The popularity of short story cycles coincides with the rise of modernism in literature, when the revolutionary impact of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein was cumulatively felt and all traditional systems, including the tradition of the realistic novel, were coming under destabilizing scrutiny (by systems themselves totalising, of course). Viewed in this context, the short story cycle is an anti-novel, fragmenting the lengthy continuous

narrative's treatment of place, time, character and plot.²⁰ There were those in Canada at this time, such as Scott and Leacock, who used the fragmented/fragmenting form paradoxically for intentionally totalising purposes. Leacock employs place, Mariposa, to display ironically his ideal of a tory and humanist community.²¹ Yet repeatedly in individual stories, the community, portrayed as robbed from within and without of genuine religious spirit and political leadership, seems always to be resisting Leacock's unifying vision. Those critics who regret that Leacock did not write, perhaps could not write, a novel have failed to see just how appropriate his chosen form — the story cycle — was to his lament for an essentially eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social-philosophy of tolerance and responsibility in the frenetic modern age.²² When Duncan Campbell Scott conceived of *Viger*, the small town on the periphery of a Quebec city at the turn of the century, and when his vision showed him, too, that all the values of the traditional humanist were here under pressure from the forces of urbanization and modernity, what better form could he have chosen to display that situation than the short story cycle? Given such visions of threatened disintegration, the novel with its totalising conventions would rightly have been considered as (or, more likely, intuitively by-passed as) formally inappropriate to the insights seeking, and forebodings moving towards, expression. And what was true of formal appropriateness at the beginning of the century became only more apparent as the decades passed.

The story cycle works through a process that Robert M. Luscher has recently described in this way: "As in a musical sequence, the story sequence repeats and progressively develops themes and motifs over the course of the work; its unity derives from a perception of both the successive ordering and recurrent patterns, which together provide the continuity of the reading experience."²³ This process Ingram earlier identified as "the dynamic patterns of recurrence and development."²⁴ In such a pattern, the first and last stories are of key significance, with the final story of the cycle being the most powerful, because there the patterns of recurrence and development initiated in the opening story come naturally to fullest expression. Opening stories in cycles of place usually describe the setting of the ensuing stories in a way that presents place as one of the cycle's major actors. For example, *Viger's* "The Little Milliner" and *Sunshine Sketches' "The Hostelry of Mr. Smith"* establish setting in ways that also provide a frame for the stories that follow; the first story of George Elliott's *The Kissing Man*, "An Act of Piety," locates the community quite literally with regard to compass points and lists neighbours who will become key players in the stories that follow. These opening stories also introduce into the contained and framed community a disruptive element: the Little Milliner herself, Josh Smith, Prop. of the *Sketches*, the diseased Irish of *The Kissing Man*, the dehumanizing poverty of Sheldon Currie's "The Glace Bay Miner's Museum," the death-in-life riddle of Edna Alford's "The Hoyer." Cycles whose primary unity is provided by a central character begin, as

might be expected, with a story of the protagonist's childhood, establishing a pattern that is repeated with variation throughout the cycle: *A Bird in the House* opens with "The Sound of the Singing," a story of Vanessa's earliest sense of richness and deprivation in the patriarchal home; "Royal Beatings," the opening story of Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* presents the first remembered confusion of love and pain in Rose's life, and begins to deal with the problem of representation — through mirroring, paralleling, doubling, echoing — of the determining influences on her personality (the problem which also becomes the actress Rose's, and remains the writer Munro's).

But it is the concluding stories of cycles that present the most serious challenges to readers and critics. These stories bring to fulfilment the recurrent patterns of the cycle, frequently reintroducing many of the cycle's major characters and central images, and restating in a refrain-like manner the thematic concerns of the preceding stories. Because of the paramount importance of concluding stories, I will conclude by illustrating their function, with specific reference to the final story in a cycle of place, "The way back" of George Elliott's *The Kissing Man*,²⁵ and a cycle of character, the title story of Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*²⁶

BOTH OF THESE concluding stories can be termed "return stories," and, as in such return poems as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Roberts' "The Tantrammar Revisited," and Al Purdy's "The Country North of Belleville," the concern is with the passage of time, change, and identity. "The way back" is as enigmatic and elliptical as the cycle it concludes. It concerns a man, Dan, whose father ignored the communal ritual of having the grinder man (a blade sharpener) present outside the house when Dan was born. As a consequence of his father's stubborn individualism, Dan loses touch with the life of his community, and he must struggle to recuperate the sense of community for himself and his family, to find a way back. "Who Do You Think You Are?" returns the wandering Rose to Hanratty and, as importantly, the reader to the book's riddling title. As both return stories and the concluding stories of cycles, "The way back" and "Who Do You Think You Are?" operate within a tradition that begins with "Paul Farlotte," the concluding story of Scott's *Viger*, where the eponymous hero struggles to reconstitute family at the end of a cycle whose stories have repeatedly portrayed fragmented families as the critical measure of the destructive effects of modernity and metropolitanism. But the signal achievement in the return story of a Canadian cycle remains "L'Envoi: The Train to Mariposa," the concluding story of Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches*, wherein an anonymous auditor — a "you" — boards an imaginative train bound for Mariposa, discovers his face reflected in a dark window and realizes that he will be unrecognizable to those among whom he once lived, as

he has become barely recognizable to himself. But if “L’Envoi” depicts an abortive return for the materialistic auditor, it remains instructive for that other “you” aboard the train, the reader, with regard to the necessity of recovering those humanist and tory values that Leacock associates with Mariposa.²⁷

“The way back” focuses on yet another quirky communal ritual in a cycle replete with public, though mostly private, rituals — all of which ceremonialize the passing on of traditions, personal histories, family memories, both the good and the bad. As the cumulative work of a cycle, “The way back” is stronger, moreover, because it echoes and reintroduces many of the preceding stories’ particular symbols, rituals and characters. Doctor Fletcher delivers Dan; a blown ostrich egg helps illustrate Dan’s alienation as a result of his father’s dismissal of the grinder man ritual (127); Dan’s overly practical father recalls Finn’s hard father; Dan avoids the old man who sits by the pond; Dan marries the community patriarch Mayhew Salkald’s granddaughter; and it is Mayhew who insists, “there is always hope of return” (132) — all of these details recalling important aspects of preceding stories. By so echoing and paralleling, this concluding story suggests that “the way back” is effected not only by an individual’s decision to participate in the life of the community but by the cooperation of the entire community, or, to speak literarily, by the whole story cycle.

Dan comes to realize that his father’s break with communal tradition is not, as his father contends, “a question of fashion or times changing” (130), though it is also and ominously that. He understands the cultural significance of the grinder man and the reasons for his own alienation: “Thing like that, if you don’t have a feeling for it, it’ll separate you from the kids in school” (129). Here the concluding story emphasizes the preceding stories’ emphasis of feeling over intellectualizing. Dan realizes, too, that his father’s attitude is “the difference between the life of [his] father and the life of the heart” — the heart which is presented throughout *The Kissing Man* as the chief sensing organ. Dan resolves: “I want the life of the heart and Mister Salkald says there is hope, there is a way back. This is the connection” (134). When an adult, Dan has the grinder man sharpen some tools, including a scythe that once belonged to Mayhew Salkald, the community patriarch who figures centrally in the opening story of the cycle, “An act of piety.” Dan’s act of concession, which acknowledges symbolically the grinder man’s vital role in the life of the community, is simple enough, as simple as tending a grave, blowing an egg, breaking the pendants of a chandelier, or catching a fish (all earlier rituals enabling various individual and communal continuities). The results of the act are complex and profound: the reestablishment of familial harmony, the reaffirmation of the importance of emotion and intuition, the reintegration of Dan’s family into the community. Dan’s wife places Mayhew’s sharpened scythe — temporal symbol of both continuity and necessary disjunction — under the bed of the baby she is weaning, thereby affirming a bond between her family and the community. This is

ultimately a cultural bond: “But when I speak of the family, I have in mind a bond which embraces...a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote.” That statement from T. S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* provides the epigraph to *The Kissing Man*, and George Elliott has framed his story cycle — whose concern is the family community in T. S. Eliot’s sense — with “An act of piety,” concerning a piety towards the dead, and the concluding “The way back,” with its solicitude for the unborn.

But *The Kissing Man* appears to reach a comforting closure only if its readers forget the earlier stories, which should prove difficult since all of them are figuratively present in this final one. To feel only comforted by the conclusion of “The way back” is willfully to forget those unflattering features of the preceding stories, such as the axe-handle factory that now holds practical sway over the lives of many of the townsfolk, the mysterious pond that has been drained, and the undercurrent of intolerance that also defines this (and perhaps every other) small community. Such a forgetting would be ironic indeed, considering that the stories of *The Kissing Man* focus repeatedly on the importance of memory and ritual in the transference of communal values. Along with its reaffirmation of communal and familial values — through repeated image, incident and character from earlier stories — the concluding story of this cycle simultaneously reminds its readers of the persistence of some old habits of exclusion and the beginning of some new anti-communal tendencies.

THE STORY “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” delivers Rose to a final confrontation with the question of identity and self possession that, this concluding story reveals, is asked most insistently of oneself by one’s origins. Like “The way back,” “Who Do You Think You Are?” contains numerous echoes of preceding stories. Both stories focus on eccentric characters, the grinder man and Milton Homer, who embody something essential in their communities. Both characters guardedly contain the key to the central characters’ search for identity, and, interestingly, both are associated with birth rituals (Milton Homer assumes it to be his right to chant a blessing over newborns [190-91]), perhaps because the discovery or rediscovery of one’s place in the community (for Dan) and self-identity (for Rose) would constitute a rebirth. An Epiphany of a kind occurs in the final story of Munro’s cycle when Rose recognizes in Ralph Gillespie yet another reflection of herself, recognizes a spiritual affinity with a man who is, like Milton Homer, closely identified with Hanratty. But readers may experience both resolution and a sort of vertigo at Rose’s intimation finally of *who she is*. With the knowledge that Ralph originally found his identity as an impersonator by imitating Milton Homer — Hanratty’s carnivalesque figure — and the revelation that Rose, the actress, the

great impersonator, imitates not Milton Homer but Ralph's impersonation of Milton Homer, the possibility of self-possession recedes into a series of reflections of reflections, for Milton Homer is himself a grotesque reflection of Hanratty. This final story with its deceptively illusory resolution actually posits the steady sense of self as something like a series of Chinese boxes. But literal Chinese boxes do end finally. Perhaps the better analogy would be with those literary Chinese boxes in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, the kind that *do* recede into invisibility, pitching readers into the infinite, claustrophobic regressus of the *mise en abyme*.²⁸ That image suggests one tentative answer to this cycle's titular riddle: You may think you possess a stable identity, a steady sense of self, but you are actually an infinitely regressing reflection of every image of yourself that has been reflected back to you by your environment, especially your early environment. Ultimately — and suggestively, disturbingly nihilistic in a writer often mistakenly considered conventional in her vision — there may well be no grounded “you” from which to launch the self-reflective probe of the book's title.

There is also a metafictional dimension to Munro's cycle that finds expression in self-reflexive literary concerns with the problems of representation and the writer's attitude towards the material of her fiction, questions that also reach problematic resolution in the final story of this cycle.²⁹ Rose realizes that in her acting she has been representing surfaces, that whatever is essential in another's personality can be spoken of only in “translation,” as she puts it, and by which she means not spoken of at all, or gestured at so obliquely as to mean much the same thing (205-06). Again she comes to this realization vis-à-vis Ralph Gillespie, for she sees in Ralph someone who, even more than herself, is an imitator of surfaces, thus residing “one slot over from her own” (206). Ralph, self-condemned to imitate only Milton Homer (who, in being presented as one end-product of its Methodist and Anglo origins, contains something of Hanratty's essence), finally “Milton Homer'd himself out of a job” at the Legion Hall because the new people in town no longer knew what he was doing. In one of the finest ironies in this highly ironic concluding story, Ralph, the imitator of surfaces, dies when, mistaking the Legion Hall's exit, he falls into its basement. Those who fail to find their way beneath surfaces may be done in by that which they ignore or suppress, and so never get out. And this concern with getting away from and returning to origins — what Rose was and is in relation to all that Hanratty represents — is a recurrent theme in all the preceding stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

But I am not as concerned here with exploring further the complex issues raised by *The Kissing Man* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* as with showing something of the cumulative function of their typical concluding stories. Both stories depict provisional possibilities respecting the recuperation of community for Dan and the presence of a sense of self and identity for Rose. But those possibilities must remain provisional within both these concluding stories and the preceding stories of

the cycle, preceding stories which the cumulative function of the concluding stories then asks the reader to reconsider. As much as they tempt with hints of comfortable closure, they also destabilize, resisting closure. This is true also of "Paul Farlotte," the concluding story of D. C. Scott's *In the Village of Viger*, of *Sunshine Sketches' "L'Envoi,"* of Laurence's "Jericho's Brick Battlements," and of the final stories of numerous other cycles. Such inconclusive concluding stories would appear to be one of the dominant characteristics of the story cycle, and when this conventionalized indeterminacy is worked by writers of Scott's, Leacock's, Elliott's Laurence's, and Munro's skills, the result is story cycles that return to their origins without ever quite closing the circle.

W. H. New has suggested that the popularity of the short story in Canada results from our status as a marginalized culture and its status as a marginalised genre. Stories enable Canadian and New Zealand writers to work, often with subversive irony, in a form that is not the dominant genre in the overwhelming cultures to, respectively, the south and the west.³⁰ I would add that the story cycles' tension between the one and the many suits the writers of a country that was, in socio-political terms, formed out of the tension between the conservatism of England and the liberalism of France, and subsequently between its own communal conservatism and the liberal individualism of its gigantic neighbour to the south. It may also be that the distinguished Canadian short story in its extension to the story cycle most aptly mirrors in its form the distinctive, yet closely linked, regions of Canada: a kind of geo-political fictional linkage of bonds and gaps *A mari usque ad mare*, as opposed to the continuous totalising story written *E pluribus unum*. Such speculations begin to explain the increasing predominance in Canadian literature of what Priscilla M. Kramer has called the "cyclical habit of mind,"³¹ a habit that we see expressed in the long sequential lyrical poems of modernist writers such as Louis Dudek, in the deceptively random arrangement of elements in a "life poem" of Robert Kroetsch or bp Nichol, in the increasing popularity of the "documentary poem," and in the shaping of stories into cyclical patterns of recurrence and development by many of Canada's best fiction writers.

NOTES

¹ I prefer the term "cycle" to "sequence" for its historical associations with other cyclical forms, and because "cycle" best captures the form's dynamic of repetition and development. For a different view, see Robert M. Luscher, "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book," in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafar & Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 149.

² See Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 24; John Barth, "Tales Within Tales Within Tales," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 218-38; see further Barth's "The Ocean of Story," pp. 84-90, and "Don't Count On It: A Note on the Number of *The 1001 Nights*," 258-81; Andreas Schroeder, "Fear of the Novel: The Linked Short Story in Saskatche-

- wan Fiction," in *Writing Saskatchewan: 20 Critical Essays*, ed. Kenneth G. Probert (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1989), 162; and W. H. New, *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1987), 10-12.
- ³ Quoted in Ingram, 148, n. 12.
- ⁴ *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: World Publishing, 1963), 46.
- ⁵ Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 130.
- ⁶ See S. L. Dragland, Introduction, *In the Village of Viger and Other Stories*, by Duncan Campbell Scott (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), 12.
- ⁷ Recent evidence of the growing critical interest in Canadian short story cycles can be seen in *Writing Saskatchewan*, 155-79.
- ⁸ Any survey of the story cycle in Canada must note such unacknowledged experimenters in the form of the linked series as the Frederick Philip Grove of *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) and the Hugh MacLennan of *Seven Rivers of Canada* (1961), though the scope of the present essay does not allow for further consideration of these hybrid forms. See Rudy Wiebe, "Afterword," *Fruits of the Earth*, by Frederick Philip Grove (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), 351-59, for a discussion of the cyclical form in Grove's writings.
- ⁹ I would emphasize here the adjective "traditional" or "conventional," aware that there are many contemporary novels, such as Julian Barnes' 1989 *The History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, that resemble story cycles, as this paper describes them, more than novels. See Luscher, 153: "The form's development has been spurred not only by Joyce and Anderson but also by the possibilities of unity demonstrated in American regional collections and by more recent experimentation with the novel."
- ¹⁰ Although Luscher disagrees with Ingram's method of categorization (162), he concedes that Ingram's terminology is the one "critics most commonly use" (149).
- ¹¹ Ingram, 19.
- ¹² Ingram, 19.
- ¹³ Robert Kroetsch, "No Name Is My Name," in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford, 1989), 51.
- ¹⁴ See F. R. Scott's "W.L.M.K.," in *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford, 1966), 60-61, for a satiric poem on compromise as the defining characteristic of Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister, Mackenzie King.
- ¹⁵ Ingram, 15-18.
- ¹⁶ For example, those writing on the Saskatchewan story cycle — David Carpenter, Andreas Schroeder, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Edna Alford — work, however unaware of doing so, from these premises first established by Ingram. See *Writing Saskatchewan*, 155-79.
- ¹⁷ Luscher, in criticizing and attempting to correct Ingram's system of categorizing story cycles, arrives at a "definition" of the form that is practically useless because of its inclusiveness.
- ¹⁸ See Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe: Poems, Tales, Essays and Reviews*, ed. David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 480-92; or his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, "Twice-Told Tales," in *Selected Writing*, 443-46.

- ¹⁹ See Luscher: "These works should be viewed, not as failed novels, but as unique hybrids that combine two distinct reading pleasures: the patterned closure of individual stories and the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcend the apparent gaps between stories" (149-50).
- ²⁰ Again, Luscher is worth quoting in this regard: "By operating without the major narrative unities of the novel, the writer of the short story sequence courts disunity in order to achieve 'victory' over it by setting up a new set of narrative ground rules that rely heavily on active pattern-making faculties" (150).
- ²¹ See Gerald Lynch, *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1988).
- ²² See, for example, Robertson Davies, "Stephen Leacock," in *Our Living Tradition*, First Series, ed., Claude T. Bissell (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1957), 136, and Donald Cameron, *Faces of Leacock* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967), 138. This view of Leacock is best expressed in the title of Cameron's article, "Stephen Leacock: The Novelist Who Never Was," *Dalhousie Review*, 46 (Spring 1966): 15-28.
- ²³ Luscher, 149.
- ²⁴ Ingram, 20.
- ²⁵ Subsequent quotations will be from George Elliott, *The Kissing Man* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962).
- ²⁶ Subsequent quotations will be from Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978).
- ²⁷ There is quite a difference between the way concluding stories function in Canadian and American cycles. The concluding story of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, the American cycle nearest to Leacock's *Sketches*, is titled "Departure," and when George Willard shakes the dust of his hometown from his heels, he looks from his train window and sees that "the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood." *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919; rpt. ed. Malcolm Cowley, New York: Viking, 1960), 247. Recall that Leacock's narrator and auditor finally find themselves returned to "the leather chairs of the Mausoleum Club, talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew." *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), 186.
- ²⁸ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Maggibbon & Kee, 1967), 72-75.
- ²⁹ See Lawrence Mathews, "Who Do You Think You Are?: Alice Munro's Art of Disarrangement," in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview: ECW, 1983), 190-93.
- ³⁰ See New, ix. See also Raymond Knister, Introduction, *Canadian Short Stories* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1928), xi.
- ³¹ Priscilla M. Kramer, *The Cyclical Method of Composition in Gottfried Keller's Sinngedicht* (New York: Lancaster, 1939), quoted in Ingram, 24.

