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The Theme of Self-quest in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

Abstract

The transitory nature of identification seems to be a recurring motif in case of "the Scottish writer in exile" Alistair MacLeod's writings. *No Great Mischief* (1999) depicts the troubled process of self-quest, during the course of which the main character of the novel is trying to come to terms with his personal and communal history. How do we become who we are? How is it possible to live in the present and move on without losing our emotional ties with the past? These are some of the questions that MacLeod's novel addresses as *No Great Mischief* invites a reading sensitive to the key experience of dislocation and to our endless quest for meaning, unity, and identity.

Résumé

Le caractère transitoire des procédures d'identification semble être un motif récurrent dans les oeuvres d'Alistair MacLeod, « écrivain écossais en exil. » *No Great Mischief* (1999) présente le héros principal, à travers la quête de soi, faisant des efforts pour finir son histoire personnelle et collective. Comment est-il possible de devenir ce que nous sommes? Comment est-il possible de vivre dans le présent et de subir des altérations continues sans perdre pour autant nos attachements au passé? Ce sont des questions qui émergent dans le roman de MacLeod. *No Great Mischief* invite à une lecture proposant l'expérience de la dislocation ainsi que de l'interminable quête du sens, de l'unité et de l'identité.

From the lone shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.
Canadian Boat Song[1]

Where is here?

Alistair MacLeod (1936) is a Canadian writer of Scottish-Gaelic origins whose forefathers left the Scottish Highlands during the late eighteenth century at the time of the Highland Clearances. As there was no work and food, hundreds of Highlanders left their homeland and settled on Cape Breton Island. This northern region of Nova Scotia is a territory that emblematises the historical complexity of Canadian identity and belonging. Geographically it lies at the east-

ernmost edge of the Canadian Province of Nova Scotia that is separated from Ontario and the great western mass of Canada by the French-speaking province of Quebec. The area was settled largely by Scots, including a high number of Gaelic-speaking Highland Scots who arrived in the territory of the Eastern seaboard Mi'kmaq people, long after a much larger-scale French colonization of the St Lawrence valley – present-day Quebec and "Acadie" in New Brunswick Province. This location posed another barrier to the inhabitants; they were separated from the rest of Anglo-Canada by the vast province of Quebec, which was not just another settlement, but an ex-colony with a political as well as a social, and ethnic mind of its own (Campbell 33). As a result of this double barrier, these marginalised people were compelled to turn inwards and search for their ethnic origins in the past. The inability to identify themselves enhanced an attitude that has been characterised by Tom Nairn the following way:

> [S]uch inwardness in turn encouraged a degree of obsession with the past – their own history in pre-industrial or even in pre-Hanoverian times, the clannish social inheritance of the older Kingdom of Scotland. That was part of what continuing to "conduct their lives in Gaelic" meant, or implied: lapsing back in the 18th or even the 17th century, when Highlanders won battles and wars. (Nairn 48)

Nostalgic retreat into the past is, no doubt, one of the emblematic motifs of Alistair MacLeod's novel, also highlighted by the rather unusual title of *No Great Mischief*. The quotation is taken from General Wolfe's secret description of the Highlanders who fought under his command against the French at Quebec in 1759, and it hints at the heartbreaking statement he allegedly made just before the crucial victory, a victory won in no small part by the talents and bravery of the Scottish Highlanders: "They are hardy, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country, and no great mischief if they fall" (*NGM* 102). In order to understand the complexity of the situation one needs to get at the heart of Scottish history. The same General Wolfe at the age of nineteen participated in the battle of Culloden in 1745 when the Jacobite Prince Charlie's supporters lost. In the aftermath of the serious and cruel measures of retaliation that followed, many Highlanders took refuge in France, and when the British Army confronted the French in North America, they were offered pardon on the condition of fighting for the British. As a result of this Wolfe, who earlier at Culloden had stood against the Highlanders, ended up depending on their fighting skills, but as a final irony of fate, the General was killed during his great victory on the Plains of Abraham (McNaught 42). Relentless interest in the past and the exploration of major historical events from the viewpoint of the individual, are the underlying themes of Alistair MacLeod's novel. The writer reveals his motivations in the course of an interview:

> I tried to explore just how slippery history can be sometimes. We can learn the dates and the facts, but we can never really know what went through the minds of the people who were involved in those historical events. Very often it wasn't written down, or, if it was, it was done by the victors, the people who won the battles. (Baer 336)

Instead of searching the collective memory, MacLeod focuses on the individual life of his heroes, since *No Great Mischief* is connected to the life experience of six generations of the

members of the Clan MacDonald, and to 700 years of Scottish history. The novel centres on the recurring motif of self-quest and identity formation. The family saga is geographically tied to the island of Cape Breton, which, in 1784, became a British colony, and in 1820 it was re-annexed to Nova Scotia. The troubled nature of historical relations that influenced the family life of the MacLeods was commemorated on a pile of shingle stones bearing the following inscription:

> Pioneer Donald MacLeod
> His wife Janet MacPherson
> Applied for and granted 1808-11
> A section of this the good earth
> Tradition and culture enriched
> The land of their adoption. (Miller 154)

The complex themes of origins, home, and displacement are introduced in the opening scene of the novel, and they remain of major interest during the course of the entire work. The introductory scene of the narrative depicts a group of nameless fruit and vegetable harvesters who have gathered in the southwestern part of Ontario from a great variety of places, some from the Caribbean or Mexico, others, French Canadians from New Brunswick or Quebec. They come to this place in "the golden month of September," because "the bounty of the land is almost overwhelming" (*NGM* 1). The idyllic mood is violently disrupted by the blunt remark of the narrator: "[t]his land is not their own"[1]. As it turns out, these people do not belong here, they are working many miles away from their homeland. Alexander, the narrator, seems to be well aware of the similarities and the distinctions between the many kinds of workers, yet he identifies himself with the community of immigrants and, in spite of their dissimilarities, he highlights the single common strand running through their life; they are all "imagining themselves back home" (66). According to Bill Ashcroft: "It is when place is least spatial, perhaps, that it becomes most identifying" (Ashcroft 125). His explanation provides a revealing insight in connection with the identity of diasporic peoples:

> [t]he place of a diasporic person's "belonging" may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community, in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief, including nostalgia for a distant homeland. (125)

The novel also draws attention to another peculiar feature of diasporic subjectivity, namely that one can be foreign on one's home ground (Edwards xxv). In the troubled course of history some people emigrated of their own free will, while for others emigration meant an irretrievable kind of loss, a permanent state of exile. The position of exiled emigrants is best characterised by a general sense of displacement, thus the perception of their spatially and geographi-

1) "Canadian Boat Song," sometimes known as "The Lone Sheiling," by an unknown author, was first published by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in September 1829. It is a poem of exile, expressing the sorrow of those who suffered as a result of the Clearances, or the expulsion of the crofters from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Klinck 168).

cally unidentifiable location shifts inevitably to the kingdom of the mind. As the heart of the exiled always lies elsewhere, he or she is compelled to search for these lost origins.

Home and belonging, some of the central themes of the novel, also resonate with the crucial dilemma of Canadian self-identification: "where is here?"[2] Frye's question points at the most problematic aspect of Canadian identity; where is home for those who have left theirs and are confined to live in temporary displacement? Alistair MacLeod, "the Scottish writer in exile" often speaks about a deep sense of loss and uncertainty that relentlessly underpins the transitory nature of identification. Alexander MacDonald, the narrator of *No Great Mischief,* undertakes a metaphysical quest during the course of which he tries to come to terms with his personal and communal history. The tensions of identification call forth two different layers of identity; identity can offer a static sense of being and unity, but identity can also be described in terms of a process that enables identification. The first sense of commonality points towards the roots and the origins of identity, as a result of which we turn to the past in search of something often irretrievable; in case of the second layer we are dealing with a contemporaneous process that is located in the ever-changing elements of our everyday lives (Hall 222-4). The present analysis of the novel investigates seemingly oppositional elements of identity formation that on the one hand strive for oneness and unity, on the other hand, make identity the means of providing discontinuous points of identification. *No Great Mischief* invites a reading sensitive to the key experience of dislocation while it tries to make sense of our endless quest for meaning, unity, and identity.

Uncovering historical legacies

Identities are the names we give to the different ways in which we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within the narratives of our personal or communal past. In order to maintain our identity we need to have access to the various cultural representations of our past by ways of remembering, telling and imagining (Hall 226). Being rooted in history also means that we have to position ourselves in relation to common cultural referents, like language; in relation to the geographical environment and the landscape; in relation to the wider regional or national community of peoples. With the intention of fulfilling these functions, MacLeod's novel self-consciously foregrounds the theme of historicity. As the narrator's story goes, members of the "clann Calum Ruaidh" left their Highland home of Moidart, in 1779 in a plain boat. The painful decision was taken by the great-great-great grandfather in order to ensure a future for his family. The six children lost their mother during the boat trip, and when they eventually landed in the New World, Calum Ruadh broke down and wept for two whole days. "He was crying for his history. He had left his country and lost his wife and spoke a foreign language. He had left as a husband and arrived as a widower and a grandfather, and he was responsible for all those people clustered around him" (22). Crying for history has become a recurring motif in

2) "It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (Frye 466).

connection with Scottish historical consciousness: it all started with the massacre of the MacDonalds in Glencoe (1692), when in an emblematic act of victimisation, the ancient traditions of clan hospitality were betrayed. It continued with the national grievance for the lost cause as the rebellious and fierce Highlanders were irretrievably deprived of their independence in 1707 and in 1745, and culminated in the mass exodus of the Clearances that heightened the general sense of pain and loss.

The role of history and historical consciousness plays a vital part in the course of the entire novel. The word history is derived from the **Greek** word *historia*, meaning "a learning or knowing by inquiry," and as such it is connected to the act of investigating the past. History, in a way, legitimates existence, therefore the aim and purpose of finding out about our past, about our history, serves the purpose of legitimating our identity. The two Alexanders, the narrator and his grandfather, are mutually obsessed with trying to uncover their family histories. They were compelled to do so by their personal fates, as an orphan and an illegitimate child growing up without knowing their fathers. Grandfather was born out of wedlock, and he was always troubled by the circumstances of his own birth. He thought that knowing history would legitimate his personal and national past and it would also enable him to develop a deeper sense of belonging.

> Perhaps that's why he became so interested in history, he felt that if you read everything and put the pieces all together the real truth would emerge. It would be somehow like carpentry. Everything would fit together just so, and you would see in the end something like "a perfect building called the past." (216)

Ashamed of the event, his mother never tells anything about the mysterious father figure, and grandfather does not seem to be able to discover any traces of him, not even a photograph that would help to guide the little boy's imagination. Since he is often told that he "looks just like his father" he regularly stares at his own reflection in the mirror with the hope of catching a glimpse of his father. The grandson's sense of loss and uncertainty is enlarged by the shocking family tragedy in the wake of which he lost both parents and a brother at a very early age. Alexander and his twin sister Catherine desperately search the photo album for a picture of their vanished parents, but they do not seem to be able to find one.

> There are no pictures of our parents by themselves. They are always in large groups of clann Chalum Ruaidh. I took these pictures to a photo studio and asked if it were possible to isolate our parents and then have their individual photographs enlarged. Blown up. I would like to have their pictures on the wall. They tried but it would not work. As the photos became larger the individual features of their faces became more blurred, it was as if in coming closer they became more indistinct, I left them with the group. (221)

As the above example illustrates, members of the clan do not seem to have access to a private identity, as within these closely knit communities family ties are of the greatest importance. It is interesting to observe some of the traditional hallmarks of family or clan identity. The most obvious ones are recurring Christian names, like Alexanders, Calums and Catherines, that have

traditionally run in the family, or the visible signs of fair complexion, bright red hair and ubiquitous blue eyes. A typical example of the lack of a personal identity is revealed when Alexander, on his first day at school, is ridiculed for not knowing his own name, because until now he has been the "gille beag ruadh," the little red-haired boy. The uniformity and exchangeability of the different family members is further revealed in the tragic aftermath of a mining accident that takes the life of Cousin Alexander. When another family member arrives from San Francisco to take the place of the deceased one, nobody seems to notice the difference. The fact that members of the clan look similar and often work and live together emphasises, and further enhances, their sense of togetherness and belonging. Thus team spirit often suppresses the individual's otherwise natural wish to differentiate. Their way of life runs the risk of turning into a form of entrapment, a fossilised way of existence that resists any changes coming from the outside world. The clan members' similarity is always emphasised, and thus, what unites them is always more important than the individual differences that would otherwise separate them. Isolation from the rest of the world necessarily enhances closer ties with the family, and as the group characteristics take over, these characteristics provide moral and emotional guidance for its members. This attitude explains why, instead of developing their uniquely individual identities, a shared sense of belonging and unity has always been of primary importance for the survival of emigrant communities living in geographically isolated places.

One of the most obvious markers of identity is language, which, in case of the descendents of the Scottish Highlanders, is "the language of the heart" (Rogers 29). The knowledge of the ancient language enabled cultural continuity from one generation to the next and it is through Gaelic that one of Alexander's brothers is symbolically reunited with his imaginary homeland. When Malcolm arrives at Glasgow station, a place he has never been to before, he encounters a fellow Gaelic speaker who invites him to stay on his farm. In order to safeguard traditions, Gaelic songs were carefully preserved in the collective memory of the family. Sharing language and their common origins provides unbreakable ties between seemingly disparate members of the community. The connection between language and music remains to be a particularly close one, since it provides an underlying theme for the novel with its numerous references to Gaelic songs and laments. Music for the descendants of Highland Scots is imbued with personal meaning; there is a strong hope that the singing of Gaelic songs might transcend the dividing barriers of time and place. "Grandfather once said that on Culloden Moor the Highlanders sang. Standing there with the sleet and rain in their faces, some of them sang. To cause fear or to bolster confidence or to offer consolation" (210). The singing of Gaelic songs offers hope and consolation by helping the members of a community to share their deepest moments of joy and sorrow. However, frequent revisiting of the past maintains nostalgic connection with an illusionary world that is inevitably fading away. During the course of an interview Alistair MacLeod himself refers to Gaelic as a "beautiful prison" (Baer 245) that often isolates its users. The Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon warns that too many ties with the past carry the dangers of producing identities that are idealised and out of touch with reality. He claims that if silences are not resisted, they produce "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels" (Fanon 176). Due to the novel's obsessive portrayal of the past, Alistair MacLeod often fails to avoid the very pitfalls of the psychological situation Fanon warns against.

Identifying in the present

The legacy of the past weighs heavily on the shoulders of the novel's narrator, Alexander MacDonald, a contemporary descendent of the "clann Chalum Ruaidh". He left the island and became a successful orthodontist who, in the opinion of Grandma, was doing the futile job of trying to "improve on God's work" (58). Alexander suffers from certain mid-life and end-of the-century crises and, on the whole, often feels guilty and uncertain about himself. An orphan since the age of three he is destined to search for his origins. Since he was adopted and brought up by his grandparents, he develops a natural sense of curiosity towards the past. Following the life story of Alexander, the reader discovers that instead of developing an autonomous selfhood he is trying to find his way in life with the guidance of ancient family values and traditions. As he never seems to be able to come to terms with the tragic events of family deaths, his mistaken notions of guilt and loyalty are constantly evoked. Alexander recounts an event that occurred during the summer holidays of his university years when, in order to stay in touch with the rest of the family, he joined his brothers in the mines. While the protagonist was away celebrating his graduation, a tragic accident occurred, in which one of the young men, another Alexander MacDonald, died. The narrator blames his own ambitions for the death of his cousin: "I was also aware of a certain guilt concerning the death of the red-haired Alexander MacDonald, although I was not sure if the guilt was or should have been mine" (159). Alexander's powerful sense of belonging is also nourished by sustaining his sense of guilt for not safeguarding the family traditions well enough. The MacDonalds' "codes of behaviour" comply with the ancient values of clan society, where loyalty and solidarity are of utmost importance. The sentiments of these values and beliefs are best summed up by the famous "Canadian Boat Song," part of which reads: "Mountains divide us and the waste of seas / Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland" (187); or by quoting Robert the Bruce who before the decisive battle of Bannockburn (1314) allegedly said, "My hope is constant in thee, Clan Donald" (187). In order to preserve the family's past, Alexander is desperately trying to comply with the family maxims that were religiously passed on to him ever since the tragic death of his parents.

How do we become who we are? How is it possible to live in the present and move on without losing our emotional ties with the past? In order to survive, it is essential to record and remember the most remarkable moments in one's life. Historical knowledge is of vital importance as it forms the basis of the simultaneous processes of self-discovery and self-comprehension, while the lack of it poses the threat of becoming dispersed in oblivion. A deep sense of longing and reverence for the ancestral past is one of the most striking aspects of MacLeod's writings, in which his fictional characters continually reassert who they are. A highly symbolic question regularly pops up in the novel, and it illustrates Grandma's genuine disbelief whenever members of the younger generations fail to recall what she considers to be a noteworthy event of the family history: "How could you *not* know that?" (53). For those who have inherited Highland identity it is obvious that "you cannot not know what you do know." This privileged access to knowledge is not always pleasant, but it cannot be neglected or avoided as knowledge is like a genetic inheritance. Alexander, invested with the role of the "remembering narrator" (Nicholson 132), follows in the footsteps of the ancient bards, and

with the help of narrative memory tries to recollect, preserve and understand the seemingly disconnected events of his personal and in his family's past. In an emblematic moment of self-revelation Alexander discovers what turns out to be the leitmotif of his existence:

> When I first started practising dentistry, I sometimes saw myself in my white coat with my dentist's drill as an extension of my earlier self, with the jackleg drill. Leaning towards the surface that I drilled while the cooling water splashed back towards my face. Drilling deep but not too deep. Trying to get it right. (252)

"Drilling deep" and "trying to get it right" inspire and guide Alexander in his narrative journey of self-quest. Narration is always more than a simply descriptive act, as it also marks a constitutive process by which people try to impose order and continuity on the otherwise disparate events of their lives. It is part of "an active interpretative process by which human beings order their conceptions of self and of the world around them" (Worthington 13). Alexander, the narrator-hero of the novel is constantly trying to gain control over the events of his life by fitting the pieces of the family saga into a readable and "livable" narrative.

It is for the same reason that he undertakes the long and tedious journey from Windsor to Toronto on the occasion of his fortnightly visits to his eldest brother Calum. Following the death of their parents, Alexander and Catherine were brought up by their grandparents, while Calum together with his two elder brothers stayed on the island where they grew up having to provide for themselves. None of the three brothers returned to school, instead, they followed in the footsteps of their ancestors; one of them became a miner, the other one went back to Scotland and worked on a fish farm. Calum, the eldest, the biggest, and the strongest of them grew into a protective father figure who felt responsibility for all of them. The tragic turning point of his life is largely due to those mistaken notions of clan loyalty that have protected and haunted generations of MacDonalds in the shape of the family maxim: "you should always look after your own blood" (53). Calum, in order to save their reputation, gets into a fight with a French miner, and in this fight he accidentally kills his opponent. Convicted of second-degree murder, he is sentenced to life imprisonment and by the time he gets out, he turns into a disease-ridden alcoholic. As the narrative catches up with the present, the thirteen years of age difference that formerly separated the brothers are entirely dissolved and their relationship is best characterised by the imagery of "two tired boxers in the middle of the ring, leaning into one another. Each giving and seeking the support of the other" (175). Alexander's journey to visit his brother becomes a symbolic act of self-fulfilment by which he hopes to attain a better sense of understanding of the world and his part in it. In the role of the narrator Alexander tries to keep close track of the life of his family, yet, during the entire novel, he remains in the position of a curious outsider; as an eternal exile he is constantly struggling to make connections between here and there, between present and past, and between new and old ways of life.

Different forms of homecoming

Identity and the notion of identification rests on the assumption that we share some kind of common origins or characteristics with another person or with the members of an ideal community, hence the aim of identification is to establish some kind of allegiance on the basis of this foundation. As the narrator drives across the fields where the migrant pickers are working, he detects a close likeness between himself and the unknown group of people; he realises that deserting the ancient family job of mining has turned him into a kind of displaced labourer. Alexander identifies himself with the pickers on the bases of the common experience that all emigrants share; they left their homeland and certainties in the past. Regardless of their origins, whether they come from the Scottish Highlands, from Quebec, the Caribbeans or Mexico, they are all exiles. The protagonist, similarly to a good miner, or to a dentist, "drills" deep into the past with the intention of finding the roots, the origins of his problems at present. Nostalgic and often sentimental retreats to the personal and historical past of the MacDonnalds provide structural pillars in the ongoing process of self-identification. *No Great Mischief* explores the familiar dimensions of Canadian identity; "where is here?" or perhaps more accurately, "where is home?"

In spite of the transitory nature of identification, Alexander's story is a narrative that demands homecoming. The closing scene of the novel is Alexander's journey as he takes his dying brother Calum back to their Cape Breton home. This is an emblematic crossing, which took many lives before the causeway was built. Alexander and Calum return to the fatal spot that witnessed the death of their parents and brother on the dreadful night of March 28. In a moving scene of the novel Alexander reassuringly turns towards his dying brother: "This is the man who carried me on his shoulders when I was three. Carried me across the ice from the island, but could never carry me back again" (262). For Calum the passage through Canso Causeway becomes a symbolic crossing from this world to the next one. He returns to the sea that has already buried several members of his family, like the great-great-great grandfather and his first wife Catherine MacPherson. Calum Ruadh lies buried near the cliff's edge, on a point of land which is gradually being worn away by ocean storms: "His grave is moving out to sea [...] or the sea coming in to meet him" (10). The same sea that separated Calum from his ancient home in the Highlands may eventually return him to the land of his forefathers. Alexander undertakes the job of the mythological figure of Charon: "Ferry the dead. *Fois do t'anam*. Peace to his soul" (262). Learning to accept death, letting the past and loved ones go helps him attain peace and harmony in the present. On this fatal spot of "family reunion," Alexander remembers the death of their two grandfathers. His maternal grandfather was always neat and fastidious, he was "the man who could be counted on to be always in control" (118) – most appropriately he died while reading a history book about the Scottish Highlands. He was "the self-reliant man who was overtaken by his own history" (245-6). Their paternal grandfather was a jovial and down-to-earth character who loved his whisky and a good company. He died on the merry event of a family gathering "from jumping up in the air and trying to click his heels together twice" (245). He learns an important lesson of family history: their life was as different as their deaths, none of them better than the other, just different. Alexander, who by his faith is condemned to ferry people and memories between different worlds, reaches the

end of a historical and metaphysical quest. He finds the right passage that takes him back to the safe grounds of his homeland, as in the final moment of death, peace and reconciliation, the main character of the story gains a deeper self-understanding that helps to master his troubling sense of guilt and uncertainty. The narrative traces the progression of Alexander's personal and historical self-construction. Invested with the role of the modern bard, Alexander is compelled to balance between the tensions of the fading past and life in the present, never forsaking one entirely for the other, but always acknowledging the authority of each over the life of the family. *No Great Mischief* reads like an archetypal tale of exile, in which the only sense of consolation can be derived from the mutually liberating acts of remembering and sharing our personal and communal histories.

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