

# Roots and Routes

## in a Selection of Stories

by Alistair MacLeod

The fact is that the beginning always begins in-between,  
intermezzo.

GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI, *A THOUSAND PLATEAUS*.

**C**entral to Alistair MacLeod's *Island* is the return to the original island or Highlands, phonetic closeness somehow reducing the geographical distance between the two referents. The motif is particularly prominent in four of the collection's sixteen short stories: "The Return" (1971), "The Closing Down of Summer" (1976), "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" (1985), and "Clearances" (1999)—a corpus that roughly spans Alistair MacLeod's writing life.<sup>1</sup> Starting from W. H. New's inspiring remark that "the English-language vocabulary for characterizing landscape (and people's relationship with land) interconnects with the vocabulary for characterizing language and the use and function of language" (New 1998 164), I propose to analyse the functioning of pairs that combine spatial and linguistic displacement—returning and iteration, but also crossing and analogy. I will then be using a tropical approach to shed some light on the creative tension between roots and routes which lies at the core of MacLeod's fiction. His stories are indeed equally concerned with the centripetal forces of the ethnic culture in which they are embedded and with the centrifugal expansion of writing that announces its scope and concerns as universal, as if immune—or perhaps indifferent—to five decades of post-humanist critique and deconstructive doubt.<sup>2</sup>

Because MacLeod's stories foreground the singularity of their Gaelic protagonists and their habitat, analysing the tropes through which the regional is made coterminous with the universal is then likely to throw light on the tacit acceptance evidenced in their reception. In his review of Irene Guilford's *Alistair MacLeod*, the only volume of critical essays so far devoted to

MacLeod's writing, Lawrence Mathews pointedly wonders why "no one ever says anything about MacLeod's work that could be construed as even mildly negative. . . . Despite the slightness of his output . . . and despite the reluctance of academic critics to examine it closely, he has been allotted a secure niche in the Canadian pantheon" (Matthews 119). My hypothesis is that, in MacLeod's short fiction, the operations of iteration and analogy allow local place to resonate with a national sense of space beyond the immediate insularity, or regional specificity, of their plots and setting. The consonance of MacLeod's stories with a general, indeed national, response to the particulars of place suggests that their alleged universal value may rest upon the consensual validation of their contribution to the "imagined geographies"<sup>3</sup> (Fiamengo 241) in which the nation, fragmented and diverse as it is, grounds its own existence.<sup>4</sup>

### **What happened?**

What distinguishes the short story as a genre from the tale and the novel, Deleuze and Guattari explain, is the secret that informs its narrative development and orients it towards the past. In a short story, they add, one does not expect anything to happen for everything has *already* happened:

It is not very difficult to determine the essence of the [short story] as a literary genre: Everything is organized around the question, "What happened? Whatever could have happened?" The tale is the opposite of the [short story], because it is an altogether different question that the reader asks with bated breath: "What is going to happen?" . . . Something always happens in the novel also, but the novel integrates elements of the [short story] and the tale into the variation of its perpetual living present. (Deleuze and Guattari 192)<sup>5</sup>

Hence, the implacability driving Alice Munro's "The Time of Death," or Mavis Gallant's "Voices Lost in Snow." As their narratives resist the accomplishment of what has just occurred, they delineate a tear in the fabric of events even as they attempt to mend it. MacLeod's stories are no exception to Deleuze and Guattari's principle—nothing takes place in them that did not take place long ago and, one may add, far away. The characters' individual present is enfolded in the clan's collective past—the Highland Clearances which, at the end of the eighteenth century, forced them away from their home to Nova Scotia. Six generations later the ancestral culture that was transplanted into the New World is withering under the joint pressures of poverty and progress. The secret MacLeod's characters share, but will not admit, is constrained within a double bind, staying in Cape Breton being

just as impossible as leaving it. The narrative then obsessively recounts the moment of returning, when the home place provisionally coincides with the characters' longing to dwell there again.

Such is the case in "The Return," an initiation story built on concentric excursions from and back to home's still centre: the return of the prodigal son and his family to North Sydney, Alex's return to his grandparents' house, the men's return from the pit, and finally the family's return trip to Montreal. About to depart for another mining season overseas, the men in "The Closing Down of Summer" are already anticipating their return to Cape Breton and the eventuality that it may be their final journey home to one of the small island cemeteries. In "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun," a tremendous big grey dog, saved as a pup by the clan's ancestor, disappears and returns to cause its master's accidental death. Later on, it will reappear as the big grey dog of death that all the man's descendants glimpse at the moment of their demise. Likewise, the blanket mentioned five times in the opening of "Clearances" is a synecdoche of a narrative weaving together the past and present of the central character, an ageing widower whose property is coveted by a clear-cutter and a German couple smitten with the ocean frontage. The clashing interests of the tourist industry and those of a local population barely surviving on the island's depleted resources are set in parallel with the territorial struggles of World War II and the silent eviction of thousands in the eighteenth century, suggesting the constancy of the economic pressures which have beset the Gaelic community and condemned them to poverty and exile.

In all four stories, the narrative is syncopated. It points insistently beyond its own narrow scope, so that even as it explores the present, one feels the story cannot be comprehended outside its relation to the formal dimension of the past (Deleuze and Guattari 237). What happened then may account for a sense of belonging Alex "knows and feels but cannot understand" (R 91; see also 82, 83, 90), an intimation which impresses itself even more brutally upon the characters of "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun." Both "The Closing Down of Summer" and "Clearances" take this investigation further as their narratives are concerned with liminality, specifically with the interstitial differences and similarities through which the characters define themselves in relation to distant origins but also in respect to other close-knit communities—Highland Scots (CS 185, C 418), French and Irish mining crews (CS 202), the Acadians and neighbouring Mi'kmaq (C 148). In musical terms, a syncopation occurs when the strong note is *not* on the beat.<sup>6</sup> These stories

similarly feature a contrast between iteration—the recurrent motifs that encode territory and sustain a sense of belonging—and analogy, a syncopation which cuts short the refrain of home and distends its limits to accommodate intersubjective distance.

### **The refrain of home**

In “De la ritournelle,”<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari observe the territorializing function of repetitive sound patterns, whose effectiveness rests upon the pervasiveness of the sound which irresistibly includes the subject within its reception. In this respect, hearing is to be opposed to sight, a selective sense that requires a separation between perceiving subject and perceived object.<sup>8</sup> Both perceptual modes contribute to the tracing and shaping of territory. Visually, or from a discriminating perspective, a territory can be defined as the critical distance between two individuals of the same species (Deleuze and Guattari 319). Aurally, the approach being now inclusive, an interval is induced by expressive sound patterns that mark off space as territorial insofar as they supersede and exclude any other expressive matter: “We call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes. . . . In the narrow sense, we speak of a refrain when an assemblage is sonorous or ‘dominated’ by sound” (Deleuze and Guattari 323).<sup>9</sup> The meaning of *territoire*, in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis then diverges slightly from the legal implications of the word *territory*,<sup>10</sup> the French concept containing notions of appropriation and identification associated in English with local, heterogeneous place as opposed to global, homogenous space.<sup>11</sup>

In their relation to place, Gaelic and, to an even greater degree, song are evident territorial markers. In “Clearances,” they create the distance that ostracizes strangers and trespassers (C 428). And, when during World War II the central character visits the ancestral Highlands, the rustle of Gaelic, its “soft sounds” and “subliminal whispers,” signals his entry into a territory where markers are aural and haptic rather than optic and distant (C 418-419). Back in Cape Breton, the young man has pups sent in from the Highlands to breed them following the instructions of a Scottish shepherd (C 421). The line of Border collies that later accompanies him into old age also embodies the territorializing function of sound. The man addresses his otherwise nameless dogs with the phrase the shepherd initially uttered to identify the animal and its territorial vigil: “*S’e thu fhein a tha tapaidh* (It’s yourself that’s smart)” (C 423). From the point of view of reception, the Gaelic fragment also has a

definite territorializing value. The reader's ability to *voice* the inscription indexes belonging to the island/Highland sound continuum whereas those who need the translation are merely permitted provisional access to it, a limitation materialized visually in the writer's use of brackets.

The recurrence of a Celtic phrase is more ambivalent in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun." The silhouette of the big grey dog also serves as a transition between the clan's mythic past and the narrator's present but, instead of suggesting their seamless continuation, the recurring name of the "*cù mòr glas*" impresses a punctuation denying the character escape or progress (B 312). The Gaelic refrain suggests that change, whether spatial or temporal, can be checked through the repetition of a set formula, not a language for communication, but signifiers whose musicality moves speaker and listener alike, hemming them in the voicing of territory.<sup>12</sup> Gaelic is then only marginally concerned with exchanging information. Instilled in infancy, it partakes of the sacred and its rituals. It is the language used in prayers, to love or to mourn, in lament and in exultation. As one of the characters puts it, Gaelic is the "reflexive" tongue that conveys and causes affects (C 418). As they come in sight of Cape Breton, his father's tears remind Alex of earlier ceremonies when listening to Celtic music had the double function of commemorating home and inculcating its significance in a child who had never been there:

My mother does not like [my father's violin records] and says they all sound the same so he only plays them when she is out and we are alone. Then it is a time like church, very solemn and serious and sad and I am not supposed to talk but I do not know what else I am supposed to do; especially when my father cries.  
(R 80-81)

Focalization upon a ten-year-old's limited understanding leaves some space for the quiet humour of a mature narrator who recalls the sentimental ritual with mingled feelings; it is hard to tell whether it is genuine concern for his father's grief, or plain boredom that predominates in the recollection. Equally ambivalent are the revelations as to filiation, masculinity, and their connection to home, that await Alex in Cape Breton. At the ferry landing, their small party is greeted by a drunkard's obscene song, causing the outrage of Alex's mother. As a genteel Montrealer, she finds the local filth—at once a class, a gender, and a regional marker—quite insufferable (R 82). A whole story, and a two weeks' lapse, will be necessary for Alex to begin to fathom what he senses but cannot understand about Cape Breton and its sway upon his family.

In both “The Closing Down of Summer” and “The Return,” the traditional family plot refers both to the grave that awaits the characters in the local cemetery and to the course and purpose of their lives. One of its avatars is “the hereditary salmon net,” another beautiful and cumbersome inheritance in “Clearances.” The characters’ names repeat those of the previous generation and it is expected of their descendants that they will replace those whose untimely death has left a vacancy down the pit, or on the fishing boats. In “The Return,” the narrator’s uncle died “buried under tons of rock two miles beneath the sea.” (R 87). As it combines drowning with the shaft accident, the event epitomizes the suffocation that awaits the men, a prospect only liquor may blunt, male alcoholism turning into another, more insidious but just as fatal, form of drowning (R 87, B 317, CDS 207). Belonging *in* Cape Breton is rife with contradictions, the home place being at once life-preserving and suffocating as revealed in the climax of “The Return.” Fresh from the ferry, Alex approaches the new environment with the references of any ten-year-old raised on a staple of boy’s magazines and US frontier adventures.<sup>13</sup> But it is contact with male dirt and toil that signals his entrance into masculinity and his Gaelic lineage:

[My grandfather] places his two big hands on either side of my head and turns it back and forth very powerfully upon my shoulders. I can feel the pressure of his calloused fingers squeezing hard against my cheeks and pressing my ears into my head and I can feel the fine, fine, coal dust which I know is covering my face and I can taste it from his thumbs which are close against my lips. It is not gritty as I had expected but is more like smoke and sand and almost like my mother’s powder. And now he presses my face into his waist and holds me there for a long, long time with my nose bent over against the blackened buckle of his belt. Unable to see or hear or feel or taste or smell anything that is not black; holding me engulfed and drowning in blackness until I am unable to breathe. (R 93-94)

The grandfather’s gesture evokes the baptism rituals which, to Anne McClintock, are so crucial to male land claiming (McClintock 29). Alex experiences an earthy drowning and rebirth through the matrix of two rough hands that impress their own mark and the physicality of place upon him. The sensation, “almost like my mother’s powder,” is associated with a gentle but definitely smothering affection. And as the fine dust saturates the boy’s five senses it causes a rapture that borders on malaise, an excess perceptible in the insistent use of redundancies—“pressure,” “pressing,” “presses”—and a string of isocolons culminating in an alliterative outburst of sibilants and plosives. Because it implies that the embrace of kin and place is so overwhelming it is potentially lethal, the scene calls to mind the tragic reunion of

the *cù mòr glas* with the founder of the line in “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.”

As the dog’s offspring have never had any contact with people, they misunderstand their mother’s boisterous joy for an attack on the man’s supine body; the wild pack then pounces on him and tears him apart under the eyes of his helpless sons. Although the plot partly recalls the cautionary tales in which a foundling brings disaster into the community that gave him shelter, its concern goes beyond the spatial distinctions ancient myth sought to establish between outside and inside, *hostes* and *hospites* (Serres 1983 145-152). Rather, it addresses the endurance of an archaic articulation between man and the environment framed by the title and its echo in the denouement, “we are aware that some beliefs are what others would dismiss as ‘garbage.’ We are aware that there are men who believe the earth is flat and that the birds bring forth the sun.” (B 320) The hounds are emanations from the rock and the sea; their conception on the strand results from the pull cosmic energy exerts on the alternation of tides and seasons as well as on the breeding frenzy of animals (B 312). Of the elements that concurred in their birth, the dog’s offspring has retained the colour, the ruggedness and, above all, a formidable force that is both life-giving and devastating. “The ambiguous force of the *cù mòr glas*” (B 317) has the characteristic duality of the eco-symbols through which human beings have vested meaning in their surroundings, laying the foundations of the “proto-landscape” (Berque 39-40 and 59-60) that predated the advent of a Western aestheticizing gaze, and the subsequent perception and representation of landscape as distinct because distant from the spectator who assesses his dominion over the view he beholds.<sup>14</sup>

Neither in “The Return” nor in “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun” is the environment quite objectified into a landscape: there is not enough distance, or distancing, between the characters and the place they inhabit.<sup>15</sup> In Alex’s eyes, his grandparents are metonymically related to their surroundings, “My grandmother is very tall with hair almost as white as the afternoon’s gulls and eyes like the sea. . . . My grandfather . . . has a white moustache which reminds me of the walrus picture at school” (R 84). The mine is insistently described as having the characteristics of a living organism—“the black gashes of coal mines . . . look like scabs,” (R 82) “green hills with gashes of their coal embedded deeply in their sides” (R 97). In “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” the big grey dog is silhouetted against a land endowed with human attributes as in the dead metaphor “the brow of the hill,” used three times

when the old man is crushed by his own creation (B 313-314). Generations later, as the narrator's father lies in hospital awaiting his vision of the big grey dog of death, his six grey-haired sons sitting around the bed eerily recall the six grey hounds who encircled their ancestor and devoured him, his mangled body materializing the foundation of a line in which genealogy, language, and territory are inextricably interwoven.<sup>16</sup>

"As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" illustrates in an exemplary fashion the iterative patterns that characterize MacLeod's stories. Through them, the refrain of home is made consonant with the territory the characters inhabit. It also leads to a temporal inscription which shuns the linearity of chronological progress for the cosmic cycles that regulate life in its manifold forms, an aspect brilliantly analyzed by Simone Vauthier in the essay she devoted to MacLeod's unconventional use of the present tense.<sup>17</sup> At times, the refrain of home may have the weight of a burden. The emplotment of the character's future limits its accomplishment to the prolongation of a line in which genealogical, linguistic, and territorial strands combine and bind the characters to the island conceived as a verbal extension of the original Highlands.

### **Conserving / conversing**

The continuity of the cultural practices that produce territory, for instance the fashioning of vegetal badges or the ritual sharing of drink and song in "The Closing Down of Summer," is also manifest in the characters' concern for their animals. Dogs, in particular, are tokens of permanence. Being descended from the animal companions of the first exiles, or later imported from the Highlands, they are quite literally "from another time" (B 310). Only careful breeding has ensured the preservation of their original traits requiring that they be kept "in pens during the breeding season so that they might maintain their specialness" (C 421). Here man's control of animal instincts signals a clear line between nurture and nature. No dubious cult of roots can be found in MacLeod's stories, their narrators being rather wary of the confinement ethnicity may involve.<sup>18</sup> In "The Closing Down of Summer," McKinnon's miners are distinguished from rival crews who will not leave their province because "they are imprisoned in the depths of their language" (CDS 203). Equating territorial entrapment with unilingualism,<sup>19</sup> the metaphor derives its ominous overtones from all the cave-ins recounted in "The Closing Down of Summer." "Clearances" similarly features a dilemma between conservation and conversation. For minorities, the preservation of their language is indeed an asset for ethnic cohesion but it is also a liability

that may contribute to their exclusion from wider cultural and economic exchanges:

But in the years between the two world wars they realized when selling their cattle or lambs or their catches of fish, that they were disadvantaged by language. He remembered his grandfather growing red in the face beneath his white whiskers as he attempted to deal with the English-speaking buyers. Sending Gaelic words out and receiving English words back; *most of the words falling somewhere into the valley of incomprehension that yawned between them.* Across the river the French-speaking Acadians seemed the same as did the Mi'kmaq to the east. All of them trapped in the beautiful prisons of the languages they loved. "We will have to do better than this," said his grandfather testily. "We will have to learn English. We will have to go forward." (C 418, my emphasis)

Once again land and language are brought together in a metaphor capturing the isolation caused by ethnic entrenchment. Here the "valley of incomprehension" which renders exchanges impossible finds its counterpart in the "chasm" cutting across generations in "The Return" (R 91). Because it is out of place in the maritime setting, the image jars and draws attention to a decision that links communication with spatial progress. Going forward is indeed emblematic of the dynamics that impel MacLeod's characters and the awareness that cultivating one's distinctiveness within the nation is incompatible with a stubborn clinging to the past.<sup>20</sup>

This paradox is confirmed on two occasions when the return to the Scottish Highlands leads to an encounter with desolation and death immediately followed by the reassertion of Cape Breton's hold upon the character. In "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun," one of the grown-up sons is battered to death outside a Glasgow pub by seven large, grey-haired men in a scene that reiterates his father's fall under the claws and fangs of the island's big grey dogs. In "Clearances," the soldier's excursion to his ancestors' villages holds no revelation for him either, except perhaps an intimation of his own mortality, some of the gravestones bearing his very name (C 420). The narrator's resentment surfaces in a description which refers to the discontents of the past only to foreground the constancy of the power politics that, having caused his community's eviction, brought him back to Europe five generations later, to defend interests in which he still has no part. History is presented as a crushing inevitability, the character's present a puny re-enactment of past oppressions. The passage of time is then irrelevant or, at least, secondary to the territorial clashes that go on pitting individuals and communities against one another. The Highland shepherd implies just as much when he exclaims, "You are from Canada? You are from the Clearances?"

... as if it were a place instead of a matter of historical eviction” (C 419).

MacLeod then drives the point home when he has his ageing character defend his ocean frontage property against European interests whose financial pressure is presented as far more irresistible than the military expansion he fought as a young man in World War II trenches.

It would therefore be inaccurate to mistake the narrators’ concern with the fractures of long ago for nostalgia. The commemorated past is quite uninhabitable and offers little, if any, refuge against the economic uncertainties of the present. In “The Closing Down of Summer,” descriptions of the drought and industrial decay combine into pervasive evocations of ruin. The representation of the island then splits into two irreconcilable extremes: the parched wasteland of the summer coast or the inland cemeteries of the torrential fall. And the slender beach where the characters are waiting for a change in the weather provides the geographical analogy of all the transitions their community is engaged in. In “Clearances,” the diaphoric use of “clear” allows the narrator to collapse three distinct periods into one territorial struggle fusing the evictions, land clearing in Cape Breton and, finally, the pressure exerted on small land owners by the clear-cutting industry on the coast and the extension of the National Park to the north (C 426). The demonstration reaches its conclusion in a self-conscious doubling of the young soldier’s discovery of the Highlands and their “unpopulated emptiness” when the soldier, now an elderly man, registers a similar desertion in Cape Breton (C 420 and 429).

The consequences of territorial strife—eviction, itinerant labour, and, ultimately, immigration—lead to spatial displacements that assert the link between the story’s agent and its action, indexing the structuring role of the search for employment and its consequence, the journey, identified by Chklovski first in the tale, then in the episodic structure of early novels (Chklovski 194). And yet, for all their departures and returns, MacLeod’s stories do not feature the circularity of the completed quest. Neither do they have the verticality of a picaresque itinerary, the ups and downs of the hero’s fortune delaying narrative progress, exacerbating the reader’s involvement, but never representing any serious threat to the ultimate social ascent of the hero. But MacLeod’s narratives are not impelled by the necessity of an accomplishment. Their trajectory is characterized by its periodicity, their plot occupying the interval between a departure and a home-coming, the intermittence of resources and seasonal labour sending the characters from Cape Breton across the country into the wider world and back. Looking

back but moving on, these stories therefore conjoin roots and routes in a lateral dynamics of successive crossings.

### Crossings

In MacLeod's stories, Cape Breton is never pictured as a self-contained, sufficient, and secluded haven. Cut off from the mainland but open and exposed to Atlantic influxes, the island is first and foremost a site of exchanges. In all four stories, insularity transforms any displacement into a crossing of some significance, "a journey on the road to understanding" (CDS 197). In "Clearances," the middle-aged couple's trip to Prince Edward Island turns into a profane pilgrimage to the manufacturer where they have been sending their wool production since the early years of their marriage: "Later his wife was to tell her friends, 'We visited Condon's Woollen Mill on Prince Edward Island,' as if they had visited a religious shrine or a monument of historical significance and, he thought, she was probably right" (C 414). The exclamation receives unexpected rhetorical relief, its iambic lilt getting amplified in the sway of the two equal-length segments that frame the preposition *on*. The wife's fervour suggests two analogies to the narrator—"religious shrine" and "monument of historical significance"—which shun the spectacular or the picturesque to elevate the prosaic and the germane into a local pride.<sup>21</sup> In MacLeod's stories, analogy has an informing function that goes well beyond that of decorative artifice. Because it captures an identity which is not essential but relational, the trope establishes a partial equivalence between the local, insular event and a global, plural field of reference.

In its strict Aristotelian sense, analogy fuses comparison and reason, as it formulates a ratio between four items and two sets of relations ( $a/b = c/d$ ) (Borella 24). The relation therefore allows the conjunction of the similar with the different but also the passage from one plane to another superior sphere, as implied by the idea of elevation contained in the Greek prefix *ana*.<sup>22</sup> Mediaeval theologians then developed complex analogies to approach the ineffability of the divine through a subtle, rigorous gradation of the manifestations of the One in the many. In the secular world of MacLeod's stories, analogy with its related forms, the simile and the comparison, are repeatedly used to inscribe the singular, insular experience within a wider referential frame. The *cù mòr glas*, to cite but one example, is thus related to a Scottish and a West Coast manifestation of the *genus loci*: "For a while she became rather like the Loch Ness monster or the Sasquatch on a smaller scale. Seen but not recorded. Seen when there were no cameras. Seen but

never taken” (B 316). Bridging the geographical and cultural extremity of its components, the analogy isolates in both an identical response of the human mind to a space alive with intensities that have not been objectified into a stable, external spectacle.

In “The Closing Down of Summer,” several references to the Zulus similarly extend the story’s referential and figurative scope beyond the immediate concerns of the crew and the future of their communal lifestyle. Their impressive physicality and the mastery of skills that shake the earth are not the only traits the Zulus share with the miners. Both communities belong to oral cultures in which group cohesion is achieved through ritual. And both have adapted to a fast-changing, increasingly global world where exotic forms of authenticity are all the more valued as they are becoming extinct. In this respect, the Celtic Revival concert and the Zulu dance performance are analogous in their reception by audiences who, well-intentioned though they may be, are unable to comprehend their profound signification. Communication subsequently aborts and each group remains confined within its linguistic and cultural limits, a seclusion to which the narrator reacts with unease, as evidenced in his choice of the word “archaic,” used recurrently in reference to Gaelic and its speakers.

Beyond an outward likeness, analogy then isolates an intractable core of difference into which the narrator yearns to delve. Intellectual apprehension and physical displacement are expressed in identical dynamic terms, the narrator’s failure “to understand [the Zulus] more deeply” being equated with the impossibility “to enter deeply into their experience” or “to penetrate behind the private mysteries of their eyes.” Tracing the occurrences of the adjective “private” in this short story will highlight the pull within a trope which, even as it brings the disparate together, will not assimilate the similar with the same: “Yet in the end it seemed *we too* were only singing to ourselves. . . . songs that are for the most part local and private and capable of losing almost all of their substance in translation” (CDS 196). Ultimately, the analogy between the two communities conveys to the outsider the incommunicability of local experience. And yet the trope circumvents the aporia of the untranslatable, the identity it posits being necessarily relative, circumstantial, possibly debatable:

He looked at the land once cleared by his great-great-grandfather and at the field once cleared by himself. The spruce trees had been there and had been cleared and now they were back again. They went and came something like the tide he thought, although he knew his analogy was incorrect. He looked toward the sea;

somewhere out there, miles beyond his vision, he imagined the point of Ardnamurchan and the land which lay beyond. He was at the edge of one continent, he thought, facing the invisible edge of another. (C 430)

The unexpected syntactic reversal in “they went and came something like the tide” jars and throws into relief the flawed logic that would derive identity from a mere recurrence. The analogy between spruce and tide is rejected as spurious because it confuses man’s intervention in the vegetal cycle with the cycle itself. In doing so, the analogy naturalizes the clash between competing economic interests, and disqualifies the character’s rebellion. The evocation of the Scottish coast has no elegiac, reconciling virtue. Rather it confirms the narrator’s awareness of the profound, essential difference that lies between the bare Highlands and the land of trees, his commitments to the past and the challenges of the present.

Often undermined by the disparity it seeks to limit, its validity threatened by an intrinsic inaccuracy, analogy is regarded with suspicion by the mathematician and the philosopher alike. For the writer, however, analogical approximation may come close to an approach, the trope triggering the associations and correspondences that open onto the multiplicity and complexity of shared experience. In the case of MacLeod’s bilingual characters, Gaelic and English are frequently paired in translation, one language cleaving into the other’s necessary yet inadequate shadow, “‘*M’eudal cù mòr glas,*’ shouted the man in his happiness—*m’eudal* meaning something like dear or darling” (B 314). Because it engages with an intractable nucleus in signification,<sup>23</sup> translation may be regarded as the overarching analogy out of which all the narratorial attempts to convey the bond between the characters and the land proceed. “The Closing Down of Summer,” for instance, repeatedly laments the miners’ failure “to tell it like it is” (CDS 206). The grammatical impropriety of the conjunctive use well captures the narrator’s effort to *stretch* his argument beyond the literal in order to communicate the elation of the crew’s physical engagement with the elemental world:

I suppose I was drawn too by the apparent glamour of the men who followed the shafts. . . . We are always moving downward or inward or forward or, in the driving of our raises, even upward. We are big men engaged in perhaps the most violent of occupations and we have chosen as our adversary walls and faces of massive stone. It is as if the stone of the spherical earth has challenged us to move its weight and find its treasure and we have accepted the challenge and responded with drill and steel and powder and strength and all our ingenuity. In the chill and damp we have given ourselves to the breaking down of walls and barriers. We have sentenced ourselves to enclosures so that we might taste the

giddy joy of breaking through. Always hopeful of breaking through though we never will break free. (CDS 201)

The Conradian overtones of the opening signal the amplification of the miners' labour into an age-old confrontation between man and the elements. The central comparison—"It is as if the stone of the spherical earth has challenged us to move its weight and find its treasure"—initiates a prosopopeia through which Cape Breton's mining tradition is elevated into a geste of man's struggle against a stinting nature, a motif which is not without resonance in the national imagination. The final chiasmus ("breaking down . . . breaking through . . . breaking through . . . break free"), plural abstractions and the syllabic expansion in the series "walls," "barriers," "enclosures," lead the reader to consider in this miniature mining epic the ambivalence in any confinement, at once an obstacle and an enticement to movement. The contradiction, interestingly, is also present in the formal compression that characterizes the genre, an enabling constraint in terms of narrative efficiency and reader participation.

In MacLeod's stories, intensity similarly results from the contradictory pull between iteration and analogy, the territorializing impulse of conservation and the deterritorializing force that operates in conversation but also in literature, each participant turned towards the other, text and reader tuned to the other's reception.<sup>24</sup> Such is the assurance I read in Terry Eagleton's words: "It is not just experience, but language, that takes a writer away from home because there is something curiously rootless about writing itself which is writing only to the degree to which it can survive transplantation from one context to another" (qtd. in Simpson-Housley 123). And MacLeod's stories have survived transplantation. Territorializing refrains do bind their characters to Cape Breton. Grounded in the island/Highland sound continuum, their iterations of home register the passage of time as a mere intermittence, the pause before a repetition—the oscillation of the tide, the flashes of the lighthouse, the occupation of the land, the rise and fall of cultures—all of them *ritornellos*. And yet, in these stories permanence is checked by their narrative's restlessness, an impatience with geographical and temporal constraints, that seeks an outlet in analogical forays into the distance, and the possibilities that lie somewhere, out there. These short stories therefore rely upon a sense of liminality, an in-betweenness to which a Canadian audience is likely to respond because it is emblematic of a shared relation to both region and nation as borderlands, zones of contact but also of interaction (Brown; New 1998), between different communities with competing and yet complementary claims to the land.

## NOTES

- 1 Subsequent page references will appear directly in the text after the following abbreviations: (R) for “The Return,” (CS) for “The Closing Down of Summer,” (B) for “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” and (C) for “Clearances.”
- 2 In her review of *No Great Mischief*, Dianne MacPhee typically winds up citing MacLeod’s claim that “what makes things universal is that they touch a core, a storehouse of human experience and concerns that transcend regions and transcend time” (qtd. in MacPhee 167). Jane Urquhart concurs when she writes that “MacLeod’s stories have been called – albeit with great admiration – traditional, even conservative, by a literary world cluttered with theories and ‘isms’ (Guilford 37).
- 3 Janice Fiamengo uses this heading to introduce her chapter on “Regionalism and urbanism” in the 2004 *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. The phrase, of course, obliquely refers to the communities of the imagination which, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, underlie the formation of nations. At a second remove, it also allows Fiamengo to emphasize the vitality of regional writing in Canada and its lasting role in the definition of a Canadian canon and tradition.
- 4 An anonymous reader has pointed out to me that my field of investigation frequently overlaps with that of David Williams in his *Imagined Nations* (2003). Contrary to Williams, I did not feel the need to elaborate on the different positions of the speech community and the writer writing, or MacLeod’s subtle adaptation of a community’s oral fund to the requirements of a written communication, as these various points have been argued in great detail by Williams himself. My own interest rather lies in MacLeod’s elaborate written style and the rhetorical strategies his stories develop to bring the local to converse with the distant. My initial intention was to understand why and how MacLeod could be widely read and appreciated by people who do not necessarily feel bound by clan cohesion, a solidarity with, or even a nostalgia for, Cape Breton’s Gaelic past.
- 5 I have amended Brian Massumi’s translation and restored the word “short story” where he opted for the word “novella,” presumably to foreground the idea of a recent development in the course of events, the latter being implicit in French as *nouvelle* may refer either to a short story or to a piece of news. The original reads as follows: “L’essence de la ‘nouvelle’, comme genre littéraire, n’est pas très difficile à déterminer: il y a nouvelle lorsque tout est organisé autour de la question ‘Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé? Qu’est-ce qui a bien pu se passer?’ Le conte est le contraire de la nouvelle, parce qu’il tient le lecteur halestant sous une tout autre question: qu’est-ce qui va se passer? . . . Quant au roman, lui, il s’y passe toujours quelque chose bien que le roman intègre dans la variation de son perpétuel présent vivant (durée) des éléments de nouvelle et de conte.” (Deleuze et Guattari 235)
- 6 The *OED* defines the word as “the action of beginning a note on a normally unaccented part of the bar and sustaining it into the normally accented part, so as to produce the effect of shifting back or anticipating the accent; the shifting of accent so produced.”
- 7 The translator of *A Thousand Plateaus* entitled this essay “Of the Refrain,” an approximation that does not quite capture the melodious and obsessive connotations of the *ritornello* that gave the French *ritournelle* in the original version.
- 8 Michel Serres explains that sound does not really take place but rather *occupies* place: “Though its source may remain ill-defined, its reception is wide and all-encompassing. Sight delivers a presence but sound does not. Sight distances, music touches, noise

besets” (Serres 1985 53, my translation). *A Thousand Plateaus* similarly emphasizes the privilege of the ear, “Colors do not move a people. Flags can do nothing without trumpets. Lasers are modulated on sound. The refrain is sonorous par excellence, but it can as easily develop its force into a sickly sweet ditty as into the purest motif, or Vinteuil’s little phrase” (Deleuze and Guattari 348).

- 9 “On appelle ritournelle tout ensemble de matières d’expression qui trace un territoire, et qui se développe en motifs territoriaux, en paysage territoriaux. . . . En un sens restreint, on parle de ritournelle quand l’agencement est sonore ou dominé par le son” (Deleuze et Guattari 397).
- 10 “‘Territory’ is a designation of claim over land, of *jurisdiction*, the power to *say the law*” (New 21).
- 11 *Place* has no satisfactory equivalent in French, its translation as *lieu* lacking the oppositional articulation *place* derives from its assonance with *space* (Staszak 252-253). This may account for the reliance of French geography (and Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy) upon the notion of *territoire* to address the specificities of the local.
- 12 In “The Road to Rankin’s Point,” and “Vision,” singing the song “Never More Shall I Return” (*Island* 158-159 and 346) has an evident metonymic function for the characters. Performing the song together is a clear substitute for inhabiting the lost land, an instance of reterritorialization in song.
- 13 “I do not know what I’m supposed to do until my cousins come back and surround me *like the covered wagons around the women and children of the cowboy shows*, when the Indians attack. . . . My almost-attackers wait awhile, scuffing their shoes on the ashy sidewalk, and then they separate and allow us to pass *like a little band of cavalry* going through the mountains.” (R 89, my emphasis)
- 14 Analyzing the ambivalence of the ancient Celts’ response to the forest, Augustin Berque draws upon the constitutive duality of Gilbert Durand’s archetypes, their signification being either positive or negative depending upon the diurnal or nocturnal regime in which they are envisaged.
- 15 I am using the word “landscape” in the restricted sense Augustin Berque has defined to distinguish the notion from any unspecified reference to the natural environment. For Berque, a landscape is not an object per se but a “*médiance*,” i.e. the outcome of a series of mediations between a perceiving subject, perceived surroundings and a fund of cultural, social and historical representations (Berque 16-19).
- 16 This passage is highly reminiscent of the foundational rituals in Ancient Greece and Rome where the fragmented body of the victim was shared by the community, giving birth to a sense of the collective through political representation and art (Serres 1983 118).
- 17 Although she concentrates upon one specific story, Vauthier’s valuable conclusions throw considerable light on the frequent and spectacular shifts from the preterite to the present that characterize MacLeod’s writing in general. Laurent Lepaludier has also drawn attention to the iterative value of the present tense in his analysis of “The Closing Down of Summer.”
- 18 “Second Spring,” a story revolving around a young boy’s dream of breeding a prize-winning calf, is a wonderfully comic refutation of ideals of purity. The boy sets off on the island’s roads, determined to take his precious cow to the perfect bull which, he knows, is available in a nearby farm. As Hazard Lepage leading his stallion on Alberta’s tricky roads in Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*, the boy will have little choice but to adjust to the vagaries of animal desire.

- 19 By using the adjective “unilingual,” MacLeod ironically suggests that, for many, bi- or multilingualism is the norm, as in the following description: “The real estate agent stood listlessly between them while the July sun contributed to the perspiration forming on his brow. He looked slightly irritated at being banished to what seemed like a state of unilingual loneliness” (C 428).
- 20 For a fine analysis of the inscription of *No Great Mischief* within the wider frame of the nation, see David Williams’ “From Clan to Nation.”
- 21 The narrator’s awareness and implicit refusal of the pastoral alternative is just as interesting: “This was in the time before the Anne of Green Gables craze and they did not really know what people were supposed to visit on Prince Edward Island” (C 414).
- 22 “La notion *analogia* . . . exprime l’idée d’un rapport (*logos*) entre ce qui est haut et ce qui est en bas (verticalité), parce que ce qui est en bas est comme ce qui est en haut (répétition), avec, éventuellement l’idée d’un renversement (le plus petit comme analogue du plus grand)” (Borella 25).
- 23 “The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation that goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation. Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.” (Benjamin 75).
- 24 In this respect, it is not indifferent that the etymology of the noun “trope” should be a Greek verb meaning “to turn,” referring to the rhetorical twist given to expression to achieve greater effect and perhaps also, this is my own interpretation, to the pull carefully-wrought statements exert on the reader’s attention.

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