Bodies in Translation: Alistair Macleod's *No Great Mischief*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to push my understanding of translation beyond the identifiable Source and Target Language paradigm that address many contentious issues of practitioners as well as theorists of translation. Translation has to do with movement and distance. Languages remember, fail, or try to remember their older narrative contexts in their new cultural life as they negotiate the distances travelled between cultural spaces, relocating in the body of the reader. More than the act of putting thoughts and ideas of one 'language' into another, it makes much sense to recognize how translation is a version of memory and a bodily act in the sense that the new text remembers the distance between languages in its narration of the aura of the body translated. The paper uses Michael Cronin's idea of the 'therapy of distance' to discuss Alistair MacLeod's Canadian novel No Great Mischief (1999), which, with its breadth and sweep, takes the reader across oceans and to stories and lives remembered in oral and written narratives. The paper argues that in the communal body of the reader is the distance, translated back as print memory, which enables the tensions that imagine the nation. In the course of the argumentation, the paper identifies translations that find a body at the level of cultural identities manifest in terms of history, language, and readable surfaces (skin texture, and eye colour) that mark off and identify clan and nation as well as remember the distances that constitute a sense of history.

In his book *Translation and Globalization* Cronin introduces the notion of translation with a reference to how in AD 828 two merchants arrived in the city of Venice with the mortal remains of

the evangelist St Mark that they had stolen from the tomb where he lay in Alexandria (Cronin 2003). The relevance of such saintly bodysnatching may not be immediately apparent for translation, but it draws attention to what Cronin, following Brown's work, calls the "therapy of distance" (ibid 9) in his examination of the 'medieval practice of translation' (ibid 9), and what it says about translation and our roles as translators, teachers, and theoreticians in the global economy. Cronin locates the idea of movement and distance that is central to translation in the story of saints and their rise and function in Latin Christianity. P Brown's work on *The Cult of Saints* parenthetically refers to translations in the context of the common medieval practice of such saintly thefts as "the movements of relics to people" (quoted in Cronin op cit 8). However, the act of translation, in the religious or in the secular domain saves on time but "[does] not save on distance" (ibid 8). For, when "pilgrims go on a journey, the principal discovery is not destination but distance. The spiritual value lies as much, if not more, in the wandering as in the arrival" (ibid 9).

Here Cronin extrapolates on the idea of distance traveled to arrive at a description of translation from Brown's parenthetical reference to how "shrines containing relics were all closed surfaces, the faithful glimpse helps understand the therapeutic value of distance in a moment of sacred vision for the pilgrim who holds for an instant the miraculous power of the source text, the body that narrates something of its aura still. The miracle for the pilgrim/reader is the experience at the moment of glimpsing the 'fragments and shred of the sacred' of the distance between the body in remembered Alexandria and later in Venice.

Alistair Macleod's novel *No Great Mischief* (1999) set in Canada is as much about the legendary patriarchs, the secular pilgrims, who embarked on a journey from the Scottish Highlands and resettled in present-day Nova Scotia as it is a remembrance of distances traveled. As David Williams concludes, it is about the "shift from clan to nation", "a print creation of the imagined nation,

of that dreamed home in the book where Highlander and Québécois live in harmony with Ukrainians, Mennonites, and migrant workers from Mexico" (Williams 2003:102). In another sense, the novel remembers the journey in terms of oral memory and the technology of print culture not so much to arrive at a destination where one subsumes the other, but experience the distances in multiple narrative journeys.

What I wish to argue is that the narrative undercurrent of the shift from clan to nation is as much a discourse of the "fundamental tensions of the narrative" (ibid 102) of orality and print, as it is about the therapy of distance. In the silent reading that marks print culture, the reader is aware that there are others also who imagine similar worlds in the silence of reading[1]. That is to say, the reader, in the privacy of silent reading imagines nations[2] in the mind. In Macleod's novel, the reader relives the simultaneity of oral as well as print narration in a communal body, "occupy[ing] the same textual space as the narrator-listener, recalling shared family history" (ibid 84) that shares these two modes of narrative emplotment. In the communal body of the reader is the distance, translated now back as print memory[-3], which enables the tensions that imagine the nation.

The opening of the novel thus draws attention to the immediate moment of narration as it gets hold of the distances traveled to arrive at that point of memory that launches the narrative. A description of the Trans Canada Highway where the roadside stands display to "pick your own" (Macleod 1) the rich autumn harvest soon draws attention to migrant labourers who "pick instead for wages to take with tem when they leave. This land is not their own" (1). The regular practice of farmers ploughing down the old crops for the new cycle after picking, recalls from memory the narrator's grandmother who spend decades nurturing her precious plants. What the introductory paragraphs of the novel give the reader is a glimpse into the distances that describes a narrative that spans memory, elaborated in language, and history. This singular trope of distances that the narrator travels in multiple ways embodies

personal and collective memories in the body of the book as well as the reader.

The body always remembers. Translation is a version of memory and a bodily act in the sense that the new text remembers the distance between languages in its narration of the aura of the body translated. Macleod's novel emphasizes of how "the cultures of Québécois and highlander are equally based on economics of memory" (Williams 2003: 92). This version of memory manifests in the way Gaelic language and songs are sung (as oral text), remembered, and translated into English (the printed text); or how Gaelic, French, and English translate historical distances into a shared cultural history of loss; in the repeated story of Calum Raudh setting foot in Canada in oral and print versions and the stories of the faithful dogs; or even in the multilingual existence of the miners as they translate history and dreams in their songs in a remembered Orpheus-like state.

The oral poet Orpheus, at least in Ovid's version, returns from the underworld and sings his risqué songs that remember the exploits of the gods particularly on the earth. The narrator in the novel "mediates between cultures of speech and print" in what would seem as "the predicament of an over-educated son or rural folk" (ibid 86). Alternatively, Alexander MacDonald, everyone's *gille beag ruadh*, the narrator-translator is the orthodontist-turned-Orpheus whose remembrance recalls in oral and print ways fragments of the clan's shared language and history.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the narrator makes out the soft singing from his brother Calum's room when he goes out into the hallway after meeting him. The printed narrative remembers and renders the first four lines of the song in Gaelic and identifies it with a brief explanation and a translation in English: "He is singing '*Cumha Ceap Breatuinn*', 'Lament for Cape Breton', which is one of those communal songs often sung by large groups of people or in situations where one person sings the verse and the group sings the

chorus" (Macleod 16). Unlike the song of Orpheus, it is not a risqué song, nor a risqué thought that emerges as narrative. As he begins "to descend the steep, sad stairs, beneath the forty-watt bulb, the song continues and I am almost surprised to realize it is no longer coming from him but from somewhere deep within me. It rises up to the extent that my own lips move in an almost reflex action" (16). Calum and the narrator remember the pain, the longing, and that memory is translated here in the body of Gaelic and English where the Gaelic is obviously heard, then translated and made available in print. The song intercedes as an expression of time and distance in this release of the longing of the heart. As Williams remarks, 'One of the paradoxes of the book is that print can communicate this oral feel for existence" (Williams 2003: 95).

Such intercession is also a function of translation as when the grandma, in her senility refers to the ability of her 'friend' to the narrator-grandson. She remarks how songs that were very much a part of the rhythm of life had become the collector's item, thanks to the work of folklorists. In a sense, grandma's lament is also for Cape Breton. "We always sang," she says, "We always sang when we were working and then we just sang because we liked to. We were used to it. Some of the songs were long, verse after verse. It wasn't until the radio came along that we thought maybe our songs were too long. The ones on the radio lasted only a few minutes" (270-271). The 'friend', the narrator's grandfather who is also her son's father-in-law knew a lot of songs. "He knew all of the verses in his head and never made a mistake. He could remember everything. We should have copied all those words down while he was still with us. Copied them in a scribbler or something, but we never got around to it" (271). The cultural distance that grandma perceives here with the death of the grandfather is addressed in the narrative when the songs find a new body in the memory of the printed text when the narrator-grandson writes them down; the songs find a body in the reader.

There are other translations that find a body at the level of cultural identities manifest in terms of history, language, and

readable surfaces (skin texture, and eye colour) that mark off and identify clan and nation as well as remember the distances that constitute a sense of history. The narrator recalls how as a young boy he was surprised to hear from his grandfather that *Calum Ruadh* cried when he "landed on the shores of Pictou" (Macleod 24). There is no nostalgia in this evocation of the source text relocated from Scotland to Canada; the grandfather responds "composing himself and after a thoughtful moment" (25) to the incredulous query of the young boy who is at a loss to understand why an adult cried. In an interview Alistair Macleod discusses what it means to be away from the home landscape which helps clarify the processes of memory for bodies read in different climes. Macleod says, "I don't know if absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it makes the mind more thoughtful" ("Alistair Macleod and the Tuning of Perfection" www.modestyarbor.com/macleod.html). It is now easier to read what grandfather tells the young boy, with that little critical note in parenthesis that is the therapy of distance: "'He was', he said, composing himself and after a thoughtful moment, 'crying for his history. He has left his country and lost his wife and spoke a foreign language. He has left as a husband and arrived as a widower and a grandfather, and he was responsible for all those people clustered around him. He was,' he said, looking up to the sky, 'like the goose who points the V, and he temporarily wavered and lost his courage'" (25).

In a way both grandpa and grandfather cry for history in their oral and print memories of the Highlander who tried to make history with Bonnie Prince Charlie in England and later with General Wolfe in Canada. It is distance again that foregrounds the painful memory of the "auld alliance" (269) between the French and Scot against the English. The history of their people, doubly translated by the two grandfathers in oral and print ways in the text remind how the "Québécois and Cape Bretoners have been historical allies in loss, both of them having suffered the overthrow by the British of their respective feudal societies, first at Culloden in 1746,

then at Quebec in 1759, and at Montreal in 1760" ("Orality and Print" 90). While grandpa remembers the story he has heard and firmly believes in its truth value "ever loyal to the story he has been told", grandfather, the literate man makes a great discovery in the campus library while he attends the graduation of the young Alexander. He "searches the written record and finds that his people were betrayed" (90).

What the distances that constitute this memory of betrayal plots in Alexander MacDonald's text is Wolfe's hypocritical remark about the Highlander. In this sense, the novel turns inside out Wolfe's statement when his body is stolen from historical records and translated in the body of fiction. In this translation as therapy, Alexander MacDonald makes grandfather explain to grandpa in the body of print how MacDonald first fought against Wolfe, then went to Paris where he learnt French, and after he was pardoned fought for the British army in Quebec. And so, the narrator has the literate grandfather explain that Wolfe "was using them against the French". The body of fiction initially reads: "Wolfe referred to the Highlanders as his secret enemy and once, speaking of recruiting them as soldiers in a letter to his friend captain Rickson, he made the cynical comment, 'No great mischief if they fall'" (Macleod 109). Later on in the text, Alexander MacDonald translates for his sister grandfather's 'suspicion' about Wolfe. The sister apparently is in the know of things, for she repeats how the Gaelic-speaking soldiers went to France, and then returned to fight under Wolfe, comfortable with two languages.

Catriona, the narrator's twin sister further translates Wolfe's body in her brother's narrative in this "shared history of the another" (Macleod 238). It is perhaps in Catriona's oral narrative shared in print that we glimpse how the warriors newly returned from France were unaware of Wolfe's attitude towards them, one built on suspicion, fear, and distrust. "They didn't know about his earlier letter describing them. I still remember some of the phrasing: "They

are hardly, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country, and no great mischief if they fall'" (237). This signals the politics of the novel, for "[f]rom the title page onward, then, imperial interpretations of the Conquest are being called into question" ("Orality and Print" 89). What is more, "the words 'from Britain's shore in days of yore, Wolfe, the dauntless hero came', are never mentioned. Nor is *The Death of General Wolfe,* that icon of imperial hagiography produced in 1771 by Benjamin West, a painter from the Thirteen Colonies (Warner 214)" (89). Such translation-as-fleshing of Wolfe in oral and two print versions (the text in the campus library and then in the body of the novel) signals the distance the narrative travels from clan memory to national imaginings.

There are other textual re-awakenings of memory of the dead in the narrative that remember the body in multiple ways. What David Williams refers to explain the "somatic component" of oral memory as the "ache of memory" that can "produce a pain that has to find physical release" ("Orality and Print 96) is a useful way to describe embedded memories that have narrative therapeutic value. Such narrative is made available in the repeated translation of the body of the dead cousin and later in the journey in which Alexander MacDonald ferries his dead brother. The physical release posits translation as narrative of healing, at least for the narrator, who is "trapped in the net of my own guilt and history" (Macleod 14). The clan working in Renco Development remembers the dead cousin in bodily ways when they have Alexander Macdonald in the place of the red-haired cousin. More importantly, the aunt's ache of memory is translated as the brothers prepare to leave for work after the funeral: "Before we left, my aunt gave me the gift she had purchased for her son. 'Take this and *wear* it', she said, passing me the shirt. 'Don't leave it in the box. Will you do that?'" (Macleod 132).

In more bodily ways, the ache of the memory of the dead cousin manifests in physical terms when the Calum Ruadh clan stick together and help their cousin from San Francisco, he is included in

their team working for the company: "We found among our luggage and assorted papers the pinkish-brown employment card that had belonged to the red-haired Alexander MacDonald. It was more fragile than the current plastic S.I.N. cards, but the numbers were still intact. Calum took the card to the timekeeper. 'This man will be working with us tomorrow', he said" (224-225). It was as though the red-haired cousin was back after a short vacation. "It was almost as if the new Alexander MacDonald was the beneficiary of a certain kind of gift. A gift from a dead donor who shared the same blood group and was colour-compatible, although the two had never met. A gift which might allow an extended life for each of them. An extended life, though false, allowing each of them to go forward. Not for a long journey. Just for a while" (225-226).

Translation as gift that nourishes life, though, does not seem to be fully realized in this instance as the violent events leading to the death of Fern Picard and the imprisonment of Calcum attest. It is the memory of this that reinforces the sense of time and place for the modern Orpheus trapped in the shared guilt and history; he must travel to ferry back the dead. Only, the classical journey of Orpheus is made in the car across the Trans Canada Highway as he goes to meet Calum in the opening section of the novel and in the last chapter. This translation of the journey from oral to print narration is also a return voyage home. Or as Michael Cronin puts it, "Translation is a return ticket: the voyage out is complemented by the journey home…the translation *demarche* is essentially nomadic" (Cronin 2003:126).

Alexander goes to Toronto to pick up his brother who had phoned him and said "it's time" (Macleod 276). From there they head east into Quebec. They sight the lighthouse off Cape Breton where their parents died in the treachery of ice that gave way. Now, Calum dies in the Passenger seat beside Alexander. At this point, the narrator re-inscribes in the body of the printed text the memory of how Calum carried the three year old Alexander across the ice from

the island. Calum dies after "We're almost home" (Macleod 281), which signals the translation of clan relationships into "reading coalitions" (Anderson 77). For in the silent reading of the novel is established an imagined relationship in the space of the text that embodies the story of the journey home taking in all the sights that catalogue the nation[4]. Equally importantly, it is also a "geography of the nation" ("Orality and Print" 102); a very fascinating translation of the maps of the mind to imagine the nation in a multilingual existence as the reader takes both the highways that communicate a national consciousness and a mind.

NOTES

1. See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* where he shows the newspaper reader reassured that he inhabits an imagined world shared and rooted in everyday life. See especially page 39.

2. See David Williams' preface to his *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction* especially page vii.

3. Benedict Anderson writes of how the 'thing' became the French Revolution, remembered in print: "Like a vast shapeless rock worn to a rounded boulder by countless drops of water, the experience was shaped by millions of printed words into a 'concept' on the printed page, and, in due course, into a model" (77-78) and "it entered the accumulating memory of print" (77). What we get in Macleod's novel is memory in print in a very different sense.

4. David Williams rightly notes: "For what he notes on the borders of his family history, and what he writes in the margins of oral memory, amounts to a vision of what Benedict Anderson calls 'imagined communities'; that is, communities mediated by some technological means. From the imagined inclusion of Ukrainians in Canada to the nameless workers invited by signs in the fields along the highways…the narrator appears to be

> engaged in cataloguing the plurality of the nation, from oilmen (and his sister married to a Slav) in Calgary, to ethnic miners (and his own brothers) in Northern Ontario, to Celtic fishers (and his remaining family) I Nova Scotia….Whatever their economic or immigrant status, they are still imagined as potential fellow citizens. In that respect, the print-form of the novel turns into an instrument of citizenship, by which large numbers of scattered people, who can never meet in person, can still meet in textual space that identifies their imaginative belonging in the geographical space of the nation" (100).

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