The Place of Memory and the Memory of Place in Alistair MacLeod’s Short Story Cycle
As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories

Introduction
The importance of memory and place in Alistair MacLeod’s works has already been discussed by several critics. The aim of this paper is to read As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories (1986) as a short story cycle, that is, in the light of genre theory, in order to propose a new way in which the question of place and memory can be studied. This reading takes into account certain formal aspects of MacLeod’s work which function as a vehicle for accommodating and enhancing an important thematic concern in the cycle. This preoccupation has to do with the tensions that emerge from a contemporary sense of double belonging: a sense that relates at once to a particular regional world and a kind of global(ized) identity that still awaits to be defined. Both the place of memory and the memory of place play a fundamental role in the relations established between the poles of the above-mentioned tensions.

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the John F. Kennedy Institute (Free University, Berlin) for a grant with which I carried out research for this paper.
2 For analyses of place in its relation with regionalism, see Berces, Diemert, and Stevens. Many scholars have discussed the importance of memory in MacLeod’s work, but it is especially relevant in the essays of Gittings and Hiscock (memory and history), Kruk (memory and exile), and Nicholson (memory and cross-cultural and historical connections).
3 In most critical studies of short story cycles, critics have tried to explain the structure of the genre in relation to the gender (Martín Lucas), ethnicity (Davis and Nagel), and nationality (Kennedy 1995, Lundén, Lynch, and Struthers) of the writers who use it. The arguments of the latter support that the short story cycle is a metaphor of a national identity composed of different regional identities. Struthers and Lynch posit the “Canadianness” of the genre, whereas Kennedy and Lundén defend its “Americanness”. The motto defining the assumptions behind each of the positions is different, however: Lynch claims that “the [Canadian] short story cycle most aptly mirrors in its form the distinctive, yet closely linked,
As Birds Bring Forth the Sun as a Short Story Cycle

As theorists of the short story cycle have posited, in this genre, the stories are, at the same time, individual entities and parts of a larger whole whose meaning results from the way in which readers make those entities interact with each other. In order to give coherence to the whole, writers employ one or various connective devices, such as a consistency of protagonist, narrative voice, setting, or recurrent themes or motifs, rather than the linear temporal-spatial structure characteristic of the traditional novel. Disruption and discontinuity are also present in the blank spaces between stories, and/or in the use of different narrators, characters, settings, etc. In the case of *Birds* the most important elements of connection and coherence are the place where the action occurs, and the narrative voice – a voice in the form of memory – that relates those events. Almost all of the scenes of the cycle take place in the rural world of Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia), which is remembered by different – yet similar – narrators. Memory is, for them, the catalyst both of personal knowledge, of the expression of regional and cultural memory, and of a universal knowledge that relates to the global world.

Among the main concerns of the narrators there are two important questions that the structure of the book, as it has been anticipated, reflects. These are:

1. How to assimilate or adapt to the changes brought about by economic and cultural globalization without losing one’s own regional sense of place (roots, traditions, culture).

regions of Canada: a kind of geo-political fictional linkage of bonds and gaps. *A mari usque ad mare*, as opposed to the continuous totalising story written *E pluribus unum*” (Lynch, 102). *E pluribus unum* is precisely the motto that Kennedy and Lundén use to define the nature of the short story cycle in the United States: “Perhaps the very determination to build a unified republic out of diverse states, regions, and population groups – to achieve the unity expressed by the motto *e pluribus unum* – helps to account for this continuum passion for sequences” (Kennedy 1995, viii). For Lundén’s development of his argument see the fifth chapter of his book. The idea that I am supporting in this paper is somewhat different: more than seeing the genre as a metaphor for national identity, I think that the short story cycle problematizes regional identity in relation to other regional or national identities.

4 One of the earliest critics of the short story cycle is Forrest Ingram, whose definition of the genre, following a new-critical practice, privileges elements of coherence over features of the cycle which create disruption. Later theorists have paid attention to both the coherent and the fragmentary in the genre, especially Lundén and Kennedy.
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2. How to allow access to personal and collective identity, such as regional identity, to others.

In the act of writing, the actual existence of a book like MacLeod’s can be interpreted as an attempt to balance both issues, and thus can be read as a potential solution. By writing regional stories for an international audience, MacLeod demands our consideration of the regional in relation to the global. In the first story of the cycle, the narrator ponders a statement he reads in a literature textbook: “the private experience, if articulated with skill, may communicate an appeal that is universal beyond the limitations of time or landscape” (MacLeod, 1). Skeptical of its validity, he – like the other narrators – will test it nonetheless. Throughout the cycle, memory is activated by the narrators by means of phrases like “I am thinking of this now” (13, 125), “I am writing this […]” (32), or “I am speaking here of a time […]” (50). Because first person narrators create such a powerful presence, readers almost immediately see through their eyes and thereby are allowed to share their memories.

In the remainder of this paper I will concentrate on three of the seven stories of Birds: “The Closing Down of Summer” (the opening story), “The Tuning of Perfection” (the fifth story) and “Vision” (the concluding story) in order to elucidate the implications of genre theory for a study of MacLeod’s book as a cycle in which the tensions between the particular and the global are sustained through memory and its constant return to place. In “The Closing Down of Summer” the whole action paradoxically consists of the stillness of a group of miners who lie on the beaches of Cameron’s Point5, waiting for the weather to change. This is a place forgotten by the Government, where no public roads exist, and therefore is accessed only by those who know it well. The “August gale” will signal that the summer is over and the men will then leave the island for distant and unknown landscapes of South Africa. The story is a meditation on the part of MacKinnon, the first-person narrator, whose memories of the past and into the future already set up the readers’ minds in the way a short story cycle works. MacKinnon remembers the hard labor history of previous generations and the losses involved in it, as well as reflects on the present changing world, and anticipates, in the

5 Cameron’s Point is not a real place in Nova Scotia, but interestingly, it is the name of a burial mound north of Rice Lake, near Peterborough, Ontario, dated to AD 100. For those who are familiar with the region, this detail intensifies the thematic connections with death that pervade the story.
manner of known information, the comfortable life of the generations that will succeed him.

For MacKinnon, identity is a question of sharing the knowledge of a certain kind of work, and of the history and stories one has learned. Because MacKinnon’s children will be exposed to very different experiences, his enactment of memory, performed in the present tense and in the voice of a man who speaks for a whole group, turns out to be a permanent reminder of that which our regional identity consists of. But such an understanding of identity, as the story shows, is intimately related with the place where one has grown up.

The rural world of Cape Breton is presented at the beginning of the story both in its beauty and its harshness. According to Gerald Lynch, opening stories, in the case of cycles unified by place, “usually describe the setting of the ensuing stories in a way that presents place as one of the cycle’s major dramatis personae. […] These opening stories also introduce into the contained, the framed, community a disruptive element” (Lynch, 25). “The Closing” presents a regional setting which, as a character, has its own development and ‘personality’. The “disruptive element” introduced in this community of people is to be found soon in the antagonistic consequences that extreme weather conditions bear for natural life, on which regional life depends, and for those who temporarily enjoy their holidays on the island: “The heat has been bad for fish and wells and the growth of green but for those who choose to lie on the beaches of the summer sun the weather has been ideal” (MacLeod, 7). Whereas local economy, reliant on natural resources and basic structures of regional product exchange, suffers from drastic climatic changes, another kind of economy, one based on national and international tourism, manifests itself as a more vibrant and powerful force. Symbols of regional identity like the moonshine the miners exchange with the local fishermen, the flowers they will pick up to remind them of the

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6 See MacLeod, 22; Cyclicality is also suggested structurally by juxtaposing stories whose action is developed in alternating seasons. The paradox of placing death as a theme in the first story of the cycle announces, perhaps, that this idea of death is not final but regenerative. As the narrator reflects, when the time arrives for leaving the region: “Perhaps this is the end and the beginning?” (MacLeod, 27).

7 The idea of setting as one of the “characters” of the cycle is mentioned by Kennedy in his theoretical essay on the short story cycle (Kennedy 1988, 20).
place they are leaving, the Gaelic songs they will sing, “bubbl[ing] up somehow within [them]” (MacLeod, 19) – all of these are part of a regional culture untranslatable to the language of the tourists. Tourists get a different – if not distorted – idea about what constitutes regional identity. As cultural symbols they will merely identify Gaelic songs artificially sung in summer festivals organized by local or federal authorities. This communication gap is emphasized by a constant use of the pronoun “we” throughout the story. Aware of this gap between himself and the rest of the world, the narrator feels compelled to share the personal experience (which is also the collective experience of most of the male inhabitants of Cape Breton Island) with others.

The contrast between leisurely travel and the necessary displacement of people in search of job opportunities finds resonances in other kinds of ambivalence throughout the cycle. The ambivalence of meaning that regional identity has for the miners and for the tourists is introduced in the opening story to be taken up again later in the cycle, especially in “The Tuning of Perfection”. This story dramatizes such ambivalence as it is confronted by the protagonist Archibald, who is a descendant of an old Gaelic family from the Isle of Skye. Recalling the marginality of the families of the first story, he also lives in a place forgotten by the Government. His life is sustained by personal hard work and memories of song and story transmitted from generation to generation. Archibald is aware that a new kind of economy is taking over the old one. Once, he is asked to sell his mare in order to keep her constantly pregnant on a farm near Montreal and produce birth control pills from her “water” (MacLeod, 101). In the face of a brutal destiny for his animal and her colts, which will be slaughtered upon birth, “he felt somehow betrayed by forces he could not control” (MacLeod, 101). So he tries to keep control on his life and personal economy by using his own resources for production.

More important in regard to the new ways of life and Archibald’s dealing with them is the offer he gets from a young producer of a summer “Celtic Revival” festival. A television show will broadcast the event internationally. The producer makes suggestions for shortening the songs and insists that the singers dress elegantly because, as he says, “I really don’t understand your language so we’re here mainly to look for effect” (MacLeod, 107). He constructs, in short, another idea of regional identity which does not correspond with the way such identity is understood by local people like Archibald. What this story foregrounds is the way in which regional cultural
signifiers are superficially exploited and little understood when they are marketed for global consumption. Archibald contests the use of tourism as a strategy for constructing identity. He refuses to take part in this form of globalized culture because it lacks the true social, historical circumstances and feelings that once inspired the Celtic poems and lyrics. However, another character in the story, Carver, takes advantage of the situation and gives in to the producer’s desires. The fact that he does not even speak Gaelic seems to matter little to him when the compensation is an interesting sum of money. Carver’s sense of morals may appear weak to Archibald at this point, but the ending of the story allows for another interpretation. It appears that Carver and his men are complicit with a globalized idea of regional or cultural identity, superficial as it is, only because it will allow them to set up their small businesses in the region; because with the financial gains brought about by participation in the summer festival they will buy a boat engine and a truck and, therefore, continue a kind of regional life and economy which would otherwise disappear.

“The Tuning of Perfection” functions as a central story, which exposes the tensions between regional identity, personal, and collective history and the process of internationalization of regional cultures. As Archibald and Carver’s final look on things shows us, this tension is a question of “tuning,” of adjusting the old to the new and the new to the old. Unlike MacKinnon, the protagonist of the first story, who remains in the miners’ enclosed world of past traditions, it seems that Archibald, who nonetheless never abandons his personal morals, comes to understand and respect the way in which others deal with new ways of life. Carver’s final words, “Look, Archibald […] We know. We know. We really know [original emphasis]” (MacLeod, 117), make Archibald sympathize, after all, with people like Carver, a man who does not represent the “perfect” morals, but knows how to “tune” them according to the circumstances.

The last story of the cycle is “Vision,” a story which, unlike the others, was not published independently, but written for the publication of the cycle. In this sense, one might expect that MacLeod attempted to have the story function as a concluding story, bringing together thematic and formal aspects developed in the cycle. According to Gerald Lynch, the concluding, or “return story” “depicts provisional possibilities respecting the recuperation of community for its displaced former and current inhabitants and the tentative presence of a sense of self and identity that is intimately connected to place as home” (Lynch, 31).
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In a way, “Vision” provides such “provisional possibilities”. In the story, Canna and Kintail are both places of Cape Breton Island. But the former seems to be much farther from the latter than real distance dictates. Canna is the mythical place of old Scott traditions, beliefs, and ways of life, whereas Kintail, whose economy has been affected by international markets like the New England Market, stands for the world of practicality. The inhabitants of Canna are surely displaced in the sense that their history is that of generations which came from Scottish lands from where they had been banished; the displacement of the current inhabitants of Kintail may have to do with other, more recent historical aspects: having fought in two world wars, witnessing the impoverishment of the region’s economy, trying to meet the needs of a new one. So, again, we find the adjustment that “The Tuning of Perfection” dramatized so well. The history of many generations is brought together in “Vision” in a manner that all of the people belonging to those different generations share the same place, Cape Breton Island, as home. In this concluding story the sense of self cannot be conceived if it is not through an understanding of “place as home”.

Formally, “Vision” functions as a homey space where all the participants in the literary act of communication – readers included – are accommodated. The story is especially interesting for the narrator’s metafictional comments on the construction, sharing, and keeping of stories. If we go back to the beginning of Birds, towards the end of the first story, the traces of the miners’ scarred bodies disappear from the beach sand with the waves, but as we realize in the last story of the cycle, the memory of them has remained with the reader, as we listen to the narrator’s reflections: “the future scar [emphasis K.SS] will be forever on the outside while the memory will remain forever deep within” (MacLeod, 128). “Vision” indeed opens with the narrator’s reflection on story-making and memory:

I don’t remember when I first heard the story, but I remember the first time that I heard it and remembered it. By that I mean the first time it made an impression on me and more or less became mine [original emphasis]; sort of went into me the way such things do, went into me in such a way that I knew it would not leave again but would remain there forever (MacLeod, 128).

By the emphasis on the possessive “mine” readers are reminded of the divisions established in the first story between “We” and “Others.” If the narrator writes the story as an attempt at communication and as an act of
love, here we are being invited to make the stories of the cycle ours by remembering them.

As if to bring the whole cycle – and not only “Vision” – to a close, the narrator summarizes: “This has been the telling of a story about a story but like most stories it has spun off into others and relied on others and perhaps no story ever really stands alone” (MacLeod, 166). The narrator is of course aligning himself with other former and absent narrators, so that his own authority is downplayed. But another of the effects achieved by such an address is that readers are led to think of the book as a space where collective memories of place come together and, therefore, as a literary form in which the particular and the global are not exclusive of but support each other.

**The place of memory and the memory of place in the construction of regional and global identity**

The title of MacLeod’s collection – with its allusion to “Other Stories” – discourages the critic from perceiving the book as a set of related stories, as a cycle with structural principles of order and coherence, combined with elements of disruption and discontinuity. But to read it as such, as I have suggested, helps us discover the importance that the tension between the particular and the universal, the regional and the global, bears for MacLeod. In the same way as Archibald pays careful attention not only to the words, but also to the tone, the speed, and the cadences of his singing, MacLeod directs our attention to the formal aspects of his book. The architecture of *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, thus, emphasizes the tensions between the local and the global, between regions and a globalized world. What E. A. Poe saw as one of the disadvantages of the novel (Poe, 61) – that readers are forced to interrupt their reading and therefore the book’s effect of unity vanishes – proves enriching in the reading of short story cycles. According to Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, in the short story cycle (to which they refer as “composite novel”), the human need to make connections by seeking order “is frustrated by a collection of unrelated stories because a reader must constantly begin over again, starting anew with each story, and literally becomes exhausted in the process” (Dunn et al., 5). However, I would argue that readers “exit” each story (a memorized place) to interfere with our own worlds, therefore gaining a broader perspective, and later we come back to the particular again. Each story recreates the regional world of people with their own economy, mores, traditions, and beliefs. But when we enter a new story we engage it with an awareness of the processes of globalization in which we have been immersed and the changes brought about by them. The
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short story cycle is a genre of multiple new beginnings in which the practice of memory allows us to constantly reassess our relation with place, with our identity as it is inscribed regionally and in the wider context of globalization. Through memory and place, Alistair MacLeod explores the different positionalities conforming our identity, in our particular circumstances and as they are socially and culturally shared. In this way, genre theory, far from being a static system of classification, becomes a heuristic approach for examining the dynamic relations between writers, texts, and readers.

Works Cited


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