

EXISTENTIAL MARITIMER: ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S *THE LOST SALT GIFT OF BLOOD*

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Set in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, Alistair MacLeod's short stories in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* are conspicuously regional and rural, although the influence of modern urban life appears occasionally and critically, thus offering a comparative estimate of how much and in what direction times are changing.¹ MacLeod has said in interviews that place is important in his work, as it is in Canadian writing generally, and he has called attention to a similar emphasis among nineteenth century English novelists and Southern writers in the United States.² But he has also counseled readers about exaggerating place at the expense of other elements in his work, and he has described himself as a "realistic" writer, a term which certainly includes local color and regionalism yet encompasses a great deal more both for him and for experienced readers. Commenting on the emotional effects of region—the "'landscape of the heart'"—he has likewise mentioned the profound effects physical life can have on emotional life, especially if one's body is mutilated, and the fact that intellect and emotions frequently draw individuals in opposing directions.³

MacLeod's realism is as much inward and psychological as it is geographical, and it is through the interaction of psychology with a specific place that his realism takes on complexity and more than local interest. My position, in fact, is that MacLeod's achievement as a realistic Maritime writer is to have made literary form a means of philosophic insight. Regional events of a simple and familiar nature unfold routinely in appearance, but they are freshly perceived to evoke unsuspected depths and perspectives.⁴

The nature of MacLeod's thought can be readily identified as existential by the author's repeated concern with several aspects of the human condition, in particular with choice, freedom, becoming, alienation, exile, other people, and death. There is

coherence and continuity in MacLeod's outlook, though no special basis at present for invoking Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel, or others as specific sources. His existentialism takes shape as complete and living dramas, in keeping with the elemental conditions of his Maritime realism and the potentially inexhaustible combination of circumstances which constitute existence.

Neither the youthfulness of some narrators nor the rural simplicity of many characters and their settings prohibits the skillful projection of timeless philosophic concerns. The philosophy in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* is produced by the full confluence of short story elements, most notably setting, character, and imagery, although plot pattern and retrospection also create structural dimensions of meaning which would otherwise remain unexpressed by the characters. Water, rain, and the sea frequently become complex exponents of beliefs, fears, and hopes, thereby extending the limits of thought symbolically and giving spatial dimension to wordless preoccupations.⁵ Overall, MacLeod's fictive world generates implications which I believe are singularly relevant to the development of Canada historically, for time and again his stories undertake an inquiry that goes beyond theorizing about identity to another which confronts the physical world and defines the self through choice and action. Regional materials take on philosophic importance, and this elevates an interest in place to a universal concern with one's place in the world.

In a single story, MacLeod's characters frequently span several generations, thus establishing historicity as a human value. This value is amplified because his characters, most often Canadians of Scottish and Irish descent, are aware of their past and are engaged in some of the oldest and most rudimentary forms of labor—farming, mining, logging, and fishing—though three of his narrators in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* are high school or university instructors. Most of his characters' lives are critically vulnerable to if not determined by environmental conditions such as climate, the sea, the region's depleting coal resources, and are well within reach of devastating economic poverty, although this fact is not examined as a political issue. The very harshness and simplicity of their living conditions, the physical demands imposed upon them by their work, a sense of standing still or losing ground in a changing world, all provide—to use the mythic symbolism of Albert Camus—a Sisyphean

context in which the human spirit is seen striving to affirm its most basic values rather than submitting to the weight of necessity.⁶

Hardship is a continuing way of life in MacLeod's fiction, a past and for most characters also a future. Some see this way of life as authentic and salutary, worthy of perpetuating, such as the narrator-professor in the title story and the grandparents in "The Return." Most have no other alternative, though some young women marry out of the region. Hardship is faced not only by individuals but also by entire families and generations of people. It dominates *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and becomes through historical scope and continuity a representative measure of what it means for the human spirit to exist. Maritime conditions become the human condition reduced to its essentials.⁷

Interaction between human reality and environmental conditions produces conflicts and effects which might be called naturalistic, consequences which threaten to subvert human reality by debasing its higher values. In some of the stories the threat is so powerful and pervasive that the experience borders briefly on nihilism for the characters involved. Existence is made to seem meaningless, and coping with this self-destructive awareness is the critical turning point in most of these stories by MacLeod.⁸ Although the distance between primitive hardship and a meaningless existence may not seem great by ordinary standards, more often than not the transition from one to the other brings about an instinctive personal revolt, each with its own logic in the structure of each story. Two factors exerting constant nihilistic pressure are the proximity of most characters to survival conditions and, secondly, death itself, the final elemental darkness threatening to reduce all hopes to one uniform and meaningless conclusion. Other factors also exert their influence, but the aforementioned two are ever-present and are given special structural importance in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* because they are emphasized in the first and last stories and seem to serve as a philosophical frame for the entire volume. That is, they constitute the perimeter within which existence can be faced with the fewest illusions ("In the Fall") and the most authentic hopes ("The Road to Rankin's Point").

Since MacLeod's characters are directly dependent upon nature for a living, like other living creatures they are exposed to

life-threatening risks. The comparison is not lacking in serio-comic potential,⁹ as in the anecdote of

the man who escaped from a collapsing mine only because he saw the rats racing by him toward the light and . . . [he] dropped his tools and followed, sprinting after them and almost stepping on their scaly tails as the beginning roar of the crashing rock and the shot-gun pops of the snapping timbers sounded in his ears. (114)

The knowledge of how much the human body can be abused by natural causes is omnipresent, and not only in the recurring sight or memory of scars, blood, or gnarled hands. An exploding mine can disperse men, and with them the mystery of human nature, into

forever lost and irredeemable pieces of themselves; hands and feet and blown-away faces and reproductive organs and severed ropes of intestines festooning the twisted pipes and spikes like grotesque Christmas-tree loops and chunks of hair-clinging flesh. Men transformed into grisly jig-saw puzzles that could never more be solved. (58)

Reminders of mankind's mortality are not confined to life underground, though these coal mining materials provide as apt an emblem of human striving as Sisyphus with his boulder.¹⁰ MacLeod's story "The Boat," which contains an allusion to Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, concludes with the discovery of the narrator's father's body in the sea

between two boulders at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs where he had been hurled and slammed so many many times. His hands were shredded ribbons as were his feet which had lost their boots to the suction of the sea, and his shoulders came apart in our hands when we tried to move him from the rocks. And the fish had eaten his testicles and the gulls had pecked out his eyes and the white-green stubble of his whiskers had continued to grow in death, like the grass on graves, upon the purple, bloated mass that was his face. There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair. (151)

Whether the passage is read literally or symbolically, there is a touch of parody added by the seaweed and aimed at the

supposed majesty of the human species chained, beaten, and consumed in a sea of natural forces. The entire image is a discovery, appropriately recalled with factual accuracy and understated horror. The message offered by the sea here is one of complete assimilation by the physical world, of unity without freedom. There is the implied consolation of other and better memories, but this last memory too reaches beyond the Maritimes and threatens to become what may be the only credible message, even for a man of ideas, because the narrator, who was freed by his father's death to become a university professor at a "great Midwestern university," is subsequently disdained by his mother for having chosen to leave and is seriously troubled at night by the fear of being alone with death. Although his choice was the right one—his father's death (whether accidental or suicidal) was not entirely in vain—his liberty seems like exile and is diminished mentally and emotionally by guilt, fear, and loneliness. The narrator's present state contrasts sharply with his youthful observation of a photograph of his father wherein the "immense blue flatness" of the sea stretching out "to touch the arching blueness of the sky" seemed very far away from the father, or else the father was "so much in the foreground that he seemed too big for it" (141). These misleading suppositions have now been reversed, and in spite of the narrator's distant exile in the world of ideas, the same ironic truth now applies to him and is supported by long-standing communal precedent. The fishing grounds where the father went overboard ten years ago remain protected for the family by the local inhabitants, unfished and untouched because, as the narrator says, "to them the grounds are sacred and they think they wait for me" (150).

Faced with environmental undertow and the nothingness to which it can lead, some of MacLeod's characters resist the nihilism they experience only because they have become accustomed to doing so, like the narrator's book-hating mother in "The Boat" who "was of the sea as were all of her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned with her dark and fearless eyes" (133). History and tradition play a major role, of course, adding their unwritten strength to her energy, her habits, and her lack of thought. Others seek refuge elsewhere. Her son, as I have indicated, found a promising alternative in the Promethean light of his father's undisciplined and unlimited love of reading—in the apparent freedom of the mind—although the

son is forced to discover that both mind and body, despite the assumed dichotomy, must submit to the anguish of identical existential conditions. This submission can be accelerated, and because of despair or need some characters willingly sink their minds into their bodies. According to the traveling salesman from Ontario in "The Vastness of the Dark," despair and indiscriminate relief in sexual hedonism are common reactions among women who have lost their husbands in mining accidents, a condition he hastens to exploit to nourish his own appetite.

When the illusion of well-being is lost by young children, the reactions are by no means identical. In the story entitled "In the Fall," the innocent assumption of parental infallibility gradually weakens, and pre-established values slide into different types of disrepute for two brothers. The "fall" refers both to the season and the unexpected loss of value especially as witnessed by a ten-year-old boy David who sees his parents' sale of an aged and ailing pit-horse for mink-feed as a betrayal of trust and affection, if not of their humanity. The decision to sell is forced upon the parents by poverty and the natural causes of age and illness. The mother's recalled argument seems flawless, based as it is on expediency, material necessity, and the observation that people mean more than animals:

"There is no need of postponing it; the truck is here and there will never be a better opportunity; you will soon be gone; he will never be any younger; the price will never be any higher; he may die this winter and we will get nothing at all; we are not running a rest home for retired horses; I am alone here with six children and I have more than enough to do; the money for his feed could be spent on your children; don't your children mean more to you than a horse; it is unfair to go and leave us here with him to care for." (20-21)

Although the father finally agrees, his reluctance gives credence to the moral and emotional ties created between him and the horse. Both shared the mining experience,

and they had become fond of one another and in the time of the second spring, when he left the mine forever, the man had purchased the horse from the Company so that they might both come out together to see the sun and walk upon the grass. And that the horse might be saved from the blind-

ness that would inevitably come if he remained within the deeps; the darkness that would make him like it self. (16)

Another more permanent darkness is now setting in, produced by age and illness. The father knows that affection and trust over the years create their own kind of moral obligation, that the horse might make it through another winter. He denies these values this time and submits to the coercion of circumstances, swayed in part by his family's size, by the urging of MacRae (the drover and buyer), and by the closeness of the horse's death. Though reluctant, his consent contributes nonetheless to a conception of history as a deterministic and unfeeling cycle of growth, survival, and decay.

The cycle is well understood by David's brother James, the stoical fourteen-year-old narrator, who helps his mother raise capons for the Christmas market:

Sometimes I like them and sometimes I do not. The worst part seems to be that it doesn't really matter. Before Christmas they will all be killed and dressed and then in the spring there will be another group and they will always look and act and end in the same way. It is hard to really like what you are planning to kill and almost as hard to feel dislike, and when there are many instead of one they begin to seem almost as the blueberries and strawberries we pick in summer. Just a whole lot of them to be alive in their way for a little while and then to be picked and eaten, except it seems the berries would be there anyway but the capons we are responsible for and encourage them to eat a great deal, and try our best to make them warm and healthy and strong so that we may kill them in the end. (18-19)

To James, the conflicting tendencies of this naturalistic cycle make no emotional or logical sense, and the impact is a sense of nihilism on a small scale. The choice to sell the horse for mink-feed magnifies this nihilism, however, particularly for the young David, who has successfully nursed the horse, he believes, by sprinkling water on its hay. To David's disbelief, there is a total negation of human support—affection and trust are withdrawn—and since the negation originates with his parents and means certain death for the horse, he is overwhelmed with emotional and logical confusion. The sale is a triumph for MacRae who seems to incarnate aspects of the indifferent cycle. He feels absolutely nothing for the horse, is associated with types of foulness,

and obtains possession of the animal significantly only through the father's devious use of the horse's blind trust. Ten-year-old David's reaction is to plunge into the nihilistic moment by slaughtering his mother's capons in a murderous fury. Although it might be thought that in so doing he adopts and perpetuates the role of MacRae, his behavior also suggests a more positive alternative because he does so in outrage and retaliation. Rather than furthering the ends of nihilism, he amplifies its shock and dramatizes the senselessness of prematurely contributing to inevitable destruction. I say "prematurely" because the capons were being raised to be killed.

Throughout the story the environmental elements of sea, wind, and rain are ever-present and symbolize the increasing power of natural forces to interfere with and dominate human judgment, to extend the fall to human values. The sea is first described as ambiguous, changeable, anguished, and sometimes calm, but it contributes to the horse's poor health and its constant pounding against the grey cliffs intensifies with the slow and successful transfer of the horse to the insistent MacRae. The rain, carried by the wind, actually makes aggressive contact with the characters and "slashes," "stings," "burns," becomes "curtains making it impossible to see," turns earth into mud and slop, and finally freezes into "stinging sleet." The onset of freezing temperatures seems to envelop the narrator and his parents in an emotional numbness. James does not know what to do or say following David's vengeance, yet he leaves his parents alone outside embracing with "ice freezing to their cheeks" and discovers himself moving instinctively to help his brother "understand."

But understand what? James's last word in the story is both deceptive in appearance and presumptuous, but it serves to remind the reader to differentiate two distinct evaluations of the same concrete experience. For the precocious and stoical James the hard truth may be historical and grounded in the cumulative logic of his entire narrative, taking into account his father's conflicting choices made at different points in time, and the diverse responses to the sale dominated by MacRae's indifference. It seems likely that because of the sale of the horse, James has applied his experience with the capons to human history, that is, that even though moral necessity and feelings may at one time appear superior to material necessity, they serve nature's purposes none-

theless and have their functional place in the deterministic cycle. In the long run, too, feelings change nothing, and acceptance is inevitable. David's reaction to the sale, on the other hand, depends entirely upon values and emotions, and reveals that existential dilemmas can be worsened and values lost. The "fall" cannot be avoided, but the process can be opposed and humanized by deliberate and rebellious choice from one generation to another. Both evaluations emerge from the story's structure, and they dramatize the paradox of the Judeo-Christian Fall that determinism and freedom have never been independent of each other.

The inherent duplicity of all truths needed to make the right choice is acutely realized by the eighteen-year-old narrator in the next story in the volume, "The Vastness of the Dark." Here MacLeod advances by using the potential discord in the self's mind-body dualism to organize the narrator's mental and then physical journey away from a Cape Breton mining town to avoid becoming like his unemployed father who has nowhere to go, and his deaf and somewhat senile grandfather who romanticizes all the big and now closed mines where he once worked. The narrator's characterization of these relatives illustrates what is true about himself: he feels alienated within the experience of other generations in his large family, a fact further emphasized in the first half of the story by the heavy use of interior monologue, a preoccupation with the ambiguous relationship of rooms, and an increasing interest in old picture postcards and forgotten place-names.

Although eager to create his own future by himself, the narrator's journey, a traditional symbol of becoming, appears to be more of a flight from something, and his alienation intensifies as he hitchhikes across Nova Scotia with no clear destination in mind besides remote Vancouver. He is legally and physically free but he feels disoriented by his own impressions and especially by those of a travelling salesman from Ontario who invites the narrator to share his debasing attitude toward women and regional suffering, an attitude which amounts to a species of subhuman indifference. Later, sitting alone in the salesman's parked car, the narrator is once again surprised to find himself being looked upon as an outsider, but this time by the very people whose experience he knows best, as if he too were a travelling salesman. And their hasty judgment casts doubt upon the credibility of his own depreciation of family ties.

Having reached this mental precipice, appropriately near the border of Nova Scotia, in Springhill, the site of two earlier tragic mining accidents, the young narrator perceives from within himself and from without the threat of self-negation he has helped to produce. He can neither adopt the salesman's nihilism nor deny that the self is communal, if only in error and grief. To do either would be to dissolve all attachment with place and time, to become as it were no one nowhere, even though this is more less where the narrator has been heading all along. His ability to choose otherwise, however, is a natural outgrowth of past experience, neither arbitrary nor picaresque, which reduces the discord between mental awareness and bodily fact. This is to say that personal integrity is deliberately sought as a human value in both the story's action and form, by both the narrator and the author, thus blending choice and necessity in different dimensions of the same story. The logic is that having turned his back on his family and the region's physical landscape, the narrator is asked to deepen and complete the rejection by dismissing the region's specific humanity, its psychological and emotional history, as his own has been, with oversimplified judgments, and this he finds impossible to do because of latent memories of personal hardship in the mines, experiences which previously contributed to his flight (41-43). These painful memories work positively now, like the cold underground water his grandfather came to associate with procreation and blood, a symbol of the region's deepest and unforgettable sense of communal life. "Once you drink underground water," his grandfather had said, "it becomes a part of you like the blood a man puts into a woman. It changes her forever and never goes away. There's always a part of him running there deep inside her" (42, 50).

Error and grief appear thus as potential sources of moral solidarity, a defence against the abyss, even though both have an obvious and powerful alienating influence. What remains for the narrator now is the necessity of deciding where he will allow these and other double-edged perceptions to lead him. His having been offered a concluding ride by job-seeking Cape Breton miners would suggest, structurally and allegorically, that despite all else the accepted kinship is a choice in the right direction.

In the collection's title story, MacLeod once again uses a narrator's journey to organize the implications of an important choice, but this time the destination, a Newfoundland fishing

village, is emphasized from the start and contrasted later on with the point of departure, a modern urban area in the "heartland" of Canada (86). The journey structure, long useful in travel and descriptive sketches, is reimagined to invest the course of history with a choice. The narrator, a successful thirty-three-year-old university professor, fathered a son he has never seen eleven years ago in this village while gathering Elizabethan songs, ballads, and beliefs for his doctoral dissertation. His return is intended to determine the fate of the boy: whether to allow the child to continue living with his grandparents or to start life anew with his father. The alternatives involve an opposition between acquired human values and the father's biological priority. His choice in the context of the twenty-five-hundred-mile journey calls into question widely disparate ways of life literally worlds apart in space and time.

History itself is established as a necessary value in the story's structure through the use of narrative recall which sharpens focus. Accurate awareness of the past creates conditions which make the narrator's choice possible. Through the grandfather's retrospection the narrator learns of the mother's death and the love the grandparents have for the boy. Then an interior monologue, fueled in part by drink, reveals the father's frank evaluation of himself as a "lost and faithless lover," and as a collector of things from the past he has not always understood. From the beginning, the story's quiet atmosphere of unspoken possibilities seems to have virtually no direction until memories and choice fill in what is missing and render the present more authentic and complete.

Upon his arrival the narrator observes children fishing joyfully in the temporarily calm sea amidst what he sees as a festival of myriad color and evening sunlight, and this symbolic image of transient perfection is followed by unquestionable evidence of the boy's happy growth within a family context of affection and stability, where each event and object seems to have a life of its own. At the same time, however, poverty is also present, as are the destructive powers of the restless wind and sea booming against the rocks, visible moreover through their effects everywhere on weatherbeaten shanties, rusting metal, rotting rope, and twisted frames. The grandparents themselves, though good for the boy, can hardly write and are primitively superstitious and aging. Setting and character, then, project a rudimentary whole-

ness seriously threatened at present only by the unexpected reappearance of the boy's father and his power to disregard the good he sees by taking possession of the child.

The story's rural and urban settings interrelate to clarify this possibility so that finally the father's return alone to urban Canada is experienced as historical exile which the child has been spared. The father's choice amounts to allowing the boy a more realistic life in the natural world, and worthwhile development of perhaps simple but essential human emotions, as opposed to the more misleading and illusory satisfactions he sees engendered by urban life, a contrast examined at length in another story called "The Return."

The father's announced decision to leave without the boy, made at sunrise, occurs while looking into a mirror, as if he were not entirely a part of their harmoniously organized lives. His decision, however, like the sun-washed air he appreciates upon his arrival, cuts through the memory of fog associated with past confusion and the mother's death. Although his long journey seems to have changed nothing, he has in fact reappeared briefly between sunset and sunrise, as in a troubled dream, to infuse circumstances with choice and human value. Unknown to the boy, he deepens the sense of a legendary belief whose underlying meaning he betrayed eleven years earlier "that if a girl would see her own true lover she should boil an egg and scoop out half the shell and fill it with salt. Then she should take it to bed with her and eat it, leaving a glass of water by her bedside. In the night her future husband or a vision of him would appear and offer her the glass. But she must only do it once (82). Having previously offered the water, he now makes the convincing gift of blood of his only begotten son (John 3:16). His act is one of ultimate goodwill, analogous in existential terms to New Testament hope, revealing new faith in the old human values he has encountered, and this perpetuates one type of life, instead of another, in the future.

The last story in the volume, a narrative elegy entitled "The Road to Rankin's Point," depicts the almost mystical strangeness of living one's own certain death while facing its certainty among others both as a past event and an impending responsibility. Death is treated as a journey homeward and a reunion, intensely personal yet communal. The "road" in the title is one taken by four generations of the same family from two continents, a road uniting in this instance a grandmother in her nineties and her

twenty-six-year-old grandson Calum, who narrates the story, as he returns to die at his grandmother's tiny farm near the top of a cliff beyond which there is only the rocky promontory of Rankin's Point, and beyond that nothing which the eye can see.

The narrative is profoundly meditative and marvelously distanced from the symbolized physical world despite the narrator's close appreciative attention to the living presence of surrounding life—the animals, birds, plants, and insects. The narrator looks with more than usual intensity at all that is once again present to his mind, but more from within himself and through the mirror of memory than directly. Thus he sees all living and immediate things, including another large family reunion and his own declining powers, as if they too were already memories. And except for the disturbing sound of the grandmother's sometimes urgent voice speaking out from the present (173-74, 183-84), the narrative is bathed in an aura of retrogressive spiritual detachment and calm, as if all things present and decided were seen from afar, like photographs in the day's passing, and almost without the intervention of the sense. "I feel myself falling back into the past now," he says, "hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future. My twenty-six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little" (184). With his grandmother's death, however, and his own half-unconscious and apocalyptic fall into the void below the cliff, internal and external darkness "become enjoined and indistinct and as single as perfection. Without a seam, without a sound, they meet and unite all" (186-87).

Although there is almost no explicit religious discourse in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, there is much that generates analogous implications without being incompatible with the work's existentialism. In this remarkable death scene, as in other stories and circumstances, alienation and nightmare ("seam" and "sound") are subsumed in an aesthetic unity which humanizes absolute darkness. MacLeod retrieves existential limits from total meaninglessness through the values of his art, just as another narrator, in "The Golden Gift of Grey," retrieves his self-respect from threatened loss by reconceiving the obligation he must fulfill. MacLeod's craftsmanship lifts his materials beyond ordinary claims of pessimism. In a sense, "glass prisons" (60) and "walls of memory," to use his own metaphors, have been touched by "flick-

ers of imagination" (83). Thus his characters' defence of humane values, oriented in diverse ways by the omnipresence of the past, is further enlightened for the reader by principles of structural integrity and style. Whereas through memory the present is enlarged and given direction (assuming recall is possible, wanted, and does not fail), through imagination aesthetic unity encompasses the past to become the indwelling spirit in all re-created materials, the chosen forms upon which unspoken knowledge depends. And over against the deterioration and complete indifference inspired by *le néant*, a distinctly lyrical prose style works to revalue stories of even the greatest physical hardship.¹¹

MacLeod's existential fictive world is inherently one of historical and aesthetic faith, and his realism is more nearly akin to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1917) termed an "ideal realism."¹²

NOTES

¹ (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976; rpt. New Canadian Library, 1985). All references are to the New Canadian Library edition. MacLeod's second collection of short stories, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), also fits this description.

² Colin Nicholson, "Signatures of Time, Alistair MacLeod and His Short Stories," *Canadian Literature* 107 (Winter 1985): 90-101. Nicholson's study, a cross-weaving of critical exposition and an interview with MacLeod, explores the interaction of past and present time both as specific narrative techniques and as experiences important to MacLeod himself. The study proceeds mostly by way of diverse examples selected from the stories in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, but gives extended treatment to "The Boat" and brings into relief the lyricism and themes produced by the interaction of time, the themes of entrapment and escape, loss and regret, circling and returning, and personal and communal values.

³ Mark Fortier, "Alistair MacLeod," *Books in Canada* (August/September 1986): 38-40. MacLeod cites Elizabeth Spencer's phrase "landscape of the heart."

⁴ As is true for consciousness, place in fiction is a condition of perception. It is needed to define the self and may come to be seen finally as the ultimate reality. A similar though unintended extinction of the self may occur when fiction which is more than usually faithful to current events, history, or regional details leads to readings during which factual comparisons occur at the expense of the

integrative power in mimetic perceptions. The act of reading is itself threatened by existential stresses.

⁵ Janice Kulyk Keefer in *Under Eastern Eyes, A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987) observes that MacLeod's Cape Bretoners "possess a tragic knowledge of self and world that is all the more profound for the fact that they cannot speak it" (183). She emphasizes the tragic quality in MacLeod's fictive world and the more than regional implications of "going or staying" (182-84, 234-36).

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York & Toronto: Random, 1955; rpt. Vintage, 1959). In the Preface to this volume Camus writes "that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism" (v). For Sisyphus, memory is one of the means. He becomes "convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human" when returning to his rock: "in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death" (91).

⁷ Keefer, cited above, writes "that some quality inherent in the history and conditions of Maritime life makes possible an authentic vision and expression of human experience" (18). She sees MacLeod as one of a number of Maritime writers able to avoid the two extremes, represented by the Hugh MacLennan-Ernest Buckler version of the Maritimes, of either denying the region's imaginative value or losing perspective because of excessive regional immersion (233, 238).

⁸ A similar dynamic is present in MacLeod's *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, though these stories, generally speaking, emphasize the assimilation and impact of legend and folklore in the knowing process, e.g., the volume's title story and "The Tuning of Perfection."

⁹ Humor originating from an information disparity is much more frequent in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*. "Second Spring" is a major example.

¹⁰ In "The Closing Down of Summer," the opening story in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, MacLeod's miners—men "[a]lways hopeful of breaking through though we know we never will break free"—do in fact achieve larger-than-life status, incarnating like Sisyphus an heroic world-view despite futility.

¹¹ In a review entitled "Alistair MacLeod's Fiction: Long Homeward Journey from Exile," *Atlantic Provinces Book Review* 13 (May/June 1986), Ken MacKinnon well observes "that there is a sense in which all of MacLeod's work is more or less part of one great story with a single great theme. This is a tale of the long homeward journey from exile. As a yearning for perfection, the motif has a religious aura of being exiled from our father's land" (3). My viewpoint here is that within this complex orientation a sense of perfection more than the fact of exile informs MacLeod's prose style.

¹² *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton UP, 1983), I, Ch. XXII (esp. 241-42, 260-62), wherein Coleridge discusses the "philosophic imagination" and what it takes and means to unify.