

AGING, MEMORY AND IDENTITY: ALICE MUNRO'S "THE BEAR CAME OVER THE MOUNTAIN" AND "IN SIGHT OF THE LAKE"

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Abstract

Aging and its effects on both body and mind figure in many of Alice Munro's stories, but in a way her characters age with her, and loss of memory and problems of identity disintegration become more crucial in the late period. This essay explores the representation of old age in Alice Munro's fiction, focusing on "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and "In Sight of the Lake", two compelling stories that portray painful forms of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The analysis addresses both thematic and stylistic issues, discussing the connections between selfhood and memory and highlighting the technical and structural devices masterly employed by the writer to communicate the feeling of disorientation and identity fragmentation.

Senilità, memoria e identità in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" e "In Sight of the Lake" (In vista del lago) di Alice Munro

Il processo di invecchiamento e i suoi effetti su corpo e mente sono presenti in molti racconti di Alice Munro, ma si potrebbe dire che i suoi personaggi invecchiano con lei e perdita della memoria e disintegrazione dell'identità diventano argomenti più pressanti nell'ultimo periodo. Questo saggio esplora la rappresentazione della vecchiaia nella narrativa di Munro, con particolare riferimento a "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" e "In Sight of the Lake" ("In vista del lago"), due testi con personaggi afflitti da demenza senile e Alzheimer. L'analisi si propone di indagare l'argomento sia dal punto di vista tematico che da quello stilistico, evidenziando i dispositivi tecnici e strutturali magistralmente usati dalla scrittrice per comunicare disorientamento e frammentazione.

Writing old age

In this essay I intend to explore the relationship of aging, memory and identity in Alice Munro's late fiction, focusing on "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", and "In Sight of the Lake"¹, which can be considered most compelling stories of

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¹ "The Bear Came over the Mountain" was first published in the *New Yorker* (Dec. 27, 1999-Jan. 3, 2000), and later included in *Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Marriage* in 2001.

old age and its often painful changes, in a stylistic tour de force. Aging and its effects on both body and mind figure in many of Munro's stories, where she draws attention to age consciousness and constructs different representations of middle age and old age, not necessarily as traumatic moments of change. However, when dealing with senescence, new issues and questions of identity are addressed: how much does chronological age alter individual identity, is there a recognizable continuity of self in spite of loss of memory and severe forms of debilitation like dementia and Alzheimer's disease?

Scholars have pointed out how Munro's characters age with her, from the Bildungsroman of the early period – that could be called a “portrait of the artist as a young woman” – to mature and middle aged women, to aging protagonists. Older women, however, appear also in early short stories, but usually seen by a younger woman. When old age, disease, and death figure, they act as a mirror, a vision of the future, a *memento mori*. Among earlier texts that introduce this theme and anticipate its in-depth treatment in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and “In Sight of the Lake”, are “Spelling”, “Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd”, and “Lichen”².

In “Spelling” Rose returns to her hometown to assist her stepmother Flo, who is afflicted by dementia and needs assisted care. Before placing her in the County Home for the Aged, Rose visits the facility, which is organized on different floors according to different levels of autonomy and consciousness. On the last floor she meets with the totally disabled: «Bodies were fed and wiped, taken up and tied in chairs, untied and put to bed. Taking in oxygen, giving out carbon dioxide, they continued to participate in the life of the world» (187). This painful description of humans reduced to breathing bodies leads to the encounter with an old blind woman making loud shaky noises, whose only persisting ability resides in spelling words, and Rose wonders if they carried «their usual meaning or any meaning at all» (188). This horrifying scene introduces the dimension of language in the assessment of mental failing, and the complicated mechanism that allows humans to establish the connection between objects and language. However, words, even just spelled words, might be able to establish a contact with people, and thus acquire a redeeming value. The text foregrounds the disquieting alterity that aging can involve (Collier 52), but as DeFalco argues, this scene can also be read as significant for its insistence on the «incom-

“In Sight of the Lake” first appeared in the British magazine *Granta*, 118 (2012) and was then included in the collection *Dear Life* (2012).

² “Spelling” was included in *The Beggar Maid / Who Do You Think You Are* (1977), “Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd” in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), and “Lichen” in *The Progress of Love* (1986).

prehensible, yet undeniable, personhood» of this old woman (*Uncanny Subjects*: 84). This tour of the Home causes Rose to have a dream where people are locked in cages, with Flo in one of them «handsomely seated on a thronelike chair, spelling out words in a clear authoritative voice [...] and looking pleased with herself, for showing powers she had kept secret till now» (188). This dream fragment reveals the perception of old people homes as prison, but also the possibility for the individual to maintain and express her personality. One peculiar feature of stories about old age is the attention given to nursing homes, institutional spaces that foreground the segregating and depersonalizing aspects of residential care, but also engage with the persistence of humanity and questions of identity³. As always in Munro, ambiguity and complexity are at the core of her fiction: even when loss of memory and dementia seem to annihilate personal identity, this comes back in a modified version, showing a certain continuity of subjectivity. As critics have pointed out, Flo's obstinate and demanding behavior when suffering from dementia can be recognized as an exaggerated version of the stubborn younger woman she used to be (De Falco. *Uncanny Subjects*, and Jamieson. "Surprising Developments").

"Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" takes place in a nursing home, which is described in its institutional organization and architecture. The protagonists are two women who have known each other for eighty years, since kindergarten, have some physical ailments but are mentally capable. They have memories, maintain their personalities, can develop new friendships and take care of each other. Intersection of questions of age, class and gender are particularly significant in this story⁴. Even in a story like "What is Remembered"⁵, which is about the love affair of a young married woman, although recounted through the distorted memories of the aged protagonist, a central episode takes place in a home for the elderly, with the visit to an old aunt who seems to have lost any inhibitions and recounts her past sexual adventures, which become a sort of premise to the sexual encounter that's going to follow.

In "Lichen" chronological age is emphasized by the presence of a male character who refuses to age, dyes his hair and couples with younger women. His ex wife, instead, accepts the aging of her body and seems to find satisfaction in her

³ Sara Jamieson explores the representation of old age homes in Munro's fiction and locates it in a gerontological debate concerning the nature and meaning of residential care for older people, questioning the assumptions underlying the pervasive perception of the old age home as total institution of social control. ("Reading the Spaces of Age"). See also Amelia DeFalco's "Uncanny Witnessing" and Patricia Life's "Shaking off Shackles".

⁴ See Francescato's essay in this volume.

⁵ Published in the *New Yorker* in February 2001 and included in *Hateship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* the same year.

midlife. The inevitable passing of time is marked by the visit to her father in a nursing home and metaphorically by the fading of the photo of a young naked woman the ex husband carries in his wallet and likes to show off because he is having an affair with her. The Polaroid snapshot appears as a version of “L’origine du monde” by Courbet, but the woman’s realistic black public hair is perceived as lichen by his ex wife and later turns gray in the sun. Everything decays and humans cannot avoid aging and death, but this story shows the inner resources of middle-aged women and their capability to adapt to change.

Undoubtedly, however, it is in Munro’s later collections that old age becomes central, and memory plays an important role when a story is focused on an older person who tries to reconstruct an episode from the past, or a whole life. Tricks of memory may happen to a perfectly conscious person, with lapses and subconscious negations, but in some of the late stories age becomes senility, afflicted by illness, deterioration of body and mind, loss of memory, forms of dementia, Alzheimer’s disease. This brings new perspectives to the narration, and demands new techniques and structural devices. Munro’s short stories are always complex structures that may cover a long period of time and be marked by significant temporal gaps with memory playing a crucial role. Her late stories become longer, they occupy a larger span of time, with gaps and various anachronies, making the text more episodic and fragmentary⁶. As Ailsa Cox maintains, in Munro’s late style there is «a sharpened awareness that time is irreversible and a growing sense of discontinuity between youth and old age» (277).

Memory loss and identity: “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”

Critics have recognized the importance of memory in Munro’s work, not just as a recurring theme, but as a structural element that shapes her fiction. Memory becomes part of a complex construction of narrative identity that flows through all of her work, in a sort of literary and biographical trajectory, so that memory could be discussed within a single short story as well as part of her entire narrative corpus⁷. “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” is probably the most relevant for a discussion on memory, identity and aging, and has received a great deal of critical attention. This tale shows the effects of what is recognizable as Alzheimer’s disease on a seventy year old woman. Loss of memory is the primary change associated

⁶ Munro herself points out these changes in the Introduction to the Vintage Edition of her *Selected Stories* (1997): «In later years my short stories haven’t been so short. They’ve grown longer, and in a way more disjointed and demanding and peculiar» (“Introduction”: xiv).

⁷ See, among others, Francesconi’s essay “Memory and Desire”.

with the illness, one of the symptoms that is generally considered to lead to loss of identity. Cancelling short term memories and sometimes bringing back forgotten ones from the past, the final effect is of disorientation and identity fragmentation. The symptoms are described realistically in the first part of the story, when memory deficits start to manifest themselves in everyday life so that the protagonist Fiona places little yellow notes all over the house, to mark various objects. There is a progressive loss of semantic memory and retrograde memory, space and time disorientation as well as difficulty in recognizing people. The disease leads to her being put in a nursing home and to a crisis in a fifty year marriage. The woman at times seems not to recognize her husband, and becomes emotionally involved with another patient.

The short story is narrated in the third person and is not focalized on the woman suffering from Alzheimer's, but on her husband Grant, who recalls crucial moments in their marriage, revealing his frequent betrayals in the Sixties and Seventies with students and younger women, without ever wanting to separate from his wife. This re-remembering on his part is an attempt, common among caretakers and family members, to retrieve personal history and to make sense of the past when faced with erosion in the mind of the individual with the disease. In the perfect structure of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", the husband's memories work as a sort of counterpoint to his wife's loss of memory, bringing to the surface a relationship full of ambiguity, lies, silences and the inability, on his part, to penetrate her mysterious identity. Her personality has always been elusive to him and this constituted part of her charm, so that Alzheimer's in a way seems only to have increased her attraction. Or maybe his inability to penetrate his wife's complex personality depends on his lack of sensibility, his concentration on his job and sexual adventures. On the other hand, the woman's new love story at the time of Alzheimer's is a sort of counterpoint – or maybe retaliation – to his past betrayals, and in fact he is jealous of this rather absurd, adolescent-like relationship between patients. But other questions arise. In particular: what kind of love is possible for a person whose identity seems to have been affected by the disease? One possible answer is offered by Francesconi: «Fiona experiences desire precisely for the loss of memory. Oblivion creates the conditions for the development of new modes and forms of configuring meaning, memory and desire» ("Memory and Desire": 349). More relevantly: what identity remains when memories are erased? This question is related to the significance of memory in western culture and to ideas concerning the formation and persistence of subjectivity. Concepts of self have come under scrutiny by science, psychology and philosophy, with different approaches and ideas on what constitutes identity, from Jerome Bruner's theory of the narrative construction of identity to Galen Strawson's debunking of narra-

tivism, that is the idea of constituting one's identity through narration. Some researchers challenge the notion that loss of memory and language necessarily signals loss of human selfhood. Linda Simon, for example, discusses the common perception of loss of memory as a threat to the survival of the self in Alzheimer's sufferers, and points out, on the contrary, the persistence and sometimes intensification of personality traits and eccentricities that existed before.

Since the story is told from the point of view of the husband and he cannot know what is going on in his wife's mind, the reader doesn't know either. It is difficult to understand how the brain of a patient affected by Alzheimer's works, even from the neurological point of view, let alone how she/he feels. Symptoms are recognizable, but variations in memory disturbances are frequent, episodes of amnesia are followed by apparent recovery of past fragments, so that it may be difficult to completely accept a diagnosis of progressive degenerative disease. At times the husband in this story recognizes his wife's personality, her irony and sense of humor and suspects her of joking, like she used to before the disease. Grant oscillates between different perceptions of dementia as a serious pathology that destroys memory and language skills, and a continuity in personality that transpires in spite of loss of memory. When he looks at the patients in the institution, he still perceives their humanity:

even the ones who did not participate in any activities but sat around watching the doors or looking out the windows – were living a busy life in their heads (not to mention the life of their bodies, the portentous shifts in their bowels, the stabs and twinge everywhere along the line), and that was a life that in most cases could not very well be described or alluded to in front of visitors (298).

The questioning attitude in the narrative voice and in the focalizer contributes to the unstable perception of the disease, so that Ventura can speak of a «playful, distanced, and ironic approach to the ravages of aging» (2), and Francesconi of «progressive loss of memory as a non dramatic condition» (“Memory and Desire”: 344). In the same line of interpretation, Patricia Life considers selective forgetting and remembering as an opportunity to live to a greater advantage, facilitated by being in a new environment.

Fragments of dreams and memories: “In Sight of the Lake”

With this text Alice Munro seemed to have reached the utmost limit in her anatomy of memory and loss of memory. But she took the next almost impossible step of telling the story not from the point of view of a witness, but from the point of view of a woman suffering from a form of dementia, possibly Alzheimer's. She

took up the challenge in the short story "In Sight of the Lake", with an extraordinary display of creative narrative strategies and psychological insights. The difficulty resides in the nature of the illness itself: «The subjective experience of dementia, particularly in its late stages, remains largely unknown since the condition destroys precisely those tools necessary to produce a coherent life story» (DeFalco. "Uncanny Witnessing": 223). There have been few other successful attempts, such as *Barney's Version*, the celebrated novel by Mordecai Richler, where the protagonist starts writing his autobiography at the beginning of the disease and progressively finds it difficult to continue, so that at the end it is his son who corrects and completes it – a very clever solution to the narrative problem⁸.

In Munro's story the narrator is extradiegetic, but the focalizer this time is the protagonist, an elderly woman who seems to be suffering from the onset of dementia, is looking for a doctor whose name she cannot remember, and in the process gets lost in the small town where his office is supposed to be. The whole experience is one of disorientation, told in a fragmented way through a series of disconnected scenes and images. The reader's impression, as well, is one of disorientation while witnessing what happens in the mind of an old woman experiencing a painful loss of memory. She becomes progressively more confused, her mental problems increase, she is lost in space and time. At the beginning of the narrative Nancy (the protagonist) wonders «if her mind is slipping a bit» (217), but she refuses this idea and thinks «It isn't mind. It's just memory» (218). However, pathological loss of memory and madness become intertwined, the 'mind doctor' becomes the 'crazy doctor'. A man she encounters suggests that the doctor might be at a Rest Home nearby, and when she gets there the door opens and she finds herself trapped in a hexagonal space with four doors that don't open, she cannot get out and panics, tries to scream, cannot breathe. She wakes up in bed, and the reader discovers that she is in a nursing home, with a nurse telling her «You must have had a dream. What did you dream about?» (232). She answers she had been dreaming of when her husband was alive and she was still driving a car. Her answer seems that of a person who is in control of her memories and language, not that of a patient affected by dementia. She recognizes the nurse and can read her name on the brooch she wears. She might be in a nursing home for other kinds of ailments, not necessarily because suffering from dementia, or she might be in the early stage of the disease. The final exchange between her and the nurse confirms the ambiguity. The nurse asks her: «You have

⁸ DeFalco mentions this novel as well as Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and Jeffrey Moore's *The Memory Artist*, together with nonfictional memoirs. See also the texts examined by Wendy Roy in "The Word is Colander: Language Loss and Narrative Voice in Fictional Canadian Alzheimer's Narratives".

a nice car?»). And she answers: «Volvo». «See? You are sharp as a tack» (232). Everything depends on a verbal tense, the present tense used by the nurse. The answer might imply that the patient thinks she still owns the Volvo, but the question might also be a grammar mistake («You have» instead of «did you have?») on the part of the nurse, and then Nancy's answer would be correct. The end of the story is open, the reader is left wondering if the dream was a representation of her painful process of mental decline or rather of her fear of losing memory and getting dementia. If we look at the earlier version of the story, published in the British magazine *Granta*, everything becomes clear. The protagonist tries to explain herself and is cut short by the nurse:

You see, I have an appointment to see a doctor whose name I can't seem to get straight but I was supposed to find him here and I have followed some directions as well as I could but no luck. I felt I had got into some ridiculous sort of trap and I must have a tendency to be claustrophobic, it was alarming – “Oh, Jean, hurry up”, said Sandy. “I'm behind already and I have to get you into your nightie and all. That's the same thing you tell me every time”⁹.

While the final book version maintains uncertainty, this ending, instead, eliminates every ambiguity: Nancy is actually suffering from a form of dementia, her recurring dream is part of her delusion and mind crumbling. Opinions on the two endings differ: Neil Stewart, for example, considers the *Granta* version unquestionably superior while Wendy Rohr values the revised version as the better one and an example of Munro's mastery of compression.

As is often the case with old people, in the dream she doesn't remember words and recent facts, but she has distinct memories of the past, she claims that everything was better in former times, when she was young, we assume both in the world outside and inside her mind. The distinction between reality and dream is blurred to the point of misleading the reader. The story reads as the experience of a person who suffers from pathological loss of memory – verbal, temporal, and spatial¹⁰. The success of the story is based on the writer's ability to construct a dream that looks like the meandering of a deteriorating mind. Dreams have the fragmented quality of the first part of the narrative, they often move from one scene to the next without apparent connection, chronological and causal coordinates are weak, the emotional dimension dominates over the

⁹ Quoted in Stewart. The character has undergone a name change from Jean in the magazine version to Nancy in the book.

¹⁰ In her recent book on Munro, Francesconi interprets the story as a real life experience and the final awakening in the nursing home as happening after a long temporal ellipsis, marked by a blank in the text (*Alice Munro, Il piacere di raccontare*: 91).

rational. Dreams incorporate experiences and fears, they bring to the surface memories that the conscious self may have buried, and Nancy's dream may be a reenactment of past events, through condensation, displacement and symbolization. If dreams allow for accessibility to parts of the mind that are inaccessible through conscious thought, one question posed by this story is if the dreams of a person affected by dementia work the same way, how much they reflect inner life in spite of memory failures. In her essay on "Memory and Desire", Francesconi argues that «dreams do not allow the resurrection of memories but perform illuminating contingent rewriting versions of original material. Dreams are valued in Munro's work for their vibrant narrative potential» (353). It is possibly in this short story that the narrative potential of dreams is explored at its best, together with a visionary attempt to represent the disorientation and painful loss of memory of a person affected by a disabling illness, or of her fear to lose her memories and identity.

In *Illness as Metaphor* as well as in *Aids and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag wrote about the ways a culture generates myths about certain diseases that give them meaning beyond that of a physical or mental disorder and reveal culturally shared fears and desires. Apart from being directly connected with population aging in western societies and in Canada in particular, Linda Simon discusses the current popular and fictional focus on Alzheimer's disease within this critical framework and interprets it as a product of the postmodern world, a representation of the «sense of disorientation in a world that seems increasingly alien, a world of the young in which older people feel, inevitably, pushed to the side» (14). Sontag argued that illness as a metaphor needs to be demystified, and disease discussed literally as well as metaphorically. In these stories Munro explicitly explores the very nature of Alzheimer's, «with its painful loss of memory, its tenuous grasp of reality and the intimation of a dissolving self» (Simal 62). Her fiction succeeds in offering a realistic and compassionate portrayal of elderly people and forms of dementia as part of the «absurdity of the human condition» (Cox 277), while resonating with contemporary concerns with fear of loss, isolation, disorientation, fragmentation. Lateness of theme and style in her work keeps reminding us of the inevitability of loss and death.

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GENERATIONS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S *TIMESCAPE*

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Abstract

In 1790, Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated from Scotland to Canada, where they settled in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Born in 1936, MacLeod died in 2014. Although he is not an autobiographical writer, his centuries-long family history is fundamental to his writing, families and generations being for him the natural configuration of human existence. In turn, generations inscribe themselves in the history of the countries they live in. In his short stories and one novel, MacLeod succeeds in problematizing both heritage and generational conflict. Emblematically, in the novel *No Great Mischief*, the narrator, while walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: "Living in the past is not living up to our potential".

Generazioni ed eredità culturale nel timescape di Alistair MacLeod

Nel 1790 gli antenati di Alistair MacLeod (1936-2014) emigrarono dalla Scozia in Canada, per stabilirsi permanentemente a Cape Breton in Nova Scozia. Non è uno scrittore autobiografico, ma la storia secolare della sua famiglia è fondamentale alla sua scrittura, perché famiglia e generazioni sono per lui la configurazione naturale dell'esistenza umana. A loro volta le generazioni si iscrivono nella storia dei paesi dove vivono. Nei suoi racconti e nel suo unico romanzo, MacLeod problematizza eredità culturale e conflitto generazionale. Nel romanzo, *No Great Mischief*, il narratore, mentre cammina in un'affollata strada di Toronto, è spinto a meditare da una frase emblematica che legge sulla t-shirt di una ragazza: "Vivere nel passato è non vivere appieno le nostre potenzialità".

From Skye to Cape Breton

Immigration from Scotland to Canada had its beginning as far as 1622 under the reign of James VI of Scotland (James I of England), with the founding and naming of the colony of Nova Scotia in the Gulf of St. Lawrence¹. Scottish im-

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¹ The Gulf, which is more an internal sea than a gulf, was named by the French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534. Also the name Canada, meaning roughly 'abode', 'home', is believed to be due to Cartier.

migration increased when many Highlanders fled Scotland after the failure of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite risings, the ensuing defeat at Culloden in 1746, and the death of Bonnie Prince Charlie, Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, in 1788. Today Scottish Canadians are distributed all over the country and are one of Canada's largest and more influential ethnic groups². Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated to Nova Scotia from the isle of Eigg, one of Scotland's Inner Hebrides, in 1790, settling in the island of Cape Breton. He was born in North Battleford, in Saskatchewan, in 1936³, where his parents had temporarily migrated. After other migrations from migration, first to Edmonton and later to Mercoal, Alberta, where the father worked in a coal mine, in 1946 the family went back to Cape Breton. This is the deep eidetic timescape⁴ Alistair MacLeod elects to deal with in his less than twenty short stories⁵ and in his novel *No Great Mischief* (2000). Although he may be easily misinterpreted as such, he is not an autobiographical writer; instead, he makes cultural history and his family history, his mine, using its ore to build the foundations of stories and characters belonging to our time.

The geographical and historical choreography of his fictional families and their patterns are fundamental to his vision of human progress through time because to him families, generations and their ties are the natural configuration of the very existence of the human race. In turn, generations inscribe themselves into the systemic structure of the country of which they are citizens. In every single one of his short stories and, with more emphasis on historical facts, in his one novel, MacLeod problematizes the often-conflicting issues of tradition and progress, heritage and contemporary realities, education and lack of it, parental and extended family relationships and bonds, including in-laws. Although contexts and agonists may seem to be reiterated, they are in fact varied presenting what could be almost called a range of case studies on and of family configurations. None of his characters seem to find optimal solutions to the conflicts they live through, because, ruthlessly and feelingly at the same time – quite an achievement on MacLeod's part –, the stories show that what is good for one person or community is bad for another. Nonetheless his characters cannot help making choices. MacLeod does not add judgements or even

² Scottish Canadians have registered tartans varying from province to province, or territory.

³ Alistair MacLeod died April, 20, 2014 in Windsor, Ontario, where he lived and taught English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

⁴ 'Timescape' was first used by the astrophysicist and novelist Gregory Benford, notably in his novel *Timescape* (1980). 'Timescape' has affinities with but is not Bachtin's 'chronotope'.

⁵ Sixteen of his short stories are collected in *Island - Collected Stories* (2001). Two are published separately in periodicals, while some are still unpublished and some unfinished.

opinions to representation, but often makes his characters debate those issues within themselves – in *No Great Mischief* between a brother and a sister who are twins.

The boat and the book

In MacLeod's writings, education and/or the lack of it are paramount factors in determining not so much the characters' choices but rather working as antagonists in the shaping of their lives. When some of the characters exit the enclosure of their clan – indeed it could be called a stage – they do it at a cost. The following pages will necessarily confine themselves to some, yet exemplary, of his short stories. In "The Boat" (1968), MacLeod's first published short story, the first person narrator, recalling his and his family's past, is a young academic, whose dead father was a fisherman, owner of his boat, in Cape Breton Island. Here the conflict over education versus fishing as a means of earning a living involves father, mother and son – with six sisters in the background. When he was not in the boat, the narrator's father spent most of his time reading in a room of his own, where he accumulated magazines and books, many of them novels⁶. The mother, beautiful in a severe fashion, strong and not illiterate, believes only in physical work, in homestead self-sufficiency and in maintaining the *status quo* of her family in the local community. She disapproves of her daughters' marriages because none married a fisherman but young men from outside and went with them to live in towns; and she bitterly, relentlessly resents her only son's desertion of his father's fishing 'profession' to go to university and make a 'profession' of reading books. He, the son, recollects that:

[She] had not read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time. [...] At times, although she was not overly religious, she would bring in God to bolster her argument, saying, 'In the next world God will see to those who waste their lives reading useless books when they should be about their work'⁷ (MacLeod. *Collected Stories*: 8).

⁶ The father's room cannot but recall Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, giving the theme an additional perspective.

⁷ The narrator's mother attitude shows a curious analogy with that of Stephen Dedalus' mother in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, when, at the beginning of Chapter 5, she tells her son: «you'll live to rue the day you set your foot in that place» – «that place» being the university (179).

Yet MacLeod makes it very clear that the young academic admires her mother, making him repeatedly add details to a portrait of her that borders on aestheticization, the semiconscious nature of which is part of the character of the young professor of English Literature, who describes her as «tall and dark and powerfully energetic» and for years «a local beauty», slightly disturbingly also telling the implied readers that she reminded him of Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye⁸, quickly adding «in a physical way» (5). She is beautiful in an almost Pre-raphaelite-like way⁹ even when he recalls that:

She fed and clothed a family of seven children, making all of the meals and most of the clothes. She grew miraculous gardens and magnificent flowers and raised broods of hens and ducks. She would walk miles on berry-picking expeditions and hoist her skirts to dig for clams when the tide was low (5).

His ties with his father are just as complex and mature slowly. One night, during a summer spent home trawling with him in «the boat», while they were talking about *David Copperfield* in his room, his father told him he had always wanted to go to university. Later, the narrator, by then an academic, thinking in retrospect about that personal confession, remembers how that summer he realized the existence of a new bond between him and his father, based on their common love for literature, and how he was simultaneously struck by the privilege of going to school he had been given and the life of forced endurance his father had to go through:

And then there came into my heart a very great love for my father and I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. [...]. And I knew then that I could never live him alone I felt that I had been very small in a little secret place within me and that even the completion of high school was for me a silly shallow selfish dream (21).

Nonetheless, when he remembers that momentous summer and the death of his father the following autumn, he lives in a town and teaches at university. The treatment of time in the story may at times seem difficult because of the interplay of flashbacks with reflective moments of the fictional present, but it is, in fact, very precise and consistent with MacLeod's representation of the

⁸ Eustacia Vye is a very complex and controversial character in Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878).

⁹ The Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) offers interesting examples of tall, dark, beautiful women.

layered feelings of the narrator. In his present, the young academic has to face both old and new conflicting bonds and rifts: his father's confession makes him feel he would have approved his choice, yet he also senses a bitter remorse thinking of his life and death, and thinking of the «lobster beds off the Cape Breton», «grounds» the community and his mother consider «sacred» and waiting for him (24). Centuries of culture make his literary present fight with his family heritage: fathers had always been fishermen, mothers had reared children and took care of the whole household tasks, sons and daughters should follow in parents' footsteps. It is part of the character, decidedly a round character, his thinking of his mother always through a sequence of images, making her a severe, tragic and yet aestheticized epitome of his betrayal of their community culture:

It is not an easy thing to know that your mother lives alone on an inadequate insurance policy and that she is too proud to accept any other aid. [...]. And that she lies awake in the early morning's darkness when the rubber boots of the men scrunch upon the gravel as they pass beside her house [...] and she alone [...] has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea. And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue (24-25).

The fog

The choreography of family members changes in another short story, "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" (1974): a ten-years old grandson is being brought up by maternal grandparents in a small fishing village in Newfoundland, not far from Cape Spear¹⁰; his mother and official father are absent from the scene because they died in a car accident; his natural father arrives in the village summoned through a sense of duty by the grandfather, while the boy does not know the stranger is his father, and the father has never seen the boy before and did not even know he had a son. Like in "The Boat", the narrator in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is a young and clearly successful academic, but this time the point of view is that of a father not that of a son¹¹. The narration, fictionally lasting no more than twenty-four hours, is scrupulously maintained within his knowledge and perceptions.

¹⁰ Cape Spear is the easternmost point of Atlantic Canada, dramatically beautiful and awe-inspiring – a good example of the picturesque sublime.

¹¹ There is not the least sign of the young academic in "The Boat" being the same person of the academic in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood".

His arrival at the village, literally at the end of the road from the nearest town, driving a «small rented Volkswagen», is a highly pictorial and emotional homage to the stunning beauty of the landscape and at the same time a proleptic intimation of a perduring cultural heritage: «Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. [...] 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 [...]» (118-119). It is protracted for more than two pages and does not end abruptly but lingers on almost to the end of the narrative, intermingled with the characters' motions and dialogues.

In the middle of that three-dimensional scenery, the narrator meets his son, John, serenely unaware that the stranger is his father, and, soon after, is invited by the boy's grandfather to stay for the night. Through the natural and anthropological landscapes, the characters features and clothes, and a number of knowledgeably selected tell-tale objects, the story is a representation of the traditional life of fishermen and their family in an epitomic village, which is made by MacLeod to appear as an outpost of Gaelic Ireland in a Canadian contemporary context. The family in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is Irish and Catholic and, not unexpectedly, very similar to the Scottish family¹² in "The Boat". After supper, during which John does most of the talking, and after some family playing and singing a couple of old traditional songs, ingeniously chosen by MacLeod to be read as connected with the story, the narrator and the grandfather are alone, playing chess, drinking hot rum toddies and talking. It is at this point that the antefacts are grafted into the present situation, so that past and present are told in two parallel tracks, a not chronological one for the past, a chronological one for the present.

The grandfather starts his part of the story in *media re*:

When she married in Toronto [...] we figured that maybe John should be with her and with her husband. That maybe he would be having more of a chance there in the city. [...] Well, what was wrong was that we missed him wonderful awful. [...] Anyway, they could have no more peace with John than we could without him. [...] They sent word that he was coming on the plane [...]. Well, it was all wrong the night before [...]. The signs all bad [...] (134-135).

A list, a compendium of centuries-old superstitious beliefs follows – the omens and the human beings immersed together in a flood of fog, which is to

¹² During our private conversations (I was translating some of his short stories), MacLeod frequently underlined the similarities between Scotland and Ulster – and his interest in both.

the grandparents the most frightening of all bad omens. Yet, the aircraft transporting John lands safely through the fog, but the car accident where John's mother and her husband die takes place that night in the far away fog of Toronto: «That night they be killed» (135).

The narrator's part of the story spills over in his thoughts later, when he is alone in the room where he will spend the night, which is near the room where he fathered John and where the boy now sleeps. Literary images cram his mind intertwined with images of the local imported popular culture, the culture he investigated as a student, in particular the girlish belief that helped him to seduce his host's daughter. The quotation, though shortened, is long but worthwhile:

The room is full of sound. Like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window [...]. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in. [...] there is no boiled egg or shaker of salt or glass of water waiting on the chair within this closed room's darkness. Once, though, there was a belief held in the outports, that if a girl would see her own true lover she should boil an egg and scoop out half the shell and fill it with salt. Then she should take it to bed with her and eat it, leaving a glass of water by her bedside. In the night her future husband or a vision of him would appear and offer her the glass. [...] 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 (137-138).

MacLeod endows his young scholar's thoughts with a touch of irony¹³, but chooses to stop short of making him a courageous and profound thinker. The key-word, and therefore the key image of the story is «fog», the fog without duplicating itself in the fog within: «I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog» (138).

The boy and his grandparents are unaware that they live a life that is 'heritage' and 'folklore' to scholars and archives, they do not know the word 'picturesque'. The successful academic knows all that, and knows that the disappearance of cultural heritage is something to be fought against. Yet, how can this be done? Who does preserve the cultural heritage better, the scholar through his work or the illiterate grandparents who still live their 'heritage', or, may be, John will? John, of whom his grandfather says: «John here has the makings of a good fisherman» (128); and about whom his father asks himself: «And perhaps now I should go and say, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout [...]. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my col-

¹³ MacLeod's allusion to the protagonists of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is perhaps too evident to be pointed out.

lecting and most successful life?» (139). He does not tell John he is his father and leaves him with the grandparents, leaving to the reader the interpretation of the title: John, the «gift of blood», is a gift from a father to the lonely grandparents, or rather a gift refused? Or is the fathering of the boy ironically called a gift? Or the scholar wants to preserve the harmony and beauty of the village and its inhabitants, almost as a gift to a living, necessarily impermanent archive? Besides, there is another gift, briefly mentioned: the boy gives his unknown father «a smooth round stone [...] worn and polished» by sea and sand to «near perfection», and says «I like to collect them» (140). Does he, like his father, have «the makings» of a good collector of knowledge of the past? MacLeod's titles are always difficult and layered. Once more, the quotation of the entire passage would be too long. Suffice to point out again that MacLeod's characters make choices, but, as anticipated, do not find pacifying solutions. It would be easy to read the father and the grandparents in the story as instances of selfishness in different degrees of consciousness, but MacLeod makes things much more complex and ends the story with far more questions than answers.

Song and silence

The family pattern changes again, and utterly, in “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984). The central character, Archibald, is a seventy-eight years old ‘lumberer’, faultlessly respectful of the beauty of the woods, «a tall, slim man with dark hair and brown eyes and his own teeth» (271), whose ancestors had come to Nova Scotia from the Isle of Skye four generations before. At the beginning of the short story he has been a widower for forty-nine years; his wife died giving birth to a son, their fourth child, who died with her. After that, their three daughters had been brought up by his wife's sisters, within an enlarged family. Now, in the year 1980, he lives alone high up on a Cape Breton Island mountain in a log house he himself had built to near perfection and where he has a superb, pictorial view of the valley below, the sea, Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands.

The generational conflict involves the entire family, particularly the younger members of it, but becomes especially alive when it extends itself out of the family clan to include a «gang» of young men belonging to other families. The story is narrated in the third person, by a very subtle narrator who mostly (not always) limits his knowledge to Archibald's life and thoughts, oscillating from inside and outside elements. The text of the short story is crammed with meaning, all the words and information are pondered to contribute to the whole, every word counts. Archibald, who clearly received a secondary school educa-

tion, still speaks Gaelic, knows by heart a large number of traditional songs and ballads and is an extremely good singer. He is well known to researchers in the field and is frequently asked for contributions:

Many of the letters [...] 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 [...]. He did not mind the folklorists, enunciating the words [...] explaining that 'bh' was pronounced as 'v' (like the 'ph' in phone is pronounced 'f', he would say), expanding on the more archaic meaning and footnoting himself the words and phrases of local origin (280).

When he and his family receive an invitation to sing traditional Gaelic songs in Halifax, at a Festival connected with «the year of 'Scots Around the World'» (184), while his relatives, especially those in their twenties or thirties, seem more excited by the prospect of spending a week in Halifax than interested in singing, he reacts with a mixture of warm feelings and philological passion, although the word philology is obviously unknown to him. The organisers interview other groups of singers, but Archibald's family is the one they prefer, mainly because of Archibald's leading skill and exceptionally good voice and enunciation. Yet, when they are singing and Archibald is asked to cut the song before it ends, he becomes very upset: «It's not finished [...]. It's a narrative». The producer says that there is no problem, since nobody knows the language and they are «just trying to gauge audience impact» (298). But, the austere and passionate philologist in Archibald strives toward perfection and cannot compromise. To his family's chagrin, since he cannot accept the songs to be cut in the middle, he declines the invitation to sing in Halifax. Another group will sing in their place, the 'gang' of those reckless young men always ready to pick up a good 'fight', far less good and respectful of heritage and authenticity, but a group who can accept to cut a song because they do not know the meaning of the words they sing. Archibald, in the end, envies and admires them for their «closeness [...] fierceness [...] tremendous energy» (309), thinking that perhaps «men like them» (309) fought in the «storm past» (309) of Scotland. Archibald prefers silence.

Timescape and irreversibility

Several others of MacLeod's short stories would be interesting too, especially considering that they cover a gamut of family structures. No less interesting would be the novel, *No Great Mischief*, where the case studies coalesce into the history of the generations of one family, from Culloden to contemporary To-

ronto, via Cape Breton. Almost at the beginning of the novel, the narrator, Alexander MacDonald walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative, and partly upset, by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: «Living in the past is not living up to our potential» (56).

MacLeod's concept of time is linear and its movement unidirectional; it could aptly be described by Arthur Eddington's 'Arrow of time'¹⁴: the past can be remembered, preserved, studied, imitated, acted and enacted, obeyed in its commands, endured in its consequences, expiated, and much more, but it cannot be 'the present' a second time – its unidirectional movement is irreversible. In his timescape, paradoxically, the two academics and the folklorists of the three short stories here privileged¹⁵ do more to preserve the past than the mother in "The Boat", John and his grandparents in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" – though the natural father's choice makes the situation multi-layered – and Archibald in "The Tuning of Perfection".

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¹⁴ Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) was an English astrophysicist and literary writer. He developed the concept of the 'Arrow of time' or 'Asymmetry of time' in 1927.

¹⁵ At least "Island" (1988) and "Clearances" (1999) must be mentioned, because the choice of the protagonists of both stories, albeit for very different reasons, is, like Archibald's, silence.