

Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

Cynthia Sugars

Volume 33, numéro 2, 2008

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl33_2art08

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Sugars, C. (2008). Repetition with a Difference:: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(2), 133–150.

Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

CYNTHIA SUGARS

Memory was busy with the events of many years. I retraced step by step the pilgrimage of my past life, until arriving at that passage in its sombre history, I . . . secretly marvelled,

“What brought me here?”

“Providence,” was the answer which the soul gave. “. . . You form a connecting link in the destinies of many.”

— Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (199)

I N HIS JANUARY 2004 TALK as part of the Munro Beattie lecture series at Carleton University, Alistair MacLeod gave a brief account of his family history. Relating a story about his grandmother, MacLeod spoke of his ancestor using an intriguing verb tense, referring to her as the woman who “*was to become* my grandmother” (“Writer’s Life”). While *was to become* confers on the grandmother an identity and destiny after the fact, one’s inflection on the verb *was* is also important, for if you separate the two verbs, *was* and *become*, it suggests something rather different. She “*was to become* my grandmother,” as if to say she existed *in order to become* my ancestor. The simultaneous necessity and contingency contained in the phrase are striking and provide an evocative entry point into MacLeod’s acclaimed novel, *No Great Mischief*, a work that circles around the contradictions of chance, destiny, origins, and genealogy by evincing a kind of ambivalent compulsion for repetition linking past with present.

No Great Mischief is propelled by a drive for genealogy. The genealogy of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* looks back to where their “Canadian” family line can be said to begin, mimicking a kind of *Mayflower* landing on the coast of Cape Breton and marking a moment from which the Canadian branch of *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, and the Canadian nation itself, *were to begin*. As the narrator tells his sister, were it not for a MacDonald’s presence on the Plains of Abraham, “the history

of Canada might be different” (236). Indeed, as the novel traces the progeny of the originary Calum Ruadh over subsequent generations, the *clann* are made emblematic founders of Canadian settlement. “I think of them as winning Canada for *us*,” retorts Grandpa to the other grandfather’s sceptical account of General Wolfe’s abuse of the Scottish Highlanders in Quebec (108).

Long after death, the originary Calum Ruadh shadows the family’s lives. As both a memento mori and a reminder of origins, he is commemorated on the boulder marking his grave, which looks out, steadfastly, from the rocky point. The hold of Calum Ruadh is strong, as is his superego-like gaze. Nearly all of the descendants, we’re told, have “large families . . . which led in turn to . . . complicated genealogies, over all of which [Calum Ruadh’s] name continued to preside” (28). More significantly, his red hair keeps popping up in subsequent descendants as a reminder of his priority. In this way, the novel invites various speculations about the conflicted role of genealogy in the constitution of identity and teleology. “Each of us repeat[s] his own small history,” the narrator says of himself and his brother Calum (13). Yet the gap between past and present remains unfathomable. Were we meant to become what we are in the future? Or is the intent applied only after the fact? To what extent is the past part of a teleological chain leading up to the present? As Margaret Atwood expresses the “conundrum” of historical and individual memory, “how do we know we are who we think we are . . . ?” (8). Or, more specifically, how do we know we are who we *were meant to become*?

A prime source of the novel’s power is the way that it plays on this paradox of contingency and origin. The word *contingency*, as it is used in contemporary literary theory, commonly means either “accident” (the contingency of fate) or “inevitability” (something being contingent on or determined by something else). This might be likened to our everyday notion of the word *chance*: “by chance” signalling something occurring by accident, “a chance” signalling an opportunity, a way of directing one’s fate or making things happen. We see this distinction in two overt references to “chance” in the novel: the “come by chance” child (the grandfather) who is an accident, an embarrassment, a *what should not have been*; and Grandma and Grandpa’s reference to “The Chance,” the opportunity that determines their future prosperity, the *what was meant to be*.¹ Likewise, the notion of “origins” contains two divergent

meanings: referring to a line of descent that is multiple, sequential; and, in the words *originary/original*, meaning the first, the only, the singular. The “passivity” of origins in the former sense is transformed to the latter via an imposition of intentionality. Yet, as Edward Said observes in his meditation on “beginnings,” the authority of a beginning as a singular event or “original achievement” paradoxically gains its worth “precisely because it is so often repeated thereafter” (32). Genealogies evoke both terms, “contingency” and “origin,” and both meanings of each term. They emphasize origins, both in the sense of the duplication of origins (inheritance) and in the sense of beginnings and therefore singularity (what sets one apart, what distinguishes one). Likewise, since they are at once future and past oriented, genealogies emphasize the contingent in the midst of apparent destiny; they effect what Benedict Anderson identifies as a conversion of “chance into destiny” (12). On the other hand, they also highlight the pure “chancishness” of fate. This combination of destiny and chance elicits what we might term the “back to the future” effect: a gazing upon the past (specifically one’s ancestors) to ensure that destiny (oneself) does not get sidetracked. The compulsion for genealogy is marked by an insistence on the predestined for fear that it might be gripped by the precarious. “We will live a long, long time,” predicts one of the MacDonald grandfathers in *No Great Mischief*, “if we are given the chance” (17).

In “The ‘Uncanny,’” Sigmund Freud speaks of the unsettling effect of contingency and origins. We are all committed to the uniqueness of our identities (and hence fear the appearance of a double), yet we are equally compelled by a drive toward heredity and genealogy (which means that we welcome the appearance of genetic links and doubles). When the double takes the form of a genetic relation, it brings both of these processes into conflict in the sense that the desire for uniqueness and originality is brought face to face with the desire for lineage or inheritance. The unhomely double thus embodies psychic anxiety and is connected both to birth and origins (where does one come from?) and figurative death (what happens if one is not unique?). Paradoxically, the proliferation of unhomely doubling can have a reassuring effect since it *reiterates* one’s origins. In other words, the uncanny double can be marshalled in substantiation of genealogical inheritance and continuity. In this sense, a form of genealogical repetition embodies a seeking of uniqueness even as it undermines the quest *for* uniqueness. The simulac-

ral effect of the repetition encompasses two contradictory possibilities. If a simulacrum is that for which there is no original, it can nevertheless trace the quest for origins as a kind of slippage, a repetition with a difference. Repetition functions as a way of avoiding an awareness of both radical contingency and divine ordination. Said explains this in his account of Vico's formulation of the dialectic of history: repetition "will equally avoid the despair of seeing history as gratuitous occurrence as well as the boredom of seeing history as realizing a foreordained blueprint" (*World* 113). If duplication at once gives you a sense of origins and historical legitimacy, while undercutting any sense of originality, it assuages the anxiety of the latter through the containing effects of the former. The repeating double functions as a way of disavowing the contingency of beginnings and endings, in part because the process of duplication circumvents the progressivist problem of teleology.

Jane Urquhart's poetic meditation on MacLeod's vision argues that for MacLeod the "biological and genetic" can never "be connected to that which is ephemeral or casual" (41). It is the "utter absence of the casual," she argues, "that gives MacLeod's stories their enormous power" (41). I would argue the precise opposite: it is the relentless weight of the casual or contingent that renders the lives of MacLeod's characters (and human existence generally) so compelling. The attempt to evade the inevitability of fate/contingency lends to human existence a simultaneously terrifying and reassuring aspect.

David Creelman's analysis of MacLeod's two short-story collections charts a movement "from the realist genre's emphasis on cause and effect," evident in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976), "in favour of the romance tradition with its emphasis on predetermined patterns" ("Hoping" 92), as in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* (1986). *No Great Mischief*, I would argue, notwithstanding the fact that it was published after these collections, stands somewhere in between; in fact, it takes this conundrum as its very subject: that is, the problem of whether human existence is determined by contingency or fate. What is it, precisely, that is inherited, and how powerful are individuals in altering or responding to this inheritance? Since we all inherit our ancestors, do we also inherit their hauntings (i.e., what they were haunted by), or is this simply a reading of a cause into an effect? Is there such a thing as a genetic unconscious, and if so to what extent is there potential for choice? Can we ever choose to be who we become, or is this always something thrust on us by the legacy of the dead?

These concerns were present in a number of MacLeod's short stories before the publication of *No Great Mischief*, particularly "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" and "Vision." In the former story, the *cù mòr glas* ("the big grey dog") exists as a marker of the ambiguity of fate, something that "It is hard to *not* know [that] you do know" (*Island* 319), even if it is only known at the level of what Christopher Bollas terms the "unthought known." If the *cù mòr glas* exists as a kind of curse or inheritance (and a repeating double) passed down through the family line, "something close to a genetic possibility" (*Island* 318), it is unclear whether its origins were accidental or predestined. The killing of the great-great-great-grandfather by his beloved *cù mòr glas* transforms the familiar family friend into the *unheimlich* "big grey dog of death" (317). As a result, an originary accident is transformed into destiny, and genealogical inheritance (origins) becomes inextricably linked with mortality.²

A similar pattern occurs in the short story "Vision," which contains a series of repetitions and doublings (including a number of twins) that create a distinctly uncanny effect. The narrator's ancestor is described as a "Son of Uncertainty" (*Island* 355), pointing to his illegitimacy, yet this becomes an inherited trait to the extent that subsequent descendants are described as "children of uncertainty" (367). The literal displacement, and contingency, of the ancestral line have been converted into an inherited psychic condition. However, the family genealogy is also characterized by its capacity for *Da Shealladh*, or "second sight," which suggests a double capacity: the ability to view the pure contingency of events/fate, and, in some instances, the ability to escape the traumatic eruption of contingency (e.g., the father's escape at Normandy). In the story, to have vision is to see the "accident" of the future without being able to change it, thereby highlighting destiny as inherently contingent. One would think that the point of having second sight would be to enable one to alter events, to arrange events a second time. But *Da Shealladh* is also translated as "two sights" (326), or seeing double. In this sense, reiteration merely reinforces the fixity of the accident as a formative event, irreversibly transforming accident into destiny (as in the story of Oedipus, an obvious intertext in the narrative). MacLeod takes these questions of accident and destiny as they relate to individual human existence and transposes them onto a historical-genealogical level, contemplating physical or genetic traits that are inherited (e.g.,

red hair, black hair, twins) alongside the experiences or stories that get passed down as seeming genetic traces so that both appear to be “in the blood.” In MacLeod’s fictions, what is “inherited” is the trauma of a primary ancestor whose experience is passed down the family line, though whether as an inherited predisposition or as a duplicating coincidence is unclear.³

By 1999, MacLeod had expanded his interest in these questions to the point that they became one of the central threads of *No Great Mischief*. In striving to make sense of his proliferating genealogy, the narrator seeks to order and taxonomize the past after the fact. As Said puts it in his discourse on beginnings, we seek to “apprehend an otherwise dispersed number of circumstances and to put them in some sort of telling order” (41). We seek in our genealogy “foreshadowings of [our]selves,” says Catherine to her brother in *No Great Mischief* (235). We scrutinize our ancestors for what they *were to become*. This is true of the grandfather’s imagined figuration of his absent father as resembling himself. In a willed reversal of chronology, the grandfather enacts a retrospective imposition of destiny. “Rather than saying the children look like their parents, he’s trying to make the parent look like him,” MacLeod states in his interview with Shelagh Rogers. “And I think this idea of understanding where you came from is a central one within the novel” (22). The more our culture becomes infused with technologies of duplication and counterfeiting (as the narrator keeps coming back to in his thoughts about orthodontics and plastic surgery), “the more confused we are about the unique, the original,” and “authenticity can no longer be rooted in singularity” (Schwartz 11, 17). Perhaps in response to this dilemma of duplication, our culture is becoming increasingly propelled by what I would call a reinvestment in “filiation.”⁴ This might explain the narrator’s confusion in the novel, not to mention MacLeod’s own obsession with the paradox of origins.

In the novel, the origins themselves proliferate through the simultaneously haunting and reassuring reappearance of “the little red-haired boy” descendant, the *gille beag ruadh* (18). The narrator, one of many Alexander MacDonalds, is himself a kind of clone — one of the many *gille beag ruadhs* that the family line has produced. On the other hand, for this particular branch of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, he is *the gille beag ruadh*, the one to which they all keep coming back. As a stand-in for the original progenitor, the *gille beag ruadh*’s appearance signals

what Bruce Fink identifies as “the return, not of the same, but of the different” (223), one in an endless line of substitutions in which it is not the familiar that returns but something that only appears familiar. It is a representation of “the object that never *was* . . . but which is retroactively constituted as having had to have been lost” (228). In the *gille beag ruadh*, subject and lost object become fused.

If our hero, Alexander MacDonald, is in a sense the original *gille beag ruadh* within the immediate family (his brothers, parents, and grandparents insist on attaching this epithet to him and to no other — not, for example, to his similarly red-haired cousin Alexander, nor to the American Alexander who is taken in by the brothers as a Vietnam draft dodger), he also represents the presenced past, the stand-in for that history which can never be delivered in palpable form. He is spoken of as *the gille beag ruadh*, but when his sister Catherine is travelling in Scotland years later some long-lost relations identify him as *a gille beag ruadh* (165). Replicas of him keep popping up (both in hair colour and name), effecting a kind of Derridean proliferation, a persistent distancing from a point of origin that undermines the drive for singularity and authenticity. The more you try to pinpoint an originary ancestor, the more he or she exceeds your grasp, the more you succeed only in conjuring up an “originary substitute” (*Of Grammatology* 243).⁵ The fear of being purely originary is matched only by the uncanny fear of being duplicated. The only purely originary descendant would be a true “come by chance,” a foundling or accident, one who is not part of the bloodline, what Said would call an “intransitive, ‘pure’ beginning” (*Beginnings* 50). Inevitably, the desire for origins meets the anxiety of originality.

At points in *No Great Mischief*, the reappearance of the *gille beag ruadh* has an uncanny effect, as when Catherine’s son is stopped on the street in Calgary and identified as being of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* (30). One is condemned never to be anonymous. As the narrator notes, “Such [red-haired] individuals would manifest themselves as strikingly unfamiliar to some, and as eerily familiar to others” (30). At other times, the replications become a source of bonding, as when the boys play their genealogical word games on out-of-town hockey trips — “What is your father’s father’s father’s father’s name?” (29) — invoking a limitless retreat into a seemingly immemorial past that fixes them in place and time. This effect is reproduced after the death of another red-haired

Alexander, the narrator's cousin, when the clan gathers for the funeral at the homestead in Cape Breton. When a police officer shows up to charge Calum with speeding and assault, he asks for someone named MacDonald, only to be greeted by an echo as the various members of the clan shout "Right here" or "Over here" (125). Later the casket is adorned with "a small stone chip from the original *Calum Ruadh* boulder" (126).

The constant encounters with familial descendants should offer the narrator some source of consolation for the vague sensation of inauthenticity and melancholy that dogs him. If one mourns "the irretrievable loss of the familiar" (Peter Marris qtd. in Riegel, *Writing* 6), one can counter this with a kind of compulsion for repetition to revive the familiar in acceptable, but haunting, guises. Indeed, in a straightforward psychic dynamic, the representation of loss is necessarily linked to the use of repetition, and one might even say that MacLeod enacts a kind of recurrence of recurrence in returning to this motif so often throughout his oeuvre. But what is it, after all, that the narrator seeks to reproduce? He can never say, since in effect he is haunted by a past that he never had, a nostalgia for what he has never known. In a sense, the *gille beag ruadh* feels himself erased, and the proliferation merely underscores his position in a sequence of duplicating origins. Calum's first words to his brother in the rooming house in Toronto are significant: "Ah, 'ille *bhig ruaidh*, you've come at last" (8). If his reappearance seems predestined, Alexander is nevertheless unsure of his role in the family genealogical line, in part because an unbridgeable rift was introduced between himself and his older brothers when he was a child.⁶ His destiny, *what he was to become*, was thwarted. Thus, though he continues to be the little red-haired boy, which inserts him definitively into the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, the identification is always unfulfilling, always a figment of what MacLeod has enigmatically called "this inherited life" (qtd. in Nicholson 94).

The novel, then, does not so much chart a nostalgic return to a recollected past associated with some kind of romantic legitimacy and origination. Instead, the loss of community and cultural unity that so many critics highlight as the central theme of MacLeod's writings⁷ is already a reality in this narrative in the sense that the narrator was never as fully a part of this past as he was meant to be. Alexander does not have the luxury of seeing in the past "the organic unity of home"

(Hiscock 53), since “home” for him has its origins in disruption. He has been deprived of the ability to *be* nostalgic. In effect, Alexander is possessed by the event of an enduring childhood trauma, for he is at the mercy of what Cathy Caruth calls “a history that [he] cannot entirely possess” (5). Caruth identifies the “haunting power” of trauma in its being based on an inherent absence or “forgetting” (4, 8), since the originating experience is essentially irretrievable. In such cases, “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4). In a wholly unreconcilable way, Alexander’s identity is (and always has been) premised on his disjunction from a world that nevertheless steadfastly seems to claim him.⁸

Yet, even after Alexander states that he can say nothing for certain of his originary red-haired ancestor, Calum states that he, Alex, is “still the *gille beag ruadh*” (18). While his red hair may render him generic within the clan, it also confers on him an identity and security. Derrida has written about the ways that family names are “always related to death” in that “the one who gives . . . or bears the name will be absent from it” (*Work* 13). The same might be argued for the *gille beag ruadh*, which, as Derrida notes of names, declares the unique and the “disappearance of the unique” at the same time (34). In school, when asked by the teacher to state his name, the boy can only recite what he has been told: “I remember thinking of it [*gille beag ruadh*] as my name and responding to it rather than to ‘Alexander,’ which is what is on my birth certificate. And even on the first day of primary school . . . I failed to respond when my true name was called from the roll” (18). The sense of alienation conferred by the name and the reality (the red hair) is repeated further in the indeterminacy of red hair as a signifier of identifiable genealogical origins. The old man whom Catherine speaks to in the house on the beach in Scotland tells her that Bonnie Prince Charlie “‘had red hair. . . . And was said to be very fond of girls. Some of us,’ he whispered, ‘may be descendants of the prince’” (162-63). Even more unsettling is the later revelation that “James Wolfe had red hair” (195).

If the narrator’s identity is tenuous from early on, making him always “on the lookout for the foreign sound [of his own name] in the future” (19), his identity is wrenched from its moorings at the age of three when his parents and brother drown. It is this event that crystallizes his fixation on the paradoxical question of the contingency of the past, both

as predetermined and as accidental: “This is the story of how my sister and I, as three-year-old children, planned ‘to spend the night’ with our grandparents and remained instead for sixteen years until we left to go to university. This is a story of lives which turned out differently than was intended” (57). If a different life is what was intended, then this twist of fate becomes an origin that is not one. Yet it is quickly converted into destiny by the people who assess it immediately following the drowning: “[They] cast about for reasons. Perhaps since my parents had taken the job on the island they had not gone to church as often as they should have? Perhaps they had engaged in pre-marital sex . . .? Others told stories of forerunners . . . and of how such harbingers could now be seen as prophecies fulfilled” (54). Unofficially, the accident is deemed an “act of God” (54), thereby highlighting both possibilities: determinism and accident. Yet the narrator and his brother Calum remain tormented by the uncertain status of the event, and the narrative keeps circling back to it as a moment of “originary loss.” “If you had been with them,” the narrator says to his brother, “you would have gone down too,” to which his brother replies, “If I had been with them I might have saved them” (209). Both are haunted by the accidental nature of the event while also secretly suspecting that it was, indeed, *what was meant to be*. Grandpa’s near death on the ice some years earlier functions as a premonition of this event as well as an after-the-fact means of meditating on the paradox of fate: “Grandpa could have been lost as well and then things would have been quite a bit different — especially for you, *’ille bhig ruaidh*” (182). The narrator and his brother are plagued by the prospect of *what might not have been*, tormented by the irresolvability of contingency and destiny. If their grandparents had moved to San Francisco, Calum ponders, “things would be much different for us” (208). If the parents had died sooner, Alexander and his sister “might never have been born” (216). “If your parents knew they were going to drown,” Grandpa admonishes the brothers, “do you think they would have started across?” (251).

Alexander is also plagued by the apparent coincidence of his cousin Alexander’s death in the mine shaft on the very day that Alexander is awarded his university diploma: “there was a vague uneasiness associated with the circumstance and the timing of it all. . . . I realized that Alexander MacDonald had partially paid for the car which ferried me home from my splendid graduation” (172-73). To atone for the guilt

of coincidence and fate, the narrator goes to work in the mines with his brothers, offering himself as a substitute for his cousin, another *gille beag ruadh*, the red-haired Alexander MacDonald. It is also the shiftiness of fate that infuses his relationship with his brother Calum in the present, since the “accident” that results in Calum’s prison sentence is set into motion by the narrator’s commitment to be true to his blood and help his American double: another red-haired Alexander MacDonald. Alexander, in retrospect, must struggle with his own complicity in Calum’s fate. Grandma, also in retrospect, recalls having a premonition of Calum’s future when she sees him become fascinated by his reflection in a bottle of beer (190), yet the narrator also knows that it is the contingency of fate that is responsible: the accident that led to him and his sister being raised in relative security and affluence by their grandparents, while the three older brothers were left to their own devices, orphaned in the old *clann Chalum Ruaidh* homestead.

Alexander MacDonald, as an adult, is, like his ancestor Calum Ruadh, mourning “for his history” (25), but is that history a past that has been left behind or a future that was to have become what it has not? This uncertainty complicates the notion of nostalgia as it has been applied to MacLeod’s works, for what we see here is not a longing to return to a home of the past but a longing to *arrive at* a past and future that was never allowed to be. On the one hand, he is mourning the loss of his parents and brother to the sea many years before, the definitive moment when destiny seemed to veer off course. Indeed, in the present tense of the novel’s framing narrative, Alexander is mourning a complex of things: his parents’ and grandparents’ deaths, his brother Calum’s personal tragedy and physical decline, and the loss of a past time and place. But he is also mourning an impossible history, a past that nevertheless persists in haunting him through its tantalizing absence as a concrete individual memory. Its force, in other words, arises precisely “in the collapse of its understanding” (Caruth 7). This is not to say that Alexander has no memories of the past but that the “memories” that plague him most are of things that never came to pass and that can therefore never be fully articulated. In effect, Alexander was denied the ability to symbolize the nature of his loss since he cannot clearly state what it is that has been lost. He cannot even fix on the loss of his parents, since he does not clearly remember them, being only three years old at the time of the accident. In this sense, he is plagued by memories

whose very status as “memories” is unclear. As Marlene Goldman writes with reference to Japanese Canadian historical narratives, “How can one begin to mourn, if one cannot name what has been lost?” (368). This is precisely Alexander’s dilemma. The curse of the “what if” refuses to let him be.

Stephen Greenblatt has written of the primary human trauma as “the fading of remembrance” (218), yet perhaps it is more accurate to speak of the incommensurability of remembrance *as* a memory. In the novel, the narrator and his brother are plagued by both the fading of remembrance and its steadfast refusal to fade. Like Grandma’s image of the nail in the shoe (one can get used to anything but a nail in one’s shoe), the traces of the past refuse to let them go. This is emblemized in Grandma’s Alzheimer’s-like condition toward the end of the book, a condition marked not by a loss of memory but by “the past in the present tense” (266). Grandma, like the narrator, is being stalked by remembrance. Tormenting him with its unavailability, the past taunts the narrator with simultaneous views of what *was* and what *might not have been*. As he says at the outset, “Sometimes it is hard to choose or not to choose those things which bother us at the most inappropriate of times” (2). He cannot not remember. The irony, however, is that Grandma no longer recognizes the narrator as the *gille beag ruadh* (272), which is apt given that he feels himself a long way from the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* at this point in his life, so in a sense she is accurately recognizing him for what he is not. However, it also highlights the epithet as one in a multitude of genealogical substitutions. “‘Oh, the *gille beag ruadh*,’ she says: ‘The *gille beag ruadh* is thousands of miles from here. Yet I would know him if I met him anywhere in this whole wide world’” (272). Of course, this is precisely what members of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* do repeatedly — they keep stumbling upon, and embracing, members of the MacDonald clan in the most unlikely of places and projecting themselves into these individuals. Invoking a kind of Lacanian misrecognition by presuming sameness in difference, the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* genealogy points to the inheritance of an integral ambivalence about origins, an inherited experience of unsettlement that is matched by an insistence on pursuing its effect. Like their dogs, the people are condemned to try too hard and care too much.

The role of the *gille beag ruadh* is therefore twofold. As a kind of ordinary marker, it always embeds within it a subsidiary trauma, a deferral

that highlights the inherent undecidability of genealogical destiny itself. It evokes the insatiability of desire. To use Merleau-Ponty's words, it captures the sense that "Whether it is mythical or utopian, there is a place where everything that is or will be is preparing, at the same time, to be spoken" (qtd. in Said, *Beginnings* 73). This "place" where the *what was to become* lies in gestation is also that which constitutes the inarticulable loss that persists in shadowing the narrator.

It is significant, as well, that along with red hair, twins are a genetic trace passed down through the family. The narrator, Alexander, is himself twinned with his black-haired sister Catherine (29). If the book is concerned with "our distinctness as individuals in a society of duplicates" (Schwartz 19), it is also concerned with our solitariness as individuals in the world of the present and hence courts the consolation that genealogy can afford. According to Hillel Schwartz, the persistence of twins in cultural narratives is due to the fact that a twin "makes of our selves our own kin" (21). In the novel, it is fraternal not identical twins that are inherited (29), enabling a straddling of the tenuous divide between sameness and difference: almost the same but not quite. The twins, Alexander and Catherine (duplicates of their grandparents' names), are linked by a shared history since they were the ones separated from their older siblings following the drowning.

In later years, it is with Catherine that the narrator shares his most intimate discussions about origins and ancestry, for she, too, appears to be on a similar quest. Catherine, as well, is obsessed with the "what if?" of their inevitable yet haphazard destiny, while she is also concerned with the possibility of a genetic inheritance of the past. She aligns herself with their maternal grandfather, who "felt that if he couldn't understand his immediate past, he would try to understand his distant past" (234). "Sometimes I think of *clann Chalum Ruaidh*," she tells Alexander. "All of those people with their black and red hair. Like you and me. All of them intertwined. . . . I suppose this is the way adopted children feel when they wish to seek out their biological parents. They are perhaps looking for foreshadowings of themselves. Forerunners" (234-35). Yet, like the repeating red-haired boy, Catherine offers Alexander little consolation. Schwartz writes that twins "appear to tell us most of what we want to know about being uniquely human and . . . more than we want to know about feeling alone" (21). Because Alexander does not associate Catherine with the negative effects of a haphazard contingency, he is less

concerned with her fate. Touched by her own melancholy, she is in some ways too much a duplicate of him. It is the source of the melancholy that he is seeking, and it is the prematurely aging Calum, he suspects, who may hold the answers.

If repetition is a means of avoiding the irreducible “abyss between the self and the permanently lost Thing” (Woodland 128), genealogical repetition might offer some way of straddling this gulf. Malcolm Woodland expresses this through his assessment of the divergent teleologies that are invoked in different accounts of mourning and repetition: a teleology of overcoming, and a teleology of “bewitchment” or a courting of loss (130), which approximates the condition of melancholia. If the *gille beag ruadh* points to “an always-receding horizon, a textual crux that both elicits and repels interpretation” (131), it is also the case that the novel is ambivalent with respect to this lack of closure. Does the use of repetition (not only of genealogical characteristics such as red hair, black hair, twins, and six siblings but also of narrative elements such as songs, stories, names, images, phrases, and animals) suggest an “undesirable fixation on a past trauma” (132) or a fictive recuperation of absent origins? Is the “striving for ‘retrieval’” an end in itself (132)? And does the work, finally, offer a view of where these two teleologies meet (137), thereby mediating, through the courting of genealogy, an approach to the unspeakable fact of human contingency? Is “this inherited life” a blessing or a curse?

Said speaks of our persistent obsession with origins as “a genetic optimism, that continuity is possible *as intended by* the . . . beginning” (48). Yet in MacLeod’s works, the trajectory from fixed inheritance to a sense of individual identity is ambiguous. Is the little red-haired boy seeking a way of turning chance into destiny, or is it the horror of an apparently relentless destiny that pulls him up short? Which is more terrifying, in other words, to think that existence is all accident, or to think that it is predetermined? And does genealogy highlight chance or destiny, or both at once: the *what might not have been*? Slavoj Žižek writes of the retroactive fictionalization that occurs in narratives whose temporal linear progression is disrupted in some way. The ability to look at the past from the perspective of the present means that one knows the ending in advance, which invites one to deny the accidental nature of events and impose a teleology. It lures one into seeing things as predestined (seeing coincidence or destiny where there may not be any),

encouraging a defiance of contingency. It enables a turning of chance into destiny, which is both reassuring and unsettling at the same time, since it provokes an awareness of the inescapable within the contingent, “the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of ‘chance’” (Freud, “Uncanny” 359-60). On the other hand, the retrospective eruption of a conclusive catastrophe renders palpable the contingency of events, the knowledge that an already known fate becomes sealed by an arbitrary event, which leads one to ask, “Will the unavoidable really happen?” (Žižek 70). Genealogy activates both sequences: on the one hand, the ending retroactively confers a sense of teleology and inevitability; on the other, it highlights pure accident. The uncanny effect is to render one’s genealogical past both familiar and foreign.

In the Canadian “settler” context, this paradox of origins is highlighted in what appears to be an increasingly urgent drive for genealogy in contemporary Canadian personal and cultural narratives.⁹ Stephen Turner defines what he calls the “settler unconscious” as an “accumulated experience of unsettlement” (22), an “inherited” legacy of inarticulate melancholy that informs the constitution of national identity and that therefore applies to multiple groups within the national constituency, not just to the descendants of settlers. This dilemma is perhaps especially characteristic of settler-invader cultures that place their “originary” roots in a moment of cultural and symbolic orphaning. If the need to establish origins *here* has been crucial for many non-Aboriginal Canadians (as Margaret Laurence’s Morag Gunn so clearly learned on her journey to the Scottish Highlands), this quest is always compromised. This is so because the very notion of settlement is premised on a denial of Aboriginal priority. As Tony Tremblay puts it, it is the settler narrative “that insists on *beginning*, . . . [and] that problematizes the start, and, once problematized, resolves inevitably to begin in nothingness, privileging the absence it can name to the presence it cannot” (161). But if one’s ancestry — even one’s orphaning — appears to have been preordained or necessary (*what was to become*), where is MacLeod’s novel positioned in this settler trajectory? In other words, the desire for fixable origins may also be compromised because the retrospective gaze always grapples with the problem of destiny. Is history foreordained or contingent, and how does this affect one’s reading of colonial history? Was it destiny or accident?

Laura Moss describes MacLeod's novel in terms of "an assertion of the continuity of 'settler' history" (6). It is this, surely. But what is this urge for settler history providing? An experience of unsettlement, in the sense of the settlers' inadequate occupation of a land that is haunted by a kind of return of the repressed past? Or is it that the settler history provides a sense of legitimating, albeit precarious, origins? If settler history is always premised on a simultaneous remembering and forgetting of history/genealogy, it is also necessarily marked by a kind of anxiety of absent influence and origins. Postcolonial theorists have embraced the inherent paradox of the unhomely to highlight the uncanny nature of colonial experience. Homi Bhabha describes the colonial presence as "split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (107). Likewise, Alan Lawson speaks of the ways settler-invader narratives operate as "counterfeittings of both emergence and origination" (158). MacLeod's novel takes this problematic as its focus, playing on a series of interrelated paradoxes in the quest for a genealogy of settler, national, and personal contingency. "Ah, 'ille bhig ruaidh, you've come at last" (8).

NOTES

¹ Ironically, "The Chance" is provided by the "come by chance" since the grandfather arranges the new job for Grandpa.

² In a sense, one might see this as a prototheme of MacLeod's much earlier story "The Boat," to the extent that the "accident" of the father's death, and the son's inheritance of his father's temperament, threaten, in the future, to become inherited patterns in turn linked to a fear of "be[ing] alone with death" (*Island* 1). In "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun," the narrator identifies the family's inheritance as "our own peculiar mortality" (320). In both stories, contingency (in the sense of both accident and cause and effect) and fate are inextricably entwined, just as inheritance/origins are necessarily caught up with a concept of descent/mortality. To see one's origins in a genetic family line is also to see oneself as necessarily mortal and, horrifically, replaceable.

³ This is echoed in Alexander's inheritance of the original Calum Ruadh's "crying for his history" in *No Great Mischief* (25). Both are plagued by a history that veered off course.

⁴ According to Said in his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, the modern period has been marked by "the transition from a failed idea or possibility of filiation to a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship, which I have been calling affiliation" (19). "The loss of the subject," he continues, "is in various ways the loss as well of the procreative, generational urge authorizing filiative relationships" (20).

⁵ This is certainly the case in "Vision," where there is no single originary ancestor, and, indeed, the two warring families appear to be related in devolving their ancestry from the Hebridean island of Canna and in both having ancestral tales of *Da Shealladh* ("second sight").

⁶ A similar rift in genealogical memory occurs in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun." When the great-great-great-grandfather is killed by the *cù mòr glas*, "He was no longer there for his own child of the spring who, in turn, became my great-great-grandfather, and he was perhaps too much there in the memory of his older sons who saw him fall" (*Island* 317).

⁷ See, for example, articles by Davidson; Hiscock; Nicholson; and Riegel. Creelman's assessment of MacLeod's oeuvre is distinct in that Creelman convincingly identifies a shift from MacLeod's early writings, which he suggests indicate a rejection of nostalgia in their "refusal to idealize the past" ("Hoping" 84), and the later works, in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, which demonstrate an increasingly nostalgic vision. See also Creelman's chapter on MacLeod in *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction*. One might say that in *No Great Mischief* loss is already embedded in the past, with Alexander's personal history of disruption being analogous to the ruptures and dislocations initiated by the processes of modernization.

⁸ In this I would disagree with Creelman's contention that, "For the characters in *No Great Mischief*, a sense of personal identity can be attained only as the individuals connect themselves to the historically anchored, collectively constituted community" (96-97). For Alexander, it is the anxiety that arises from this desire, precisely because it is impossible, that persists in haunting him.

⁹ See my article "(Dis)inheriting the Nation: Contemporary Canadian Memoirs and the Anxiety of Origins."

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Atwood, Margaret. *In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817." *The Location of Culture*. By Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1994. 102-22.
- Bollas, Christopher. *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia UP, 1987.
- Caruth, Cathy. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
- Creelman, David. "'Hoping to Strike Some Sort of Solidity': The Shifting Fictions of Alistair MacLeod." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 24.2 (1999): 79-99.
- . *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "As Birds Bring Forth the Story: The Elusive Art of Alistair MacLeod." *Canadian Literature* 119 (1988): 32-42.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . *The Work of Mourning*. Ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.

- Fink, Bruce. "The Real Cause of Repetition." *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus. New York: State U of New York P, 1995. 223-29.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *Art and Literature*. Ed. Albert Dickson. Trans. James Strachey. Vol. 14 of *The Pelican Freud Library*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. 339-76.
- Goldman, Marlene. "A Dangerous Circuit: Loss and the Boundaries of Racialized Subjectivity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.2 (2002): 362-88.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Guilford, Irene, ed. *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Toronto: Guernica, 2001.
- Hiscock, Andrew. "'This Inherited Life': Alistair MacLeod and the Ends of History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (2000): 51-70.
- Lawson, Alan. "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Settler' Subject." *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*. Ed. Cynthia Sugars. Peterborough: Broadview, 2004. 151-64.
- MacLeod, Alistair. "An Interview with Alistair MacLeod." With Shelagh Rogers. Guilford 11-35.
- . *Island: The Collected Stories*. Toronto: McClelland, 2000.
- . *No Great Mischief*. Toronto: McClelland, 1999.
- . "A Writer's Life: Geography as Inspiration." Munro Beattie Lecture. Carleton U, Ottawa. 30 Jan. 2004.
- Moodie, Susanna. *Roughing It in the Bush; Or, Life in Canada*. Ed. Elizabeth Thompson. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1997.
- Moss, Laura. "Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question." *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Moss. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003. 1-23.
- Nicholson, Colin. "Signatures of Time: Alistair MacLeod and His Short Stories." *Canadian Literature* 107 (1985): 90-101.
- Riegel, Christian. "Elegy and Mourning in Alistair MacLeod's 'The Boat.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 35.3 (1998): 233-40.
- . *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2003.
- Said, Edward. *Beginnings*. New York: Columbia UP, 1975.
- . *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Schwartz, Hillel. *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*. New York: Zone, 1996.
- Sugars, Cynthia. "(Dis)inheriting the Nation: Contemporary Canadian Memoirs and the Anxiety of Origins." *Moveable Margins: The Shifting Spaces of Canadian Literature*. Toronto: TSAR, 2005. 177-202.
- Tremblay, Tony. "Piracy, Penance, and Other Penal Codes: A Morphology of Postcolonial Revision in Three Recent Texts by Rudy Wiebe, John Steffler, and Joan Clark." *English Studies in Canada* 23.2 (1997): 159-73.
- Turner, Stephen. "Settlement as Forgetting." *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*. Ed. Klaus Veumann et al. Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 1999. 20-38.
- Urquhart, Jane. "The Vision of Alistair MacLeod." Guilford 36-42.
- Woodland, Malcolm. "'Pursuit of Unsayables': Repetition in Kristeva's *Black Sun* and Strand's 'Two de Chiricos.'" *Mosaic* 37.3 (2004): 121-38.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991.