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September 2008



Writing to Tell, Telling to Live:
Reading the Storyteller in Alistair MacLeod's Short Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the way Alistair MacLeod's short fiction formally and thematically invokes the presence of Walter Benjamin's oral "Storyteller" figure/and culture, elaborated in his 1936 essay, in order to ask broader questions about the role of storytelling—oral and written—in contemporary culture. The essay analyzes the cultural implications for resuscitating this storyteller figure. I develop a paradigm to explore the "use" of stories by synthesizing "found" ideas drawn from various cultural sources: Benjamin's affirmation of the *use* of story, the rhetorical criticism of Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams' searching analyses of the individual, culture and education, and finally cultural philosophies of narrative by Richard Kearney and Richard Rorty. This paradigm is then tested in five MacLeod stories.

I show how MacLeod's stories, in foregrounding the links between writing and orality, invite us to reevaluate the role of orality and literature. MacLeod's texts demonstrate how narrative and storytelling encompassing a newly visioned and embodied subject, re-grounded in the matrix of family/culture/history, can narrate us through fragmentation and loss towards a new cultural vision. Contemporary manifestations of Benjamin's "Storyteller" figure discovered in MacLeod's texts are seen to reflect the many existential sources of story and the culture-shaping energy that story is. Rehearsing the active shaping and historicizing of self and culture through narrative, the stories work to renew our sense of the fundamental nature and cultural use of story. These conclusions have significant implications for how we inherit and carry forward from generation to generation our location or dislocation within personhood, family and culture.

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Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

Walt Whitman, "Beginning My Studies"



Introduction ~ In Search of a Narrative

The truth about stories is that that's all that we are. Thomas King

This essay is a response to the short fiction of contemporary Canadian writer Alistair MacLeod. The depth of passionate communication in MacLeod's language and literary form seizes the reader by the collar and sustains his or her attention through its sheer gravity. The sense of being both storied and personally (lyrically) addressed by a voice at once urgent and still, deeply concerned to authenticate existence, compels this reader to listen and engage. Not from any unconditional literary adulation which MacLeod may or may not be guilty of attracting, but rather as an effect of that rare saturnine tone conveying a consciousness steeped in experience, that inherently speaks to a kind of listening and a kind of feeling not much called upon these days, even in reading.

It's not that we can glibly identify. There is no comfortable mirroring of common contemporary experience, for women or likely for most men either. No clever dialogue, sexy themes or thrilling settings to merry the reader along in that postmodern, death-defying, hothouse happiness and desire fulfillment our manic North American culture seems most of all to wish to inculcate. Psychologically and culturally these texts pull us down below "all that" to a level of interiority and feeling which little discourse in our culture any longer feeds.

This essay considers how MacLeod's short fiction can be read as containing significant implications for the cultural modalities of narrative and storytelling. As MacLeod himself states plainly: ". . . story has obviously existed longer than literacy has...so there are all kinds of people who can tell stories, who can't read or write" (Kruk 170). I examine the ways MacLeod's stories can be seen to establish the sense and authority of Walter Benjamin's oral storyteller figure -

elaborated in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller” - in his contemporary mass-produced works of short fiction, by tracing correspondences between the two sources. I further consider the cultural consequences of MacLeod’s resuscitation of a very old-fashioned form of storytelling for contemporary society. I propose one of these consequences to be an affirmation of the human subject, yet a subject which the stories “rewrite” as an ongoing process, whose being and meaning are inextricably bound with personal/familial and cultural history. MacLeod’s stories refute the either/or between the grand narratives of modernity and their alternatives in postmodernism. MacLeod’s is neither the bourgeois subject nor the decentred linguistically-determined one of postmodernism, but one whose meaning and reality are in flux and to which he/she is subject, as well as being the subject. Though this subject is most often a masculine one, it does not pretend to speak for a feminine one nor does it pre-empt it.

My primary source will be Macleod’s *Island* volume, which contains all his short stories. I will limit my investigation to five of the sixteen short stories: “In the Fall” (1973), “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” (1974), “The Road to Rankin’s Point” (1976), “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984), and “Vision” (1986). All references in the section “Encounter with the Stories,” unless otherwise noted, are to *Island*.

Making Use ~ A Way of Reading

Critical and Cultural Approaches

I cite several inspiring critical and cultural approaches in this essay through which I have arrived at a concern with the notion of use in encountering literature. Firstly, Irish critic Terry Eagleton's arguments in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* and elsewhere, for a political criticism based on the recognition that all criticism is political, that is, saturated in its own values whether it acknowledges them or not, have been an inspiration (169-80). Eagleton would relocate literature within the wider field of discursive practices and believes that literary theory can be applied to all cultural discourses and signifying systems as forms of power and performance, rather than to "literature" as a privileged object. To this end, he proposes the revival of rhetoric - the original form of criticism - whose concern would be for the kinds of *effects* such discourses produce and how they produce them. So from this perspective, the point is not to define the study of literature in terms of its method or its object, but in terms of why we should want to engage with it. Eagleton feels that such rhetorical criticism can incorporate much from the concepts of literary theory (for instance, its belief that discourse can be humanly transformative shares much with liberal humanism). At least liberal humanism, Eagleton reminds us, can say that it studies literature because it makes the reader a better person. The weakness of such liberal humanism, for Eagleton, is that it considers this in isolation from a determining social context, in narrow and abstract terms, that is, ignoring that a person in our time in Western society is largely responsible for the oppression in which many people on the planet live. In short, taking a cue from liberal humanism, literature can have a *use*, much as that idea has been problematic. The history of the study of literature has after all been fraught with debate over

whether either the object – or the study of it – is of any use at all beyond pleasure or entertainment.

In scanning Eagleton's survey of the rise of English as a literary subject, any notion of use seems harnessed to the dominant ideology of the time. Eagleton first establishes that literature itself cannot be defined separately from any value-system. He chronicles how our current idea of English begins when literature during Romanticism evolved a privileged idea of the aesthetic as it strove to distinguish the creative individual from an increasingly utilitarian society, so that literature became separate from political analysis and awareness. Creative literature and art now became by implication "useless," an end in themselves. Literature became an alternative ideology, resolving things into a unity that cannot be found in real life. From the Victorian period onwards, as society became disenchanted and the aristocracy was threatened, this was extended by thinkers like Matthew Arnold who saw literature as the perfect replacement for religion. Its "use" then, was as a means of ideologically controlling the middle classes, raising them to the best of their culture. To this end literature was first spread in state-established schools and working-class colleges, and this ran parallel to the first admission of women to schools. Literature became the "poor man's classics." Peter Barry cites Professor F.D. Maurice at King's College, who introduced the study of set books and lay down some of principles of liberal humanism " 'to emancipate us . . . from notions and habits peculiar to our own age', connecting us instead with 'what is fixed and enduring'" (qtd. in Barry 13). English Literature came to be seen as the property of the Middle class and the expression of their values.

Eagleton describes the emergence of liberal humanism:

Literature would rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed –

namely, that of their masters. It would communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action. (*LT* 22)


It was only after the First World War that the study of English infiltrated the establishments like Oxford and Cambridge as imperialist Britain turned to the nationalist sense of English literature and its organic tradition of society. With the ruling class shaken, thinkers like F.R. Leavis began to see literature as the saving humanist influence. Under the influence of the critical journal *Scrutiny* launched by the Leavises in 1932, literature became a touchstone: "...less an academic subject than a spiritual exploration coterminous with the fate of civilization itself" (*LT* 29). But in the end, claims Eagleton, the Scrutineers were inescapably elitist. Though valuably bringing about the early version of cultural studies and recognizing the potentially transformative power of education, they did not go so far as to attempt to change the social order, and in Eagleton's words they "...betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College. 'Ordinary' people seemed acceptable if they were seventeenth-century cowherds or 'vital' Australian bushmen" (*LT* 31).

Parallel with these developments was the appearance of T.S. Eliot from America who "rewrote" the history of English literature, positing the Great Tradition, which again depoliticized literature and centralized the idea of restoring mythic, sensuous language that connected through to a supposed fundamental nature and was also connected with the worship of agrarian organic society. Leavis's work, through the Cambridge critic I.A. Richards, eventually led to the American New Criticism, which promoted close reading and further isolation of literature from its historical and social contexts. This technical, scientific approach dovetailed

with the needs of America's large population and the imperative for literature to prove itself there against science, which was the dominant field of knowledge. It was also a recipe for political inertia. Consequently from the 1930s to 60s, in America, literature was separated from language study, historical context and philosophical questions. This approach grew so entrenched that it came to be perceived as the only criticism that had ever existed.

The decades of Theory from the 1960s to the 90s saw literature redevelop links back with philosophy as a reaction against liberal humanism, forcing it to acknowledge its value-laden foundations and to recognize that there has existed a body of theoretical work for many centuries. Literary theory in fact long pre-dates the literary criticism of individual works. For instance, the idea that literature is to provide pleasure was one from the distant past. But as Eagleton sees it, much theory has been a flight into anything but the concrete: "...the poem itself, the organic society, eternal verities, the imagination, the structure of the human mind, myth, language and so on" (*LT* 171).

Pursuing his idea of rhetorical criticism, Eagleton continues: "Radical critics are also open-minded about questions of theory and method.... Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable" (184). For Eagleton, what we choose and reject depends on what we are practically trying to do. Radical critics are the same as any critics in this, he emphasizes, except that their particular social priorities see them labeled as "ideological." Such a criticism may have many different goals, for instance, exploring how the signifying systems of a literary text or a film produce certain ideological effects, or fostering a sense of linguistic potential in children denied it by their social conditions ("utopian" uses of literature and a rich tradition of utopian thought which Eagleton believes should not be dismissed



as “idealist”). Another goal could be the active enjoyment of artifacts or the production of one’s own discourse. Within all this activity, the study of what is currently called literature would have its place, but such texts would be rewritten, recycled, inserted into different relations and practices. Eagleton reiterates that they always have been, but that the word *literature* prevents us from recognizing this fact.

Eagleton makes clear that such a strategy has far-reaching institutional implications. Literature would cease to be separated off from other cultural and social practices. He is not troubled by such a possibility as he sees those who live by culture to be privilege.¹ He reminds us that literary critics and English departments are custodians of a discourse and that their task is to preserve this discourse. Discourses of all kinds, from film to advertising to natural science, produce effects which are linked to the maintenance or transformation of systems of power. The power-relations between the literary –academic institution and those who are selectively admitted to it, largely determine what can be done with or said about literature. (*LT* 177)

To the degree that the above is true, literature can scarcely be approached as or perceived as “useful.” Clearly the idea of use, or of literature’s connection to ordinary life or to the reader as an agent of meaning, has not been much explored or disseminated within literary culture since the Victorians. More fundamentally we can see that literature – how we define it, how we approach and respond to it – has been largely determined by the educational institutions that exist and hold power within any given culture. It seems timely in light of the above, to attempt to turn the concept of “use” on its head, to revision and expand it as a notion that both criticism and literature can be actively useful to us as self-determining readers, citizens, and critics. I intend the term to function here in more of a refractory and suggestive way, in part because it is far more about intention than method and can be developed in many different directions, and in part

because the term has many dovetailing and overlapping applications in this study of MacLeod's work.

Firstly, it relates to Benjamin's key observation that the story always contains "something useful." In the wake of postmodernism, it seems essential that literature can be engaged with as "useful" for many possible purposes. Writing such as MacLeod's in which storytelling is foregrounded both formally and thematically, presents itself as valuable material for consideration in this regard as it invites us to re-trace the links between literature and story, and to re-consider their shifting definitions and social contexts throughout history. Another instance of "use" then, is that MacLeod's work instructs us broadly on the use of storytelling/narrative itself and implicitly, by its drawing of the links between literature and storytelling, on the use of literature. We can consider the potential of using literature as we use story, so that, inverting the past Eagleton discusses where literature has been used as an instrument by one group over another, or has been treated as a reality unto itself, we become subjects who *use it*.

In turn, there are the particular effects or "uses" of MacLeod's individual stories as will be analyzed here. The subject as written by MacLeod is a subject that can use, rather than *be used*. In a culture such as ours where art most typically serves an entertainment or decorative function, excepting overtly spiritual or religious art/practices, or certain functional art forms such as architecture or pottery, we have no experience of the sacred or wisdom culture where the spoken word, dance, costume, visual and sculptural art, are integral aspects of cultural expression and community. (Native cultures of North America are of course, excepted here). MacLeod's stories themselves depict such a participatory culture, where Gaelic song and its performative aspects are woven into family and everyday life, so that losing it is like losing a limb. (Perhaps the closest our society gets to this in the case of literature is through live readings by authors, in

the marginal renaissance of oral storytelling, which occurs largely in an entertainment context.) The culture thematized in MacLeod's stories seems fittingly mirrored and encountered with a critical approach which actively incorporates the notion and spirit of use.

The notion of use finds further support and logic in the critical and dialogic recognition that literature or storytelling itself is anyway, never neutral. Irish philosopher and critic Richard Kearney reminds us: "Every narrative bears some evaluative charge regarding the events narrated and the actors featured in the narration" (155). Or as Voloshinov (Bakhtin's counterpart) expresses it:

In point of fact, the linguistic form...exists for the speaker only in the context of specific utterances, exists, consequently, only in a specific ideological context. In actuality, we never say or hear *words*, we say or hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behaviour or ideology.* That is the way we understand words, and we can respond only to words that engage us behaviorally or ideologically. (Voloshinov 70)

An approach to literature and narrative from a more philosophical quarter seems one of the most direct and pragmatic in suggesting the multivalent use of literature. Writing on the ethical role of storytelling (a position which of course assumes a subject with at least a narrative identity and capable of ethically responsible action), Richard Kearney reminds us that our interestedness in stories, history, communication "...is essentially ethical in that what we consider *communicable* and *memorable* is also what we consider *valuable*" (154). He cites the philosopher Richard Rorty as arguing for a society "inspired by narrative imagination rather than doctrinal sermons or abstract treatises." ² Kearney writes:

Indeed, Rorty goes so far as to suggest that narratives not only help to humanize aliens, strangers and scapegoats – as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did, for example, regarding white prejudices against blacks – but also to make each one of us into an ‘agent of love’ sensitive to the particular details of others’ pain and humiliation. (155)

Though some, like Kearney, may believe that ethics has an ontological foundation revealed in and through narrative imagination, and others like Rorty, may see no way for signifying the extra-linguistic reality behind representation, so that all writing is description, Mark Dooley points out that this does not diminish the ethical importance of narrative for either position. Though even our moral norms and language are a cultural inheritance, so that all is a matter of sets of description competing against other sets of descriptions, Dooley writes: “...narrative has the capacity to expose us to many alternative self-descriptions” (Gratton and Manoussakis 174). For Dooley, commenting on Kearney and Rorty in the final chapter of this text, none of these descriptions is any closer to the intrinsic nature of the self. Rather, he agrees with Rorty on the implications of this:

. . . making the turn from a religious and philosophical culture to a literary one requires that we read *all* writers (e.g., literary, philosophical and religious) not as those whose descriptions of ourselves and our world are accurate representations, but as those who believe that “redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of the human imagination....” (Gratton and Manoussakis 176)

Dooley further elaborates:

Such a literary culture of the type proposed by Rorty would not deploy literature in an effort to extrapolate the universal from the particular, or reality from appearance. It would be deployed for the purpose of getting in touch with as many particulars as

possible. What gives literature its ethical force is not that it is morality's own medium but that the reader can become acquainted with people and situations that traditionally have appeared alien or strange. (Gratton and Manoussakis 176) ³

Finally, Dooley quotes Rorty himself to great effect in the notes to his chapter:

...Religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance.... Novel readers, by contrast, are seeking redemption from insensitivity rather than from impiety or irrationality. They may not know or care whether there is a way things really are, but they worry about whether they are sufficiently aware of the needs of others. Viewed from this angle, the hegemony of the novel can be viewed as an attempt to carry on through Christ's suggestion that love is the only law. (qtd. in Gratton and Manoussakis 179) ⁴

Another cultural resource meaningful to this essay has been the writing of Raymond Williams, the British cultural materialist and theorist who wrote prolifically on culture for several decades in the mid-1900s and beyond. His writings on the individual, culture and education have proved to be illuminating and fruitful in drawing out the significant cultural themes and implications to be read in MacLeod's work as we will see in the section below, "The Individual and Culture in MacLeod." I have found Williams' work to be a truly humane and humanist inspiration, within its gendered and historical context.

Further to the example of Voloshinov cited above, the dialogical criticism derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly as elucidated and revisioned through the writing of Lynne Pearce, and supplemented there with recognition of the importance of the text-reader relationship, has provided significant background reading. The idea of the dialogic contract, which pre-empts all utterances, spoken or written, seems particularly manifest in MacLeod's

work. The texts under consideration, as we will see, bring home powerfully the dialogic tenet that all utterance is made from within a concrete socio-historic context and also precisely demonstrate the Bakhtinian subject as one which is inherently social, formed through an ongoing process of dialogic exchange.

Pearce points out how, in a world she sees as split open by the modern obsession with “difference,” commentators have observed across the writings of the Bahktin group the constant focus on relationality between binary terms; that is, Bakhtin honors *both* things and the relations between them (7). MacLeod’s works are rooted precisely in assumption of that relationality. Pearce emphasizes the plural nature of the dialogic subject as well as the fact that dialogues can involve more than two people. In considering the text-reader relationship, which she notes as absent in Bakhtin’s work, she also suggests the importance of considering who a text is *written for*, that is, how the addressee is constructed and the possibility of many shifting subject positionings throughout a text.

MacLeod’s work with its intimate first-person address, foregrounds this aspect of a text, particularly in “Vision,” where the speaker and listener positions are continually shifting within the story and we are able to observe how the content of even what may seem to be the same story, is continually determined and re-shaped by the intent of the teller towards the particular listener. Pearce stresses that the dialogic interdependence of the speaker and addressee is inscribed by *power* and that acknowledgment of this is vital to a radical, politicized understanding of dialogic principle. (She shows that this principle has been problematically avoided in much contemporary interpretation of Bakhtin’s work) (4).

Often in MacLeod we experience a narrator who is openly in anxious and conflicted dialogue with his own consciousness and nature, and with the power of historical and cultural

imperatives. In mediating these forces, the narrators transparently address the reader as equal and mirror, effectively dissolving the division between self and other. Through an intonation that is participatory rather than “confessional,” the narrators expose the fragility of their search and imply that it is humanly shared by all of us. Speaking through as much as to us, the narrators affirm a flow of intersubjective consciousness, self/as other. The effect is often more like an extended lyric poem, as if we each are a single listener, each the many in the one, receiving the story for our own.

Bakhtin’s suggestive concept of the *chronotope*, his term for how time/space are represented in a literary text (derived from Einstein’s theory of relativity), can also be richly utilized in reading MacLeod’s stories, particularly “Rankin’s Point,” “Vision” and “Island.” Bakhtin tended to use the term in the sense of different chronotypes applying to different genres, such as the “adventure chronotype” or the “idyllic chronotype” and also to other subcategories such as the “chronotype of meeting” or the “chronotype of the threshold.” He later explored, in relation to more recent literature, the possibility of multiple chronotypes within a single text and the complex interactions among them, inscribed by power in the same way as dialogic voices. Extending Bakhtin’s ideas, Pearce notes that though it has nothing to do with verbal dialogue, the concept is structured, like his model of the dialogic utterance, as a relationship between two fixed terms. She further observes the structural similarities between the polyphonic text and the *polychronotopic* text, noting how this shows that the dialogic principle is not confined to linguistic representations (18). In formulating a gendered element for the concept of the chronotype (Bakhtin’s concept was gender neutral), she analyzes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a polychronotopic text. MacLeod’s texts, like Morrison’s, manifest the concept beyond Bakhtin’s formulation, in that they assume that not only author and reader can move between chronotypes,

but that characters too, have access to chronotypes beyond their immediate present and can move across them.

Further informing, but less prominent approaches in the essay regarding the importance of the text/reader relationship have been the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser and the cultural theory of Mikko Lehtonen, who, in his *The Cultural Analysis of Texts*, shows meaning as always in formation through the intersection of reader, text and context.

Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller"

One can ask whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether or not it is his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and others, in a solid, useful and unique way. Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller" celebrates the archetypal figure of the oral storyteller (as reflected in this instance through the example of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov). Benjamin felt the "great, simple" outlines of the storyteller had become knowable or isolable to us at this time because of the distance that society had attained from such a figure. Since the First World War especially, the nature of experience had been shattered. "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly," writes Benjamin (Arendt 83). Benjamin's nostalgically framed essay calls "for a return to the 'living immediacy' of a tribal culture, one that fosters the sensuous appreciation of the mythic and allegorical." Nigel Wood comments: "In 'The Storyteller' Benjamin's embrace of the atavistic is far from an antiquarian impulse, as he holds it up as the only available route back to wonder and our instinctive selves" (Lodge and Wood, *Modern Criticism and Theory* 10).

Benjamin links us to the root of story as originating both from those who have stayed at home and know the local tales and traditions of a place, and those who go away and return. He sees these figures as embodied in two archaic archetypes of the storyteller: the resident tiller of the soil and the trading seaman, who would encounter each other in the medieval artisan class. Benjamin stresses an orientation towards practical interests that is characteristic of many born storytellers: “All this points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful” (Arendt 86). Further, he notes, such storytelling is itself an artisan form of communication. But Benjamin sees the communicability of experience decreasing:

In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for othersTo seek this counsel, one would have to be able to first tell the story. . . .Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. (86)

For Benjamin, this is not just a “symptom of decay” or a “modern” symptom:”

It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history. . . that have quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.” (Arendt 86)

He sees the rise of the novel as the earliest symptom of the process whose end is the decline of storytelling, as unlike other prose literature, it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled and cannot counsel others” (Arendt 87). This is opposed to the storyteller who takes what he tells from experience – his own or others – and makes it the experience of those who are listening.

Experience, Benjamin tells us, has been replaced by information, which is required to be verifiable and plausible, so that it is incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. Information lives only for its moment, while a story preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. The broad dissemination of information means every event comes to us already shot through with explanation. “Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (89). In Benjamin’s view this is essential: “There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis” (90).

He reiterates that storytelling is always the art of repeating stories. However, listening and assimilation require a state of relaxation that is becoming rarer. The root of listening is in the “boredom” contained in the rhythm of work - the art of repeating stories is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener, the more memory is impressed upon. Benjamin cites Paul Valery as significantly sketching the craftsmanship of storytelling. Just as the role of the hand in production was reduced, so the “place it filled in storytelling lies waste.” Benjamin is speaking of the roles body and gesture played in storytelling. Now, as Valery sees it: “ ‘ . . . Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated’ ” (qtd. in Arendt 92). Thus the gift of retaining and repeating stories is lost. Benjamin adds that even storytelling has become abbreviated by the evolution of the “short story,” “ . . . which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers. . . ” of narrative through a variety of retellings. (92) Valery is further cited: “ ‘ It is almost as if the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort’ ” (qtd. in Arendt 92).

The significance of memory, the theme of stories containing intelligence from afar – whether spatially or temporally - and the authority of death and eternity are all delineated as sources of story. For Benjamin, Valéry’s idea of the decline of eternity is significantly related to the alteration of cultural attitudes towards death, which in turn is closely bound with our diminishing ability to communicate experience. He discusses how bourgeois society gradually removed the presence of death. “Dying was once a public process . . . and a most exemplary one . . .” (93). For Benjamin, the authority of death is at the heart of the story as a person’s knowledge or wisdom first assumes transmissible form at the moment of death. This fact seems analogous to the way narrative is structured and yields meaning, by virtue of its end-point.

Terry Eagleton notes however, in *How to Read a Poem*: “It is significant that political radicals like Benjamin, however, did not *only* mourn the decay of experience in the age of mechanical reproductionOn the contrary, radicals like him knew that the death of certain forms of experience meant the possibility of bringing others to birth” (20). Unlike the modernists who saw such fragmentation of experience as a catastrophe, many such as avant-garde artists recognized that a new poetics seemed possible. The emptying of the human subject may be the prelude to something new.

Considered within its historical context and parameters as a gender and culture-specific text, Benjamin’s essay stands as a valuable poetic geography and cultural document of the primal human act of storytelling. The essay informs and inspires many diverse followers in the lineage of storytelling. In *The Knowing Body: The Artist as Storyteller in Contemporary Performance*, Louise Steinman affirms the essay’s relevance:

In oral cultures elders are revered as the keepers of knowledge. It is their stories which contain the wisdom it is necessary to know for survival and for death. I see in performers

today a desire to listen to those stories and to apply that wisdom, to confront the experience of death and all that it implies about our own lives and our own perilous times. The deaths which impel us to find meaning in life may be the deaths of those near to us. Or we may be so impelled by cultural death—such as the Holocaust—which attains the dimension of myth . . . Or it could be simply the sense of cultural loss in our civilization as a whole. (133)

I will show in the essay that follows the correspondences between Benjamin's storyteller and the storytelling of MacLeod and demonstrate why an essay written in 1936 might be relevant to this work, and how MacLeod's storyteller also renews the human subject. We will see how Alistair MacLeod's texts subvert Benjamin's claim above that even storytelling has become abbreviated by the evolution of the "short story" which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that "slow piling of layers of narrative that comes with many re-tellings."

The Voice of the Storyteller ~ Telling Singing Writing

Contextualizing MacLeod

David Creelman in his *Setting in the East* describes Maritime literature after the 1920s as largely characterized by the tensions of “nostalgia and hesitancy,” at first expressed more in the romantic genre inherited from Europe and gradually evolving into the realism which is the dominant genre of the region. As the decades wore on, the tendency was to move away from the nostalgic elements of the earlier writing, allowing more focus on the real problems of the mid-20th century and the uncertainty of the future. Though government support poured into the area in the 60s and subsidized developments in health, education, and social services, the area has continued to be defined by its heavy unemployment and underdevelopment and so continues to have the repeated experience of loss and hesitancy around the future.

Creelman tends to classify the region’s literature in terms of its place on an ideological continuum from liberalism to communitarian liberalism to conservatism, the latter expressing more nostalgia and belief that the freedom and identity of the individual depends on successful integration in a stable culture. He emphasizes that the element of nostalgia in the culture/literature is “doubled” by a layer in which the nostalgia is manufactured and exploited by the market to create this impression of the area, whether or not such a society ever actually existed, and suggests that there is good reason to question whether it ever did. Ernest Buckler is the writer considered to have successfully linked the forces of nostalgia, celebrating the rural culture that existed in the Anapolis Valley just as it was fading out under modernist and urban influences, in his 1952 novel *The Mountain and the Valley*.

In this historical lineage, Creelman locates MacLeod in a chapter with Alden Nowlan, stressing that both grew up in communities affected by the economic downturn of the 20s and

30s and both produced most of their fiction after the region was reshaped by the economic reforms of the late 60s. For Creelman this means that their early work at least was characterized less by nostalgia, and more by hesitation or even alienation. The power of memory to overcome this distance, he suggests, appears only in their later works. Creelman describes MacLeod as beginning with a more liberal, egalitarian outlook for the individual with his early stories in the 70s, and then gradually moving to a more nostalgic and conservative position:

The characters of MacLeod's later stories anchor themselves in their traditional community, either the immediate community that surrounds them or the community that is accessible to them across time; as the role of the stable community is emphasized, its enduring structures, hierarchies, and gender roles are also valorized. (*East* 137)

Bracketing any discussion about why the individual's interweaving with his/her community should customarily be defined as "conservative" with the term's customary connotations (an assumption not present in this essay), I suggest that MacLeod's work takes place beyond such dualities as modernist/postmodernist or liberal/conservative and occurs rather at the boundary and reconciliation points of these conventional divisions and is more concerned with the negotiations of human consciousness and life in these border areas. Specifically his texts enact a revelational space where the subject simultaneously encounters his/her self, mediates a relationship to his or her inherited culture, and transmits "experience" through narrative. Though it may not always be "the old recounting to the young" and though such narrative may, as Benjamin wrote, be "removed from the realm of living speech," these narrators nonetheless are registering their intrinsic relation to that "living speech," conveying immediate experience in a new/old way and enabling us at the same time "to see a new beauty in what is vanishing" (or has vanished.)

Alternately Christopher Gittings writes: “The thematizing of what New calls the ‘historicity of heritage’ is manifest in the Scottish-Canadian genealogical explorations which characterize such Canadian works as Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* and Alistair MacLeod’s short story “The Road to Rankin’s Point”” (1). Gittings further contextualizes MacLeod’s writing with that of Scottish Clearance writers Iain Chrichton Smith and Neil Gunn. Gittings writes:

These genealogical explorations. . . are especially evocative of the genealogies Canadian critic and author Robert Kroetsch describes {*Treachery of Words* 65} as ‘the narratives of discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even.’

Kroetsch writes that as victims of such a history, ‘we wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions.’ (Kroetsch qtd. in Gittings 2)

Gittings suggests that the narrators in these works “...return to these moments of disjunction to recover parts of themselves and their cultures through a reconstruction of the lost peoples in their ancestral pasts from the remnants of oral narrative, music, and the ruins which mark the landscape” (2).

The critical articles examining MacLeod’s body of work focus variously and usefully on its mythic-elegaic character and its postcolonial or philosophical themes. In her postcolonial analysis, Simone Vauthier sees MacLeod’s “Vision” as “. . . adding to the world’s story-body a version of the old themes of blindness and insight, loss and uncertainty, the old needs to memorialize and celebrate, which in its artistic achievement becomes an invitation to try and enlarge, if possible, our vision” (*Mapping Vision* 171). Kroetsch writes:

The very ability to see ourselves is based on the narrative mode: the I telling a story of I, of we, of the they who mirror us. We name, from the world's story-body, the recurrences and obsessions and strategies that become, in turn, the naming of a culture called Canada. (70)

“Story-body” is an apt phrase, as in this essay I would like to focus needed attention on how MacLeod's works function above all, to “story” us across the continuum: personally, bodily, and culturally.

Reading Benjamin's Storyteller in MacLeod

There are three prominent aspects of MacLeod's work through which correspondences with Benjamin's storyteller can be explored in the selected stories. Firstly there are the formal considerations associated with the dominance of the storyteller's voice and the foregrounding of narrative as oral and written storytelling, and how the narration works to achieve a seamless meshing of subject and culture. The storytelling motif is triple-layered because the narrator is telling stories, while foregrounding the discourse and conventions of storytelling, and is moreover telling stories about a culture where storytelling is still intrinsic and where oral versus written culture is still a site of struggle.

Secondly, there is a forceful materiality inscribed in the texts, expressed mainly through the body and death, intersecting and consonant with the associated death of the culture. Body, death, sexuality, and nature are all viscerally materialized. These presences reflect Benjamin's ideas on death and story in “The Storyteller,” while also reinscribing the body of the subject, and materiality itself, as the basis of story and of culture, as perhaps the first and last story. All the

while this body is indeed firmly rooted in its cultural and historical context, which is the containing story behind all the stories.

Thirdly, it is culture and historicity itself which are significantly thematized by the setting of the clan culture of the Cape Breton descendants of the Scottish Highland Clearances, as it manifests varying stages of dissolution or fragmentation of its basis in fishing, mining, farming and lumber livelihoods (resulting in further emigration), along with the slow accompanying erosion of its Gaelic heritage. Human values are revealed here through the life of the land and animals. The interface between the individual and culture is the primary gestalt of the stories, incorporating the question of education as opposed to physical work, or mediated against immediate experience. Colin Nicholson hints at this: “Throughout ‘The Closing down of Summer,’ the narrator’s brooding intimations of mortality seem to owe as much to the alienating effect of a single year at university as they do to art’s longevity” (*Signatures* 100).

The Telling - Formal considerations

MacLeod is a unique voice in fiction that invokes a strong awareness of narrative, its construction and purpose, and which foregrounds meaning itself. Looming largest in Alistair MacLeod’s work is the authorial voice and the act of telling as transcending the content. The work is almost closer to lyric poetry than to fiction in the intimacy it assumes with the reader. The word “author” in this instance is fulfilled as a voice possessing “authority.” Edward Hirsch’s description of the effects of lyric poetry resonate deeply with the impact of MacLeod’s work:

Reading poetry is an act of reciprocity, and one of the great tasks of the lyric is to bring us into right relationship with each other . . . The lyric poem is a highly concentrated and passionate form of communication between strangers—an intimate, intense, and

unsettling form of literary discourse. Reading poetry is a way of connecting—through the medium of language—more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation. (Hirsch 4)

The foregrounding of narrative allows us to re-trace the links between literature and storytelling, between oral and written story. The narratorial voice in its immediacy and authority is situated however, at its interface with the clan culture and its historical context, textualizing an equal presence and power for both self and culture. This is the common configuration in all MacLeod's fiction, the warp and weft of the text. This narratorial presence serves to enact the self as a process of ongoing inquiry, while recovering values of culture and historicity against the flatness of postmodernism. This is significant in a vast country like Canada where there are many co-existent histories and cultures or as some perceive, there are none. Self and culture then, are written as mutually referent. The individual must continuously mediate identity in terms of genetic and cultural heritage, yet neither can he or she assume perpetual succor or "belonging" through any group as a birthright. We must in the end locate ourselves consciously through testing and experience, wherever that might finally locate us in relation to the group.

While lamenting both personal loss and the loss of a culture (of culture, period) and affirming historicity, the stories resurrect the human, elemental subject and its inevitable concerns: Where have I come from? Where do I belong? Such concerns are interpreted by many critics within philosophical terms. Frances Berces writes (referring to existentialism in its formal sense): "The nature of MacLeod's thought can be readily identified as existential by the author's repeated concern with . . . choice, freedom, becoming, alienation, exile, other people, and death" (114). Such implicit relegation of textual meditations on death to the framework of existential

philosophy seems both to miss one of the key cultural effects of MacLeod's work—that of bringing the corporeal presence of death into the centre of literature—and to attest to the relative rarity of that presence. Andrew Hiscock proposes that Julia Kristeva's construct of abjection might yield a more relevant reading of MacLeod's short stories. He writes: "His stories may be seen to greet the metanarratives of God and Progress . . . with 'incredulity,' but those of Self, Meaning and History, among others, still prevail as organizing (if not comforting) principles for human existence . . ." (68). Such readings seem reductive for a tapestry of narration that is always more poetic than conceptual and far more humanistic in its implications.

The stories can equally be read as a reinstatement of the subject against its dissolution in postmodernism. Though the typical narrator's voice is tremulous with loss, endurance and that "uncertainty" which we discover to be the grandfather's name and legacy in "Vision," and though many seek a kind of understanding which can only ever be tentative, it is this very quality of hesitancy, moved by the deliberation to fully inhabit and speak *in the present* from such uncertainty, which paradoxically invests the subject with strength and identity, and which inscribes the truth-speaking nature of the storyteller, that one who in seeking counsel can ultimately counsel others. "Oh, I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog" is the transparent plea of the narrator in "Lost Salt Gift" (138). Such uncertainty is secondarily transmitted to the reader through the intimate directness of the first person narrative, as we shadow the narrator's consciousness at every step. If we the listener, are being offered "something useful," it is the undecorated honesty of the narrator's voice and an uncertainty which is passed on as the ground for grappling with our own natures and narratives.

Hiscock cites Elroy E.E. Deimart as suggesting that the transparent constructedness of the narrative is not postmodern, but realist in serving "contrarily to strengthen the mimesis, the

believability, and the reliability of the narrator as an unprofessional, confessional storyteller” (qtd. in Hiscock 66). The attribution of realism sits well enough, but any self-conscious or at times inarticulate narrator seems more to be so as a function of his nature or of the narrative, the layering of the oral and written nature of his inquiry, and his situation in present time, rather than to serve the purpose of effecting credibility. Rather I would agree with Colin Nicholson: “His speaking figures connect with a lost world of orality. Myth and legend take their appropriate place in a writing which directly utters its evolution from earlier cultural forms” (*Regions* 132).

Within the stories too, and affirming their dialogic nature, the narrators are often giving voice or image to those who cannot speak, such as the grandfather in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” or Carver in “The Tuning of Perfection” who speaks primarily with his fists. Janice Kulyk- Keefer notes: “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” (183).

Pure and lyrical writing merges invisibly with a realistic, concrete, almost rough-hewn language and style, in weaving story around personal and cultural themes of identity and loss. The narrative voice of compassion speaks us beyond our inherited cultural polarities: life/death, myth/reality, past/present, speech/writing, space/time, physical work/education even as we do live those questions and dualities as if “real.” There is a quality of pure presence in MacLeod’s work – presences of soul, land, ancestry, love and loss, and always the shadow of the body and death. Time and the eternal co-exist as he speaks in and from both worlds at once. The presence of love is a note within all the language, as if MacLeod’s elegy is ultimately and always to life itself, as if he is an author who mirrors Rorty’s “agent of love.” Because the site of the stories is as much internal as external, because the flow of action is the relational exchange between the

subject and his place rather than fixed in one or the other, the regional becomes the universal in theme and in resonance.

MacLeod's narrators are most frequently male and this does not seem overly considered in the criticism encountered. What can this tell us? There is throughout the stories the inflection of the bardic male figure or elder, which seems to speak against the flat, non-hierarchical, postmodern society. Hiscock writes, "The textual rhythm of silence and inadequate gesture which regularly punctuate a MacLeod text may clearly be interpreted in different ways" (61). Janice Kulyk-Keefer writes: ". . . they all (the narrators) possess the education and sensibility to be accomplished tellers of their stories" (234). Alternately John Ditsky refers to writing with a unique pacing and lack of hurry to get things said:

. . . that in its quasi-stateliness is almost in a way like the product of a prior century, as well as a clarity and simplicity of expression which may be . . . the influence of Hemingway or, even more likely, be the Canadian-English equivalent of the way things are put in Highland Scots Gaelic. (2)

This tapestry of diverse connotations conveyed by MacLeod's narratives, which also constitute a layering of both oral and textual effects, reflects a richness of language that confounds labeling and whose multiplicity of impressions, impulses and motifs ("high" and "low") suggests the richly dialogic voices of a plural subject.

A further effect may be that in a culture not given to formal or expressive grieving, the reader is both disarmed and magnetized by the insistent note of mourning which seems ". . . as if the style itself were keening" (Nicholson, *Signatures* 98). Equally the insistent rupturing of the text with very visual representations of death at once violent and poetic, challenges a culture where death, like much deep experience, has passed out of view, yet serves exactly one of the

primordial purposes of the storyteller in assuaging grief.⁵ Another use or effect of such literature then, is the cultural healing and balance offered by this image. Death is given a face in MacLeod's texts, where Benjamin registered the loss of that presence. Yet in MacLeod's narratives and language, these intensities also always *just are*, at once restrained and strengthened in their textual effects by the perfunctory tone with which he underwrites everything. As MacLeod himself answers simply, when asked whether the lyricism in his writing is connected with his Celtic origins: “. . . a lot of the language I use, a lot of the images I use, and a lot of the perceptions I have are, how shall I say this, things that have been around me for a very long time...” (qtd. in interview with Nicholson, *Signatures* 98).

The oral, elegiac voice in MacLeod's work is at the same time monotonal, incantatory, hypnotic like that of Benjamin's storyteller. This is narrative as remembrance; a voice that cuts through the din. There is the presence of the chthonic and the archaic, of voices not commonly heard, energies not emphasized in our culture such as the mourning presence cited above. The narrator is typically first-person; episode, time and character are compressed to the compact quality which Benjamin describes in his essay. Circular repetition and recurrence are formal features that reinforce the presence of the storyteller, much like the weaving of a Celtic knot. MacLeod is in some sense re-telling the same story in many variations as the storyteller does.

“*Song is the remembrance of songs sung*”⁶

The presence of orality in MacLeod's work functions to sustain the Atlantic (Cape Breton) Celtic oral tradition, keeping the place and people alive and asserting historicity in the same way the North American Aboriginal oral tradition does for its culture. The blending of orality and writing as modes of storytelling is a central formal feature. The simultaneity of

different geographical spaces and the intertwining of past and present in the texts are suggestive of oral cultures. Walter J. Ong writes:

. . . in functionally oral cultures the past is not felt as an itemized terrain, peppered with verifiable and disputed “facts” or bits of information. It is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence, which itself is not an itemized terrain either. (Ong 98)

MacLeod’s texts resonate with the formal and thematic features of oral culture such as the formulaic repetition that facilitated the memory required for oral narrative. The intertextuality of MacLeod’s stories is a feature taken for granted in manuscript culture, that is, a stage between oral and literate cultures. Texts were deliberately created out of other texts, Ong tells us, sharing the common, originally oral formulas and themes before the concept of closure, and romantic notions of “originality” and “creativity,” emerged with writing and eventually print. MacLeod’s open-ended narratives, porous with cultural recall, and serving to culturally locate the individual, seem closer to the nature and purposes of oral narrative than to conventional texts driven by plot, action or novelistic characters. Nicholson lucidly expresses it thus:

His unspooling, first-person narrators connect with the notion of archivally retrieved stories. Insofar as his speaking voices show and tell their Canadian extensions of Highland recall in tales which trace their own processes of origination, they compose a scripted continuity with that earlier, oral tradition. (*Regions* 133)

Ong writes that the evolution of human consciousness through history has been marked by the growth of the individual’s interiorized self-awareness, which is tied to the development of writing:

Ontogenetically and phylogenetically, it is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another in society. Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well....Writing is consciousness-raising. (Ong 179)

He discusses how this leads to philosophical concern with the self and to the “inward turn of narrative” in the West. MacLeod’s literature seems then, to be writing us back out from the interior self to the orality that connects us with our cultural context and origins, creating a vital circle of communication and affirmation between the two modes. This encompasses the visceral physicality of MacLeod’s texts. Oral memory has a high somatic content. Rhythmic oral patterns have been shown to be linked physiologically to the breathing process and to gesture.

Universally, traditional composition has been linked with hand activity. This can range from the making of string figures together with singing, manipulating beads on strings, the presence of stringed instruments or drums, to rocking back and forth or dancing. This mirrors the activity that Benjamin describes as accompanying deep listening, such as spinning and weaving.

The halting or awkward narrative voice in some of MacLeod’s short stories likewise can be linked to an oral mode where there is no technology of writing to create distance and precision but rather the imperfections of oral utterance can be “glossed over,” a pattern intrinsic to the *bricolage* or patchwork which Levi-Strauss found characteristic of oral thought patterns. Writing and orality then, are interwoven in MacLeod’s texts; neither is privileged. Ong stresses that without textuality, oral culture cannot even be identified or valued. Edward Chamberlin writes that despite our literate bias:

The fact is that there is no culture that does not involve both oral *and* written traditions.

The major secular and sacred institutions of our supposedly “written cultures” – courts

and churches and parliaments and schools – are arenas of highly formalized oral performance. And so-called “oral cultures” have a very wide range of written texts, from painted masks and beaded blankets to knotted strings and carved trays. These scripts aren’t alphabetic, of course, but neither are the written forms of most of the world’s languages. (17)

MacLeod’s texts also inherently affirm the primordial use and effects of narrative (oral or written) in constructing personal and communal identity, and in transforming reality in a communicative loop encompassing interior and exterior, writer/teller and reader. They rehearse what Richard Kearney cites as Paul Ricoeur’s circle of triple *mimesis*: (1) *the prefiguring* of our life-world as it seeks to be told; (2) *the configuring* of the text in the act of telling; and (3) *the refiguring* of our existence as we return from narrative text to action. (133)

The Body of the Story

The body and death are a persistent and forceful presence in MacLeod’s work, linked through to the magical and archaic elements of culture. These images with their strong outlines and associated suffering, cut through any false idealism that could be projected onto the clan culture depicted in the text. Rather these images inscribe the idea that when we lose the life of the body, we lose vital life of whatever cultural form. This image of the un-alienated body, both human and animal, functions as an “embodying” symbol of both the subject and culture depicted, figured in MacLeod’s work through its expressions of physical work, sexuality, animal husbandry, and their connections to a violence deeply-rooted within us and culturally relative, in this culture clearly still integral to the experiences of birth, death and livelihood. If feminist

writers theorized the writing of and from the body, MacLeod has written the body back into the text.

Sexuality is vividly and viscerally portrayed in all its dimensions, whether as magically powerful or destructive, or in some instances as perfunctory and oriented towards procreation. There are strangely unarticulated elements such as the relationship between the woman and the grandfather in “Vision” who spent their times together “either reading books or fighting.” There are the implications of sexual potency in the grandfather *Mac an Amharius* in “Vision” and in Archibald in “The Tuning of Perfection,” which express creative force and which seem contiguous with the affirmation of the body and instinct in which the texts are rooted. Love between man and woman is rarely romanticized or central in these stories. Love is subsumed in the texts within its larger cultural functions of having children, and maintaining a household and livelihood; it is never an end in itself. The texts centre rather on the single unit of the individual within all the enfolding layers of his or her cultural matrix.

Death and sexuality are linked in the texts as through-lines to the existential and eternal. Through this powerful and conscious corporeality, the stories re-potentiate death as the vital, sacred and visible cultural experience, which Benjamin reminded us it once was. Likewise, the stories re-locate the source of cultural experience in the body. The related experiences of suffering and stoicism, fate and necessity are implied, positing a tragic sense of existence. The community’s engagement and relationship with death endow it with an inviolable integrity and moral code, which is sovereign in their lives. Death is indeed *chosen* by some, over violation of that integrity or over cultural death. The stories register the experience of what it is to have something to die for, another idea foreign in our present Western culture. The stories themselves often span both the regions of time and eternity.

The workings of death (actual or soul death), fate and the associated notion of *necessity* (the concept in archetypal psychology of that which is recognized by the self as morally or spiritually imperative or inevitable) in MacLeod's stories and their relation to cultural wisdom, are frequently expressed through the figure of the father. The rituals of personal and cultural death and rejuvenation are likewise most frequently enacted through the father-son relationship, though feminine consciousness is always integral in these mediations.

The Individual and Culture in MacLeod

MacLeod's stories suggestively reflect and refract, whether literally or symbolically, Benjamin's storyteller archetype as one who is either "resident tiller of the soil" or "trading seaman," or an interpenetration of both; that is, as either one who has stayed home or one has left and returned, bearing experience from afar. As the story-analysis below will show, MacLeod's narrators can indeed incorporate a variation of each or a combination of the two, or alternately the story can take such a figure as its subject. Further texturing occurs as the stories often precisely enact the clash or fertilization between the two archetypal sources of here and away, past and present, whether as an encounter between two people or as simultaneous energies within one person, through journeys or homecomings whether internal or physical. The stories manifest these two archetypes as more truly an energy or presence within all of us which embodies these features and all their multiplicities, as native/outsider and teller/listener. All modalities are revealed here as ceaselessly reflecting mirrors. Indeed, these narrators, so often searching for rather than offering understanding, seem more to be precisely seeking the source of storytelling itself, seeking those tellers or listeners who might heal or redeem them, and allow them to live

from that place of truth embodied by the storyteller. Others, such as Archie in “The Tuning of Perfection,” register as the keepers of story itself.

The traditional Cape Breton culture which is the site common to MacLeod’s stories and in which these narrators encounter themselves – is itself a dialogic/polyphonic community in which home and exile are simultaneous conflicted states, as the culture is descended from the Scottish Highland Clearances. The stories are seemingly apolitical or pre-political in the sense that this clan code so strongly depicted is its own politic. Its members are able to still live within their own marginal culture and are relatively sovereign in this. Such a site interrogates work, family, belonging, and of course culture itself. Overlaid against this cultural site, the self is an ongoing inquiry. There is no redeeming circular journey and we are caught in a state of fragmentation, unknowing and loss, though what was lost, or what was ever possessed is not certain at all. The only certainty seems to be the insistent belaboured will of the individual to discover and perhaps live his or her truth or in some cases, not live at all. As Calum in “Rankin’s Point” surveys the worn and ruined outbuildings of his grandmother’s homestead, he muses:

This is the “everything” left to me, I am told, by my grandmother’s will. Yet no one has ever given me “everything” before, and it is true that I have always liked it here amidst the loneliness and the privacy and the crying gulls. And I have thought of it many times during my “absent” years spent teaching the over-urbanized high school students of Burlington and Don Mills in the classrooms that always seemed so overheated. (165)

The continuities and identity loci in MacLeod’s stories of land, clan, occupation, nature and beast, tradition, ancestral heritage, and historical consciousness, effect associations with a wisdom culture. We can begin to apply here Eagleton’s suggestions about studying the various effects literature and discourse can produce. We can test this cultural site in MacLeod’s work

against the wisdom culture implied in Benjamin's discussion, as one in which the storyteller and deep listening are viable. This culture with its romantic, ideal connotations, is hardly a new element in literature, but it is a trope repeating throughout MacLeod's short stories and can be related to a tradition of literature recognized and formulated by British cultural theorist Raymond Williams in the 1960s as the "myth of the organic society."

Williams describes this myth that emerged in 18th century English society and literature, when country life became an image in many literatures, including English. The myth was first cast in terms of simple oppositions between the peace of the countryside and the "worldliness" of the city, and in more modern times, as opposed to the industrial town. Country life would also often be seen as signifying the *past*, such as the past of a writer's childhood or of humanity's, in the form of Eden or a Golden Age. Williams argues that this is where the image became confused with history. He shows that writings on this "recent" disappearance of the old organic community, though reflected in prominent examples in the 18th century (the writings of Richard Jeffries, William Cobbett, Crabbe and Goldsmith and later George Sturt are examples he cites), actually go back to an almost untraceable past and it becomes clear as the milestones are marked that it is not just about facts or historical conditions but about a way of seeing and a consequent literary convention: ". . . a failure to read the literature as literature, and then the making of a false history out of a false reading" (Higgins 114). Capitalism became identified with industrial production, but in England it was at first a rural phenomenon, beginning at least as early as the 16th century and going on during 17th and 18th centuries to create a highly productive and modernized agriculture, which was in fact the *base for* the Industrial Revolution.

For Williams, this refutes conventional ideas such as that these changes occurred and were reflected in, for instance, the period of the English writer Thomas Hardy's novels, set in the

1840s: “And hasn’t everyone insisted that it was Hardy who recorded the great climacteric change in rural civilization: the disturbance and destruction of what one writer has called ‘the timeless rhythm of agriculture and the seasons’?” Rather, by the time of Eliot and Jefferies and Hardy, Williams explains, there is already a mainly commercial countryside with new industrial towns as its markets: “As we look back over 400 years, what we’re seeing is not the destruction of a “timeless order,” but the bitter disturbance of the making of the new order—the order of rural capitalism” (Higgins 115). However, in the shock of change during the nineteenth century, the countryside was newly utilized as a human critique of industrialism, understandably but at the cost of misrepresenting the real history of rural society. Williams is saying that the powerful myth of this “fall” is the main source for what he terms the “structure of feeling” in modern thought, of nostalgia for an organic or natural society, which I suggest is an image in MacLeod’s work.⁷

Williams’ discussion of this tradition can throw light on the culture thematized in MacLeod’s stories. Its relevance increases when we see that the culture in MacLeod is already problematized. Terry Eagleton declares ironically, “The only sure fact about the organic society, as Raymond Williams has commented, is that it has always gone” (*LT* 31). MacLeod’s Cape Breton culture, sure enough, has fragmentation both before and after it. It descended from the Scottish Highland Clearances more than a century earlier, whose context is directly related to the rural history that Williams discusses. *Enclosures* of England’s old commons had occurred in waves, starting in the 13th century and for many different reasons along the way. Earlier enclosures were mainly to take over *wastes*, the old name for lands that weren’t being used at all, such as marshes and woodlands that were largely uncultivated. Later enclosures were connected with the developing “improvements” of agrarian capitalism, aimed at increasing production,

some of which were good and valid developments, taking over not *wastes*, but land already owned, which would have formerly been shared with people for farming, grazing or fuel-gathering. Even later waves were conducted by Parliament and supposedly replaced the tenant's land with other land, but it was usually not as good and had to do with turning the land into sheep farming which was profitable because of wool exports up to the 18th century. This later happened in Scotland's Lowlands and Highlands, and became one of the factors leading to the Highland Clearances.

Williams' words carry ominous historic-into-present resonance when we remember they were written in 1967 about how capitalist farming, based on landlord, tenant farmer and wage-labourer (in his particular English context), had replaced what was once peasantry:

It's true this process was very long-drawn-out: through the successive phases of enclosure and engrossing, and of still higher concentrations of capital and agricultural machinery. In fact, we're still living in its last phase, as the remaining small farmers are squeezed out of business. (Higgins 115)

How exactly we could use these words to describe the still ongoing process in the Ontario of the 2000s. MacLeod's stories then, partake of the lineage of images of fragmenting traditional culture in literature, which parallels the movement from an oral to a writing culture. The mention of Hardy should not be seen as incidental. Nicholson suggests that MacLeod's portrayal of the breakdown of Gaelic culture is a "kind of historical elegizing:" "In its invocation of a phase of irreversible transition, his writing is reminiscent of some of Thomas Hardy's concerns. . . ." (*Signatures* 99). But connections with Hardy go further as we will discover below in Williams' writings on the individual, society, and education.

This clan culture, so suggestive of Benjamin's tribal culture, is its own "politic," especially in its members' shared experience of dealing with the effects of their economic context. A social-political critique is implied, if not foregrounded, by such circumstances throughout the stories. Andrew Hiscock sees the persistent first-person narrative as creating this effect. "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. . ." (59). Human values are transmitted through a timeless-seeming image of the land and animals and tradition, yet all are brought jarringly into the present by the first-person narration. The past and its ancestral presences bleed through to the surface of the texts. The measure of the individual is his or her conscious connection to the family and culture, though the individual is always fully formed. Many choose death over violation of the integrity of their moral code or values. A powerful collectivity is portrayed, along with a certain stoicism, and tragic sense of existence. These features are notably alien or absent in contemporary Western culture. The texts are concerned with individuals mediating cultural inheritance at a mythic and ancestral level.

To our postmodern sensibility, it may be difficult to conceive of this meshing of individual and culture (excepting the media-fed, sentimental notions of "family" that permeate our culture), yet the perspective of individualism which we take for granted can be fruitfully explored and unsettled through Williams' cultural analyses, as was the image of organic society. Williams writes:

When we speak of "the individual" and of "society," we are using descriptions which embody particular interpretations of the experience to which they prefer: interpretations

which gained currency at a particular point in history, yet which have now virtually established themselves in our minds as absolutes. (Higgins 65)

Williams reminds us that in medieval times, “individual” meant “inseparable,” while our modern description in which we think of the individual in his/her own right, arose only during the Renaissance period. This development reflected changes during the Reformation in which the relationship between for instance, God and the individual and his or her destiny, came to be perceived as direct rather than mediated by the church. It grew alongside the development of capitalism and the related capacity of the individual to take part in free enterprise and more varying sources of livelihood, and the associated increase in social and geographic mobility. The individual became more and more isolable from his or her social role, occupation or nationality. The abstraction of the individual from its complex of relationships had its counterpart, writes Williams, in the growing idea of “society,” which had once implied relationship (“the society of his fellows,” to use Williams’ old gendered term) and which now also became a thing in itself. Analogous developments occurred with the idea of “community” and “state” and this became the basis for all subsequent social thinking and philosophy.

The Liberal tradition of course begins with the idea of the individual and his or her rights. In turn, both the abstract individual and abstract society were idealized over time. Gradually through the nineteenth century new descriptions evolved, recognizing anew the importance of local and community relationships as mediating elements between the individual and society.⁸ Taken further by other studies and disciplines, we have a broader idea of how deeply the individual personality is shaped by social processes, even as we recognize individual psychology. Most of us are trained to a “pattern of culture,” some elements serving to meet individual needs and others to satisfy social requirements. Further individuality will emerge

which will reciprocally continue to change and evolve that social pattern which is its processual context, as unique individual potentialities and unique histories interact.

Williams notes that within society there are many varied groups each with their own relations of tension and conflict. In his reflection on our vocabulary for discussing actual relationships between individuals and their societies, Williams draws on a range of terms. In discussing for example the *exile*, who is defined by a commitment to waiting for his or her society to change, but who cannot be involved in the actual process of change, he cites a modern variation of the exile as the self-exile or, as the Bolsheviks termed it, ‘internal émigré,’ who can manage to live within their society but are committed to a different personal reality their society does not validate or reflect.⁹ They live an internal separateness in their commitment to their own difference and individuality. Unlike the rebel, they do not fight for these principles, but watch and wait. There is tension in this and it can be difficult to form adequate relationships.

What he/she has principally to defend is his own living pattern, his own mind, and almost any relationship is a potential threat to this. He/she has become or remained his/her ‘authentic self’, but this authenticity cannot be shared with or communicated to others, or if the effort at communication is made, the commitment involved in it will be characteristically minimal. (Higgins 79)

Summing up, Williams writes:

In the case of the individual and society we need to learn ways of thinking and feeling which will enable us genuinely to know each in the other’s terms which is as near as we can ordinarily get to saying that we are studying forms of organization in a continuous process: the brain, the nervous system, the body, the family, the group, the society, man. There is no real point at which we can break off this process, to isolate an independent

substance. Yet equally we cannot select any one of them and make the others dependent on it. (Higgins 82)

MacLeod's stories precisely enact or interrogate or register mourning for, this "continuous process," as we will see. When this is thwarted we see how a figure such as the blind grandmother in "Vision" embodies an extreme state of internal exile within her body, her love relationship, her family, and her culture. She is literally sealed within her cluttered abode with all its effects.

Williams goes on to say that the study of patterns and relationships within this whole process is necessary for and constitutes, the analysis of culture. He concludes that, as essentially creating and communicating beings, the only organization adequate to our potential and resources is a participating democracy. Williams' related and insightful writings on the pattern of education in society are likewise illuminating for MacLeod's work.

The Question of education

A noteworthy cultural concern in MacLeod, and a further expression of the split between oral and written culture, is the impact of education on community and culture. Several narrators ("The Boat," "The Closing Down of Summer," "The Return," "The Road to Rankin's Point," "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood") imply the ambiguous value and effect of education in their lives, suggesting that the experience has created a psychological and social breach between them and their families, or else that the experience has been preempted by the cultural imperatives they face of proceeding into its given livelihoods of mining, fishing, lumber, and farming. Education is often implied as fostering a position of detachment and cultural exploitation, as in "Lost Salt Gift" and "The Tuning of Perfection." This theme too, extends the relevance to MacLeod's work of Thomas Hardy, as reflected in writings by Raymond Williams during the 1970s. It would

seem significant that MacLeod as a professor of Romantic literature was very interested in Hardy. The perceivable resonances in their textual worlds and concerns should be explored here.

Williams traces how the increasing social changes of the Industrial Revolution and its related effects such as the growth of cities and towns, gave rise to a new and major generation of novels in the 1840s, representing a new kind of consciousness. He suggests that what emerged in these years, traceable from Dickens to Lawrence, was an exploration of the substance and meaning of community: “For this is a period in which what it means to live in a community is more uncertain, more critical, more disturbing . . . than ever before in history” (Higgins 121). Williams writes that the permanent achievement of the romantic imagination was a position in human experience which was capable of judging the society which formed it, rather than simply seeing society as a framework. Most novels had been based on the assumption of the knowable community and knowable relationships within this framework. With the great social changes it became widely recognized that people are fundamentally *unknowable*. This developed new and radical experiments in the novel which have been furthered with each subsequent generation. Knowable relationships or experience of a local and immediate community became more often *opposed to* a society now experienced as unknowable and overwhelming. Williams cites Dickens as the writer in whose novels this development was first traceable towards the end of the century. He raises the importance of this connection between the knowable community and the knowable person.

These points lead to Williams’ discussion of education as that position from which the subject decides what is *desired and what needs to be known*.¹⁰ As opposed to the conventional thinking of Hardy as a regional novelist, or as the last voice of an old rural civilization, Williams believed that Hardy writes more deeply than any other novelists about the problem of the relation

between customary life and educated life, feeling and thought, that is between immediate and mediated experience. Williams saw his society as having arrived at a place where custom and education, one way of life and another are in direct and interesting and, he believes, necessary conflict. For Williams, we begin by learning from the ways our families live and work: “. . . a world of work and place, and of beliefs so deeply dissolved into everyday actions that we don't even know they are beliefs, subject to change and challenge” (Higgins 127). Though education allows us to see beyond that life, especially where there are stagnation or old illusions living on as timeless truth, and to understand change in the places we've lived and worked and grown up, Williams observes that often with the education comes the idea that the world of everyday work and ordinary families is inferior, distant, and we can lose our respect and affection for it. If we do retain affection, Williams reflects, education calls it nostalgia or if we retain respect, it is called politics or sociology. (127)

For Williams, Hardy is concerned with what really happens to us as we try to mediate these contrasted worlds: “. . . as we stand with a Jude, but one who has been let in, or as we go back to our own places, our own families and know what is meant by the return of the native.” Williams suggests that the real Hardy country is not Wessex, but that border country so many live in “between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change” (127). He stresses that as in all realist fiction, the quality and destiny of persons and the quality and destiny of a whole way of life are not separable. (130) This border country is a place which many of MacLeod's also narrators inhabit.

A further aspect of the question is how education becomes associated with social advancement in the form of affluence, yet as for some of Hardy's characters, this is not the determining value in their getting an education and they in fact regret how it separates them from

their culture as they become the “returning native.” We see similar ambivalences in MacLeod’s characters. (Yet Hardy recognized that this could be appreciated only by those free of material worries.) The separation of the native is a separation from the standards of the educated and affluent world “outside;” but also from the people who have not made his journey or more often a separation which masks itself as a romantic attachment to a way of life, where the people are merely instrumental, and there is a kind of patronizing affection. We will see examples of this effect in stories such as “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.”

Williams suggests that Hardy’s work does justice to the complexity of all these issues with no easy answers, that he is seeing as both a participant and an observer and how difficult this was for him to maintain. He stresses that Hardy’s capacity for all this observation is a function of education, and could not really occur without it (even his sense of the “timeless”), and then what he is seeing through it is his own native country/family/childhood/his own history. To see both levels is, for Williams, Hardy’s special gift and challenge: the native place and experience, and the education/conscious inquiry. Then to be able to see living people within this complicated past and present, becomes a further problem—seeing as a both a participant and observer—this is a strain as Williams sees it: because the process which allows him to observe, that is, education, implies in Hardy’s time and context with its attachments to class feelings and class separations, a “decisive alienation” (Higgins 135). Williams concludes that the most significant thing about Hardy, in and through these difficulties, is that more than any other major novelist he centered his major novels in the ordinary process of life and work.

MacLeod’s work suggests clear parallels with Hardy’s position as described here. The internal transactions between MacLeod’s narrators and their present/past culture means that his educated narrators are occupying this difficult paradoxical position. They are more often than

not, the particular evolved embodiments of Benjamin's tiller and trader archetypes and Williams' educated exiles or returned natives. Christopher Gittings writes that we find MacLeod's characters "... returning home with the doubled perception of outsider and native to the Gaelic culture that informs MacLeod's work" (3). As cited earlier, Janice Kulyk-Keefer suggests that MacLeod's narrators possess the education to be accomplished tellers of their stories. (234) We see repeated in MacLeod this double presence that Hardy highlighted. And we can infer that MacLeod himself has experienced his own variation of such a position in his own "return of the native" when, highly educated, he returned to the Cape Breton area. This can be read as an influence of Hardy on MacLeod's work as elucidated through the above section.

Just as Williams' writings reframe Hardy and his work, we should perhaps likewise reframe MacLeod as one not simply elegizing the "organic society" from a conservative position, but who, similarly to Hardy, and within the particulars of his own voice/narrators/time/place "does justice to the complexity of all these issues with no easy answers" and whose texts also are centred in the "ordinary process of life and work." MacLeod's work extends the education question present in Hardy as a continuing cultural theme, inscribing the educational institution as one of the primary "storytellers" shaping or misshaping our culture, as will be seen in the analysis of the stories which follows.

The circular relevance to the essay of this theme of education, emerges from this point forward, as we have seen that our approaches to literature and storytelling are one of those areas shaped by educational ideology, which in turn shapes our understanding of and availability to, community. If it is in part the nature of our educational institutions which has pre-empted the use of literature as imagined here, then MacLeod's work in turn brings to light this very fact by the way it problematizes education. What pre-empts our educational institutions from a vision which

would teach us to use literature more broadly is that same ideological force and underpinning which Hardy and Williams reflect as dividing and alienating us from customary/lived experience, undermining the whole nature of community. In turn it is that force which in MacLeod, conflicts a book-obsessed Cape Breton fisherman father and his son (“The Boat”), finds a graduate student and his young son existing on either side of a chasm between a graduate thesis and the state of illiteracy (“Lost Salt Gift of Blood”), and which finds the Gaelic singing of Archibald “faithfully recorded in the archives at Sydney and Halifax and Ottawa...” in “The Tuning of Perfection.”(280)

A number of questions and effects coalesce from the above discussion, which need to be clarified before proceeding. Williams’ historical correction of a literary image, that is, his differentiating of the literary from the historical, does not invalidate or disqualify such a literary or cultural image in terms of its own existence and purpose, though his own discussion may not go beyond the drawing of that distinction. If the organic society is “always gone,” then it must implicitly be *always present on-its-way-to-being-gone*, so must clearly be a collective psychic image of historical force, manifesting the human desire for a life-enhancing, wisdom culture. This image, if claimed and used fittingly, carries the balanced and paradoxical force of keeping our vision alive as metaphor and image, yet continuously revising and correcting it in line with historical experience and with global realities and imperatives as they emerge in postmodernism. This is the definition I propose and assume for the purposes of this essay, and which I read and imply as the common mythic culture in Benjamin, Williams’ and MacLeod. For I believe this vision - this *story* - of a wisdom culture, is a story that we need/and need to recover.

In light of all the above, I have attempted in this essay to fashion a critical approach which responds accordingly to MacLeod's work, and which seems integral with its concerns and themes. With particular focus on the formal features of MacLeod's stories and storytelling voice, as well as on the body and on culture (as a kind of microcosm and macrocosm), we will see in the following analysis that it is possible to read Alistair MacLeod's short stories with a paradigm where disparate yet complementary ideas suggestive of use in relation to literature and to story, as set out by Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton, Richard Kearney and Richard Rorty, along with the cultural analyses of Raymond Williams, are foregrounded and synthesized. The stories themselves demonstrate these concepts even as they test and extend them.

Encounter With the Stories

In the Fall

The narrator is remembering back to a moment of life-rupture, loss and the reality of pending adulthood when he was fourteen years old. Unlike some of the other stories, no specific time period is referenced, only the time of year. From beginning to end, the story is almost carnivalesque in its intense corporeality, ranging from the tender to the grotesque, the violent to the erotic, all framed by the intense corporeality of nature itself. Everyone in the family has a

different point of view, all of them passionate. The narrator, being of a threshold age, must somehow mediate and contain all the viewpoints within himself.

Recalling and reliving a moment of rupture and initiation in family life, the story has resonances with an animal fable. Though an initiation story for the narrator, it is equally a tribute and elegy to a horse, the traditional animal of labour, and a reflection on the relation between human and animal. The casual nature of the relationship, even between humankind and animal kind, is seen to be an outcome of the economic system. The story is an ethical riddle. It can be read as a kind of inversion and extension of Anton Chekov's short story "Heartache," in which a horse-drawn cab driver in a Russian city has no one to tell about the death of his own son. None of his fares shows any interest in listening and in the end it is his mare alone who "breathes on his master's hands" and willingly "listens" to the tale. In "Fall," the narrator repeats his father's oft-told story about how the horse waited for him all night in the cold when he stayed neglectfully drunk in a bar, and how shocked he was to find the horse still there in the morning. We read how bored his mother has become with hearing it, but clearly the father has the need to go on telling it as an emblem of the ties between human and beast. The small son sits on his father's lap as he tells it, a further inversion of the Chekov story. In this way, the father passes on this value to his son David. It is clear that story serves a function in the family; it is a given. The father has "told us this story many times." It is clear that the story has a "use" for the son David. It is he who in the end cannot bear the horse being taken away, and who wreaks vengeance by axing the chickens that belong to the mother and whose purpose in the family ecology is entirely economic. Chekov's protagonist likewise assumes the function of story as fundamental in his world:

Just as the young man was thirsty for water, so he {the old man} thirsts for talk. It will soon be a week since his son died and he hasn't talked to anybody about him properly. He ought to be able to talk about it, taking his time, sensibly. He ought to tell how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died... He ought to describe the funeral, and how he went to the hospital to fetch his son's clothes. His daughter Anisya is still in the country.... And he would like to talk about her too. Yes, he has plenty to talk about now. And his listener should gasp and moan and keen. . . .

(Scholes and Sullivan 236)

Chekov's protagonist lives in a world where storytelling is not only fundamental; it is as necessary as satisfying thirst. The rules and rituals around it are formal and unequivocal. It is not only performative, but an essential, physical and *practical* aspect of personal life and health. Sanity even: It should be slow and sensible, the talk. It should cover every detail: how his son was taken ill, how he died, what he said before he died. What's more, the listener is equally important and plays an essential role in this dialogic exchange: "His listener should gasp and moan and keen..." To tell is an essential human act for mediating death and grief and to be thwarted in this need seems unthinkable: "When he is alone, he dares not think of his son. It is possible to talk about him with someone, but to think of him when one is alone, to evoke his image is unbearably painful" (237). Death, grief, and narrative are inextricably bound, as Benjamin and others have pointed out.

Both stories verge on sentiment and this is surely a hazard when animals are part of the story. "Before that night, he had never been waited for by any living thing. . ." says the father of Macleod's narrator. (103) But this is exactly counterbalanced by the hard elements in MacLeod's story. The mother, she who gives birth, in this case incarnates as the "terrible mother." The sea,

appearing early in the story, is a foreboding of her presence, depicted as “roiled and angry, and almost anguished.” We hear even a hint of Greek tragedy as MacLeod describes the blackened seaweed “. . . as if this is the season for self-mutilation—the pulling out of the secret, private, unseen hair” (99). This is no idyllic rural scene, no simple happy tale of a saving animal, whatever the surface appearances. Rather it will concern the inner divisions and conflicts, social and economic, by which a family may be riven.

The image of black hair is echoed in the story of the horse, when we hear how the father had “. . . buried his face in the hoar-frost mane and stood there quietly for a long, long time, his face in the heavy black hair. . .” (103). In an image of redemption at the end, the image of hair returns in the form of the mother untying her hair, which in the wild wind, covers over both her and the father as they stand in a kind of petrified embrace, absorbing the shock of the family’s experience. Somehow, even after this, the flow and movement of life will return if we can just let it. The terrible mother and the good mother are twin faces of life, of *necessity*.

If the story is an echo chamber of loss and the shock of initiation into adulthood of a male youth, it is also a powerful image and affirmation of bodily instinct and its distortions and failures, mirroring the natural cycle and its instincts. Each character faces a reckoning with his or her instinctual self: the mother, whose instinct is to preserve her six children, the father, who in the end must act against his own instinct to let go of his horse, in the way he has had on other occasions to the mother’s more fiercely pragmatic instincts; the horse, whose instinct is so willingly to follow his master that he follows him even to his own demise; MacRae, whose more savage instincts are to subjugate animal life to his own cruel control and instrumental purposes, in much the same way he handles his sexual instincts; the bull whose natural instincts are cruelly subverted in captivity; and David, whose acute sense of betrayal in the sale of the horse invokes

the fury of his own instincts to destroy in turn, enacting the scales of justice in physical terms. The narrator on the other hand, at an age of developmental flux, is subject to a rupture in his own judgmental framework as the situation demands of his psyche that he accommodate the viewpoints of all those he loves. The narrator and his younger brother David find this experience the most difficult to mediate for they as yet lack the full maturity to reflect upon the matter and determine the best course of action:

“And I think I begin to understand for the first time how difficult and perhaps how fearful it is to be an adult and I am suddenly and selfishly afraid not only for myself now but for what it seems I am to be” (112). The narrator has no frame of reference to interpret the shock of what he witnesses, yet precisely because he is at an age between the child and the adult, he is open enough and amenable to take the responsibility to bear witness to it all. He is in a sense the only acting agent in the story, while the others are primarily acted upon. The parents must find their reconciliation within each other, through sheer necessity: “. . . my parents. . . are blown together behind me. They are not moving either, only trying to hold their place” (117). And the brothers then must find their own response and assimilation of what has happened. The narrator goes to do what it seems he must do: “. . . so I turn and take one step and then another and move forward a little at a time. I think I will try to find David, that perhaps he may understand” (117).

The experience is by definition a loss of place and position for all concerned. There is only the chaos and cacophony of all viewpoints and positions being aired and voiced in full dialogic force. And there are many voices here, with any sense of a stable ethical reality jarred open. Fittingly the narrator leaves us here in this resonating moment rather than return us to his present adult life. It is as if he is reliving, re-iterating, his negotiation of this threshold in his

psyche and perhaps in his relationships. At this moment, it expresses as his young adolescent need to claim self-possession: “I will try to find David, that perhaps he may understand.”

Instincts are ripped away to reveal deeper instincts, in this case to protect now what or who might still be protected, to play the parental role when all have suddenly abdicated it. But the last words echo: “. . . that perhaps he may understand” and we know that that there can be no understanding in this moment, and that the narrator is still trying himself to understand. And how can his younger brother even begin to? But the narrator, in his return to an experience of discontinuity, affirms the impulse, the instinct, to tell, to re-tell, to seek himself through the narrative, even if it takes a lifetime. Equally, we may hear him calling that narrative into the present and negotiating just in this present moment a kind of understanding, revealing meaning in formation through the psychic death of an animal whose being was integral to family life, as the story is told.

The Lost Salt Gift of Blood

This ruminative narration stays in and ends in the first – person present. The narrator is at the centre of events as in “In the Fall.” Once again he plunges us into the “now.” The seemingly serene description of the Newfoundland coastal setting in which the story opens is beset with an immediate sense of disruption and dislocation to points elsewhere: “. . . blunt grey rocks loom yearningly out towards Europe. . .” and “. . . grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise marauders” seems to foreshadow or mirror the nature of events in the story to come. (118) “Even farther out, somewhere beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish Coast; far away but still the nearest land, and closer now than is Toronto or Detroit, to say nothing of North America’s more western cities. . . .” Distant

elements and present absences immediately prevail. Though we may be at the land's edge, this place is clearly a centre to which other places become relative. Even the sea gulls are portrayed as “. . . also looking quietly out toward what must be Ireland and the vastness of the sea” (119).

Nonetheless we are reminded that life here, though nurtured in this “tiny, peaceful womb” of a harbour, “. . . originated from without; came from without and through the narrow rock-tight channel that admits the entering and withdrawing sea. That sea is entering again now. . .” (119). Though the setting appears constant, it is substantively composed of a constant interplay and exchange of elements. The sexual imagery here proves to be a fitting metaphor for the narrator's story. For he has returned to reckon with the existence of the red-haired son he fathered a decade earlier when, as a graduate student studying folklore, he had an affair with the daughter of a local fisherman. The boy's mother has died, and the child has been with his grandparents. Among these colourful houses in the harbour which seem “buoyantly yet firmly permanent in the grey unsundered rock” he will decide whether to turn around unseen and drive back the thousands of miles he has come unannounced, or stay and face his question.

The boy however is right there in front of him, unknown as yet to the reader, playing in the harbour with his friends, and the narrator refers to him as “the small fisherman.” The narrator immediately experiences his awkwardness in such a setting. After a few steps on the stony path in his leather shoes, it is the damage to his leather shoes which he notes. A mere stranger to the boy, the narrator wants to encourage the friendly group of boys in their fishing but finds himself not knowing what to say. When the boy offers the narrator his fishing rod to have a try, he returns it before long “. . . to the hands where it belongs” (123). As the group leaves for supper and the man walks away with them, we learn that their accents are broad and Irish. When the boy's grandfather appears, it is too late for the narrator to get back into his car and vanish. He is

invited to their house for supper, but the grandmother's quietly hostile response to his presence warns the reader that this foreign presence brings a ghost of the past.

Before we know much else about this family, we see that they are poor, waste nothing and use mostly the resources found in their environment. Anything broken is repaired, redeemed, put to another use. The family is clearly interwoven with and deeply belonging in its place, including the young boy, who with his grandfather's help, has repaired twelve broken lobster traps which were thrown up on the shore. He is saving money for an outboard motor; clearly his future is here. After supper the family, who are all musical, take out their instruments and begin singing. This happens before any conversation: "The old and young singing now their songs of loss in different comprehensions" (130). Their old Gaelic songs mirror the lost love which we will find to be at the heart of this still unknown story.

This narrator is narrating into life a question we don't yet understand. When the boy and his grandmother go off to bed, the grandfather brings out an old checkerboard, made in fact by the boy, from a length of broom handle. They play a "solemn game" and we know that we are inching toward the story within the story, as we hear that "Neither of us loses all the time" (132).

Another foreign element is introduced to set the stage for this story, the smuggled rum the grandfather then brings in, which the narrator knows "to be strong and overproof" and which has come "... in fog from the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon" (133). The ritual of alcohol facilitates the ritual of storytelling. But there are further barriers: "It is difficult to talk at times, with or without liquor; difficult to achieve the act of saying....Again the glasses are refilled" (134). The grandfather's story then unfolds in his own dialect, and the boy's identity emerges along with the sense that the grandparents and the boy belong together. We learn how they had attempted to give the boy to his mother, one of their daughters, who lived now in Toronto, so

that “. . . he would be having more of a chance there in the city” (134). But the boy willingly returned to them, though the day of his arrival was full of what to the grandparents were signs of death: things dropping and breaking, the dog going crazy. Though the boy returned safely, his mother and her husband were indeed killed that night in an accident with their vehicle.

Consistent with the profusion of fog imagery in the story, we remain in a fog even when the grandfather’s story finishes. We know it is still only *part* of the story. In the end we will in fact only discern this narrator’s tale through its motif of gaps and negatives. It is as if the narrator himself cannot quite bring himself to tell, either himself or us. Through the merest hint, when he finally goes to bed observing, “the small room has changed very little,” the reader knows he has been there before and in an intimate context. He refers to himself as a foolish Lockwood with no Catherine to be let in, an ironic allusion to the ghost of Catherine in the novel *Wuthering Heights*: “But no one waits on the other side” (137). And as he hears the sound of “my one son’s sleeping,” the boy “does not beckon any more than the nonexistent voice in the outside wind.” Referring to a belief held in the outports, the narrator notes mournfully: “There is “. . . no boiled egg or shaker of salt. . .” (138).

And to his son most of all, he wonders “what would I say?” The absences and negatives of the story only accumulate: “The darkness presses down upon me, but still it brings no sleep. There are no voices and no shadows that are real” (138). In the narrator’s moment of truth—this is after all a life-defining encounter—we know that lack of sight and insight are behind the defining image of fog in the story and in the contained stories within it, and that the narrator finally *sees*, or hopes to see, as he writes and speaks. “Oh, I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog” (138).

There seems an equal and ambiguous mix of self-parody, irony, bitterness and naked self-exposure when the narrator then lapses for a full paragraph into an inner monologue of romantic language and allusion, as he considers possible responses to his son's existence.

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....Or shall I wait to meet you in some known or unknown bitterness like Yeat's Cuchulain by the wind-whipped sea. . . . (139)

The references here to Celtic heroes such as Yeats's *Cuchulain* and Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, the archetypal epic of the lost father-son relationship through mistaken intent and identity, remind us appropriately of the timeless and universal backdrop of this ancient quest and question against which the narrator's dilemma occurs and must be considered. They also reiterate that story reaches everywhere to inform us. At the same time we know the story will not provide the answer to the deeper question of belonging and possession. The self-mockingly mundane and anti-heroic scenario the narrator draws with "oh son of my *summa cum laude* loins..." show he knows grievously that all the education and literary reckoning in the world will not answer or redeem his age-old predicament.

Like all the physical resources around them, the family has revered and redeemed this situation too, without asking or demanding; it too is in the end, a gift. The boy - life itself - is the gift at once given, lost and received by all, and neither ownership nor blood has a place in this transaction. A larger matrix of place and necessity inform the boy's innate sense of what he belongs to, namely himself and his own nature. Like the place he belongs to, the boy's being is a meeting of many sources and origins. The piling up of elemental imagery of water, fog, "moisture... in many forms," of blood and salt, inscribes the paradox of the lost, befogged soul

of the narrator and yet the fact of water as birth, as life, including the gift of this young boy, both lost and found.

It is significant that the storyteller here is seeking insight or wisdom, before any offering of it is possible, and he is sharing, articulating that discovery with us at every step. He is at once a lost and entirely exposed soul, significantly unnamed, who throughout gradually defers his story to that of the boy and his grandparents. For all his education and articulation, he has not been able then or now, to communicate or understand. Here we encounter the paradox of alienation caused by education and the further paradox implied: that it is the narrator's very education that allows him to both exploit and at a later time, pay respects to the culture he visits. Here are echoes of the paradox of estrangement and insight which Raymond Williams drew attention to in Hardy's work and which figures prominently in MacLeod's stories. The potential of educational discourse to objectify and manipulate lived experience is interrogated with minimalist intensity as the narrator reflects with almost self-contempt on the vulnerable belief held in the heart of the girl he visited there: "It is the type of belief that bright young graduate students were collecting eleven years ago for the theses and archives of North America and also, they hoped, for their own fame" (138).

This relational failure is textually redeemed as the narrator progressively disappears through the narrative in a consciously dialogic act of self-renunciation weighed heavily by the recognition, "Oh, I have collected many things I did not understand" (139). While the narrator's own story has been deliberately fragmented and impressionistic, it is the grandfather whose story, at the centre of the text, is given complete in his own dialect. (A story which also implicitly contains and honours the grandmother's and the boy's story.) Ultimately it is this story we are being given by the narrator. This transcription of his speech into textual form has further

significance for the grandfather's story because, as we later discover, the grandparents are mostly illiterate. The grandparents' experience, with its supernatural incidents and the tragic loss of their daughter at the heart of it, bears witness to the depth and reality of their culture in a way that belies the collecting mentality with which the narrator had documented and exploited their cultural features.

This honoring of the grandparents' story bears more weight when we learn more of the many adumbrated obstacles and imbalances in the narrator's relationship with this family. On leaving, he says he "would to somehow help or keep in touch but..." The grandfather finishes his sentence: "... but there is no phone, he says, and both of us can hardly write. Perhaps that's why we never told you." At the same time we learn that "John is getting to be a pretty good hand at it though" (141). The line insinuates another thread in the historical force forward of cultural and personal reconciliation in hinting that the boy may, like his father, become educated and in his literacy, may have a further counter-effect on the valuation of his cultural inheritance, though from a broader perspective. The line is also a gentle intimation of the future possibility of relationship, of life energies expanding and reconciling, of the onward flow of life. But of course, this is not the point of the story. Structured as an open first-person narrative of self-inquiry and exposure, tracing the encounter with the moment of self-recognition, it has quietly led us to, and leaves us too, at that open centre where possession is nullified as the soul faces itself against the insistent fog and flow of life.

In terms of Benjamin's archetypes of the storyteller as tiller or trader, this tale recounts a disruptive encounter of physical and moral cross-fertilization between an educated teller from away and a native, illiterate family. It likewise enacts an encounter between oral and written culture. The story is conveyed by one from away as ultimately an act of reparation in which

physical and psychic bereavement transmute into more fruitful or at least more insightful existence.

The Tuning of Perfection

As enigmatic and implicitly almost as rare as the bald eagles that have nested since time immemorial on his mountain, Archibald—the storyteller here seems to convey in the first paragraph about his protagonist—is going to prove himself his own man. His unfailing discernment and independence will have a rather larger than life effect on his community. This rare third-person narration is referring to a time past yet deliberately signifying the present act of telling: “. . . it seems best to give his exact age now, rather than trying to rely on such descriptions as ‘old’ or ‘vigorous’ or ‘younger than his years’” (271). The narrator’s self-reflexive citing of these terms re-iterates the act of telling as well as the choice-making of words involved in both writing and speaking. It tells us further that the narrator will be as exact and exacting as his subject clearly is: “He never wore the more common rubber boots in public—although of course, he owned and kept them neatly on a piece of clean cardboard in a corner of his porch” (272).

The deceptively simple and almost mundane physical descriptions of Archibald suggest the plain and practical language and qualities of the storyteller, while belying and insinuating that a deeper potency is likely to be present in this figure. The story’s language is similar to that found in fairy tales. Archibald seems to possess an ageless innocence, almost a trickster nature. We are in fact being presented with the image of a storyteller, a bardic, solitary figure whose stubbornness and integrity will eventually become a reflective and transformative mirror for his

family and community, and a force for truth. A “kind of formality that hung about him” means, we are told, that he is always called Archibald, never “Archie” (279).

The extensive use of quotes in the story around terms describing the physical features of Archibald’s life communicate to us that he is a “storied” figure. He is also immediately placed as being culturally displaced. There are remains on his property of the house built by his great-grandfather who had come from the Isle of Skye. This land, on top of the mountain where Archibald now lives alone, was chosen perhaps to make him inaccessible “. . . because of the violence he had left in Scotland. . . .” (272). These references firmly locate Archibald in his Gaelic historical lineage as a descendant of the Scottish Highland Clearances, and stress its elements of violence and agonism. We know that Archibald is a marginal and sovereign figure when we read that his land is a mile above “the second last house,” and so outside the bounds of “public” land. The winding road that ends in his yard has been a “bone of contention” for many years in terms of whether it should receive public service or not.

When Archibald and his wife- to- be were young, they worked at building their own house on the land “with determined perfection.” As they worked they sang together in Gaelic, some of the songs twenty verses long and on still days, people living down on the mountainside and even in the valley below could hear them. This potent image of the two as cultural carriers living a unity of culture materialized all the way down through work, song, family, land, almost defiantly inscribes a symbolic ideal which, though brutally arrested on the physical level, will be inwardly fulfilled through Archibald’s subsequent life journey. His marriage, one of frantic intensity and implied sexual potency, is indeed portrayed as a rarifying force in which the pair come to eventually exclude others for their own company in their erotic fever. The narrator tells us that only the monogamous eagles nesting farther up the mountain “seemed above them.”

After her early tragic death, his wife continues to be a muse presence for her bardic husband, eventually appearing in a dream at his moment of reckoning when he must decide the terms on which he will sing his songs for the television special. Upon her death, Archibald seems to be perceived as further and further outside defined cultural boundaries and roles. Even his own relatives project concerns on his behaviour in the form of fears for his three young daughters being alone with them, so that they eventually take over care of the children: “So that in the end he seemed neither husband nor brother nor even father but only ‘Archibald’” (279).

These facts inscribe Archibald’s presence as a mythic or outsider figure, embodying the paradox of a “monastic existence,” while possessing a creatively rooted psychic-sexual potency. His is a nature which threatens the common order of things. He is sought out for practical purposes only or for his potency, such as when his sister-in-law attempts to seduce him one year after his wife’s death. The story conveys Archibald’s archaic quality of innocence through the bewilderment and dismay he feels at the sexual references coming from his family, who can only vulgarize a physical-psychic potency which they do not possess. These very qualities of innocence and pragmatism belie such potency, and mediate that force for the reader. Likewise, the cultural context in which Archibald exists as a bardic figure is conveyed at first by an almost perfunctory, ironic cataloguing of his public reputation, in much the same way and with the same use of quotes as his physical features are described:

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 had 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. (280)

This ironic litany of information in which Archibald’s cultural wealth is reduced to an objectified historical and intellectual commodity – “faithfully recorded” – piles up layers of cultural commentary. The oral culture harbored within Archibald has been flattened into written and scholarly documentation (collected like the folklore in “Lost Salt Gift”), which is removed from the realm of lived experience and equally removed from the actual personhood of Archibald. The society that Benjamin envisioned where information replaces experience is here fully fledged. A particular irony here is that in oral cultures, archival material such as genealogies and implicitly songs such as those Archibald bears in memory, would not be in the form of “lists” of dates but rather would exist as the “memory of songs sung” (Ong 99).

We see here how educational discourse plays a role in maintaining the hegemony of such an information society. The tension borne here is that the writing culture and mindset that can allow us to document oral culture can also effect a paternalistic distance from such artistic values, reducing them metaphorically to a “plethora of footnotes” in place of the living participatory audience that would once have existed. But the narrator makes clear that for Archibald, such documentation has no coextensive significance for his living art, but simply exists for and within its own frame of reference. As such he treats of it without judgment and as a practical matter like all else, an approach which itself harmlessly subverts any exploitation of his nature:

He did not really mind the folklorists, enunciating the words over and over again for them, explaining that “bh” was pronounced as “v”. . . expanding on the more archaic meanings and footnoting himself the words and phrases of local origin. Doing it all with care and seriousness in much the same way that he filed and set his saws or structured his woodpile. (280)

The narrator twice interrupts to bring us back into the present of his telling, which reframes the story in an oral motif and also situates the story in an actual time period: “Now in this April of the 1980s he thought of himself, as I said earlier, as a man of seventy-eight years old who had made it through another winter. He had come to terms with most things. . .” (280). We have been given the backdrop of his life and external reputation and are now brought to the storytelling present of this April morning many years after these events.

We learn that the “new world” has perverted and distorted even most of his descendants; they are like parodies of their historical lineage. His granddaughter Sal plays bingo, wears tight-fitting jeans and slogan T-shirts and her husband’s rubber boots, all that we know Archibald himself would never wear in public. Sal appears on this morning with two phone messages for him, first that his family will be asked to sing in Halifax for the year of “Scots Around the World.” His granddaughter, like most of the rest of the family, can sing because she has heard the songs all her life. But she does not understand the words and has no internal connection to them. She is obsessed with the opportunity to go on the tour only so that she can sleep in and shop. The other news is that a man wants to buy his mare and he appears soon after wearing a suit, which seems unusual to Archibald. The buyer is accompanied by Carver, who is cast as a “. . . violent young man from the other side of the mountain” (286). Through Carver’s appearance as an area guide for the horse buyer, it becomes apparent that he has a respect for

Archibald, paying homage to the way Archibald handles the timber on his mountain, to the reputation he and his twin brother for sawing huge quantities of timber in a day when they were young. We are again privy to knowing that Archibald is a storied figure.

Archibald is incredulous when Carver later mentions matter-of-factly that the young mare he just sold will not be used for working, as Archibald believed, but for making birth control pills, on a farm outside Montreal connected with a lab. Carver suggests they are kept pregnant all the time and the colts just thrown away. Like so much else, Archibald cannot grasp the existence of such realities in the world and feels betrayed by forces beyond his control. The haunting image of the discarded animals connects him back to his other losses, and adds to the sense of a threatened cultural and natural milieu which threads through the story. The life of the bald eagles that nest on Archibald's mountain appear repeatedly as a metaphor for Archibald's rarified and threatened existence. Archibald projects on to them the vulnerability of his own family life when he sees them struggling up the mountain after their search for food, and he fears for the future of their offspring. The folklorists too, had researched the eagles and commented to Archibald how strange it is that hardly anyone knows about them and that their existence would be threatened if they used pesticides or herbicides in the forest industry.

The reader may suspect that Archibald could quietly disappear from his mountainside and all traces of his cultural inheritance fade away with him, made extinct by the cultural toxins around him, his nature violated like that of his mare and like the eagles, by the instrumental economic forces dominating our culture. Or at best that he would sustain himself willingly or resignedly, as a cultural curiosity. But Archibald is about to match wits with the culture and the family from which he has gradually become more and more alienated and through that engagement, as much internal as external, he will reassert the transformative and truth-telling

mode of the storyteller and bard, so that both the narrative and the narrating storyteller re-iterate that role for the reader.

As his family members join in motley fashion on several occasions to practice their singing for the audition, inner doubts and questions accumulate for Archibald. The producer, who mirrors Archibald's relatives with his agitation and slogan T-shirts, makes the situation clear: "Look, I really don't understand your language so we're here mainly to look for effect" (297). And later: "Yeah, first of all we'll have to cut them....They're too long" (301). Archibald comes to grasp that the quality of singing is of little matter to them: "It's not a regional show. It will be national and internationalWe want people who *look right* and who'll give a good impression of the area and the province" (300). Archibald has the right look, the presence and '*credibility*,' however he does not want to change or cut the songs: ". . . that's the way those songs are. You've got to hear them in the original way" (301).

The story interrogates notions of cultural authenticity and depicts the distortion of this oral culture to fit criteria of entertainment value: "The other problem is that they're too mournful. Jesus, even the titles, 'My Heart is Heavy', 'The Drowning of the Men.' Think about it" (301). The producer is baldly requesting Archibald's people to presentably package their culture, while decimating the very heart of its experience as reflected in the words and titles of its songs. This violation is masked by the skewed notion of authenticity they ironically promote in its place. When Archibald asks whether they will accept the MacKenzies, "one of the oldest and best of the singing families," headed by a woman who is his distant cousin, he is told that they only provided a tape as her family now live too far away and cannot manage to gather for this event. The tape is not acceptable, the producer tells him. "Garbage. No good at all. An old woman playing a tape recorder while seven or eight people tried to sing along with it. Wasted our time.

We wanted people that were alive, not some scratchy tape” (301). Yet Archibald knows that there is more life and authenticity by far in Mrs. MacKenzie’s tape than in the version of the songs which he and his family would be coerced into doing for the television special.

The image of Mrs. MacKenzie enters readily into the heart of Archibald as he recognizes the soul bond he feels with her through the music they share. “It seemed sad to Archibald, feeling almost more kinship to the scarcely known Mrs. MacKenzie than to those members of his own flesh and blood. . .”(295). Culture as true belonging is shown to be based on something different and deeper than blood, as in “Lost Salt Gift.” This incident also textually denotes a further example of the loss of oral culture by dispersal into the anonymity of North America with its emphasis on superficial merriment, such as by the migration of Mrs. MacKenzie’s singer sons. There is insufficient cultural support for saving the remaining vestiges of this culture.

Archibald grows impatient with the family singing practices, their tired jokes about him, and their agitated demands to gratify the producer’s wishes. When they speak, the narrator attributes their words by the order of their voices calling out, rather than by their names. His relatives have lost their personal and cultural identities and have become creations of the new world. The producers describe their voices as “ordinary,” except for Archibald’s: “By the twelfth verse the music took hold of him in a way he had almost forgotten it could. His voice soared above the others with such clear and precise power that they faltered and were stilled” (297). When he sings this song, *Mo Chridhe Trom* (My Heart is Heavy), the text first quotes the verses in the Gaelic language. When Archibald is finished and is then interrupted by the producer when halfway through another song, he feels very much alone and his thoughts turn to the words of the song he has sung. The text then repeats the words in English, but only so that the English reader knows to what it is that Archibald’s thoughts have turned. In this way the narrative privileges

Archibald's native language. This is the moment in which Archibald reengages with his own art, initiating a process of deliberation. The stories, the experience they contain, belong so deeply to Archibald that they cannot be violated for any commercial demands. The songs themselves - his art - will ultimately be the informing energy of his truth.

Archibald's dilemma however, is first compounded by the emergence of Carver and his group of alleged male singers as a surprise third group who will audition for the producers. The producer hints that Carver's group may fit the bill, not because they can sing the real songs, but because they have tremendous *energy* and a lot of male voices. The only issue is that their faces are often scarred and beat up. Carver admits to Archibald that the song they sang for the producer was "... not even a song. It's just a bunch of syllables strung together" (303). But Carver insists the producers nor anyone else knows that, and if the folklorists do, he is unperturbed: "... but me, I don't know no folklorists." Nor is Carver concerned that the Royal Family will be part of the audience. "Look, what did the Royal Family ever do for *me*?" (303) Carver is determined to get the gig. His reasoning is purely pragmatic and work-related; he and his men need a boat engine (for seasonal fishing work) and a truck. The position Carver assumes in the face of this opportunity is an inverse of Archibald's response, a couple of generations on: Archibald is slow and ponderous. Carver is swift and decisive, always certain. He is a warrior and another kind of outsider whose youth and energy imply a different face of the creative-sexual potency possessed by Archibald. Faced with a cultural event shaped to determinates of the mass commercial and political interests of globalization and tourism, one which glosses over the acts of violence and colonization which brought this Gaelic culture here in the first place, Carver makes no quiet nor grand gestures about authenticity.

By instinct, Carver and his group happily agree to make the right noises and revisions in their appearance in order to pass the audition. For them the songs anyway, are lost, mere remnants of their past. Unlike Archibald, they feel they have nothing to lose. In playing the part, in going through the motions, they become a mirror image of those forces that want to package their cultural representation, to likewise serve their own ends through it. “*Us, we’re adjustable*” (302). In their willing if half-conscious participation in a postmodern pastiche of Gaelic culture, they in a sense subvert the dominant culture by emptying out its projected meaning. Their aim - to assist their own renegade culture - is as pure as any. The vital male energy and sexuality of Archibald, Carver and even the eagles, are a unity over the asexual and denatured perspective of the ironically- named “producers.” The different responses of Archibald and Carver underline that the point is not the particular choice, but who determines it, to what or whom is it subject?

Archibald meanwhile finds his own answer by moving more deeply into his internal presences, such as the image of Mrs. MacKenzie:

He thought of her with great compassion, she who was probably the best of them all and who had tried the hardest to impress the man from Halifax. The image of her in the twilight of the valley of the MacKenzies playing the tape-recorded voices of her departed family to a man who did not know the language kept running through his mind. He imagined her now, sitting quietly with her knitting needles in her lap, listening to the ghostly voices which were there without their people. (303)

Mrs. MacKenzie’s story, reverentially embedded in Archibald’s psyche and so in the text, powerfully inscribes not only the cultural kinship he shares with her, but in its few simple lines conveys an enormity of familial and cultural fragmentation, dislocation and bereavement. It is likewise an eloquent marker of grief within the story.

Archibald further has a dream in which his wife appears, as she often has through the years. In this dream she sings: “Every note was perfect, as perfect and clear as the waiting water droplet hanging on the fragile leaf or the high suspended eagle outlined against the sky at the apex of its arc” (304). The next day Archibald knows that he cannot change or shorten his songs. The authenticity of his art has clearly triumphed over the producers’ demands. Walking back up the hill to his home after stating his position to the producer on Sal’s phone, he experiences an energy and purpose that remind him of his youth. And he feels the “rightness” he felt “. . . when he courted his future bride and when they had decided to build their house near the mountain’s top, even though others were coming down” (305). He is at peace.

Soon after, on a rainy night “. . . he was finished watching the international and national and regional news...” (305). We feel the tongue in the narrator’s cheek here, showing us that as in the beginning of his tale, things are normal again in the seemingly mundane surface of Archibald’s life. Archibald has returned to that seeming silence in which he can receive all the “stories” of the world, that is, “the news.” For we know now that the excellent television reception which, we discovered earlier in the story, he gets on his mountaintop, is a fitting foil and metaphor for this bardic “receiver” and “transformer.” When he looks out the window and sees a car weaving up the valley, he soon intuits that the car is coming for him.


Archibald is not a violent man, but his practicality ensures that he is ready to meet anything. He strategizes methodically to defend against whatever threat might be coming towards him now, quickly making use of simple means such as the positioning of his table and himself behind it within easy reach of his giant poker. “When he swung it in his hand its weight seemed like an ancient sword” (306). Similar to the fairy-tale descriptions used by the narrator

in the opening of the story, Archibald uses a ritual oral motif to signify his preparation for danger:

“If they come in the door,” he said, “I will be behind the table and in five strides I can reach the poker.” He practiced the five strides just to make sure. Then he put his left hand between his legs to adjust himself and straightened his suspenders so that they were perfectly in line.

Archibald understands the skill it takes to drive up the dangerous switchbacks of his mountain, especially on a wet, dark night. He begins to “. . . almost admire the driver,” recognizing that they are “. . . very drunk, but also very good” (307).

Such recognition by Archibald implies the presence of an equal, which has not occurred before in the story apart from the invisible presence of his wife and Mrs. MacKenzie. It is Carver he soon finds inside his kitchen door, blowing in with the wind and rain. Carver calls out to his friends that yes, Archibald is here and directs them to bring it in with the instructions: “. . . try not to dirty his floor.” They have brought boxes full of forty-ounce liquor bottles and Archibald feels “It’s as if someone were preparing for a wedding” (308). Being the “most abstemious man on the mountain,” Archibald is all the more moved by their gift and its cost. The liquor was purchased at a bootlegger’s two hours ago; they’d been away all day and in fights. There is a fresh cut on Carver’s forehead, which, Archibald notes to himself, cannot be covered, by the moustache or beard that he is growing to appease the cameras. The physical mark of Carver’s most recent fight is the textual marking of the immediacy and vitality of his existence, a force that may now easily override any wish or need he felt to meet the terms of the television special. Further, his gesture towards Archibald might be the first indication that he has already moved beyond this and has in fact become Archibald’s inward apprentice. This possibility is signified



by the gift exchange occurring as the closing action of the story and its symbolism of the two men's ultimate psychic complementarity ("as if someone were preparing for a wedding") as well as by Archibald's inner response. The sense of his blacksmith's poker as an "ancient sword" is mirrored when he now reflects on Carver's nature:

He also envied them their closeness and fierceness and. . . their tremendous energy. And he imagined it was men like them who had given, in their recklessness, all they could think of in that confused and stormy past. Going with their claymores and the misunderstood language of their war cries to "perform" for the Royal Families of the past. (309)

Archibald recognizes that Carver embodies more of his deeper cultural traits than any of his immediate family. His "small nod of acknowledgement" to Carver is the dawning of a deeper recognition that Archibald has done more than "made it through another winter." He has renewed his own deep nature and possibly found the reflection in his community of the energies needed to carry forward his own gifts and cultural values. The significance of this exchange and the suggestion of an equal shift in Carver's consciousness is anchored by the last line of the text. "Look," said Carver, with that certainty that marked everything he did. "Look, Archibald," he said. "We know. We know. We *really* know" (309). Archibald's role as a cultural elder is affirmed and marked in the text at the end by the appearance of Carver and his group as wild knights-errant who acknowledge their community's "chieftain" with their awkward "gift."

The story enacts that there is no more culture for storytelling, no one to hear, or else only as a cultural relic or curiosity. It is only other marginal, subversive figures such as Carver who paradoxically are able to reflect and meet Archibald's integrity. Archibald seems the cipher of Benjamin's storyteller who, we see in the litany of scholarly documentation, has *himself* been

flattened into a vestige, an archival relic. Yet the energies of oral and bardic culture embodied by Archibald have proven invulnerable to external forces and sustainable by more powerful inner presences. It is with and through these absent and invisible presences beyond the space-time continuum that Archibald finds and chooses to keep familial and cultural solidarity, in keeping with the solitary and invisible path of his own life. Now void of a genuine culture of listeners and reduced to being a scholarly record or a form of mass media entertainment, Archibald is compelled to turn his transformative and truth-speaking energies to the “tuning” and “perfecting” of his own nature.

At a late period in his existence, he might have abdicated or modified the deeper dictates of his nature for the sake of external gains or for the sake of a larger community participation, but in testing this possibility he rather finds himself called, after the story’s title, to tune more deeply the perfectionism of his art, craft and being – that source from which he orders alike the universe of his words, his woodpile and his songs. Through this inner action of the bardic storyteller, the story metaphorically enacts the ethical nature and source of narrative, as reflected in Kearney’s statements. Archibald embodies both the resident tiller and one in exile, a further tension informing the internal unity he ultimately achieves through his life journey. Carver and his kind may be the descendants and inheritors of this culture who will ultimately adapt and revitalize it within their own generational and socio-economic context.

Ironically, since it is one of the few stories that is not narrated in first-person, it seems all the more plausible to further read Archibald as a cipher for the author/artist MacLeod himself, encoding the kind of profound care, practicality and craftsmanship inscribed in his texts, reflecting the qualities of Benjamin’s storyteller. The story may stand as a metaphor for MacLeod’s central stance as a writer, perhaps one as hard-won as Archibald’s—to hold fast

against the drift of culture, to write slowly, to not “change the songs” (stories) to be about something more fashionable than death and grief and organic culture, to dare to mourn.

The Road To Rankin’s Point

Once again a first-person narrator plunges us into the “now” of telling and subverts the conventional distinctions between writing and oral expression: “I am *speaking* now of a July in the early 1970s and it in the morning just after the sun has risen following a night of heavy rains. My car moves through the quiet village. . .” (143). Once again we live an unfolding narrative where a male narrator at once detached, gentle and relentless, addresses us as intimate listener as we witness the “telling” or defining event of his life. Like most of MacLeod’s narrators, this one is neither solipsistic nor aiming to embroil us in a slice of subjective psychological angst. Rather we are lifted promptly onto the wings of a consciousness-in-motion encompassing a totality of history and geography as well as his immediate temporal/spatial community. The narrative is immediately structured at an existential level of reflection. The positioning of the reader as a participatory, co-discovering presence is heightened by the fact that the narrator is physically journeying as well. A relentless sense of motion pervades the story, counterbalanced by a stillness that seems to be speaking from everywhere at once.

As the narrator locates us geographically within the Atlantic Coast’s fishing industry, we learn that the lobster season has ended and has not been a successful one. The price of cod in Ontario is \$1.69 a pound and there is talk that in Newfoundland the fishermen may strike. This archive of the economic scenario in the province of Nova Scotia swiftly gives way to the narrator’s vision of the road off Cape Breton Island giving way to the Trans-Canada Highway: “If followed relentlessly, it will take you almost anywhere in North America; perhaps to Central

and South America as well” (144). The narrator’s evocation of this road is a haunting, impersonal almost-view from space in which he traces the highway as an existential abstraction, revealing the paradox of our supposedly connecting continental road as a monster of disembodiment: “. . . the high-powered ‘luxury’ products of Detroit. . . .and the grinding trucks. . . carrying the continent’s goods. . . .will all be miles away. . . sitting around campfires and sweating in the motels” (145). The vision becomes more nihilistic as it builds:

Some few will end in twisted, spectacular wreckages, later moaning incoherently in the unknown hospitals or lying beneath the quiet sheets of death while authorities search through glove compartments and check out license numbers prior to notifying the next of kin. It is a big, fast brutal road that leads into the world on this July day and there is no longer any St. Christopher to be the patron saint of travelers. (145)

Still reeling with this jarring distance and disembodiment from space and time, the reader is then jarred back to the narrator’s spot in space. “But for me, in this my twenty-sixth year, it is not into the larger world that I go today. And the road that I follow feeds into no other. . .” (145). The narrator is rather travelling in the opposite direction, navigating his way up a twisting, turning eight-mile road that climbs to end “abruptly and permanently” in his grandmother’s backyard. On this land lies her homestead and beyond that the sea. “It is an end in every way and it is to the beginning of this conclusion that my car now begins its long ascent” (146). The line’s ominous tone and abstraction is unsettling. But the nihilistic placelessness of the infinite highway soothingly gives way to the description of the immediately present and lush summer beauty that begins and only deepens on this road once “. . . the signs of formal habitation fall behind. . . .” In stark contrast to the highway, “The road is now but a minor intrusion that the wildness will reclaim” (147).

A last almost right-angled turn before the remaining two-mile climb is called “The Little Turn of Sadness.” This is where the narrator’s grandfather staggered and fell many years during his walk home, and froze to death. Shortly after his grandmother had sent her young son to look for him the next morning, she heard the death ring or the “sound of the death bell in her right ear,” and then as if in response to the bell, she heard the howls of the three black-and-white border collies that had gone with her son. She could sense the message they conveyed. She had been twenty-six at the time and pregnant with their seventh child. The narrator’s journey here intersects with time as we cross a threshold into his life story and history. However, his family seems remote to him: “Like an improbable sequence of old black-and-white pictures taken once in the long ago. Taken of people it is impossible to ever know or to fully understand” (150). As so often in MacLeod’s work, understanding seems ever elusive. Family life is depicted as inherent estrangement.

As we follow the narrator’s consciousness, all its objects, both in time and in space, are treated with similar distance. He seems as removed from his past and family as from the vision of the transcontinental highway. The summer beauty he describes so intricately is likewise just part of his reflective stream. His grandfather’s death in fact is mentioned only incidentally to his own as yet unexplained predicament: “Now as I feel my own blood, diseased and dying, I think of his . . .” (148). The cryptic reference is barely registered before the narrative slides on. As the narrator approaches his grandmother’s home, there is the sense of a history now fading away as he passes the ruins of old houses: “Only the strength of stone has survived the ravages of time and seasons” (151).

The sudden presence of his grandmother’s animals at the approach to her home seems to signal the threshold of an archaic and ghostly form of life. First there are the “white-faced

Cheviots” sheep, many of them lying in the middle of the road which they consider to be theirs. The grandmother we are told, has strived for decades to maintain the purity of her sheep. All her animals are descended from livestock that have been there for years of “fiercely inbred generations” and even the horses’ names repeat down the years as either *Star* or *Tena*, and they will eat only hay grown on their farm. The animals seem to him like pets now, “wasted and unused” in terms of the purposes they were born for. The grandmother’s house has sunken into the earth with the passage of years to the degree that the doors must open inward. This inverted image of a dwelling space, almost fairy-tale like, juxtaposed with the narrator’s cataloguing of ancient farm implements hanging in the porch, signify entry to an interior and hidden world. The three collies are unperturbed by his arrival. At this “threshold” place, the narrator simultaneously signifies a crucial crossing of his own both existentially, as well as into the reader’s presence: “I enter now to make my presence fully known and to take my place in time” (155).

Habitual mental traces and clichés criss-cross through the narrator’s mind as he drinks tea with his grandmother, who has been expecting him, and feeds biscuits to her three dogs. An indolent ironic tone is projected into the scene as if to both understate and underline the mystery of “the game that lies some hours down our road”: On other days like this, the narrator comments, he and his grandmother would have observed “*On a clear day you can see Prince Edward Island*. Now it does not seem to matter.” His mind wanders on self-mockingly: “*Today is the first day of the rest of your life*, comes to mind” (157). Recklessly he drinks his boiling tea, “half-hopeful it might burn me more fiercely into life,” for which his grandmother reprimands him like a young boy. The reader is seductively mesmerized as the narrator drones on: “The bees buzz from the lilacs at the base of the house and bounce drunkenly against the window.” Just as we are about to doze off – “We are drowsy and waiting in the summer’s heat”(158)—he jolts us

with the remark that he has come here to find a way to understand death. We have not yet seen any sign that the narrator is attached or engaged with his ancestry. He is non-committal, diffident almost, as he depicts the coordinates of his grandmother's experience and character and their family history.

When she fetches the old violin that came from the Scotland of her ancestors and plays two Gaelic laments, it is she, not he, who is moved by the ancient music. His mind shifts back instead into its existential distances to compare the image with some of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren who, far away on that other road, gyrate to the music of the early 70s in Toronto and Las Vegas. In response to his grandmother's reminders that his grandfather was part MacCrimmon, and that they were the greatest musicians in the Scottish Highlands, he is indifferent: "Yes, I know... You've told me." He seems equally unmoved by the fact of the MacCrimmons' two gifts which are supposed to follow in all their bloodlines—the gift of music and the gift of foreseeing their own deaths. But his mind gravitates to the cryptic message left by his grandfather decades before in the rafters of the barn outside: "We are the children of our despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree." Was this after all, a prophetic epitaph for the entire family line? But finally a question coalesces in the narrator's mind, which the story itself attempts to answer: "And what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?" (159).

The narrator, Calum, feels his grandmother holds the key to a "... perception of death in all its vast diversity" (160). He would now like to understand this. Again, we travel with a narrator and storyteller who is seeking understanding rather than speaking from it. His grandmother had faced the deaths not only of her husband but of three of her brothers, who died in ways that went with their farming and fishing livelihoods. Later she endured the deaths of

three of her sons, who went out to live in that larger contemporary world and died bizarre and surreal deaths.

The story's vital centre is rather in the connecting psychic strands between the narrator and his grandmother, which soon emerge as she prepares for the visitors they are expecting. Until now their connection has been marked through the symbolic gifts with which he has paid a token respect to her heritage over the years, such as the dress and the brooch of twining Scottish thistles which he remembers choosing for her amid the pre-Christmas shopping rush in Toronto, both of which she chooses to put on now for the coming guests. Calum's registering of the brooch implies an opening of perception: "I am struck once more by the falseness of the brooch, for Scottish thistles do not twine" (162). This development is furthered by the following scene in which he finds himself trimming the "yellowed, unclean fingernails of my grandmother," suggestive of a ritual preparation for death. In performing this act he feels "I realize that I am admitted now to the silent, secret communication that the strong have always known in their relationship with the weak." He sees it as the ". . . standard that the previous generation waves always over the one that follows" (163). The fact that he has seen her more in terms of strength than in terms of love suggests that this journey is not one made on familiar emotional ground, but that he is seeking or discovering something dormant or new in the relationship. His grandmother's formidable character is conveyed by his comment that in the village below, her seventy year-old son (the narrator's father) will be nervously preparing, ". . . still half-afraid of his mother's inspection" (164).

We learn that the entire family will appear that afternoon to perform the annual ritual of deciding "What to do about Grandma?" (166). All the generations from her children to her great-great-grandchildren have returned again from their scattered locations to plan a strategy, but she

has refused for fifteen years to leave her home. This year's plan involves the nursing home in the village below, but "she has hated it as much as the friends she goes to see" who live there. Her friends there whisper to her in Gaelic and tell her of "real and imagined atrocities" in the home. The narrator's chronicling of the family's reasoning behind the nursing home strategy is riddled with stock phrases in quotes which signify conventional cultural attitudes to the elderly: ". . . 'privacy,' 'being with people her own age,' 'not having to worry about her meals,' 'receiving what is vaguely described as 'care'. . . . On and on"(166).

These phrases and the images invoked of indignity and graceless death, work powerfully both to critique and implicitly deconstruct these values. They further serve within the text to motivate and reify the reclaiming of cultural heritage that follows for the grandmother and for Calum. That the two themes are yoked together is reinforced by the narrator's second defining question which cuts across the narrative: "What does it mean that old women in nursing homes suffer from real and imagined atrocities? And are the imagined ones less terrifying because they are not true?" (167). Mirroring directly the earlier question about the significance of ancestral islands, such questions bridge the narratorial space with non-diegetic space, addressing the reader in the present moment and deeply implicating us in the question.

In his diseased state, Calum is able to empathize with his grandmother's feelings about what it must be like to live in some place like "Sunny Brook or Sunny Acres or Sunshine Villa. . . ." (167). The text hints at the psychic link between Calum and his grandmother when we learn that the family is hoping Calum will be the one who can convince her to go to the home. But ironically their emerging connection has the opposite effect. He secretly does not believe in these strategies for her care and feels himself a "Judas" in coming to supposedly convince her. The depiction of the family gathering that follows suggests a false "picture," where the dutiful

family photographs of three and four generations are taken, yet the subjects appear frozen, “desperate hopes and fears” are hidden, and “. . . one cannot always . . . fully reach the darkest truth” (170).

The estrangement between the grandmother’s culture and that of her descendants is ironically emphasized by the comparison between her family members’ cars and the namesakes they share with the real animals who might scratch and damage them: “Mustang, Pinot, Maverick” (170). The music is the surviving inheritance they share and the instruments are brought out that afternoon. “It is a style older than any of our memories and produces what we call ‘our sound’” (171). As Calum watches his grandmother dancing with easy grace and “getting through her day,” he recites in his mind all the reasons they have agreed against her remaining here, but they ring as false as the supposed “benefits” of living in a nursing home. It becomes clear to both Calum and to the reader that the grandmother’s nature and ancestral heritage incorporate clearly delineated values around the core existential experiences of birth and death. Calum recalls how after her husband’s death, the authorities suggested she would not be able to cope and that life would be easier if some of her children were put up for adoption. But she had refused. “I would never have my children taken from me to be scattered about like the down of a dead thistle.” Gittings notes: “Unlike her own ancestral mother, Scotland, who was coerced into scattering her people about the globe during the Clearances, the grandmother endeavors to preserve the sanctity of life and of family” (5). The grandmother’s position is unequivocal: “I would not be that dead. No one has ever said that life is to be easy. Only that it is to be lived” (172). We begin to understand that for this woman, “death” is more truly a life not fully lived. This profound relationship to life and death emerges as a key aspect of the “significance of ancestral lands,” which formerly may not have been apparent to the narrator.

Calum has turned to his grandmother's strength and cultural identity to fathom a way to meet his own death.

But everyone's expectations are foiled when his grandmother pre-empts any discussion of her future by announcing that Calum is going to be staying with her: ". . . now everything will be just fine" (172). Trying to will her own solution to the situation, she is calling a bluff, having informed Calum earlier in the afternoon that she has left him everything in her will, and that she hopes that he might come and be happy living there. He must yet tell her that he is dying. Amidst the shock and relief of the grandmother's announcement, the family disperses, though none can yet fathom why he should return here from his job teaching high school in Burlington and Don Mills. As Calum and his grandmother are left alone now with nothing for it but to mutually face their predicaments, all converges in the moment of emotional and spiritual symmetry in which they mutually recognize that neither can save the other now. They burst into tears: "We are weeping for each other and for ourselves." There is the effect of a mutual psychic canceling, or absorption in the other as they unite in ". . . this display of weeping weakness" (175).

The break in the text that follows signals a locational shift both within the text and within Calum's consciousness, from external to interior, from the existential to the metaphysical. It is only as he sleeps at his parents' house that night in the village below—symbolic womb of the unconscious—that he experiences almost against his own recalcitrant nature, a kind of fall into the past which seems part of the logic of death:

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." He would now go back farther

through previous generations in order to “ . . . so that I might have more of what now seems so little. (176)

What Calum could not perhaps accept or encounter intellectually throughout his life, now occurs as an inner, organic necessity as he faces a mortality that intersects with his grandmother’s existence and prospective death.

...I would go back through the superstitions and the herbal remedies and the fatalistic war cries and the haunting violins and the cancer cures of cobwebs. Back through the knowledge of being and its end as understood through second sight and spectral visions and the intuitive dog and the sea bird’s cry. I would go back to the priest with the magic hands. Back to the faith healer if only I had more faith. Back to anything rather than to die at the objective hands of mute, cold science. (176)

This calling back, and being called back, is revealed as a unity of description and experience for Calum as he sees the vision of the young MacCrimmon “ . . . quietly composing the music of his own death before leaving permanently the darkened shores of his misty Skye” (176). In a duplication of his grandmother’s experience, he hears the music, hears it like a bell. When he reiterates as his grandmother had done that “ . . . no, it is not to be confused with anything else. It is not a bird or a radio or a shunting train or a passing car . . . ,” then we know that he has crossed psychic realms into the past that she inhabits and that nothing is the same. (177)

Still in a semi-dream state, Calum drives as if “guided” up the road to Rankin’s Point, hearing now the howls of the three collies. The dogs’ eyes glow as he reaches “The Little Turn of Sadness” to find his grandmother lying dead in the middle of the road. For the fourth time in the narrative, he takes her hands, still warm, noting that her fingernails are still untrimmed. The

brooch of twining Scottish thistles is still pinned to her dress, in the end a talisman of the entwining in death which had been their hidden fate, and of the entwining of the visible and invisible worlds which is at the centre of the story. The narrator's brief encapsulation as he bends over his grandmother, "This is the ending that we have," (178) encircles the narrative with the progression towards death that has structured it. It reaches back to the narrator's intimation of Rankin's Point as "an end in every way..." and the "... beginning of this conclusion," and forward to the inevitable event which follows.

In the face of his grandmother's death, Calum rises, and in the loss of demarcation between inner and outer, past and present, and between life and death, which now characterizes his experience, and in this spot which marks a timeless site of death, it is but a step, textually and physically, for Calum to stand at the edge of the cliff, looking into the darkness beyond where the home and buildings of Rankin's Point lie, not seeing them in the darkness, not seeing anything. This personal ending for Calum and his grandmother is doubled by Calum's marking of an extinction in historical time: "For the first time in the centuries since the Scottish emigrations there is no human life at the end of this dark road" (178). The reference deepens the sense of life extinguished, as Calum turns to the sea and hears the music his grandmother had played that morning and faces an ultimate disorientation: "... the internal and the external darkness reach to become as one.... Without a seam, without a sound, they meet and unite all" (179).

Calum's death and his birth into ancestral consciousness are simultaneous experiences of initiation. His claiming of an ancestral legacy allows him a meaningful death. It is the fulfillment of his earlier intuition: "I have returned now, I think, almost as the diseased and polluted salmon, to swim for a brief time in the clear waters of my earlier stream. The returning

salmon knows of no ‘cure’ for the termination of his life” (165). Christopher Gittings writes, “Calum’s leukemia is emblematic of the insidious disease of migration, a hemorrhaging, that coupled with assimilation, threatens to destroy the Gaelic community of Cape Breton” (60). But cure can be different than we imagine. We realize only in the last line that the narrator Calum is addressing us from beyond death, which because it is unremarked, nor registered until the final line of the story, reiterates the continuum of life and death, that unity which is affirmed in the last words.

In terms of Bakhtin’s chronotypes, we find in “Rankin’s Point” that the chronotype of the present moment is simultaneously layered with the chronotype of death or infinity. The “Little Turn of Sadness” seems spatially to be a portal where one realm intersects or entwines with the other.

As a less rhapsodic and more materialized version of the relationship between David Canaan and his grandmother in Ernest Buckler’s novel *The Mountain and the Valley*, MacLeod’s story adumbrates the theme to a more conscious cross-fertilization between the two lives, and achieves more of an existential resolution. “Rankin’s Point” is a teaching, instructing story. The grandmother is instructing her grandson in the way to die. This rehearses the idea of the use of story and can be connected to Native or other indigenous oral storytelling where teaching stories are an integral and eminently useful cultural motif.

The story also powerfully affirms one of its subjects (the grandmother) as another storyteller who is tiller of the soil. The narrator from away who is returning seems, by contrast, not only to reiterate the alienation of experience away (and to struggle in the telling of the tale) and to be unconsciously seeking the source of story itself, but finally reveals himself to have found it as we discover he is speaking to us from the realm of death. This evocation of the

continuum between life and death is not common in Western culture and is rare in realistic literature. The story embodies the presence of death as the creative source of story, informing and revealing life meaning.

Vision

The first two paragraphs of this long and complex first-person narrative reveal at a stroke the dynamic convergence of memory, repetition, body and place as primary in story and in storytelling. They inscribe the bodily experience of deep listening.

I don't remember when I first heard the story but I remember the first time that I heard it and remembered it. By that I mean the first time it made an impression on me and more or less became *mine*; sort of went into me in the way such things do, went into me in such a way that I knew it would not leave again but would remain there forever. Something like when you cut your hand with a knife by accident, and even as you're trying to staunch the blood flowing out of the wound, you know the wound will never really heal totally and your hand will never look quite the same again. You can imagine the scar tissue that will form and be a different colour and texture from the rest of your skin. You know this even as you are trying to stop the blood and trying to squeeze the separated edges of skin together once more. (321)

This paragraph inscribes the emblem of the body as the true site of story. The next paragraph fully and deliberately establishes the geographic, cyclic and physical context of the receiving of this remembered story: they were a mile and a half offshore, it was the last day of lobster season, a sunny day, the last day of June, early afternoon, and the narrator was seventeen years old. Already the text has a three-tiered structure: a remembered inner story, embedded

within the frame of a specific time and location of its oral telling to the narrator, embedded further within the frame of the narrator who is passing on to us, and relating to, the remembered inner story, in present time. Notably this teller is also a listener, which foregrounds for the reader the intimate connection between listening and telling as they are sharply juxtaposed and overlaid throughout the tale.

We know already then, that a story is an infinite metaphor for other stories: it is inseparable from the time, place and psychological-historical moment of its transmission and remembering. This story-context in effect adds itself onto the story, becomes part of its substance, to be passed on with the story. So that in the temporal and historical realm, the possibility is inscribed that genealogical narratives can be woven forward through time adding archeological layers as it were. Frame is added to frame is added to frame. Or in the spatial realm, we see that story, like any craft, is the shaping of elements into a structure, in this case the material being constituted by language and the infinity of human experience—whether inner/imaginary or outer/ “real”—which are then projected into the framework of linear time to create narrative. We see that the simultaneity and infinite flow of experience and of language mean that a story is made of an infinite number of stories which are multiply dialogic and infinitely self-reproductive. “Vision” offers us a rich and complex experience of story on both these archival and creative levels. The story also richly affirms the plural subjects and many shifting addressees of story, both oral and written.

The middle frame—the place/time/setting of the remembered story—is however, twice further elaborated with a “detour” story about the lobster season, the industry, and some anecdotes about its history and how the narrator’s grandparents were involved in that industry, which circles back to the story. The narrator returns to this present of reference with a deliberate

encoding of oral storytelling: “All of this was, of course, a long time ago and I am just trying to recreate the scene. On the day of the remembered story, though, the sea was almost serene...” (324). He then further recreates the scene, talking more about the lobsters in their little boat, about the blind spring mackerel revolving now in the water, and about the sack of lobsters he has put by for he and his father, hidden under their oilers.

He then moves into another story-thread about the river boundary lying ahead of them which separates their fishing grounds from those of their neighbours, the MacAllesters. Because of the shifting boundary of the river mouth in recent years, there has been contention between the families, extending to the friendship between the narrator and Kenneth MacAllester, who is his age. As the MacAllesters’ boat now moves in ahead of them, the two boys wave to one another and this acts as the trigger for another story told by Kenneth to the narrator when they were in the sixth grade. This story about an ancestor of Kenneth’s grandmother who possessed *Da Shealladh*, the second sight, who was blind in the ordinary sense of sight, and who was also named Kenneth, introduces the themes of the main story relating to blindness, hinted when Kenneth finishes the story with “ ‘I wouldn’t want to be blind’” (328). Among other things these pages encode the linkages between story and reality and their reciprocity and mutual ongoing reproduction, as later the story will spiral back to extend the story of the MacAllesters in the present of reference.

The narrator has now led us to the exact moment and physical-psychological configuration of the remembered story/telling: “Now, as I said, the MacAllesters’ boat was going in ahead of us. . .” (328). He signifies the arrival of a “between” time and place, which catalyzes an act of storytelling: they have no desire to talk to the MacAllesters and there would be some time before they would find a place to dock. His father cuts the boat engine as there was “no

need to rush.” Further, they are situated as to be looking upon the site of the story, the point of Canna, called after the Hebridean island of Canna, “the “green island” where most of its original settlers were born, and where, the narrator now tells us, his grandmother was born. Again, we see the convergence of body/place/time. The inner story now begins. It is his father’s story and it begins in his father’s voice. “ ‘It was about this time of year,’ ” said my father, “ ‘that your Uncle Angus and I went by ourselves to visit our grandmother at the point of Canna.’ ” (329). The corresponding “time of year” is a further trigger for the father’s telling of his story.

Interjecting commentary about how the sense of geographic distance of Canna from where they live has changed with the advent of telephones and vehicle transportation, the narrator then takes over his father’s story. The two voices are already seamlessly overlaid. The story’s theme of second sight is established in the inner story when the father recounts how their other grandmother near where they live in Kintail, Nova Scotia, reads in their tea leaves that the twin brothers will be going “across the water.” The motif of a mythic journey is set in motion as the two boys take the boat to visit their grandmother.

The grandmother on Canna is foreshadowed as a mythic figure as the boys make their way to her. A man in a buggy stops to ask them in Gaelic “their names and where they were from and where they were going,” signifying the motif of identity as fundamental to the story. When they inform him that it is to see their grandmother, he repeats “Your grandmother?” “ ‘Yes’ they reply. ‘Our grandmother.’ ” “ ‘Oh’ he said. ‘Your grandmother, are you sure?’ ” (334). This ritualistic, repetitive exchange echoes fairytale motifs such as the encounter of “Little Red Riding Hood” with the wolf in the woods as she goes to see her grandmother. When the man in the buggy drops them at what they think is the “wrong house,” the text also cues us that

something ominous is afoot. The boys are too shy and embarrassed to say anything and refuse his offer to go in with them.

The two towering, larger-than-life figures at the heart of “Vision” are the narrator’s great-grandmother and great-grandfather. We meet the grandmother as she is “framed in the doorway” with her two black dogs, signifying her significance and her position between worlds. The multiple and richly layered image of the grandmother partakes of the vitality and archetypal power of the Russian Baba Yaga figure.¹¹ She is nameless, and is, at that point, of unknown identity, yet she is a teeming locus of vital life in all its creative, degenerate and destructive aspects. Her Gaelic address to them, “ ‘Cò’ a th’ann?’ ” (Who’s there?) is the first of what will be a ritual address that is echoed and mirrored through the story signifying the core motifs of identity and origination. Who we are may be buried and obscured beneath layers of what we actually see or have been given to believe about ourselves. We can read this woman already as a container of stories or hidden knowledge as her cursory and cryptic statements draw textual connections between the boys and her realm, such as telling them she has relatives in Kintail and that the dogs are twins like them. The reader is given to know or intimate more than the boys can as yet, even as ironically the woman’s riddle-like questions imply that the boys should know more than they do.

The woman’s entrance porch full of household and farming paraphernalia and the starting of a bleating lamb signal entrance to this otherly abode, much as the sheep and tool shed heralded the approach to the grandmother’s house in “Rankin’s Point.” Her dark, primitive kitchen with its chaos of filth, broken cups and saucers and the half-completed partition which is “either going up or going down” as it houses a cave for breeding and birthing animals, is an outer shell and extension for her body, “clad in layers of clothing,” all of it “very dirty and covered

with stains of spilled tea and food remnants and spattered grease” (337). Her “smeared and filthy” glasses reveal to the boys that she is blind, yet they comically and alarmingly insinuate that she possesses another kind of seeing. When the boys begin fake-eating the “tea and biscuits with the cat hair” which she serves them, they still feel she is watching them. The intelligence of her language also suggests the woman’s hidden dimensions.

As the twins depart, her ritualistic questions further foreshadow their journey as a “vision”quest: ““Do you know where you are going?”” and ““Can you see your way in the dark?”” (339). It is the third time they have been asked where they are going, and with each posing of the question, the reader is cast into more doubt and uncertainty in advance of the twins’ perceptions. Like the *Baba Yaga* figure, this woman is of ambiguous nature and intention—we are not sure if she is a force for good or evil, but sense that like the mythic figure, she is likely to be something far beyond both. Her cryptic parting words suggest ominously that we have not seen the last of her: “ ‘Some are more loyal than others,’ she said. ‘Remember that’” (340).

As the twins arrive shortly at the “buildings of their original destination,” we encounter the twins’ grandfather who is also as yet unidentifiable to either them or to the reader. The spatial and textual juxtaposition of this man and the “grandmother” however, powerfully suggests their connection through corresponding images of the Gaelic language, and the presence of the animals and the sexuality in the earthy and cthonic setting of the barn which seems an extension of the primitive quality of the woman’s home. The relationship is further signified as one that is centred in the loci of desire and subversive aspects of instinct by the “energetic breeding” of the cats mirroring the secrecy of the man’s masturbation in the barn setting. For the twins, he cuts the same fearful figure as did the woman. The twins’ subsequent discovery that this drunk, masturbating man is the same grandfather who they had formerly seen as “clear-headed, splendid

and always well-attired,” suggests the grandfather’s double and hidden identity. His effusive embrace of the twins telling them “I love you. I love you” suggestively binds their image with that of the woman and the scene of his masturbation.

Following the twins’ disturbing entry into the realm of their ancestry, the “grandmother” they recognize pulls the pieces together to restore the familiar image, assuring the children “we are glad you have come” (344). The image of the twins that night under a “mountain of quilts” in a room next to their grandparents’ encodes a womblike fairytale scenario, suggesting the layers of identity and illusion within which they are enclosed, as well as inscribing the primal cycles of day and night which animate the tale. There is something “too good to be true” when the grandparents greet them in the morning sun, each bearing a tray of breakfast. When the twins think of the drunk moaning man in the barn as “. . . like a dream they wished they had not had,” the reader bears the irony of knowing that the dream is likely much closer to the truth. (344)

During the “golden” week of the twins’ visit, Canna begins to double as a window through to the place of its own origins in a far-off land, echoed in the analogy of the type of strawberry growing there “. . . whose fruit grew far from the original root” (345). The island’s practise of old-world customs conveys the magical beliefs which form the cultural container for these archetypal characters. The connection to the original island of Canna in Scotland is focused through the correspondence/analogy of Canna’s Church of St. Columba with the original chapel on the island of Canna, through the grandfather’s story of St. Columba of Colum Cille, which he tells to the twins. Columba was in real life a Gaelic missionary monk in the sixth century who was exiled from Ireland to the Scottish isle of Iona, and whom MacLeod casts fictionally here as having founded the original chapel on the Scottish island of Canna.¹²

MacLeod's intertextual embedding of the Columba tale at the centre of "Vision" signifies many layers of meaning and inquiry and is the radial centre from which all the core themes of the story are iterated outwards and reproduced. Here at the originary centrepiece of the story is a tale that is at once heroic, historic and legendary. The "strong-willed" hero is a powerful spiritual icon whose missionary work took place at another catalytic historical intersection, that of Celtic spirituality and Christianity. Columba's constructive transformation of an experience of exile "...establishing monasteries and chapels and travelling among the people. . . .working as a missionary, making predictions, seeing visions and changing forever that region of the world" acts as an overarching message which ripples out from the centre (spatial and temporal) to the edges (spatial and temporal) of the story. (346) It is vision and understanding, such as the vision Columba embodied, which overcomes blindness and displacement, and which will confer genuine identity and belonging on all these exiled characters and culture.

Structurally the interweaving of the Columba tale enacts that stories are by definition intertextual; it posits the many possible connections or intersections between the historical and the personal; it affirms the parallel importance and equality of both cultural history and the personal /"historicity of heritage" (Gittings' term), as well as unsettling the distinction between the real and the fictive as does much postmodern fiction. In terms of content, this intertextual element reiterates the theme of seeing/not seeing and of *Da Shealladh* (second sight), paralleling the story of Kenneth MacAllesters' ancestor who likewise used a stone to facilitate his second sight, suggesting an analogous connection between the heroic figure and the common person, affirming the "story" that we all are, whatever our origins may be. The theme of cultural displacement and emigration figured in Columba's experience has the added irony that the country of Canna's origin – Scotland – is for Columba, the land of exile. This significantly

implies that personal identity and belonging are constituted by a precise convergence/intersection of body, place and self-definition which is ultimately an interior reality: as body is a metaphor or text which stands for psyche, so physical land and place is ultimately an interchangeable metaphor for interior identity and belonging, as it penetrates psyche. Place moves with/in you and without you. Space can embody the internal element of place. The grandfather says “ ‘That chapel is fallen a long time ago, too, and all of the people gone. . . .But sometimes I imagine I still see them’ ” (347). This, though the grandfather has never physically been to the original Scottish Canna.

The question of genealogy is thematized within these coordinates of identity as a more nebulous and uncertain variable, yet its impact is also profound. The grandfather tells the twins how the custom on old Canna was to marry young for it was considered unlucky to be single, but other cultural characteristics are insinuated: “ ‘Perhaps they also found it difficult to wait.’ ” He continues, saying that of all those gone from old Canna, “ ‘some of us are here. . . and we carry certain things within us’ ” (347). The grandfather is insinuating that he carries a genealogical characteristic of being highly-sexed. The reader is left with a further intimation that this sexuality is an excess as well as a creative metaphor, and that he knows this.” His subsequent statement inscribes at the centre of the tale a parable of the nebulous and entwined nature of insight and identity: “ ‘Sometimes there are things within us which we do not know or fully understand and sometimes it is hard to stamp out what you can’t see. It is good that you are here for this while.’ ” (347) If he is passing on to his grandchildren his legacy of uncertainty, he is also cryptically instructing them (as did the blind woman) that it is self-knowledge, inward vision, that determines us and which they must finally seek. Yet such knowledge is elusive and often subverted by what we cannot see.

The ambiguous connection between belonging and possession as determinants of identity, echoes through and through MacLeod's stories, as here. The two are not always coincident; possession does not always imply belonging. In "Lost Salt Gift" the narrator's son belongs to him biologically yet the boy's true belonging is elsewhere. The determining event of Columba's exile is his copying of a sacred text without permission, to which the King of Ireland ascribes the prototype judgment informing the modern concept of copyright: "To every cow its calf and to every book its copy" (345). Inscribed at the centre of MacLeod's story and analogously repeated through each story-layer is this core motif of origination and reproduction—biological, textual, geographical—reiterating the eternal riddle of identity.

Though the apparent grandmother leaves all appearances intact, complete with splendid farewell dinner, her parting statement imparts a further hint of dark family secrets and a burden of conscience: "It was good to have you here and it made us feel better about ourselves" (348). The fairytale veneer cracks swiftly again when the children drive away in their grandfather's buggy on a rainy day following the "golden" week. The scene of the grandfather's hopeless efforts to ignore the blind woman's cries in Gaelic, "*Cò a th'ann?*," as she stands near the roadway where they pass, his admission to the twins that he does not want her to know they are there, and his helpless reply to her "*Se mi-fhin...* It's myself!," configure the man, the woman and the twins together in textual witness to a shared and secret identity. The bodily fluids which symbolically (substantively) link the grandfather to the woman—his semen in the barn, his tears on coming away now from talking to her—are both washed away in the rain so that the children cannot carry forward more than a ghostly sense of this other identity of their grandfather and must make do with the "uncertainty" which characterizes much of what they observe and hear during their visit. When news comes the next day that the blind woman has burned in the the

house that has slowly consumed itself from within as she tears lumber from the partition to feed her fire, the twins' parents quickly depart to Canna for five days, but nothing is said of the identity of the blind woman. Her continuing presence as a spectre in their dreams, calling her Gaelic "Who's there?" until one night in a dream they too answer " "*Se mi-fhin,* ' " mark her as an unresolved element of their identity.

The narrator informs us that the twins never spent another week on the green hills of Canna. This not only fixes their week on Canna within their psyches as their family story and the journey inscribing their life/myth – a blind journey into the blind heart of their origins – but the narrator's words in this paragraph of metanarrative also reframe his tale(s) with conventions of fairytale/storytelling, and subtly blend and extend these into the more everyday commentary of the ongoing story as a journey to understanding: "My father and his brother never again spent a week on the green hills of Canna. Perhaps their lives went by too fast or circumstances changed or there were reasons that they did not fully understand themselves" (353). "Never again" is like "once upon a time" or "happily ever after." Like all stories, the story of the week on Canna is both complete in itself and is yet a mystery and can be extended or altered by another story which may be still to come. "...Reasons that they did not fully understand themselves" echoes their grandfather's words to them about Canna, carrying forward the legacy of "things within us we do not know or fully understand."

The twins' fated encounter six years later with a young man in Halifax, textualizing another leap in space and time, will turn out to yield the corrective story which will offer such elusive understanding. (Significantly the twins Angus and Alex hear it at the same age as Alex's son, the narrator, later hears it from Alex.) It is a story told in Gaelic by someone who is not a member of the family but parallel to it and who is implicated. He is the son of the man who

owned the store on Canna and took the children to the blind woman's house. Like the site of the father's storytelling, this story is told at a time and place between/outside ordinary life space/time (an induction centre in Halifax). The story reiterates the symbolism of bodily fluids, in this case, urine, which magically, through transfer of the urine of the young man from Canna, gives the twins their medical clearance to join WWI (and it is in World War II that the story will continue). Significantly the tale reveals more than the young man realized he was telling. The young man tells the story of *Mac an Amhuruís* and of the strange woman at the centre of his life, but he does not know that *Mac an Amhuruís* is the twin's grandfather and neither the boys nor the reader yet know that the blind woman is their grandmother.

The visit to Halifax to enlist in WWI is triggered by the encouraging sermon of their clergyman, a recurrence of the cultural/spiritual elder figure of St. Columba who also fought wars for his culture over sacred texts. When the grandfather seeks a cure for his visions, it is a clergyman whom he and the woman consult. This figure seems to have the power to cure him of second sight but at the price of cultural conformity, as he must promise to stop seeing the woman because of the scandal they have aroused. It is a denial that destroys their love and parenthood and creates a lie of the twins' life. Her culture, religion and family betray her, as they swear on the Bible. She becomes an exile within her own home, family and culture. Magic infuses the culture; however religion causes as much destruction as war and ironically seems always to be at the centre of it.

As almost an inversion of the the story of Columba told to the twins by their grandfather six years earlier, the grandfather is now the subject in a tale linking topos of sexuality and spirituality as the missionary monk becomes a travelling stud, and connections between ideas and violence are focalized in the motif of second sight, which also parallels *Mac an Amharuís* to

the MacAllester ancestor who also saw a burning house. *Mac an Amharuis*' uncertainty of his father's identity becomes a legacy he passes on to his descendants. This uncertainty and vital sexuality is extended to the woman as soul-twin to the grandfather: "She was thought to be 'odd' by some because she was given to rages and uncertainty and sometimes she would scream and shout at him in public" (355). The notion of "uncertainty" here reticulates to take on many nuances.

The talismanic presence of books is here again as in "The Boat" and other stories, once again figuring education as a shadow presence, in this case insinuated as a marginal, "auto-didact" education, through their explicit material presence, which also re-plays the image of Columba's sacred texts. An image of subversively instinctive intelligence is knit together with a vital sexuality as *Mac an Amhurius* travels the country with his stallion: "At times he would bring back books and sometimes moonshine And sometimes they would read quietly together and talk and at other times they would curse and shout and become physically violent" (355). The travel, the talk, the fighting, all translate as a kind of *reading* which is of course, *experience*.

As the earlier textual hints that the blind woman is their grandmother are confirmed by the young man's tale, we also see the motif of twins and of blindness reiterated. The woman was blinded giving birth to her twin girls, and the surviving one gave birth to twins Angus and Alex. Alex, her grandson, would also be blinded at Normandy with her presence ("Who's there?") and the simultaneous death of their grandfather on that day. Further, the blind woman had a "double" in her sister who acted as grandmother to the twins.

The paragraph of metanarrative following the encounter in Halifax encodes many further aspects of storytelling: "This, I guess, is my retelling of the story told by the young man of

Canna to my father and his brother at a time when. . .” rehearses the motif of storytelling—as telling to an audience at a particular time and context, in this instance, at a threshold moment both in terms of their age (they are ready to hear the truth) and also in cultural terms, as they are on the verge of conflict again, whether familial (MacAllesters) or cultural (war).

Through this embedded storytelling encounter, we experience too, that stories are terribly fragile things that can be lost, that are wholly contingent upon being told and heard: the youth from Canna was killed in the war, the narrator tells us, and we infer that if he had not happened on that moment in space and time when the twins were there to hear his story, they may never have heard it nor never have known their own true history. Further, a story may not exist outside its constituents of space, time, audience, and motive of teller, and yet the irony—that identity is based on and determined by the presence or absence of such stories. A story of course also belongs to its language: “The story was told in Gaelic, and as the people say, ‘It is not the same in English,’ although the images are true” (359).

More, of great significance is the fact that the story told by the young man from Canna was different than the one he believed he was telling. He believed he was telling the twins about a character named Alex who was well-known on Canna, not knowing the man was the twin’s grandfather. To the twins, this was a story about their genealogical origins. In literary terms, this is a dramatic irony, such as occurs in Shakespeare. For the cultural motif of storytelling, it reminds the reader that oral story’s meaning and content, analogously to written text and reader, exist only subjectively within the knowledge and contextual framework of the teller and the listener, so that in analogy to the literary situation of author and reader, meaning is not fixed, but formed between the teller and listener. In terms of this written oral story, there is the irony that both we and the listeners (twins) know more than the teller but also less.

The young man of Canna, it is implied, becomes a storyteller purely by the accident of context: “All of the information that spilled out of him came because it was there to be released” (359). This encloses the frame drawn earlier when he launches the story, “surprised perhaps at his own knowledge and at having such attentive listeners” (355). The word “information” reminds us ironically that though Benjamin compares story to mere “information,” stories of course always do *contain* information and in certain cases like this story, such information proves indeed to be the crucial “use” of the story.

We can read in this encounter a highly suggestive cameo image of the storyteller/storytelling mode, which incorporates yet richly extends and multiplies the features of Benjamin’s storyteller, and which, I am proposing, becomes another crucial image in the plural “vision” of the storyteller embedded in MacLeod’s texts, alongside Columba, the blind grandmother, Calum’s grandmother, *Mac an Amhuruais* and Archibald. This storyteller figure (the young man from Halifax) emerges spontaneously through a convergence of teller, listener, and context. In this light, the encounter itself is almost a precise model of Bakhtin’s dialogic contract.

The storyteller emerges when he/she is *called upon* by necessity. These energies exist within all of us. Story maybe no more or less than that which must be told. The resident “tiller of the soil” and the “trading seaman” emerge more truly in the Halifax incident as relative positions and internal modes through which we are constantly shifting, whatever our physical location. The physical setting and the two parties (twins and young man) are all “away” yet speaking of “home,” even as the subject, *Mac An Amhuruais*, is an estranged one because the twins are perceiving his identity differently than the teller. Read dialogically, the resident tiller and the trading seaman are rightfully one.

When the narrator then recapitulates for us, “This, I guess, is my retelling. . . ,” the “I guess” incribes again the vein of uncertainty which runs through the stories, embodied again in a narrator who is not imparting understanding or wisdom but searching for and constructing it, line by line, story by story. (359). This paragraph of metanarrative further reiterates the narrator/storyteller as having listened and now *retelling*, reminding us that stories are all about the telling/retelling and repeating and that each will be a different story, as Benjamin discussed. The text enacts how a listener becomes a teller.

The next section concentrates layers of cultural, historical and personal signification. The catastrophic interventions of world war occur routinely between ordinary life: “All of them in the cycle of the seasons” (360). Following marriage, the narrator’s father routinely goes again when asked to fight in World War II: “. . . with the other Highlanders from Cape Breton, leaving his wife pregnant, perhaps without realizing it.” The historical irony and imposition upon the displaced Cape Bretoners fighting the Europeans’ war is countered by the implication of solidarity in the Highlanders’ community. Within the sudden textual dislocation of landing at the beach at Normandy, the narrator’s father experiences a profoundly locating moment as the rockets explode around him. As all his fellow soldiers are killed, his blind grandmother’s presence manifests as a hand upon his shoulder, prompting him to fall back into his own language with the cry: “ ‘Cò a th’ann? Who’s there?’” (360). In the moment of profound recognition in which his life is miraculously saved and his ancestry confirmed as he hears her answer “ ‘It is myself,’” he is also blinded. Here we have an interchange between two chronotypes. Further, the incident converges with his grandfather’s death on the same day back in Canna. Against the procession of history forward, *Mac an Amharuis* has regressed inward and backward through both history and space, his eyes “. . . covered with the cataracts of age” (361):

He did not recognize, either by sight or sound, any of the people around him, and much of his talk was of youth and sex and of the splendid young stallion with the loose rope around its neck and of the green island of Canna which he had never literally seen and of the people riding their horses at Michaelmas and carrying the bodies of their dead round toward the sun. And of the strong-willed St. Columa determined to be ascetic with his ‘back turned on Ireland’ and the region of his early love. And of walls of flame and billowing smoke. (361)

This paragraph encapsulates again the powerful determinant of cultural identity in MacLeod’s texts, implying that familial identity, whether present or not, must be threaded through to a cultural matrix of specific place(s) and historicity to be valid and fructifying, whether such a matrix is a singular, geographically present site or plural sites constituted in part by internal cultural space. The nature of the grandfather is wild and untamed, like the loose-roped stallion and like the true grandmother who is also unnamed/untamed, yet their cultural identity is deeply-rooted. The image of the stallion is doubled with the horses at Michaelmas on Canna and the rituals that honor and revere death. With no certain personal origins, *Mac an Amharuis* invokes throughout his life the image of Canna and the figure of St. Columba who is “determined to be ascetic,” as his cultural “father” and spiritual mentor. *Mac an Amharuis* relates his internal exile and ascetism (denial of his love) to that which St. Columba enacted externally. The culture which carries the “bodies of their dead round towards the sun” is one in which Mac would hope to be finally identified, even as his birth was uncertain, much as Calum in “Rankin’s Point” found the confluence of personal and cultural identity in which a meaningful death can occur. Narrative becomes identity.

In the paragraph of metanarrative that follows, the narrator reflects on his act of telling and reveals more on the discourse of storytelling while bridging his way to the next story. “When I began this story I was recounting the story which my father told to me as he faced the green hills of Canna on the last day of the lobster season a long time ago. But when I look on it now I realize that all of it did not come from him, exactly as I have told it, on that day.” He reflects on the difference between what his father told him and what his uncle, who lost his leg during the war and who frequents the Legion hall, had told him. “Perhaps my father, by omitting certain parts of his story, was merely repeating the custom of his own parents who did not reveal to him at once everything there was to be shown” (361).

We read that the potential for increased understanding can take much time, and demands the telling and re-telling that Benjamin emphasized as integral to the transmission of story. We learn further how story always carries within it not only the negative space of what is omitted, but also the implicit story, of that/why the story was not told before. Three crucial aspects of story are rehearsed here: that its sources are multiple and blended, so are frequently untraceable, and thus story is a cultural/collective rather than individual creation; the complex role of time in storytelling as suggested by the difference between when events occur and when they are told (as well as location), and extending to the way time bridges stories; thirdly, that story material is always selected and subjective according to the criteria of morality, motives and character, and never just a reflection of the “real.” We know now that we have heard a story that has been already *recreated* by the narrator from the version he was told on that last day of the lobster season by his father.

The narrator continues: “But perhaps the story also went into me because of other events which happened on that day” (361). He proceeds to tell another story – of what happened *on the*

day of the remembered story/telling. Violence and territorial issues (personal rather than cultural) are enacted again, this time between the narrator's family and the MacAllesters over sexual innuendoes and the issue of a geographical fishing boundary which has, significantly, become as shifting and uncertain as all the other markers of identity and ideological bases of conflict in the story. The story shifts from personal conflict in the present of reference, to narrated tales of past cultural conflict, and then back again to the personal and familial realm in the here and now. With the two families now present at the site of the fishing boundary on this day of the remembered story, these long-standing tensions finally erupt. Once again we see the overlay, the through-line between familial and cultural history, and the way events back in "reality" on that same day constitute manifest outcomes of a story that has just been told. The old story now continues, to in turn become another story to be told by the narrator, so again inscribing metaphorically the link between story and reality and their ongoing mutual reproduction, as reflected in Ricoeur's circle of triple mimesis. The narrator becomes part of this new story, taking his place in the lineage of stories that will in turn one day be told about him. From his own father he has inherited an at least incrementally enlarged vision: When the family settles their dispute by choosing a more reliable boundary, the father says: " 'I can't see the boundary anyway,'" The narrator notes: "It all seemed so simple in hindsight" (366).

In the final paragraphs of metanarrative which frame the story, the narrator shifts into present time and a summary weaving of all the stories told or referenced: "This has been the telling of a story about a story but like most stories it has spun off into others and relied on others and perhaps no story ever really stands alone" (366). He names and locates himself as a descendant of those people, then breaks the narrative to enter the present moment: "As I write this, my own small daughter comes in from kindergarten." The words "as I write" after a

paragraph in which he has been “telling” are a startling rejoinder to the reader, not only a leap from past into present time announcing the presence of the storyteller, but also inviting us to experience this writing as a *telling*. The theme of recognition (inner sight) and sight (external sight) is also reiterated down the generations into that present moment when his daughter greets him with the riddle ““What has eyes but cannot see?”” (367)

The riddle serves three important functions in the narrative. It reiterates in a final way that the narrative bleeds through to reality; the story has not “stopped” but is still being lived. It reminds us that stories *are riddles* - stories like this one perhaps even more so - conveying the irresolvable riddle (mystery) of our identity. And it hints that his small daughter inherits that riddle of sight, the family legacy. His daughter is “ . . . elated and impressed by her own cleverness and by my lack of understanding.” For this narrator too, there is no final understanding. Understanding is tentative, provisional, ever in process. When he tells his daughter he does not know the answer to the riddle, he says aside to the reader “ . . . and I feel I really mean it.” These through-lines into the present are textualized by the narrator’s personal and cultural naming of his daughter: “She is the great-great-granddaughter of the blind woman who died in flames and of the man called *Mac an Amharuis*; and both of us, in spite of our age and our comprehension, are indeed the children of uncertainty” (367).

In then tracing the characters in the story as ““all gone”” in the literal sense, as *Mac an Amharuis* had said of the residents of old Canna, the narrator reiterates their existence as his both real and storied ancestors, and bears witness to their lives. There remains apart from him only Kenneth MacAllester, who is employed as a janitor for a soap company in Toronto, unable to become the pilot he dreamed of because of his blindness. This richly textured narrative teaches us that when story succeeds in entering us, it interacts with reality and also animates the chain of

retelling. In terms of Benjamin's archetypes of the tiller and trader, we meet in this narrator one who encounters the dislocation that can deeply inhere within location itself. "Home" and "away" are relative and interior states continually interweaving.

Story is always intrinsic with memory and it is fitting that "Vision" closes with the narrator's memory of how when they were boys, he and Kenneth would attempt to see themselves reflected in the mackerels' blind eyes and attempt to identify strands in the wet ropes of the lobster traps as they moved through the water, which was so difficult to do. These reflections and symbols of the mackerel and the rope repeat imagery from the setting of the central story-telling, and elaborate it to embody the narrator's vision as his deepest realization, rephrased three times in the last three consecutive lines of the story:

Difficult ever to be certain in our judgments or to fully see or understand. Difficult then to see and understand the twisted strands within the rope. And forever difficult to see and understand the tangled twisted strands of love. (368).

We have seen the legacy of "uncertainty" echo and fray through the story to imply multiple meanings encompassing genealogy, identity and geography. Simone Vauthier pinpoints how "Vision" both constructs and then deconstructs a myth of origin, through the chain of displacement which reverberates through the text, encompassing genealogy and place: ". . .there is no sacred, no unique place of origin because origin itself is split" (169). Place/origin is split just as, reflectively, the stories have demonstrated, Benjamin's tiller and trader are also split figures. Vauthier finally observes (and the idea is homogenous with Raymond Williams' discussion of the organic society "always already gone"): "All places of origin are always lost" (170). What is identity but no more or less than the *vision* we seek and hold, the stories we are told or finally tell ourselves, that we choose to *identify with*, as we create meaning in life/in

texts? The gift of “Vision” for author and reader, Vauthier eloquently suggests, “is the scar transformed by creative imagination, - which perhaps will reveal some hidden scar of ours” (164).



Conclusion ~ The Storyteller's Gifts

The world is made not of atoms, but of stories. Muriel Rukeyser

We have seen that story and reality interweave in a continuous and mutually reproducing synergy, suggesting that story lives in us, but equally we live in story. As MacLeod the author names and records his own heritage, his narrators are simultaneously naming and recording their personal identity and “adding to the world’s story-body” (Vauthier, *Mapping* 171). One of the stories’ many uses is that they serve to recapitulate narrative as primary to identity, and thereby inscribe the subject as fundamentally creative and always social and dynamic. The self is recast as an open text, an ongoing process of inquiry engaged in the seeking of understanding. The reader witnesses that understanding as a social and shared endeavour. This constitutes a dialogic medley of voices, both within and suggestively after the stories end, for as we know all too well from these narratives, stories do not end at all.

In demanding and assuming our listening, MacLeod’s narrators assert traces of the oral storytellers of Benjamin, as much as of the written storytellers of Conrad and of Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner.” They inscribe the act of speaking/telling as essential and as charged with necessity. We have seen that MacLeod’s narrators both reflect and revise Walter Benjamin’s two storyteller archetypes of the tiller and trader, as sources of story. Most often these narrators manifest as resident tillers of the soil, while tellers from away tend to carry experiences of dislocation and alienation, but these are never absolute or unambiguous categories. In our postmodern, globalized culture, and even in the geographical and cultural milieu of MacLeod’s stories during the 70s and 80s, the two terms translate to carry profoundly different and more complex meanings and permutations than they did for Benjamin. For MacLeod’s characters, travel or being away is intrinsically a state of dislocation as it is most often prompted by

circumstances such as economic necessity. One story portrays a narrator speaking from beyond death. In our recent more globalized postmodern culture, the two states are frequently interchangeable or skewed beyond recognition as travel is easy and frequent, individuals are by choice more mobile and less rooted in place, and the internet means that everywhere is “here” and “now.” On the other hand, many people are living in states between, such as refugee camps or in suspended or traumatic conditions of immigration. MacLeod’s narrators then, bridge Benjamin’s archetypes and our own more globalized conditions where telling and listening can be imperative for all of us, wherever we speak from, as both rootedness and dislocation prove to be defining and meaningful experiences, and once named and communicated, may be creatively transformed. They leave us with a plural vision of the storyteller as ultimately a dynamic and inseparable, dialogic energy of telling and listening, embodied and accessible within all of us. That is, we are all sources and subjects of story.

For as we have seen, MacLeod’s stories also inscribe the narrator as subject, something intrinsic or added to the story. That is, the stories are really stories of the relationship between the narrator and the story or stories embedded, in which he is fundamentally implicated. The narrator’s quest for understanding through the telling process enacts for the reader not only that narrative constitutes identity as noted above, but also that telling in turn alters reality. Richard Kearney writes in *On Stories*, that *mimesis* is not a copy of reality: “It remakes the world, so to speak, in the light of its potential truths.” Kearney affirms *mythos* as “. . . a latent interweaving of past, present and future (though not necessarily in that order)” (131). The recounting of life prizes open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception, which, as stories like MacLeod’s “Vision” enact for the reader, re-configure our relationship to reality. Kearney writes: “In that sense we may say that *mimesis* involves both a free-play of fiction *and* a responsibility to real

life” (133). He adds: “This referral of the narrative text back to the life of the author and forward to the life of the reader belies the structuralist maxim that the text relates to nothing but itself” (133).

As readers we undergo repeated shifts in positioning from one time/space plane to another in a given MacLeod story as the narrator shifts from a story he is telling, to a story he is now part of, to a story he is telling through the voice of another, to a reflective commentary on the story he is telling, or on story itself. In this manner, the stories link, in fact reconcile, a seemingly postmodern decentred surface with the deeper reiteration of archaic narrative and storytelling codes. This can be read as effecting the provocative presence of a dialogic and plural subject that is both active and receptive and that is textually and metaphorically seizing back the modality of storytelling for its own cultural use. It is a kind of turning the fabric of postmodernism inside out to reveal it as part of the whole continuum of action, belief, intention, in text as in life, or put another way, as no more or less than another story told. Re-grounding the subject as real serves the use of redressing a cultural imbalance in which the subject is emptied out. Ironically, it is precisely through narrative and storytelling that we can move from fragmentation to some kind of order or cultural vision, faint though it may be.

All the above positions the reader as witness to a consciousness-in-relation to itself seeking understanding of its individual and cultural identity, so that the reader is triggered into a process of his or her own internal dialogue/or narrative-seeking. MacLeod’s stories catalyze and invite our own stories, weaving an an endless chain link or Celtic knot of narrative. Everything is locational and about locating, so that in turn we may be compelled to ask in response to MacLeod’s narrators “...and who am I then?,” and perhaps urged to tell. Like the narrator in “Vision,” we must go on to tell. The subject/ive story or narrative is equivalent in effect to the

“fictional” story—all story adds to the world’s “story-body.” MacLeod’s narrators speak their personal truth just as Benjamin’s storyteller speaks truth through a folk or cultural story. One of the most valuable gifts or uses of these stories, then, is their passing on of the insight that, as narrative constitutes identity, we can revision ourselves as we seek and speak truth through telling, embodying within ourselves both the tiller and the trader of cultures, actively seeking and listening to each other’s stories as the basis for revisioning culture.

We can conclude that Benjamin’s archetypes prove still useful if visioned forward as metaphoric models for culturally locating storytellers and encoding that they have an integral cultural role, as likewise inscribed by MacLeod’s stories. Benjamin’s archetypes were appropriate to his cultural milieu and time at the threshold of the collapse of the grand narrative of modernity, when tiller of the soil and trading seaman were still relatively stable descriptions. When we test MacLeod’s storytellers against these archetypes and draw out their postmodern manifestations as described above, we can observe that they continue to locate the teller in reference to culture. This includes the extension to both genders as storytellers, rather than just men as Benjamin’s essay implies. These contemporary manifestations better reflect the many existential sources of story and the culture-shaping energy that story is. Resident tiller and trader perhaps finally transmute in our era to become an essence identifiable as self/ and other, dialogically linked and embodied within all of us. This would seem to be a psychic position precisely needed to envision a new culture.

Just as MacLeod’s texts formally provide the consolation of narrative, pleasing and inspiring us with their fine language and craftsmanship, the elegance and craftsmanship of the stories remind us too, that more than any other art, story allows us to create and recreate art from our lives, in recognizing the self as a process of representation, even as they equally reverence

the larger mystery of identity and of life itself. MacLeod's writing can be experienced as an enunciation of the 'I' into being and into time, embodying Kearney's statement that "all lives are in search of a narrative" (4).

MacLeod's language forcefully and sensuously materializes and affirms materiality, even when it psychologizes. The raw physicality of the stories doubles the effect, continuously embodying the psychological. Language that is suggestively material intersects with elemental concerns and earthy content to reinforce this effect. The written word is effectively reunited with the body within these texts. The foursquare language, the images like full-frontal photographs, the halting linear sentences, and the startling immediacy of the narrative all serve to materialize and to ground the parallel access to other worlds within the text. Significantly for the act of storytelling, these techniques also convey the materiality of text itself, affirming the text as object, which is an aspect of the written word we easily gloss over. Mikko Lehtonen emphasizes: "...even the most seemingly innocent and simple of texts conceals an immeasurable amount of human history. All texts have their own production history. Certain people have produced them under certain historical and material preconditions" (73). Death is likewise a tangible and material presence in all of the stories, frequently intertwined with the transmission of counsel or wisdom as in "Vision" and in "Rankin's Point." This presence is a valuable balance in a culture where death is most often invisible and emptied of meaning.

Just as importantly, the wisdom of these stories is a function of how form and content merge as the material world continually cross-links with the metaphysical, forming the primary image or gestalt of the texts. The two are seamless and simultaneous realities, continually remonstrating with each other or vying for effect. In common terms, this is magical. In the Celtic

realm from which MacLeod sources his stories, this is simply the other reality invisibly present alongside the everyday world.

Just as the material and otherworld, the past and the present, are contiguous, so are the spoken and the written word engaged in dynamic exchange throughout the stories. As MacLeod's stories "rewrite" the link between writing and orality, between literature and storytelling, they invite us to more consciously reevaluate the role of orality in our lives, and also invite the possibility of investing literature—its creation/reading/use—with more of the immediacy of oral culture. We may decide we want to tell as much as we want to read or write. Likewise, these stories can be read as inviting us to revisit reading as another kind of listening.

Cultural implications

In most of his stories MacLeod explores both personal and cultural genealogy as contiguous sites of loss and uncertainty, and shows that story is primary in shaping both dimensions. These are stories of the individual explicitly at its interface with community and culture, as addressed in Raymond Williams' writings. They embody the essential inquiry: who am I/ in relation to you, my family, my group, my cultural history? Thus they reassert the presence and primary impact of a familial and cultural matrix against our modern conditioned idea of a sundered individuality, where such a matrix may be lost, unexamined or unconscious (that is, a web of stories not-told or not-kept), but is nonetheless informing our individual lives at every step. At its most "subjective," the subject is dialogically invoking the other and its community, experiencing its innate freedom to form and articulate its links to culture, recognize cultural loss and, as Williams reminded us, to reproduce culture. Storytelling is that modality

which stitches, sustains, and of course, can un-stitch, such connections. Storytelling is culture-making.

The father in MacLeod's stories, whether violent, weak, absent, alive or dead—and albeit as the masculine emblem of culture—is frequently the site for the quest, recovery or loss of cultural wisdom in MacLeod's story, typically through his legacy to the son. The confrontation with the father is significant cultural work for both men and women in our time. These texts bear much material for that work. We can in turn ask whether, in our present cultural context, MacLeod is effectively experienced as a (literary) father or, in different terms, a cultural elder that many readers (that is, citizens) may seek and perhaps this cultural role contributes to ensuring critical status. I would argue that this is justified if so, as an extension of the value of use. Why should writers themselves, as well as literature and criticism, not be useful, that is, serve particular uses within a culture, especially a culture devoid of elders? In an essay exploring the evolving ways of mapping Alice Munro's writing, Robert Thacker refers to her writing as characterized by “. . .the feeling of being itself. . .” (Lynch and Robbeson 128). Thacker discusses the significance of this for some critics: “What seems to drive critics who have taken up Munro's work. . . is a desire to articulate some personal relation to the work, to replicate in the criticism our feelings upon reading Munro's work. I certainly feel this myself” (129). It seems likely that MacLeod, as arguably the male correspondent to Munro as female literary elder, has given us texts that create a similar effect. A reader or critic may not easily achieve academic distance from such work and those who come to it are relationally drawn, adding to the chain the texts themselves begin, so that an elegiac stance may be more likely and legitimate.

Women often appear as formidable and catalytic figures in these stories, prompting us to recognize the gendered nature of Benjamin's storyteller as solely male. Calum's grandmother,

the blind grandmother in “Vision,” the young wife in “The Tuning of Perfection,” and Mrs. MacKenzie are strong carriers of cultural vision bringing muse-like or subversive energies to bear upon their community. If they tend to be “stay-at-home” resident tillers of the soil, their influence also reaches across time and space. There is a balance between archetypal-magical and pragmatic qualities in the women of his stories, so that they are neither disembodied nor idealized. The love relationship is portrayed as erotic, committed and timeless, whether in life or in death. If there is a “dour Scots character” in some of the women (“The Boat,” “In the Fall”), these stoic or pragmatic qualities of women whose lives are interwoven with natural cycles, convey an enduring and monumental presence, and may also redress a cultural imbalance in portraying models of strong, rooted women. (Ditsky 3)

MacLeod’s texts enact story as the “archive of the human,” in this instance through its memorializing of the Scottish Highland Clearances and the further displacement of Cape Bretoners through economic need.¹³ Colin Nicholson writes of David Craig’s gathering of oral testimony from the Clearance Highlanders, where he found Clearance material more elusive than that of more voluntary emigration.¹⁴ Craig speculated that the traumatic memories must often have been repressed and that moreover, as the Highlanders may have been forced due to lack of title to land to move on into the “vastness of North America” they would leave no trace. Any stories would be lost “. . . unless they had been repeated for generations with some satisfaction and interest in the telling {?}” (Craig qtd. in Nicholson, *Regions* 131). Nicholson valuably observes:

MacLeod’s first-person narrators do in fiction precisely what Craig laments the lack of in historical records: they make audible their story, with satisfaction and interest in the

telling; and their patterns of repetition help to attach what they have to say to a wider connective tissue of myth and legend. (*Regions* 132)

This has profound implications for understanding how we inherit, or not, our sense of place within personhood, family and culture and how such location or dislocation is carried forward through generations.

As MacLeod's stories offer us the experience that it matters what, who and where we belong to, they thematize the question of a wisdom culture, implying that, though it may once have been constituted by a unity of land, livelihood, and ancestry, such a culture is no longer available in any simple form. Exploring such questions in encountering literature is valuable as much literary theory reinforces the assumptions of existing power-systems by its disengagement from the living situations of most people. These stories enact storytelling—and literature—as transmitting cultural and practical wisdom, that is, containing “something useful,” as they speak to us from both time and eternity. The culture referenced above is one from which and within which storytelling is still possible.

In many of the stories, maxims and aphorisms are stated or discovered by some of the characters, reiterating the voice and presence of the storyteller and offering the reader something concrete: “Sometimes there are things within us which we do not know or fully understand and sometimes it is hard to stamp out what you can't see. It is good that you are here for this while,” instructs the grandfather in “Vision.” This statement could be an epilogue to the stories as a whole, poetically inscribing the determining force of our story, our heritage, and warning above all against the shaping force and potential peril of “what we can't see,” that is, what has been kept from us or we have chosen to remain blind to. We can infer here the difference between a culture based on the lies of blindness and one informed by the truth-speaking nature of the

story/teller. The cultural elders within these stories, such as the grandmother in “Rankin’s Point” and Archibald in “The Tuning of Perfection,” promise a way forward through insight, whether in life or death, through both materiality and magical consciousness.

The role of education as a primary cultural “storyteller” is subtly interrogated throughout the stories. “Lost Salt Gift” and “Tuning of Perfection” examine in inverse ways how educational discourse can effectively exploit a culture for personal or commercial ends. The narrator in “Lost Salt Gift” “collecting” for the theses and archives of North America becomes the “collected” storyteller Archibald in “Tuning of Perfection,” who is faithfully recorded in national archives. Several narrators are seemingly entombed in a state of exile within their educational institutions. Conversely, books and discourse are figured as more truly alive *outside* institutions, inscribed intertextually as titles and metaphorical allusions, inscribed materially as almost alive in “The Boat” where they are a teeming and ever-multiplying pile in the father’s bedroom, or appearing as the talismanic books in “Vision” carried back by *Mac an Amhurius* and his stallion from their travels. These books as visceral and present as bodies, affirm the more vital potentials of education through almost erotic images of auto-didacticism, reminiscent of Raymond Williams’ commentary.

Retelling/ Rewriting Culture

If MacLeod’s stories can be read as thematizing the “tribal culture” still conceivable for Benjamin, they also inscribe its fragmentation and mourn its loss. They serve to reiterate Benjamin’s 1936 warning that wisdom is dying out. Some of the stories in fact partially cover some of the same time period as Benjamin’s essay or the years following in mid-century. In a sense, they exactly depict the outcomes of this historical shift from experience or tradition to, as

Benjamin named it even then, the age of information. They stand as a cultural lament and have the effect of making our deepening cultural crisis conscious. We mostly do not discover the life outcomes of the characters in the stories who have broken away from the culture and who must mediate this loss. We typically encounter them as they are looking back, sometimes to reluctantly revisit it, sometimes to actively reclaim their heritage. Many of their lives seem in suspension, caught “between” or unresolved, lives that are perhaps best defined as bridges, suggesting the lack of a cultural vision: What have we lost? What can come next, as the textual effects of MacLeod’s stories expand beyond any particular regions to articulate a global question.

The narrators who have given us their carefully crafted narratives and who achieve a nebulous identity have no clear cultural path forward delineated within the text. But a new culture can only originate from a subject that is newly rooted and authenticated. These stories rehearse the subject speaking and writing itself back, through experiences of alienation and dislocation, into the matrix of culture. We may indeed need to lose and then to recognize what what has been lost, to die literally or symbolically in passing through such uncertainty to vision a new culture. The reader, so directly aligned with the narrators’ consciousness, is implicated in that journey back. Yet the power to tell, to speak, to name, such uncertainty paradoxically begins to resonate through the texts as perhaps the deepest truth or understanding presently attainable, again inscribing the truth-speaking nature of the storyteller.

We can read the tribal, story-telling culture implied by Benjamin, the mythic culture inscribed and mourned in MacLeod’s stories, and the “organic society” Williams formulates, as a motif of metaphoric images for a life-affirming culture, one where foundations and features such as the ethical subject, bonds with nature and the body, moral certainty, cultural elders providing

spiritual and practical wisdom, an ideology of craft and beauty, and other forms of cultural wisdom, would be intrinsic. Such an informing narrative—we could call it an ideology of *care*, as embodied in MacLeod’s texts—would, we can only hope, redress the loss and damage caused by its absence, easily read (the pun is deliberate) all around us in the sheer global scale of environmental, economic, and cultural poverty and desecration. We can vision our postmodern condition in context as a necessary stage of what we can view hopefully as self-correcting loss, allowing us to see what babies might have been thrown out with the bathwater of the grand narratives for the sake of what seems an equally grandiose pseudo-narrative of personal freedom and entitlement at any cost.

In narrating my own use of Alistair MacLeod’s stories, that is, to acknowledge how I am “relationally drawn” to this work, I experience that in their insistent act of telling and re-telling, they enact the layering of narrative that Benjamin discussed as so essential for story to enter us. The stories’ effect is to counsel and balance us with their registering of loss, while indelibly marking us through their language, imagery and encoding of care and compassion, with the sense of a wisdom culture. They remind us that unless we live within the inherent constraints implied by that cultural organism which Raymond Williams described as “forms of organization in a continuous process: the brain, the nervous system, the body, the family, the group, the society, man...,” then all threatens to become unstrung.

Formally and thematically, MacLeod’s stories revivify the figure of Benjamin’s “Storyteller” and inscribe the possibility of revisioning cultural foundations lost during postmodernism. The texts re-ground the subject in the body and its continuum of life and death, and within its earthly elements of both nature and place, and further re-ground it as part of the tissue of family/culture/history. Such a renewed culture would enfold the storyteller figure in its

web. The foregrounding of the links between literature and storytelling affirms the presence and power of narrative. Story is implied as being integral to a vital culture, and story, as reiterated in MacLeod's work, is the thread that weaves together the personal/family/cultural and historical realms.

Richard Tarnas in *The Passion of the Western Mind* reminds us that the postmodern collapse of meaning is the very basis for transformation in our existential and spiritual responses to life. As Eagleton noted, Benjamin and others like him knew already that the death of certain forms of experience meant the possibility of bringing others to birth. With so many world views now historically exhausted and seen for the paradigms that they are (or we can just as well use Rorty's term "descriptions"), Tarnas suggests: "...the human challenge is to engage that world view or set of perspectives which brings forth the most valuable, life-enhancing consequences" (406). He summarizes:

The dialectical challenge felt by many is to evolve a cultural vision possessed of a certain intrinsic profundity or universality that, while not imposing any a priori limits on the possible range of legitimate interpretations, would yet somehow bring an authentic and fruitful coherence out of the present fragmentation, and also provide a sustaining fertile ground for the generation of unanticipated new perspectives and possibilities in the future. (409)

Such a culture will conceivably be one in which storytelling is prominent. To support such a cultural project, we can recognize and honor cultural documents such as Benjamin's essay as a poetics of storytelling that is worth retaining and dialoguing with to retain and nurture an ongoing vision of the cultural role of story and storytelling. We can further revision such a culture by restoring notions of usefulness to literature and to criticism, as this essay has

attempted to do. We can achieve this as Eagleton suggests by casting literature within a larger body of discourse, rather than relegating it to a privileged object. MacLeod's stories feed into the age-old question on the use and value of literature. The ideas of Richard Kearney and of Richard Rorty support this vision in their project of valuing literature as descriptions of reality which allow us to "redeem ourselves from insensitivity." MacLeod's narrators seem frequently to be attempting just that within their own existence.

Knitting together a sense of the possible uses of, and the cultural and social values around, storytelling and literature, encompassing the essential role of education within this process, and inspired by the writings of Benjamin, Williams, Eagleton, Kearney, Rorty, and extending back to Hardy, we can support the aim that rather than be treated as a canon to be discussed among academics, books should be a cultural currency, what we make sure we hand on to our sisters or our mothers or our children because we know we need to read them to engage better with our own and others' reality.

To reclaim literature and criticism as something useful is to affirm the subject as an ethically aware, responsible and engaged citizen interested in the quality of existence, rather than as someone seeking entertainment, information or vicarious experience only. This truth-seeking and speaking subject is moreover one who is always both listener/reader and teller. As Rorty suggests, we choose the descriptions of reality by which we would like to live. We can use, and be taught to use, literature as one of many tools towards agency in our lives. We can metaphorically, like *Mac An Amhuruís*, go out and "bring books back" as part of a living engagement with our questions on how to live. Thereby we truly educate ourselves and perhaps begin to reconcile the everyday life and the educated viewpoint with which Hardy's and

MacLeod's characters implicitly struggle. In the endless circle of culture we thereby generate a new vision of what education might be.

In light of the paradigm constructed here, and considering the many uses of MacLeod's stories outlined in the above analysis, we can engage with these works as an impulse towards recovery of a cultural narrative moving on through postmodernism. MacLeod's works offer the experience that a first step in culture-making may be the recovery of storytelling and of the *use* of literature that is re-connected to its root of storytelling, as socially and politically coextensive, and as re-storying the subject. The paradox implied here is that we cannot move towards a wisdom culture except as we tell and tell again our stories of what has been lost. MacLeod has taken up presence among us as such a teller.





Notes

Making Use ~ A Way of Reading

1. But even in a culture which he sees as having little time for engaged culture, Eagleton identifies four areas in the current world where culture and political action are closely united: in the lives of nations struggling for their independence from imperialism, in the women's movement, in the "cultural industry," and in the strongly emergent movement of working-class writing. (LT 189)

2. Rorty explores these ideas in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See chapter 'On Ethnocentrism'.

3. These ideas are discussed in Rorty, Richard. "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture." Nov 2000. (Accessed 1 Feb, 2008)
<<http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/pdf/rorty.pdf>>.

4. Dooley references this quote to an online source: Rorty, Richard. "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises." www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/redemption.htm (Accessed May 21, 2006). However this link could not be accessed at June 2008, so I have settled for the secondary quote.

Reading Benjamin's Storyteller in MacLeod-The Telling

5. Good examples of these epic depictions and ruminations on death are the stories "The Closing Down of Summer" and "The Boat."

6. Ong discusses this aspect of orality in Chapter 3.

The Individual and Culture in MacLeod

7. For elaboration of these ideas see: Part Six: Chapter 2 "The Country and the City" in *Literary Theory-An Anthology*, Rivkin and Ryan), p.508; also Chapter Six: 'Literature and Rural Society' in John Higgins, *The Raymond Williams Reader* and other of Williams' works.

8. Many twentieth century disciplines have acted on this recognition. Freud's work, though retaining the split between the individual and society, in practise led to an emphasis on relationships with the idea of the family and the radical importance of the patterns of relationship established in infancy.

9. In this discussion I am revising the gendered terms used in Williams' text which were characteristic of the period, and am treating these concepts as applying equally to women.

10. Williams suggests that this relates to one of the major phases in the development of the novel. This problem of what is known, what is desired and needs to be known, is as active and critical in rural as in urban communities, and was a key to the development of the country novel from Austen to Eliot and then from Eliot to Hardy. Williams traces the way "education" in

England became considered as a pattern of boarding-school and Oxbridge, even though this “standard” education was received by only one or two percent of the population. This meant all the rest were seen as “uneducated” or else as “autodidacts” (in England, later to be known as grammar-school-boy and later still as “comprehensive.”) This label of “autodidact” had been applied in some contexts to the writers Eliot, Hardy and Lawrence. Yet for Williams and many others, these writers were important precisely because they connect to a cultural tradition in England much older than the modern and exclusive circuit of the public schools. Though some like Williams himself came from working-class families but went on to places like Cambridge and Oxford, the sense of social connection continued because, as Williams stresses, the education/wherever it came from/ the developed intelligence, is not the point. “It is a question of the relation between education—not the marks or degrees but the substance of a developed intelligence—and the actual lives of a continuing majority of our people. . . who are specifically, literally, our own families” (Higgins 126) Eliot is cited as the first major novelist in whom this question is active, and later Lawrence, but Williams discusses Hardy as central in this development.

Encounter with the Stories – “Vision”

11. *Baba Yaga* is sometimes shown as an antagonist, and sometimes as a source of guidance; there are stories where she helps people with their quests, and stories in which she kidnaps children and threatens to eat them. Seeking out her aid is usually portrayed as a dangerous act. An emphasis is placed on the need for proper preparation and purity of spirit, as well as basic politeness. According to Russian folklore, Baba Yaga dwells in a cabin on chicken legs with no windows and no doors. There are indications that ancient Slavs had a funeral tradition of cremation in huts of this type. In 1948 Russian archaeologists Yefimenko and Tretyakov discovered small huts of the described type with traces of corpse cremation and circular fences around them; yet another possible connection to the Baba Yaga myth (accessed Wikipedia April 13, 2008). Also see the many variations of the *Baba Yaga* tale published through the years, a recent enchanting example being “Vasila the Wise” in Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (London: Rider, 1992). Chapter 3.

12. “Columba.” April 17, 2008. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columba> On a personal note, and to serve in contextualizing how the Columba legend might be present in our culture, I well remember the moving play about Column Cile which my daughter’s Grade Three class put on in their Waldorf School in Devon, England in 1997. The story was being given to them as one of the archetypal and inspiring heroic myths of our culture. The Waldorf Schools, founded in Germany by Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, are intrinsically founded on the importance and use of story in transmitting human values/including within the educational curriculum.

Conclusion: The Storyteller’s Gifts – Cultural Implications

13. Valentine Cunningham employs this useful term in a chapter on the necessary reinstatement of the subject in literature in his *Reading After Theory*. See p. 144.

14. See David Craig, *On the Crofters’ Trail: In Search of the Clearance Highlanders* (London, 1990).

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