Diasporic Narcissism:
De-sublimating Scotland in Alice Munro and Alistair MacLeod

In the only sustained exploration of Scottish-Canadian literary relations, Elizabeth Waterston writes:

> The situation in each nation and in its literature seems to clarify that of the other. Here are two northern nations, ironic and sentimental, each quietly resentful of the stronger, more affluent neighbour lying south of the national border, indifferent to or unaware of the impact of its culture on others. Here are two sets of writers whose literary strategies and structures have been sharpened and maybe warped by northernness, the doubleness, the angular spareness of their heritage, and the pressure of alien alternatives. (Waterston 2001, 8-9)

Freud observed that nations with uncertain claims to separateness are liable to the "narcissism of small differences" (2002, 50-51). Here, Waterston hints that Scotland and Canada's small differences are largely the same, and gradually reconstitutes them as traces of filial provenance passed from parent to child. There is a continual slippage in *Rapt in Plaid* between historically contingent literary tastes and forms (e.g. John Buchan's discovery of an "already strong attachment to his kind of writing" in Canada (9)) and totalised national mentalities ("ironic and sentimental") which betoken a linear relation of heritage transfer, rather than a common positionality vis-à-vis "alien alternatives". The shared cultural condition begins as an exogenous parallel – tensions with the encroaching southern neighbour – but is briskly smuggled under the mail-order kilt, endogenised and essentialised. "When Scots immigrants came to Canada in the early nineteenth century, they brought Robert Burns's values with them, packed into their psyches, just as the volume of his poems was packed into their brass-bound sea trunks" (9). Affinities of circumstance have quickly become organic folkways, legible as family resemblances. The north-south "small differences" of these two countries are re-coded and narrativised within the east-west dynamic of diasporic transmission, estrangement and yearning.

Tracing the problem of Canadian identity "elsewhere", along settler folkways which bypass the influence of the United States, has been a recurring feature of efforts to construct a national imaginary. Accounting for the emotional power of Alistair MacLeod's fiction, his fellow Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart declares:

> We Canadians are, after all, a nation composed of people longing for a variety of abandoned homelands and the tribes that inhabited them, whether these be the distant homelands of our recent immigrants, the abducted homelands of our native peoples, the rural homelands vacated by the post-war migrations to the cities, or the various European or Asian homelands left behind by our earliest settlers. All of us have been touched in some way or another by this loss of landscape and of kin, and all of us are moved by the sometimes unidentifiable sorrow that accompanies such a loss. (Urquhart 2001, 37-8)

The very cosiness of this "we Canadians" universalism, and its glib erasure of the violence of invasion and nation-building, occasions a deep moral unease. A similar kinship-of-the-kinless motif plays a peripheral role in MacLeod's celebrated novel *No Great Mischief*. The central drama is preceded by a roadside tableaux in which Ontario fruit-pickers – "many of them are from the Caribbean and some of them are Mennonites from Mexico and some are French Canadians from New Brunswick and Quebec" – share in the archetypally Canadian tragedy of the Cape Breton MacDonalds: "This land is not their own" (MacLeod 1999, 1). The apparent inclusivity of this trope actually re-inscribes the centrality of white-settler dislocation to Canadian identity, while claiming for those same settlers an additional *frisson* of colonial injury, and compensatory claim to authenticity. We return to the itinerant fruit-pickers in the final pages of the novel, though now they recall not the transplanted Gaels of Nova Scotia but their coastal predecessors, "the native peoples who move across the land, harvesting" (253) – as well, incongruously, as "the tall and arrogant Masai" of Kenya, prospective victims of confinement "to certain 'homelands' which are really not their homes at all" (254). In a bravura twist, the "clannic remnant" (Nairn 2004, 54) at the centre of the novel turn out not to be settlers at all; their Highland heritage entitles them to perennial status as refugees and ethnic underdogs. This fudging nativism sweeps aside the historical complexity of *No Great*

Mischief's core identity-paradox, in which Canada is "won" from the French by ex-Jacobite Highland soldiers distrusted and exploited by their redcoat commanders. At the novel's close Calum MacDonald is in prison for the murder of a French-Canadian rival rendered allegorical by the novel's careful marshalling of such ironies. But in the final jarring pages they are elbowed out the window.

> In Kingston Penitentiary, Calum said, a disproportionate number of the prisoners were from the native population. In many cases they did not fully understand the language of those to whom they were entrusted and condemned. They would hang their woven dreamcatchers in the windows of their cells, he said. (254)

Cell-mates in a Canadian cultural space of universal displacement – one compounded but also clarified by the erasure of Quebecois identity – this is the emblematic scene by which MacLeod's fiction, abetted by responses such as Urquhart and Waterston's, re-routes anxieties of white Canadian identity via the emotional vocabulary of diasporic Scottishness. Cementing the pathos and longing of the Celtic diaspora as the fundamental and even "native" condition of Canadianness, this rhetoric dissolves the historical violence of colonisation and nation-building and presents it as a continuation of internal "British" conflict, already de-realised and assimilated to the realm of ballad and romance. The dreamcatcher in the cell window extends this logic to a pre-appropriated, "New Age" indigeneity, a symptom of the white containment it would seem to protest. And so, despite their trumpeted pre-eminence in Canadian nation-building (McGoogan 2010), the descendants of Scots settlers are restored as heirs to a gloriously suppressed traditional culture.

By now it will be clear that, far from mutually clarifying, I see such Scots-Canadian "recognitions" as a narcissistic attachment: an elective affinity with a national peer constructed, in the same gesture, as the orphan's lost parent, only part of whose inheritance the child is keen to reclaim. In the work of Alice Munro, residues of Scotland are coequal with the archival knowledge by which they are retrieved and reproduced; Scottishness may only be realised as narrative or verbal performance, and

even then as one characterised by the deferral of presence.[1] By contrast, MacLeod's diasporic Scottishness is concrete and substantial, directly embodying a heritage of loss, betrayal and communion. In both writers' work we find a de-sublimation and release of – or release *from* – a legendary or ethnic Scottishness held to underpin but also upstage the insipid register of "civic", multicultural Canadianness.[2]

Munro, scepticism and textual diaspora

Famously wry, we would not expect Alice Munro to find any straightforward nostalgic fulfilment in visiting the family homeland. But her disappointment is clear as she visits the Scottish Borders to research her semi-fictional family memoir *The View from Castle Rock*. Underwhelmed by the banality of the ancestral landscape (its brownness evokes "the hills around Calgary" (5)), and feeling "conspicuous, out of place", she writes:

> I was struck with a feeling familiar, I suppose, to many people whose history goes back to a country far away from the place where they grew up. I was a naïve North American, in spite of my stored knowledge. Past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined. (Munro 2006, 7)

A recurring pattern in Munro's "Scottish" writing is the Canadian storyteller's disappointment with the revealed drabness and unromance of "real" Scotland. The Ettrick landscape Munro is delighted to associate with "a story of Merlin – *Merlin* – being hunted down and murdered" is reduced in scale to the "twice-a-week Shoppers' Bus" by which she travels there from Selkirk (Munro 2006, 5). Invocations of the legendary are consistently deflated by first-hand tourist experience, itself marked by an ambivalent desire to soberly verify or disprove the informal archive of family tales and letters. The old country is a matter of belief and unbelief, recovered only via correspondence with the "stored knowledge" of texts.

[1] For reasons of space Munro's story "Friend of My Youth" (1990) is not considered here, though it would repay a similar critical treatment.

[2] Perhaps ironically, "the conceptual foundation of the Canadian idea of civility" is the deracinated category of Britishness of which the "Scots, historically, were the primary inventers and promoters" (Coleman 2006, 6). Daniel Coleman has noted the prominence of "the enterprising Scottish orphan" in settler fiction constructing "English Canadian" identity (81-127).

It is impossible to ignore the resonance of the "real" authorial scenario which frames *The View From Castle Rock* with an earlier Munro story. "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass" centres on the frustrated researches of Hazel, a Canadian widow visiting the Scottish Borders in search of the people and places of her dead husband's wartime reminiscences. We first encounter Hazel in a hotel lobby, making notes on the day's touristic researches. These notes are instantly subject to revision and correction, but not in the light of any felt experience with which they fail to tally; they are erroneous on the internal terms of history as a closed order of confirmed truths. Hazel mistakenly dates the Covenanters' victory at the Battle of Philiphaugh as 1945 instead of 1645, directly linking the tragic aura of this place to the era of her husband's wartime visit. The cancellation of this easy transposition of historical frames, trading one battle for another, is a recurring feature of the story. Even before we glimpse the character, we catch her editing her descriptive sketch of the area, policing her own embellishments, quelling a sense of unreality. Our most rounded image of Hazel finds her curiously at home in this posture of writerly groundlessness, both fraught and self-possessed: "she was a person you would not be surprised to find sitting by herself in a corner of the world where she didn't belong, writing things in a notebook to prevent the rise of panic" (Munro 1990, 75).

Hazel is disquieted by the refusal of this place to yield up the expected, faded signs of her husband's visit. "The problem was just the opposite of what she had expected. It was not that people had moved away and the buildings were gone and had left no trace. Just the opposite" (78). Locals from her husband's stories, including a well-preserved lover, are still "in place, right where they used to be" (80). Indeed the sameness and *presence* of this world is excessive; the Borderers do not live up to their reputation for "British" reserve, and are far from withholding (83). For her part, Hazel struggles to maintain her identity as Canadian: "So have you come over here looking for your roots?" asks Dudley, a fixture of the hotel bar. "He gave the word its most exaggerated American pronunciation. 'I am Canadian,' Hazel said quite pleasantly. 'We don't say "roots" that way'" (79). This small difference seems no more than a matter of accent, but verbal performance turns out to be central to authenticating a cultural identity rooted beyond the empirical domain of the notebook.

The teenage lover of Jack's stories, Antoinette, still works in the hotel but insists she does not remember Hazel's husband. As a consolation she takes her to the home of Jack's ancient relative and former landlady. Miss Dobie lives not in the storied idyllic farmhouse but a modern bungalow, "stuccoed, with stones set here and there in a whimsical suburban style" (91). A surprisingly intense emotionalism is contained by this unassuming exterior, which it becomes Hazel's task to uncover and bring to light. Miss Dobie proves unable to recollect Jack, but offers a recitation of the Borders ballad "Tam Lin". This tale of lost maidenhead and fairy bewitchment seems to unite the fabular and contemporary worlds, offering a cold commentary on the dormant love triangle Hazel has stumbled upon and perhaps reactivated. Antoinette shares the affections of Dudley with a young, gloriously red-haired woman who is Miss Dobie's live-in carer. Mother to Dudley's illegitimate child, and herself an orphan, Judy is a blaze of flamboyance among the crockery and patterned upholstery, but one kept in check by Antoinette's barrage of coded feminine reproaches throughout the visit. Boiling with fury at Antoinette's insults, and the personal judgement implied by Miss Dobie's choice of recital ("*gin ye lose your maidenhead / Ye"ll ne"er get that agen!*" (99)), Judy gives off an atavistic odour "that washing and deodorizing had made uncommon. It poured out hotly from between the girl's flushed breasts" (95). Here we seem to make direct, pungent contact with the suppressed passions of romantic Scotland, the folkway to the more personal recognition Hazel yearns for. Yet the essential Judy we encounter here is one generated by the ballad narrative, and the oblique cruelties of its performance.

On the journey back from Miss Dobie's, Antoinette points out the supposed scene of Tam Lin's escape from the Queen of the Fairies, but "the field was brown and soggy and surrounded by what looked like council housing" (98). This anti-Gothic puncturing of mystique figures both as loss and a form of relief. Just as Tam is released from supernatural bondage by the steadfastness of Jennet, his human lover, the balladic landscape is restored to a space of ordinary modern settlement – an exorcism itself cancelled when we learn, later, that Antoinette has pointed out the wrong brown field owing to a confusion of names. What "being there" expels from this place was never "there" to begin with, even on the doubtful terms of the folktale. What Hazel finds in Scotland is not the object or ground of her desire, but *tradition* as the ritual enactment of longing, deferral and recognition.

Later recognising the ballad from Hazel's description, Dudley seems to accept "Tam Lin" as master-text to his own romantic predicament: "he threw himself back in his chair, looking released, and lifted his head and started reciting" (100). Here, seemingly, is the fulfilment of Hazel's longed-for correspondence: Dudley incarnates Tam Lin, released from the fairy kingdom of the hotel by Jennet/Judy, but also embodies Jack, lover of Antoinette and suddenly attractive to her successor Hazel. These fragile recognitions, however, are sustained only by the memory and voice of the balladeer, whose verbal realisation of "stored knowledge" is a kind of magic. As in Miss Dobie's earlier performance, the Scottishness of Dudley's speech "thickens" and "broadens" as he conjures "Tam Lin"

> with style, in a warm, sad splendid male voice […] Of course Dudley's style was old-fashioned, of course he mocked himself, a little. But that was only on the surface. This reciting was like singing. You could parade your longing without fear of making a fool of yourself. (101)

The narrative strangeness of the ballad and the potential ironies of its delivery are expelled from this hidden "depth", a flow of emotion that flushes away the question of sincerity itself. The coded displacements and correspondences of "Tam Lin" are de-sublimated in a pure release of romantic orality, a medium of personal expression and ethno-cultural communion beyond ridicule or historical judgment.

In *The View from Castle Rock* Munro is both cagy and fussy about the textual basis of her family saga, but insists that key elements are drawn directly from family letters, official documents and the writings of her ancestor James Hogg. Prominent in this work are tropes which internalise to Scotland the transatlantic fantasy which lingers in Hazel's peripheral vision. The vista of the book's title is a mysterious drunken prank or mistake, in which a male ancestor (Hogg's first cousin, James Laidlaw) claims that the view from Edinburgh Castle encompasses America rather than Fife:

> "Well the sea does not look so wide as I thought," said the man who had stopped staggering. "It does not look as if it would take you weeks to cross it."

> "It is the effect of the height we're on," said the man who stood beside Andrew's father. "The height we're on is making the width of it the less." […] "So there you are my lad and you have looked over at America," [James] said. "God grant you one day you will see it closer up and for yourself." (Munro 2006, 30)

Munro matches this domestication of the emigrant's unknowable destination with a comic acceleration of disillusionment and homesickness. Almost the moment James has led his family onto an emigrant ship bound for Quebec, after years of evangelising about America, the presence of "Black Highlanders" among his fellow passengers moves him to lament "Oh, that ever we left our native land!" (32). Andrew replies "We have not left yet […] We are still looking at Leith" (32). This condensation of the diasporic imaginary – its replacement of the real origin with a false memory – heralds the dramatic explosion of small differences throughout the collection.

Once we have followed Andrew and the rest of Munro's (real-life) ancestors from Leith to Ontario, their anxieties of displacement become refocused along a north-south axis. Prior to his family's emigration to Canada, Munro's great-great-grandfather William Laidlaw (brother to Andrew and son to James) had already estranged himself from the family by moving from the Borders to the Highlands. (Thus the family is fractured and dispersed before the leave-taking at Leith.) Several years later, and upon news of his father's death in the New World, William decides that the time has come to follow his family across the Atlantic; although not precisely.

> His father and his brothers had spoken of going to America, but when they said that, it was really Canada they meant. William spoke accurately. He had discarded the Ettrick Valley for the Highlands without the least regret, and now he was ready to get out from under the British flag altogether – he was bound for Illinois. (Munro 2006, 88)

The "Illinois" story concerns the secondary migration of William's wife and children following his death from cholera. Andrew, now settled in Upper Canada, comes to retrieve the family and move them north. The eldest son Jamie feels an overwhelming attachment to the place of his father's grave, and resists the move to Canada; the

youngest child has arrived on the day of William's death, an orphan on her birthday. This becomes a key motif in what follows, as Jamie uses his new-born sister to engineer what he regards as the necessary and fateful return to Illinois, by a misfiring ruse in which she figures as several kinds of decoy orphan in addition to her actual fatherlessness. When the travelling party stop to rest at a "crossroads inn" (95), still on the American side of the border, Jamie conceals the child in a nearby shack. When the alarm is raised, he hints that Becky Johnson, a native girl from back home, "might have been following along trying for a chance to sneak away the baby who she loved unreasonably" (104). The aim is to force a return to the place of the lost parent, to confront the false parent of Jamie's invention. But before the sister can be retrieved from the shack and somehow smuggled back to Illinois, she is discovered by local girls who over-write Jamie's deception, transferring the hungry baby to the sleeping-place of a stable boy they mean to ridicule. They leave a note labelling the foundling – both real and pretend – "*A PRESENT from one of your SWEETHEARTS*" (108), before Andrew eventually hears the baby's cries and cancels both fictions.

Jamie's strategem is, he supposes, guided by the wishes of his dead father, who "is not under that stone" back in Illinois "but in the air or walking along the road invisibly and making his views known as well as if they had been talking together – *his father* was against their going" (103). This presence compels Jamie to thwart the displacement led by Andrew, the Upper Canadian "newcomer who looked and even sounded like his father but was entirely a sham" (103). By contrast the only concern of the father-inventing local girls, upon finding the child, is "how can we best make a joke, or fool somebody?" (103). This is the precise moment *The View from Castle Rock* shifts into Munro's familiar terrain of small-town secrets and unkindness, and leaves the extravagant longings of its refugees behind. But if the collection begins to put down "Canadian" roots at this juncture, they are shaped by American rather than transatlantic pressures. During the stop at the tavern, Munro has Andrew overtly thematise his brother's fateful "choice of nationality".

> He had seen enough of the Yankee people by now to know what had tempted Will to live among them. The push and noise and rawness of them, the need to get on the bandwagon. Though some were decent enough and some, and

> maybe some of the worst, were Scots. Will had something in him drawing him to such a life.
>
> It had proved a mistake.
>
> Andrew knew, of course, that a man was as likely to die of cholera in Upper Canada as in the state of Illinois, and that it was foolish to blame Will's death on his choice of nationality. He did not do so. And yet. And yet – there was something about all this rushing away, loosing oneself entirely from family and past, there was something rash and self-trusting about it that might not help a man, that might put him more in the way of such an accident, such a fate. (110)

The alignment of Americanness with "loosing oneself entirely from family and past" positions Canadian rootedness as a kind of emotional Loyalism, allied to a watchful scepticism toward self and others. The reckless way in which the orphan herself is loosed from her true place and made a token in serious and silly games played by others embodies a too-cavalier attitude toward the ties of family, past and truth, and the perilous hijacking of the real, vulnerable child by fictions intended to recover – but also to parody – true parentage. The Canadian figure operating as the reality-principle in this story, it should be noted, is the son who doubted the father's vision from Castle Rock ("if he did not understand that his father was drunk […] he did certainly understand that something was not as it should be" (30)) and who will now play surrogate father to his brother's orphans. Scepticism and substitution are the "real" narrative strands of Munro's Scottish lineage.

MacLeod, orality and ethnic re-inscription

The fetishism of "roots" in contemporary North American culture has nominated a particular vision of Scotland as a preferred site of ancestry (see Hague 2002). The resulting idiom of white indigeneity is re-exported to the mother country and consumed as a kind of exogenous affirmation of the (frequently challenged) "reality" of traditional Scottish culture, based on the salience of its residues abroad. Gerard Carruthers links its remarkable success on both sides of the Atlantic to the fact *No Great Mischief*

> does not place undue emphasis upon the supposedly catastrophic failure of a past Scotland. This is the kind of vision that is more easily sent back to a modern Scotland which is perhaps beginning to move away from a version of its cultural past that is all loss and (diseased) post-1707 gain. (Carruthers 2009, 173)

We can best illustrate this dynamic of restoration by turning to an iconic passage in the novel. The sister of the Ontarian narrator accompanies her husband on a business trip to Aberdeen, and takes the opportunity to visit the ancestral homeland in Moidart. Here, she encounters an older woman collecting winkles at low tide.

> And then, she said, she met the woman face to face, and they looked into each other's eyes.
>
> "You are from here," said the woman.
>
> "No," said my sister, "I'm from Canada."
>
> "That may be," said the woman. "But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while." (MacLeod 1999, 147)

The sister accompanies the old woman to her home, where she is introduced as a returning native. A rheumy old man marvels at the concept of houses made from wood, before abruptly claiming his ancestors helped to shelter Bonnie Prince Charlie. This occasions some clunking exposition about "the auld alliance" and a vaguely postcolonial vindication of the Jacobite cause: "It was worth fighting for, our own land and our own people, and our own way of being" (149). To complete the picture, he hints that "some of us […] may be descendants of the prince" (149).

We seem here to glimpse the roots-tourist's forbidden scene of enjoyment: immediate and warm recognition by timeless ancestor-natives of your self-evident claim to belong, an authentication mirrored by the elevation to ancient royalty. The recovery of lost origins is sealed by the romantic imaginary of vocal co-presence. The sister begins, miraculously, to converse with the womenfolk in fluent Gaelic, a language she has not used since childhood, when she (and the narrator) were raised by their Gaelic-speaking grandparents following the death of their own parents. (The moment of their orphaning on the ice is perhaps the best-known scene of the novel.) The ecstatic

linguistic "homecoming" which follows therefore unites cultural and personal recoveries of the true self, in a register of high communal passion:

> I nodded back and it was a few seconds before I realised that she had spoken in Gaelic and that I had understood her. It seemed I had been away from the language for such a long, long time. […]
>
> She said everything in Gaelic, and then I began to speak to her and to them in Gaelic as well. I don't even remember what I said, the actual words or the phrases. It was just like it poured out of me, like some subterranean river that had been running deep within me and suddenly burst forth. And then they all began to speak at once, leaning towards me as if they were trying to pick up a distant but familiar radio signal even as they spoke. We spoke without stopping for about five minutes, although it might have been for a longer or shorter time. […] And then all of us began to cry. All of us sobbing, either standing or sitting on our chairs in Moidart.
>
> "It is as if you had never left," said the old man. "Yes," said the others all at once, "as if you had never left."
>
> Suddenly we were all shy again. Wiping our eyes self-consciously. It was like the period following passion. As if we had had this furious onslaught and now we might suddenly and involuntarily drop into a collective nap. (MacLeod 1999, 150-51)

The erotic dimension of this de-sublimation requires no commentary. Boldly refusing the displacements of narrative re-telling, we are brought directly into the presence of the sister's memory and emotionality. Such passages in MacLeod's writing operate by the condensation and discharge of the yearnings "Tam Lin" defers and recirculates in Munro's story. In *No Great Mischief* homilies such as "blood is thicker than water" take on an emblematic function which transcends "story" and the contingency of its quasi-oral style of transmission (here, from sister to brother to reader). In another scene, a Canadian fragment of the ancient clan is recognised from a moving car in a strange city by the redness of his hair alone. Only the direct superposition of one redhead over another, one origin over another ("I'm from Canada" / "You are really from here"), one historical conflict over another (Culloden / The Plains of Abraham / the MacDonalds' battle with Fern Picard) can sustain the unity of this organism. In

place of Munro's palimpsestic model of tradition and re-narrativisation, in which the earlier doubtful layer is visible through the present one, but where 1945 can never simply reincarnate 1645, and where Hazel can never truly inhabit Jack's memories, this is a model of irresistible experiential proofs which admits of no misrecognition. There is a sensuous and substantial match between the selves of "home" and "exile", which only awaits the correct circumstance in which to be manifested and released.

The key detail in this scene is "either standing or sitting on our chairs in Moidart", a descriptive superfluity which anchors this dreamlike scene in a realistically prosaic dimension, reversing the pattern of Munro's bathetic deflations. But ultimately *No Great Mischief* is not interested in the ragged particularity of the past. Toward the end of the novel, the sister recalls their own grandfather's taste for history – that of the orphans' adoptive father:

> "He felt that if you read everything and put the pieces all together the real truth would emerge. It would be, somehow, like carpentry. Everything would fit together just so, and you would see in the end something like 'a perfect building called the past'. Perhaps he felt that if he couldn't understand his immediate past, he would try to understand his distant past."
>
> "Not so easy," I said.
>
> "I know not so easy," she answered. "And he knew it too. But he tried, and he was interested, and he tried to pass it on to us." (MacLeod 1999, 215-16)

Here the evasion of experience and displacement of "our" past by "theirs" takes on the authority and legitimacy of tradition, as a pattern sanctified by custom and perhaps even the blood (the narrator suggests the habit of idealising absent parents and origins is "genetic", adding, "and I'm not mocking" (216)). The notion of a "natural" inclination to indulge such sentimental escapes bring what is emotionally at stake in MacLeod's diasporic writing directly into focus. Not, as in Munro, the articulation of one story to another (or within another) – which contains the possibility of unbelief, exposure and making a fool of yourself – but the *re-inscription* of an essentialised ancestral self into a diasporic subject clamouring to escape the prison of sham kinship and civic nationality.

Diasporic narcissism and the recuperation of essentialism

For Alice Munro, the quest to uncover and release the past is always shadowed by the anticipated moment in which "what has been so compelling is drawn now into a pattern of things we know about" (Munro 2006, 336). She closes the first part of *The View of Castle Rock* – that part centred on family history and a degree of factual reality – with an image counterpointing the sister's orgasmic re-Gaelicisation in *No Great Mischief*. This passage follows a lengthy quotation from her own father's ("real") memoirs, in which he recalls hearing his grandfather speaking Scots to a visiting cousin.

> That is where I feel it best to leave them – my father a little boy, not venturing too close, and the old men sitting through a summer afternoon on wooden chairs […]. There they spoke the dialect of their childhood – discarded as they became men – which none of their descendants could understand. (Munro 2006, 170)

Accepting the desire to hear this conversation as well as the impossibility of its fulfilment – accepting the need "to leave them" at all – strikes me as a preferable model for imagining Scottish-Canadian cultural relatedness. Here is a longing grounded in the historical condition of a settler society, rather than projected onto emigrant-ancestors in the plenitude of their imagined self-presence. Textual displacement is the fragile "truth" of Scots-Canadian literary heritage, not an ecstatic vocal communion which dissolves the real ground of national memory and contestation.

To be sure, the unsatisfactions of "English Canadian" literary identity have often been traced to the yearnings explored in these texts. In 1912 Professor Pelham Edgar of the University of Toronto lamented that

> all the countries of Europe have passed through the ballad and epic stage of unselfconscious literary production, and we are only vicariously the heirs of all this antecedent activity. They have a mythical as well as a historical past to

> inspire them, and they possess vast tracts of legends still unexplored which yield […] stores of poetic material. (cited in Coleman 2006, 17)

The insecurity of English Canada's vicarious heirs seem especially clear in the writing of Alastair MacLeod, rapturous critical acclaim of whose work seems to me inseparable from the jealous heritage-poverty of Canadian whiteness. Almost a century later, MacLeod seems to fully embrace Pelham's logic of dis-inheritance and European antecedence, and to offer an artful recovery of unselfconscious quasi-ethnic belonging. What seem, viewed from within the Scottish literary tradition, exhausted or discredited forms of national imagining (romantic Highlandism, pan-Gaelic blood bonds, balladic enchantment) gain a new life via Canadian fictions which project anxieties internal to the national literary self-image onto a static and archivally "given" Scotland, where they attain the dignity and stability of tradition. The recovery of this Scots-Canadian ur-self, with its readymade folkloric glamour, supplies a watertight historical alibi of cultural distinctiveness, marginality and suppression, reinforcing the fundamental, contrastive identification with the United States. But the resurrected parent also stands to gain. The warm Scottish critical reception of Canadian fictions manufacturing this inheritance, "returning" it to the parent apparently laundered of its essentialist baggage, both completes and authenticates the circuit of *diasporic narcissism.*

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