Boring Gravel: Literary Earth, Alice Munro's Ontario Geolithic

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"Rien ne m'est plus étranger qu'un lac."
Derrida 1997: 245

Alice Munro's writing affirms the firm articulation of the geological element and the literary element. Separating her corpus between the geologically-based stories (almost always outside stories, and childhood stories) and the non-geologically-based stories (most often inside stories and adulthood stories), the present definition of the Canadian in her corpus (a temerarious endeavour) restricts its focus to the geologically-based stories. Canadian in Munro's writing is undoubtedly the relation of the world (the constructions -- farms, towns, roads, cities, and what happens in them -- of especially human beings) and the earth (the swathe across North America of land, lakes, rivers called Canada). Obsessed with comings and goings, invasions and retreats, inscriptions and erasures, Munro's writing itself is particularly Canadian, we submit, by dint of the grating against each other of two fundamental and apparently opposed forces: her fourteen collections of stories attest a conception of geological, or deep, time upon which is placed a shallow and ephemeral architectural world. Munro passionately attempts to secure the latter's traces from the fast-approaching obscurity into which the historical insignificance of the lives she records threatens to disappear. And yet she tirelessly de-sediments such cryptic enclosures, shakes their secret events out into raw exposure, affirms life's indestructible after-life. Munro's writes environment, geography and geology, yoking Canadian place in the Anthropocene (the era of the human in geological time) with literary space-time in imagination (the epoch of the trace).

Among her 148 stories in the 14 collections (the corpus used here), and relative to the question concerning Canadian Literature, the selection here of her signature geo-literary stories stems from a response that identifies the "Canadian" with its geography, restricted to the geography of the Ontario stories and more precisely to the Ontario stories located in the home town (Hanratty, Jubilee, etc.), the home by the river (Wawanash, Maitland, etc.), and even more specially to those stories where the protagonist is the girl (become woman)

recalling her childhood in that town, even if other protagonists sometimes figure here. These stories have specific identifications of the climate, the lay of the land, the geological.

This selection excludes, from a response to the Canadian-ness of Munro's literature, a large number of stories, often overlapping: those that take place in western Canada (in which geology has at most a very minor appearance), and those stories dealing *only* with adult characters in the adult phase *only* of their life. These stories, set aside here, do not invoke the geological as do those selected here; moreover, they often relate action entirely confined to *inside* (houses, constructed spaces). The quasi-totality of stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), in *The Progress of Love* (1982) essentially take place *indoors*, and do not belong to the geological, even when they are sometimes set in Dalgleish, Hanratty, Logan, Walley, or other of the Ontario (home) towns. More, when -- rarely -- there are, in them, traces of the geological, arguably they are narrative paths or devices that appear to open the geo-possibility only so as to show the scriptor *not* taking that path in favour of others. Exemplifying the apparition of possibilities evoked but revoked are the following: "A Real Life" (*Open Secrets*) mentions "the Pre-Cambrian Shield" and features Dorrie, a female trapper (like, for one instance, the trapper Ben Jordan in "Images"); "Friend of My Youth" notes about the Ottawa Valley its "[w]ell-drained fields with none of the Pre-Cambrian rock *shouldering* through the soil" (*Open Secrets, OS*: 4, my emphasis), a personification that felt the glacial "fingers" in the other Ben Jordan story of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (*Dance of the Happy Shades, DHS*: 3) that ultimately will be featured here; "Five Points," starting from a "trailer park on the cliffs of Lake Huron" will mention "gravel" on the side of the road (*Friend of My Youth, FY*: 27); places where "only main street [is] gravelled" (*FY*: 54) set above "salt mines" provoke Almeda's awareness of the geological in "Meneseteung": "There was once a great sea? (*FY*: 58); "Wigtime" features the brutal cold near Lake Huron and Munro's signature "spring thaw" (*FY*: 258), her trademark geo-literary *dénouement* and, contrarily, "Pictures of Ice," with Austin's vanishing into its ice, her cryptic closures; "Lichen" starts with Lake Huron, the clay bluffs, the steep bluffs, and Stella is joked about as being older than Lake Huron (*Progress of Love, PL*: 32-

33); her geographical fondness for mapping and tracery instances itself in the road maps in the return from Vancouver to Ontario in "Miles City, Montana" (*PL*: 89); her recurrent insistence upon the entropy of construction smoulders in "Progress of Love" with its demise of the family home (*PL*: 25) and "Visitors" adds the former inhabitants, many years later, trying to find the torn down house (*The Moons of Jupiter, MJ*: 211), thereby foreshadowing one of the most important geo-literary texts, "What Do You Want to Know For?"; her attachment to the earth includes earthly adieux and even extra-terrestriality, such as in "The Moons of Jupiter" – a story devoted to the death of the daughter's so earthy father – that ends with their conversation prior to the surgical operation he will not survive, conversation in which his naming the moons of Jupiter is his adieu to the earth that was (the element of) his life; in "Spelling," a story about devastated altered land/mindscapes, it is not fortuitous that this story returns to the hometown as lost space and to the erasure of mapping (*Who Do You Think You Are?*); Munro's veneration for the seasonal "flood" of the "creek" and for the "ground" riddled by "holes" surfaces in "Tell Me Yes or No" that depicts its lover as "flood" or "creek" and in which the lover's survivor represents the former's death as "this hole I fall into, which is the permanent absence of you," prompting the survivor's purchase of "a map" (*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, SIBMTTY*: 117) that however only leads her to discover the pulverizing of all her mental bearings; tracks opening and crossing frozen wilderness – a frequent feature of her geo-literary stories -- mark the incipit of "Winter Wind," thereby telling us that we are in the geo-category with the "CPR tracks" and the "newly opened Huron Tract" (*SIBMTTY*: 192), and its ending informs readers of the risks of frozen lives and deaths, akin to the blanket of snow in the summer in "My Mother's Dream" (*The Love of a Good Women*). Such declivities in the narrative textscape trip readerly movement, which inclines momentarily towards the geological vein that the scriptor amusingly in a *clin d'oeil* declines the pursuit of.

Whatever might be Canadian about other stories the titles of which no mention will be made here -- and this is not always, we submit, prominent in them, it does not pertain to the climatological, the earth, the elements, which, in the stories selected here, belong to a specific part of Canadian geography: the Cambrian and Pre-Cambrian (as it most often is called) Shield, the place of glacial

deposits. Contrarily, those stories to be sifted here that do something with the earth are ones where a good amount of action takes place outside, and in the vicinity of the fictional hometown and mostly deal with childhood. Consequently, one could take the earth, its underground and its gravel and other features, as a metaphor for childhood; analogously, one could take sedimented layers as metaphor for adulthood. For all these reasons, our response to the call question of this issue hews to the category of Munro's fiction which might be called geological, or geoliterary. Regrettably, the socio-economic divisions related to this Ontario Pre-Cambrian Shield, are left aside here.

Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), to be showcased ultimately in a second part, does not entirely consist of what we are calling Munro's geo-literary story, in which at stake is the imbrication of the geological and the literary. "The Office," "Day of the Butterfly," "Red Dress -- 1946," "Sunday Afternoon," and "Dance of the Happy Shades" are left aside. Moreover, if the remaining stories do dwell in or on geo-literature or literary earth, they do not all do so to the same degree nor does the space here permit detailed analysis of each. They do, however, inaugurate a rich vein running sometimes continuously, sometimes discontinuously, in the subsequent production: this ore constitutes at least part of what this geo-archivist gives of Canada to literature, of her literary harbouring of Canada as well.

Of what is this ore made? What are the elements of the geological element? A selective reading of the corpus subsequent to *Dance of the Happy Shades* can extract numerous features or materials that, by a return (climatic?) movement (described by Ben Jordan in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" [*DHS*: 3]), will give the lay of the land to Munro's inaugural collection, its *klima*, or "slope of the earth," as well as all the textual climaxes. Across the corpus, the geological or more accurately the geo-literary composition crystalizes around words the most identifiable of which might include the following chartered *list*, each one of which being perforated by the veins of all the others creating their inter-connectedness:

Gravel	Lake	Well	Arrange
Water	Boring	Cracks	Holes

As in geological time charts, these background colours are meant to signify different temporal strata, different epochs.

"Gravel" names everything coming out of the numerous "gravel pits" in her work, made possible by the deposits and sedimentations in the Pre-Cambrian Shield. "Lake" signals all the reservoirs, the melted ice from the Ice Age, but also the run offs from various seasonal floods. "Water" and "Boring" indicate the movements of liquids that have a perforating power throughout her geo-literature. Containing liquid like "Lake," "Well" can be the access to underground sources and resources, and the presence of the underground in general. "Holes" denotes numerous results of "Boring," but its various forms can become cysts or pockets. "Cracks" opens up all places of movement or non-alignment such as earthquakes, but also underlies countless ridges, traces, tracks and so on. "Arrange" is very closely linked with historicity, or the shifting and changing over time, the endless changing arrangements that are isomorphic with the history, or writing, of the earth, as well as with the writing history of the stories.

I. The Geo-literary Corpus

Munro's Ontario Geolithic turns around climatic and climactic changes in stories whose tropicality is not in the Tropics but in the fact of things turning into other things, and into stories. A "storm" will not always occasion the turn, but its etymology, *to turn*, occasions Munro to "wonder" "if there is a connection" between the "description of a terrible storm" at the start of *Wuthering Heights* and her ancestor James Hogg's "fine description of this storm," to wit, "a storm [that] arose which *turned* out to be the worst in half a century" ("No Advantages," *The View from Castle Rock, TVFCR*: 24, 23). "Storm" and "story," so similar in form as words, do not share the same etymology, but the line of storytellers she descends from (*TVFCR*: ix) had to struggle with a family imposition of "the refusal to feel any need to *turn* your life into a story" (*TVFCR*: 20). Based on the shifting Pre-Cambrian Shield, Munro's geo-literary stories receive their turning force from storms of various climatological kinds. Some storms, escalated into global climate de-regulation caused by human activity,

even determine the writer's renunciation of the novel as form in favour of the story. The example comes in "Epilogue: The Photographer," the final piece from her second published book, her only novel, *Lives of Girls and Women. A Novel*, in which Munro's self-styled first person protagonist-narrator, Dell Jordan, renounces novel-writing and affirms story-writing. Her declination to write novels comes immediately after she, with her male counterpart, Jerry Storey, walk across a "trestle," one of the many bridges, and man-made ridges, in her corpus (such as the crucial "crossing the bridge" in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" [*DHS*: 7]): while crossing the bridge, she envisions Storey's dystopic pseudo-scientific story for the global nuclear winter that will blight hometown Jubilee ("a future that would annihilate Jubilee and life in it") side-by-side with her own plan "to *turn* it into black fable and tie it up in my novel" (*Lives of Girls and Women, LGW*: 271). However, and in a mise-en-abyme of Munro's giving up the novel for a career of *story* writing (at least 148!), the girl will abandon her novel (equated with death and destruction of earth and world), and turn, if not literally to a long list of stories, to *storing*: "as Uncle Craig" "writing his history, I would want to write things down. I would try to make lists. A list of all the stores [...]" (*LGW*: 276). The genesis of this storing up resides in structures so parched as to be cracked, and at stake in it is holing up a well of liquid from even the most minor of storms that could bore through any solid but that also attest, repeatedly, regeneration (of earth, of worlds).

"Epilogue: The Photographer" is Dell's recount of the novel, *The Photographer*, she planned to write about the Sherriff family, in particular about Marion/ Catherine, a girl from Dell's high school who, ultimately inexplicably, committed suicide by drowning herself in the Wawanash River, but also about Bobby Sherriff, the brother whose mental breakdowns, crack ups, or "madness" lands him in a mental asylum, periodically. Continuing a fault-line from "A Trip to the Coast" ("cracked" and a "crack" as "unsettling as an earthquake or flood" [*DHS*: 185, 188]), Marion as Catherine is imagined "as if she was trying to get through a crack in the invisible wall, sideways" (*LGW*: 268). The Sherriff family's speech is a cracked plateau: "their platitudes cracked with madness" (*LGW*: 270). Their house, also: "There was a strip of carpet on the porch floorboards, which were wide, had cracks between, and were painted gray" (*LGW*: 273). In her

"black fable" novel, Dell exacerbates the weather by withering it, imagining a climate and time change for the moment of Catherine's death by drowning: "For the novel I had changed Jubilee. [...] It became older, darker" (*LGW*: 270); "The season was always the height of summer. [...] But how, then [...] was there going to be enough water in the Wawanash River?" (*LGW*: 270). Like the low water in August from the previous story, "Baptizing," in which Garnet French tries to drown Dell -- all of this Munro geo-oriented corpus revolves around the seasonal flooded rivers turned into lakes, and creeks reduced to sandy beds -- low water in "Epilogue: The Photographer" is the drying up of the source: of life, but also of writing, just as high water and floods are their flow(er)ing. Dell's literary *solution* to the dried riverbed is for Catherine to drown herself facedown in the bathtub.

At stake, in her projected novel, is the sharing of imagination, the share of "if" and "ifs" -- "if" as the modality of fiction -- which the Sherriff's represent: their drowning from saturation, but also their buoyant inflated riding the wave. The "cracks" are those through which the past and present collapse into oblivion from which however they can bob back up, through those same cracks. Dell, on the Sherriff porch, thinks of her own novel, or more exactly of why she'll abandon it, to and for another store: "I had not thought of my novel. I hardly ever did think of it, any more. I never said to myself that I had lost it, I believed that it was carefully stored away to be brought out some time in the future" (*LGW*: 273). The storehouse of the novel, however, is the house as story, itself constituted as textual mesh. Its cracks are a filter, a sieve, a texture through which things pass.

> But now I remembered with surprise how I made it [the novel], the whole mysterious and, as it turned out, unreliable structure rising from this house, the Sherriffs, a few poor facts, and everything that was not told. *LGW*: 274

The "structure" is that surface through which the past is both lost and also capable of resurrection. Its cracks are where reality -- the secret (for e.g., "*What happened to Marion?* [*LGW*: 274]) -- is enmeshed. The hold (grip, container) of that secret operates from flow: from a hole, holed out, by liquid boring.

> Would Bobby Sherriff give me a clue now, to madness? [to his, to Marion's] [...] Would he spit through a crack in the floorboards and say, "I'm sending rain over the Gobi Desert?" *LGW*: 274-275

The quasi-miracle of rain in the most arid of the world's deserts, Bobby's spit through a crack brings rain to the most dried out earth on Earth, literally restoring the geological to the geoliterary.

Rain, the element of water -- nothing, in the Pre-Cambrian Shield, is stranger than a lake -- makes Bobby Sherriff the possibility of sharing ifs, of sharing imaginations.

Bobby Sherriff, the man cracked by madness in the family, asks Dell if he's boring her, and she worries about this boring: "'Am I boring you now?'" and "I kept watching him attentively so he would not ask me if he was boring me" (*LGW*: 275). In the context of piercing the secret, or of the unreliable structure as that text or mesh that filters the appearance and disappearance of reality, "boring" here has the purchase -- the hold -- that it has throughout Munro: boring as the perforation -- the *punctum*, no doubt -- that constitutes (and destitutes) the epiphany in Munro.

Bobby is not just Munro's fictionalized, or Dell's real, character. Bobby, that which or he who bobs, up and down, buoyed by water, like a fishing bob, might be able, Dell wonders, to read her thoughts: "could he read what I was thinking? There must be some secret to madness, some *gift* about it, something I didn't know" (*LGW*: 275). Opening like a fissuring wall of madness, yet also in the context of another element that spreads through the corpus from "The Time of Death" onwards, namely the element of fire ("empty a wastebasket into an incinerator" [*LGW*: 275]), and thus in the context of the holocaust and its ashes (of Wawan-*ash* River), the cracks literally split into literary stor(i)es. Dell sees the back wall of the newspaper building:

> it had certain stains, chipping bricks, a long crack running down diagonally, starting a bit before the middle and ending up at the bottom corner next to the Chainway store. *LGW*: 275

As neither the Sherriff storehouse nor the House of Usher, here the "Chainway store" fundamentally, i.e., literarily, tells of the *arrangements* of storytelling, which are as many ways of linking as they are ways of these links being disconnected by shifts, dislocations, re-alignments. The Munro corpus abounds with such (re)arrangements, from the I narrator in "The Office" ("I arrange words" [*DHS*: 74]) to the changes Munro makes to her stories when she re-

publishes them in book form (we let slip through the cracks here many other instances of the word "arrange").

Chainway store or Sherriff family/house, these structures show the play of the geological and geoliterary, earth and world, insisting always on their layering. The Sherriffs are resumed in Bobby Sherriff's final gesture, a tip-toed ballerina dancer figure:

> This action [...] appeared to be a joke not *shared* [emphasis mine] with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a *stylized* meaning -- a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. *LGW*: 277

This action is not the sharing of an if, not the sharing with Dell of the if of fiction with which one creates meaningful worlds, but rather the displaying of a world: a world, a meaning, whose language, whose alphabet, whose signification will have to be learned, otherwise. Every language is idiomatic. No sharing, in the sense of equal knowledge by two originary finitudes, is possible; rather, "display" affirms the exposure of its enclosure, and vice versa. Dell's response, "Yes" (*LGW*: 277), is the "Yes" of affirmation, her *firma*, the genesis of her signature. Munro's choice of the story, instead of the novel, stems from this display that renounces sharing.

Such a display is simultaneously as unreflective as it is scintillating, as much a black hole as a star. Just prior to this, Dell abandons the novel, in preference "to write things down" (*LGW*: 276), as had her history-writing Uncle Craig, that combination of the geological "crack" and "crag" ("crags," as variants on "ridges," structure much of the Pre-Cambrian Shield that Munro describes most thoroughly in "What Do You Want to Know For?" [*The View From Castle Rock*]). Relative to the geo-logical, this writing-down, fixing down or in-scribing, is how earth and world touch: "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable -- deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum (*LGW*: 276). These lives that do not reveal (Marion's photograph face is "unrevealing" [*LGW*: 276]) are "deep caves" or the geological structure or sub-structure, in short, the earth, yet "linoleum" is the world, the surface, the pressed together, sedimented, mixture of linseed oil, rosin, cork and burlap, which

humans put on the earth.[1] Imbricated earth and world, lives are both opaque ("dull), uncreased (uncracked or "sim(-)ple"), and endlessly ("unfathomable") replicating in patterns ("amazing"), source of *wonder*, to use a key Munro word, the Greek verb lurking nearby, *thaumazein*.

As archivist, Dell will write "things" down, listing them:

> A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main street and who owned them, a list of family names, names on the tombstones in the cemetery and any inscriptions underneath. A list of the titles of movies that played at the Lyceum Theatre from 1938 to 1950, roughly speaking. Names on the cenotaph [...]. Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in. *LGW*: 276

These arrangements trace all the patterns -- all the "place[es]" "on the map[s]" (*DHS*: 172) across her textual globe. Such lists might seem doomed to being boring catalogues. These inscriptions will always be boring, bored: both insufficient and unrevealing. But they will, simultaneously, be perforated by *puncta*:

> And no list could *hold* what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, *held* still and *held* together -- radiant, everlasting. *LGW*: 276, my emphasis

Every list will be a sieve, a mesh of holes through which will pass the life -- the Being of beings -- the desire for which is its constitutive unarchivability. Every "thing" -- be it animate ("speech and thought"), phenomenal ("stroke of light"), inorganic or inanimate ("pothole," "crack"), or even source of wonder, for "maze" from "amazement" comes from Old English *amasion*, meaning that item in this list, "delusion." Dell, or Munro, would de-sediment every thing in the world and earth, so as to hold it, to store it and to story it, yet this archive desire to hold unchanging ("still") and hermeneutically gathered whole ("together") is constituted by the very boring of a hole that destitutes it: the éclat ("radiant") of "every[-]last[-]thing" whose infinity ("everlasting") by definition exceeds the

[1] Strictly speaking, there is no geo-logy, no *logos* of the *geo-*, only geo-metry, geo-graphy, or, Munro gives to think, geo-literature:

> Si une science objective des choses terrestres est possible, une science objective de la Terre elle-même, sol et fondement de ces objets, est aussi radicalement impossible que celle de la subjectivité transcendantale. La Terre transcendantale n'est pas un objet et ne peut jamais le devenir; et la possibilité d'une géométrie est rigoureusement complémentaire de l'impossibilité de ce qu'on pourrait appeler une "*géo-logie,*" science objective de la Terre elle-même. (Derrida 1962: 79)

archivist's finitude. If things fly apart, if things cannot be shared, it is because the hole that bores and burns in this hold is precisely what permits the wondrous display.

Troped into "cracks," "boring," "hold," "spit" or "rain over the Gobi Desert," the elements with which "Epilogue: The Photographer" records the (re)turn to story-telling belong to Munro's geo-logico-lithico-literary storehouse.

If space permitted (but there is a limit to what an article can hold), here would be inserted a reading of all the arrangements, the maps, the patterns, the traces; all the floods, the lakes, the bloated rivers, the trickling creeks; all the boredom, and the bored domes, all the holds and holes, all the structures and geneses; all the wells, too -- out of which this corpus makes its geo-stories.[2] Defying finitude, risk boring gravel, engraving oneself in boredom.

In four pages of "What Do You Want To Know For?" (*TVFCR*: 318-321) Munro multiplies descriptions of what remains from the movement of the glaciers on the Ontario Pre-Cambrian Shield, while comparing the physical earth with the specialized, highly and variously detailed and coloured geological maps she uses in her explorations of its terrain. There are "drumlins" (streamlined hills or ridges composed of glacial drift), sometimes thick, sometimes sparse, sometimes "big smooth hills, some barely breaking through the ground." The "glacier" laid "them down like eggs." There are "moraines" (accumulations of boulders, stones, carried and deposited by a glacier), there are "eskers" (a long, narrow ridge of coarse gravel deposited by a stream flowing in an ice-walled valley or tunnel in a decaying glacial ice sheet), different kinds of "tills" (glacial drift composed of clay, sand, gravel, boulders), layers of "shale," "limestone," and "soil," and of course, "the ancestors of the Great Lakes." Munro's favourite is the "kame, or kame moraine," the description of which, in earthly and cartographical shapes, stresses the fact that if "geography" (earth-writing or writing-earth) is the attempt, by man, to write, to describe, to map, the earth, "geography," by the inverse genitive, is also the earth's writing, the traces that the earth itself

[2] Caro's drowning in a gravel pit in the story "Gravel" (*Dear Life*); the father's skis or *skizze* in the gravel pit in "Before the Change" (*The Love of a Good Woman*); the "cubbyhole" and useless lists in "Face" (*Too Much Happiness*); the "geo-morphology" in "Deep-holes" (*Too Much Happiness*); the "Ice Age" era "humps," "hollows," and "mounds" in "Wood"; the "ridges" in Verna's bathing cap in "Child's Play" (*Too Much Happiness*), and so on.

inscribes. This "geo-grapher" -- the earth -- is a never-stopping arranger, in degree more an earth-writer, a *géo-littéraire*, than even Alice Munro, even if, in kind, they are molecularly the same.

> [K]ame, or kame moraine [...] is a chocolate burgundy color on the map and is generally in blobs, not ribbons. A big blob here, a little one there. Kame moraines show where a heap of dead ice sat, cut off from the rest of the moving glacier, earth-stuff pouring through all its holes and crevices. Or sometimes it shows where two lobes of ice pulled apart, and the crevice filled in. End moraines are hilly in what seems a reasonable way, not as smooth as drumlins, but still harmonious, rhythmical, while kame moraines are all wild and bumpy, unpredictable, with a look of chance and secrets. *TVFCR*: 321

"Dead ice sat," as if it were a loner content to bide her, his or its time, separate from the homogeneous, conformist, masses of the rest of society (exactly like, in "The Shining Houses," Mary abhors the company of her conformist neighbours building identical Malvina Reynolds Pete Seeger little box houses and lawns, while having a fondness for the not always likeable Mrs. Fullerton and Mrs. Fullerton's multi-fold house). Like a fossilized loner, kames, or kame moraines, are born through and through by "earth-stuff": by "its holes and crevices," a "kame moraines" is a perpetually modifying network, rhizomatic, with subterranean frayed paths opening up, but it can also be the formation of a "crevice" by the separation of the "two lobes of ice" (the description is close to science textbook descriptions of the embryonic formation of male and female sexual organs in humans).

The Munro geo-corpus, if it is boring gravel, it is because, well, "a well is a hole in the ground" ("Nettles," *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, *HFCLM*: 185). A story about stones -- that have personalities -- from the gravel pits (*HFCLM*: 159), "Nettles" is about hitting "rock bottom." Yet at "rock bottom," there is a "cool, empty, locked and central space" (*HFCLM*: 184): a trauma, the hitting rock-bottom from having accidentally killed one's son, which prevents a man from reciprocating a woman's interest in him, to which she responds with "'It isn't fair'" (*HFCLM*: 185), eliciting from him his response: "'Well', he said, quite gently" (*HFCLM*: 185)[3]. The reply (which might come from

[3] The "well" is always beneath, a sort of footnote: The blind mother in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" says "'Well'," about Ben Jordan's missing wife, which draws the explanation from the daughter-narrator: "This is a habit of country people, old people, to say 'well', meaning, 'is that so?' with a

her, but the speaker is not identified) is that "[a] well is a hole in the ground": this "Well" (*HFCLM*: 186) is a resource, an underground flow, and language in Munro is the underground waterway that attests life, boring gravel, even when life on earth seems pointless, meaningless, boring gravel. In the story "The Love of a Good Woman," boys discover a dead man in his car under pond water, where "nettles" grow in an abandoned mill reached by a track "never" "gravelled" (*LGW*: 5). Wood planks "jutted out of the earth of the riverback" and "other straight thick boards" "stood up in the nearby water" (*LGW*: 4). In "What Do You Want To Know For?" Munro's search for a burial mound in a roadside country graveyard seen once before but difficult to re-locate subsequently, despite disposing of the most sophisticated maps, parallels and coincides with her waits between medical examinations of a lump in her breast, all of which is subtended by the most extended treatise of geology in her fourteen collections of stories, and therefore, given the isomorphism of the element of the *earth* and of the element of *language*, the most important geo-literary text also in the corpus.

This story -- it is a story, Munro tells us ("These are *stories*" *TVFCR*: x) -- is more bubbling, bubbling, toiling and troubling than even Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, insofar as nowhere more is the earth alive, a vulnerable living entity, than here: "a glacial landscape such as this is vulnerable. Many of its various contours are made up of gravel, and gravel is easy to get at, easy to scoop out, and always in demand" (*TVFCR*: 318). Munro's explanations of the Pre-Cambrian Shield recount all the different kinds of deposits, sedimentations, lakes, underground streams and flows that the back and forth moving glaciers left behind them when they receded or melted, "the advancing, stationary, and retreating ice," "withdrawing for the last time about fifteen thousand years ago. Quite recently, you might say [...] now that I have got used to a certain way of reckoning history" (*TVFCR*: 318). Seeing the mound or lump, the burial site, in a field triggers the reflection that the "countryside [is] always *springing* some sort of surprise" (318, my emphasis). Many pages after the story's opening on the variety of geological formations, above ground in the forms especially of deposits, and below ground

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little extra politeness and concern" (*DHS*: 12). In "A Trip to the Coast," "well" is shared by the old mother and the visitor: "'Oh well,' the old woman said, in the tone of one who does not meddle with anybody's private business" (*DHS*: 185); "'Well now a lot of people [...]'" and "'Well you never can tell [...]" (*DHS*: 186, 187).

in the forms of boring, flowing, springing, streaming water that channels through, but also concentrates within, the gravel (all such formations which will come back here), Munro recounts how her biopsy surgery is cancelled, retrieving the memory of a man she knew whose grave illness -- riddled with metastasized cancer -- gives one of the meanings of "boring gravely":

> I once knew a man who went into the hospital to have a little lump cut out of his neck. He put my hand on it, on that silly little lump, and we laughed about how we could exaggerate its seriousness and get him a couple of weeks off work, to go on a holiday together. The lump was examined, but further surgery was cancelled because there were so many, many other lumps that were discovered. The verdict was that any operation would be useless. All of a sudden, he was a marked man. No more laughing. When I went to see him he stared at me in nearly witless anger, he could not hide it. It was *all through him*, they said. *TVFCR*: 335

Cancerous cells bore through all the chambers, the healthy cellular units, of his body. At the very end of the story, Munro returns to the radiologist who advises against biopsy: old mammograms from many years earlier revealed the lump was already there, and its size, unchanged. Alleviated of any grave illness, besides the gravity of mortality itself, Munro reflects upon the seeming reassurance of boredom:

> No more hard edges on the days, no sense of fate buzzing around in your veins like a swarm of tiny and relentless insects. Back to where no great change seems to be promised beyond the change of seasons. Some raggedness, carelessness, even a casual possibility of boredom again in the reaches of earth and sky. *TVFCR*: 340

The "hard edges" are to all the geological ridges at the outset of the story, what the "fate buzzing around in your veins" is to its water boring through gravel. Yet there is another "boredom": the *domus* or "house" -- the world in short -- in which we think we are safe, protected, intact. There seems to be no promise of any change other than the changing seasons, as if their continuation itself would be forever, and our participation in them, also. Yet there is a change inside change. You think there is a disorderliness ("raggedness," "carelessness") that will just go on for ever, and you think you can even be bored, can even have the time to be bored with life because you think you are immortal, but there is a great change coming on, and there is an end to the ragged and careless and there is a being-bored inside boredom.

The historicity of the earth -- the fact that the earth itself writes, and writes itself, by dint of its shifts, climate changes, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, freezes, etc., not to mention its being written upon (the Pre-Cambrian Shield bears the effects of its having received two comets from outer space) -- means that it is a sedimentation of arrangements. Munro's stories set on the Pre-Cambrian Shield amply document such dislocations. They also, analogously, repeatedly register literal arrangements, the lexemes and dyslexia governing the arrangements of letters.

> During his first week at Continuation School my father heard the teacher read a poem.
>
> *Liza Grayman Olie Minus.*
>
> *We can make Eliza blind.*
>
> *Andy Parting, Lee Behinus.*
>
> *Foo Prince in the Sansa Time.*
>
> He used to recite this to us as a joke, but the fact was, he did not hear it as a joke. Around the same time, he went into the stationery store and asked for Signs Snow Paper.
>
> *Signs Snow Paper.*
>
> Science note paper.
>
> Soon he was surprised to see the poem written on the blackboard.
>
> *Lives of Great Men all remind us,*
>
> *We can make our lives sublime.*
>
> *And, departing, leave behind us*
>
> *Footprints on the Sands of Time.* "Working for a Living" (*TVFCR*: 127-128)

The dyslexia, which in fact is a dysphonia, stems from the father's hearing in the words that the teachers dictates a very different arrangement of letters than that which is read off the printed page by the teacher.

In the story "Fathers," Munro, the first person narrator recounting her girlhood recalls her friend Frances telling about her parents:

> "My father and mother used to sing in the Light Opera Society," she said. "They sang in *The Pirates of Penzance*."
>
> Lightopra-sussciety. Pirazapenzanze. I filed those words away but would not ask what they meant. If she had said them at school, in front of others, they would have been irresistible ammunition. "Fathers" (*TVFCR*: 188)

Spoken language is capable of kaleidoscopic arrangements, and the mutability of the element of language corresponds to the re-arranging capacity of the diurnal

round of geological and organic elements. In "Chance," the Wordsworthian mutability consists in constant re-arrangement:

> Rocks, trees, water, snow. These things, constantly rearranged, made up the scene six months ago, outside the train window on a morning between Christmas and New Year's. The rocks were large, sometimes jutting out, sometimes smoothed like boulders, dark gray or quite black. The trees were mostly evergreens, pine or spruce or cedar. [...] Snow sat in thick caps on top of the rocks and was plastered to the windward side of the trees. It lay in a soft smooth cover over the surface of many big or small frozen lakes. Water was free of ice only in an occasional fast-flowing, dark and narrow stream. "Chance" (*Runaway*, *R*: 51-52)

Munro's list ("Rocks, trees, water, snow") is capable of incessant shifting. "Water" already is moved from its third place to fourth place in the description, after snow. Every item is sometimes this, sometimes that, here or there, changing from tree to tree. The attempt to hold still and together in fact gives way to their shuffling: "constantly rearranged."

These re-arrangements are deeply geo-logico-literary, the entwinement of the one in the other and vice versa, a mutual imbrication which is the Ontario Geo-lithic and Geo-literary subtending this component of Munro's Canadian literature. In "Rich As Stink," rocks and letters co-habit a space of wonderment, which is the "gravel road": "Karin walked up the gravel road and wondered what was different" (*LGW*: 228). This gravel road is laid across the Pre-Cambrian Shield. The topography is its characteristic "ridges," those deposits from the glacier's to and fro movements: "The wooded ridges rose steeply on either side" of "the valley floor." Upon it, was a "trailer" in which Karin's mother had lived, near "to the store," but now nothing is there but "two holes" "where the gas tanks" of the store "had been." With her mother's boyfriend, Derek, Karin contemplates the "rock samples he had collected up on the ridges. Derek tried to steady her by telling her to look at the rocks" (*LGW*: 228-229). Looking at, into, the rocks gives way to the amazing, wonderful, rearrangement of letters:

> "Just look at them," he said. "Look into them. See the colors. Don't try too hard. Just look and wait."
>
> But what calmed her down eventually was the lettering on a cardboard box. There was a pile of cardboard boxes which Ann had packed things in when she and Derek had moved back here from Toronto, a couple of years ago. One of them had a silhouette of a toy battleship on the side, and the word DREADNOUGHT. The first part of

> the word -- DREAD -- was in red lettering. The letters shimmered as if written in neon tubing, and issued a command to Karin that had to do with more than the word's meaning. She had to dismember it and find the words inside.
>
> "What are you laughing at?" Derek said, and she told him what she was doing. The words came tumbling out miraculously.
>
> Read. Red. Dead. Dare. Era. Ear. Are. Add. Adder. "Adder" was the best. It used up all the letters.
>
> "Amazing," said Derek. "Amazing Karin. Dread the red Adder." *LGW*: 229

Red or read herring for de-sedimentation, de-structuration or deconstruction[4], the "red lettering" mandates that the confrontation with "the word" necessarily ("that *had to* do," "She *had to*") must dis-articulate, dis-arrange it. *Re*membering the *poesis* ("to do," "what she was doing") of endless metalepsis proper to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Karin uncovers syntax and arrangement as anterior to semantics. The wonder, or "amazement," is not with the verbal, semantic, unit; rather, it is with position, composition, arrangement. This dis-membering does not obliterate; it liberates, literates, releases ("words came tumbling out miraculously") from the "nought" of fixity, the note and the knot of arrangement, the ought and aught of enjoinment constituted by the nought of spacing, interval, the space in-between: "nought": Old English, *nāwiht: nā-* NO + *wiht*, creature, thing. Geometry does not measure fixity; it measures the *movements* on and in the earth (that itself does not move), something the story "Dimensions," about Mrs. Sands and quicksand, gives the measure of:

> She took the letters of whatever words her eyes lit on, and she tried to see how many new words she could make out of them. "Coffee," for instance, would give you "fee," and then "foe," and "off" and "of," and "shop" would provide "hop" and "sop" and "so" and -- wait a minute -- "posh." *Too Much Happiness, TMH*: 5

One could continue tracking, this time at the level of the re-arrangements of houses, towns, neighbourhoods, but also natural habitats, the numerous descriptions in Munro's corpus where, at the strata both of world (human, or social, constructions) and earth, the history and the historicity of re-arranging compositions are recorded. Instead, the geo-literarity of *Dance of Happy Shades* deserves attention.

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[4] "C'est une destruction, c'est-à-dire une déconstruction, c'est-à-dire une dé-structuration, c'est-à-dire l'ébranlement qui est nécessaire pour faire apparaître les structures, les strates, le système des dépôts." Derrida 2013: 34.

II. Literary Earth in *Dance of the Happy Shades*

Dance of the Happy Shades, as collection, is very alert to the earth and to the worlds that living beings establish on the earth: the opening meta-cosmic description of "Pop's Cafe" in "Thanks for the Ride" that describes the cosmos with or without creator parallel to textuality with or without authorship ("My cousin George [...] in the dark" [44-45])[5]; the earth(l)y and worldly place of the human and the animal is decisive in "Images," with "Joe" pre-figuring many other such figures in subsequent collections; the forlorn world of "Black Horse" in "A Trip to the Coast" is lost precisely because this part of the "Lakes of Muskoka" in the Pre-Cambrian Shield is not viable earth ("the place [...] of ghosts" [172]); the decisive story-commanding "inside-out" in "Boys and Girls" (111, 112) evokes how "the landscape had managed" "to turn itself inside out" when, right on virtually the same family farm, "in the big gravel pits you see hills turned into hollows" ("What Do You Want To Know For?" *TVFCR* 319); the Pre-Cambrian Shield is characterized by quarries, excavations such as the gravel pits, to wit: when Buddy Shields, in "Postcard," tries to put a shield between Clare MacQuarrie and Helen, so as to prevent a quarrel, his action as constable insists on the budding of new post-traumatic life (he insists that it will soon be "spring" [146]), and "quarry" is a homonym that means "viscera" (from Latin: *cor*, heart) but also "stone square": the wife-beating, rape-threatening, husband, Don Stonehouse, encapsulates the calcification of the heart, just as the gift (or *don*) from Clare (a car) to Helen adds meaning to the story title, "Postcard," insofar as Helen in the car at the end of the story is, as it were, post-car'd, a discard, a realization however that is far more budding and shielding for her, in the final paragraph, than anything Buddy Shields had provided her with; the "raw earth," "the raw black mountainside" (22, 29), is the material matrix in "The Shining Houses," a story about mono-cultural, suburban conformist homogeneity eradicating multi-material bio-diversity; burial and the inability to inter (i.e., to *bury*) ghosts explain the pound of prevention -- a pint's a pound the world

[5] Henceforth, all quotations without abbreviation before page number come from *Dance of the Happy Shades*. To restrict word count, long quotations are signaled by starting and ending words sandwiched around ellipsis, with page number.

around -- that besets the "Berryman's" and the "undertaker" in "An Ounce of Cure"; "The Peace of Utrecht" is structured by the oscillating relation of enclosure (in the world, in its clothes and boxes) and exposure (on the earth, vulnerably outside): the mutability of both earth and world denotes re-arranging forces of various kinds, including those dysphonic and dyslexic alterations which we've seen to be recurrent in the corpus and which give this story's title, "The Peace of Utrecht," to be heard as the part of Helen that escaped from domestic prison, *the piece of you trekked*, but also conjures up the piece of you that did not get away; indeed, if the writer in "The Office" conjures away memory by writing, "I arrange words" (74), such arrangements are perhaps nowhere so essential as in "The Time of Death," captured in the two following quotations:

> Irene and George got oxfords and Patricia got a pair she chose herself, with a strap across. She looked at them in the low mirror. 97
>
> [I]t looked like parts of his skin were coming away too. 94

What happens if you read the word "strap" in a mirror? It is spelled in reverse, giving "parts."

This deranging reversal, one of Munro's subtler palindromes, gives the rocket thrust of the story, "The Time of Death."

The description of Benny's flaying excoriated peeling away skin that exposes his flesh and prevents him from being able to live as third degree burns do when they remove the protective, enclosing skin, leaving only the raw flesh, the raw earth if you will, reads as follows:

> They stayed at Mrs. McGee's all night. They had been over there since the ambulance came. They saw Leona and Mrs. McGee and the other neighbours start to pull off Benny's clothes and it looked like parts of his skin were coming away too, and Benny was making a noise not like crying, but more a noise like they had heard a dog making after its hind parts were run over, but worse, and louder ---- (94)

This aposiopesis -- the m-dash -- far more severe than the falling window-sash that circumcises, castrates maybe, Tristram in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, separates, by a partitioning that isolates the word "parts," used twice ("parts of his skin," "hind parts"). Worse than flattened "hind parts," these "parts of his skin" that flay away cannot *not* be read when reading *occurs in the mirror*. Here, again, is the description of George, Irene and Patricia in the shoe store being bought new shoes by Mrs. McGee: "Irene and George got oxfords and

Patricia got a pair she chose herself, with a strap across. She looked at them in the low mirror." Patricia does not read, but only looks; however, we readers of text are given to read *in a mirror*: "strap" is the palindrome of "parts." The "parts" of skin that come off would be held in place by Patricia's *unconscious* fascination with the shoes that she "chose herself," "with a strap across," a strap that, in the deferring time of traumatic non-reception of the event, would strap parts, strapping back down the peeling away parts of Benny. It will be the backfiring *reversal of this reversal* that gives the multiplied sprung force to Patricia's transmogrification, worthy of Bram Stoker, at the end of the story, condensed moreover in fateful "Bram," the old scissor's man in the story, also named "Brandon," attesting the branding water stoked to boiling by the fire stove.

Rather than extend this list of the forces and forms of Munro's geo-writing in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the focus shall turn to "Walker Brothers Cowboy."[6]

"Gravely" might be, in this context, the keyword of "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (18). The story is about the emergence of a particular identity -- that of the writer -- whose *vocation* or mission is to affirm life: its event, its memory, its iteration; to affirm such life in the awareness of its double erasure (its disappearance, and its renunciation). The genesis of the writer is the definition -- acute vision or notice -- of the recorder, the archivist, as she who discovers the imperative to live and to affirm life, memory, recollection and survival, in the face of apparent misfortune, an indifferent nature and even a possibly malicious, malevolent, fate.

The image of the Walker Brothers Cowboy, like that of the Marlboro Man (the advertisement), is iconic: larger than life; of legendary, mythic, status. In that hyperbolic degree, the icon of the Walker Brothers Cowboy is more than a mere historical figure. This story that records the story of the father's heroic status ("we have our heroes in the ranks of Walker Brothers" [15]) -- in the face of adversity, disillusion, harsh fate -- surpasses the historical account of remote rural existence because it aspires to a far grander, a geological, a supra-human, a supra Holocene scale: the figure of the cowboy would defy time by being

[6] This story has long been privileged in accounts of the "Ontario Gothic" (Howells 16-19), less for any "Ontario Geo-logico-literai-lithic."

remembered like the dinosaurs or the Indians (Native Americans) are remembered beyond their absence even if their erasure is what mobilizes the attempt to remember and to record.

Consider the opening:

> After supper my father says, "Want to go down to see if the Lake's still there?" We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light, making clothes for me against the opening of school. She has ripped up for this purpose an old suit and old plaid wool dress of hers, and she has to cut and match very cleverly and also make stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful. 1

Father and mother are split here. The father is linked to the impossible and the improbable, the global, the geological, and to the fantastic, the event. What if the Lake, capitalized, were no longer there? The Lake was not always there, and it may not be there always, for always, for all time.[7] Contrarily, the mother is the patchwork, she is recycling, collage, her sewing the figure of Penelope, who is stationary, stuck and immobile, whereas the father is Ulysses, the traveller, the one who may not return, but, in this story, does, in the end.

The mother's collapse, her depression (recounted pp. 4-6), is the correlative of her manic flights of fancy, in denials of reality, both of which (fancy/ reality denial) the daughter recognizes as creative, but also as destructive (this is Munro's take generally on her own mother, see *Dear Life*, last four stories).

The mother is a figure of memory, but it is a memory frozen in the past. The frozen ice cream and the absence of a freezer in the house, figure the melting away of her past, her past pleasure. (Consider: "My mother will [...] unwanted emotion" [5]).

The entire box of ice cream is devoured in one sitting: it cannot be kept, its disappearance the metonymy of her disappeared pleasurable past, pleasure past. The mother imitates past conversations; she compulsively conjures "those days." Remembering here is specifically remembering loss. To the mother's memory, the daughter opposes simulated oblivion, as a form of freedom, avoiding the trap, the fox pens. That fear of being penned will be identical to her having taken up the pen of writing. The mother's memory here is a melancholic

[7] "What if you find it gone altogether?" asks the narrator in "Passion" (*Runaway* 161).

memory, one unable to acknowledge loss. Whence the collapse that follows when she prefers to lie down (6).

The depression or collapse or nervous breakdown is nonetheless correlated by her flights of fancy, her creative outbursts. The daughter -- i.e., the artist, the writer, the 'noticer', the recorder, the keeper of the event's impression, the celebrator of iterability -- undeniably gleans creativity from the mother's eclectic being-different or refusal to conform to mundane, conventional, standard, uniform existence which in rural Canada -- here at least -- is synonymous with anonymity, with therefore oblivion, with an absence of being-noticed, an absence therefore of leaving-a-mark.

When still a child, the daughter is the mother's art object, an artistic creation that the mother exposes in the mother's walks to the grocer's. Unlike with the father where the daughter will have an "entirely different" (5) role conferred upon her -- such role with the father consists in being a recorder of events in honor of their iterability as trace of life in the face of threats, nay, in the face of the necessity of erasure and, worse, oblivion -- with the mother, the role thrust upon the daughter is to be an object of ridicule (in the passage: "In the afternoon [...] on the street" [5]).

In this paragraph, the navy blue, the white, the hat, are colors and clothes that make her very unlike the "housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms" (and unlike Nora): the mother's clothes, proto-preppy, mark a social difference. Up to "the top of my head," the representation is not, *per se*, negative, but the middle sentence on the father changes everything. The obscene words chalked on the sidewalk already tell of sexuality, which the mother pretends not to see or to read ("does not seem to notice" [5]). This writing on the ground is an inscription on the earth that is tantamount to the words on the page that the daughter, as narrator and as virtual scriptor, is recording in the story itself, and they are the correlative of the inscription on the earth of geological movements whose deposits became the lakes. Repositories of melted ice, those lakes as reservoirs scream the entire import of the story, the imploringly testifying melting ice cream that recurs in the story. Here, as still child with mother, however, the daughter is an art object, and not an artistic subject: she is not yet a writer, a bearing witness I. More, as child, she "loathes" her name, the sign that

would be her existence. The daughter here would deny her name, a name that moreover is not given in the story (as will also not be given the mother's first name, despite the fact that all the others' names will be given).

Such, then, is the representation of the mother. We may now return to the first part of the story, the great paragraph devoted to the "Great Lakes" (the paragraph: "He tells me [...] lights of Tuppertown" [3]) in order to retrieve its problematic of inscription and erasure, prior to following the story's breakthrough ending.

Here, in the Great Lake/ Paragraph, Munro's geological geography, her writing of the earth, and her writing on the earth, and the earth as writer, are put on display. This writing *of the* earth, in the double genitive, is one of the most important features or even definitions of her art. Throughout *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and throughout the entire oeuvre, the earth as surface of inscription, and also as inscriber, is something constant. In this collection, reading must pay extreme attention to the word "earth," and to the earth as exposure, as vulnerability, as openness, to which can be opposed the world, as closure, as *en*closure, as protection. The basic problematic is the relation between mutability and stasis.

The earth is both writer and written-upon scene. Telescoping to the recent to and fro movement in "What Do You Want To Know For?" the ice "came," and "went back" "where it came from." Empiricism, impression, the Lockeian and Freudian figures of memory as a *tabula rasa* or *writing block* creased by impressing forces. The "flat land, a wide flat plain" is to the blank page what the "ice creeping down from the north, pushing deep into the low places" is to writing, redoubled by the metonymical mise-en-abyme of ice, "[l]ike *that* -- and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground where we are sitting. His fingers make hardly any impression at all and he says, 'Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power behind it than this hand has'." The inclined word, "*that*," leaned on, is the "hardly any" mark of "impression" from "spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground": the spread of writing, ice leaves a reservoir ("fingers of ice in the deep places it gouged," "ice turned to lakes"), in one word, the "Well," to be *read*; this spread is its intertextuality:

"creeping" is Kipling's original writing in *The Jungle Books*[8]; the anaphora of "and" ("And then," "and left," "and ice," "and there"), Biblical. One cannot not notice the not ice, i.e., the decapitated "Lake," become "lake," in the context of a personified "old ice cap" that is not longer there, save as inverted basin of water. To imagine the *tabula rasa*, the "wide flat plain," is "to try to see that plain before me," but, when still a girl, she is shorn ("the shore") from any share ("tiny share") in the Holocene, trapped only in the ephemeral Anthropocene, the human being's mistaking of its *world* for the *earth* ("my father," "at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only little longer than I have"). To see what is not there (to imagine), is to imagine -- as definition of presence -- the mythic *tabula rasa* before existence but also that *erasure* that is the future ("when it ends"). The modality of being present is imagining (my) anterior and posterior absence. Constant in Munro is the awareness of "dinosaurs," the pre-human, and also the fact of the future disappearance of humans, entropy, the post-human, the destruction of the planet by global warming. This awareness is the core of poetic vision. "Tranquillity," this Wordsworthian underground source,[9] signifies that "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is about the girl-become-lake, that movement of advance and retreat of the ice that writes, i.e., leaves its deposits on the earth, prolepsis of Karin in "Rich as Stink" who becomes a "continent," part "ridged," part "flattened out" (*TLGW* 253).

This very cursory gleaning of inscription here in this paragraph gives relief to the representation of Nora, at the end of the second, and long, part of the story (the passage: "'Time', says Nora bitterly [...] in the dust there" [17]). Nora does not record, inscribe, the directions in her memory; rather, her touch of the fender is the "unimaginable touch of time" with which Wordsworth finishes his sonnet "Mutability": the touch of time is the touch of death, or the touch of life, and here Nora's touching the steel fender no more can make an indelible mark than can the father impress the "rock-hard ground" upon which father and

[8] The "Giant creeper" is writing in the story "How Fear Came," and it is what puts the stripes on the original tiger. Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Books*, 143-161.

[9] "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind". William Wordsworth, "Preface," *Lyrical Ballads*, 307.

daughter were sitting. Still, she makes an "unintelligible mark in the dust there." This "there" is the "there" from the previous passage: "and there they [the fingers of ice] were today" (3). The unintelligible mark, if it is not of the order of the intelligible, which means, the eternal, the unchanging, the ideal, the realm outside time or space, the unintelligible mark is therefore the *sensible* mark. Its inscription is the ephemeral, writing in dust.

We are in a position to read the Lake, at the end of the story (the ending: "On the way home[...] by the Lake" [17-18]).

Licorice, and not ice cream, is what they are now to chew on: at this time, licorice was not the sweet red kind, but the bitter black kind. Not ice cream, licorice carries its sweet memory: "licor-ice." The perverse twist here ("dark, perverse") consists, of course, in the reference to the Catholic. Nora is Catholic, but Ben, Protestant, had to marry Protestant, and thus married his wife. The Catholic is to sensuality what stern Protestantism, and this Protestantism is Presbyterianism, is to the denial of the flesh, of pleasure. The daughter now knows ("But I know"), and this knowledge occurs in the verbal slippage from "pause" to "passes." Unlike her brother, who does not notice, just as she had, earlier, been unable to see the dinosaurs and the plain and the Indians. Nothing will remain of this episode for the brother, who, parallel to the mother not noticing the "dirty words" on the sidewalk, is the figure of erasure, of non-memory, non-(bearing)witness. The final word of the story, "Lake" in the capital, is the sign that the daughter accepts that the "lake," which she had insisted on keeping in the lower case, the non cap, the non "ice cap" as the father put it, is the "Lake," the capitalized form, the proper name. As such, she does not "loathe" the name, but rather affirms, in spite of erasure, the name of things, the temporary personification of things.

Clearly, in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the same young girl as in the story "Images," older than she is in "Images," crosses a threshold, from childhood innocence to adult experience, from childhood ignorance and non-awareness, to adult knowledge and awareness. She discovers that her father has a life away from her mother, away from his home, and that this life involves women, another woman. This learning experience for the girl is the awareness that she, the girl, might have been a completely different person, had her father had a child with

this woman and not with the girl's mother. This threshold that is crossed from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the family in which she lives to the non-family (the world of Nora) in which she might have been, is also crossed in the reverse direction, when she re-enters her family world:

> So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing *back* from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and *turning* strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it *kindly*, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your *back* is *turned*, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.
>
> When we get closer to Tuppertown the sky becomes gently overcast, as always, nearly always, on summer evenings by the Lake. 18

She re-enters orbit after an excursion that took her, and them, outside the circumference of her father's territory, outside their world into another universe. The expression "flowing back" is hard to understand on a first reading, and requires special attention in order for the imagery to be grasped here. One could mistakenly take "flowing back" to mean that the "father's life" was returning, was coming back. To "flow back" is what happens in an estuary, in a bay, in coastal rivers: the water flows back, like a tide flows back after having flowed out. The two prepositions in "back from our car" makes it almost seem that the "father's life" returns from the car, but that is not the imagery, in this passage. "Back from" needs to be read as "going backwards out the back of the car." In fact, Munro uses "back" here where the word "behind" should be used, in standard usage (*American Heritage Dictionary* 97). The imagery is in a sense literal, even if the literal reading of the image gives an instance of great pathetic fallacy. The father's life "flows back *from our car*" which means that behind the car, as the car returns home, the father's life is emitted out of the car, almost like the exhaust from the car. A very large wake is created with the "father's life" being like a huge cloud or, more precisely, an ether or even an element, the element through which one perceives the world, an ether or element that covers the entire land and sky.

This "father's life" *turns* dark and *turns* strange. As suggested, one first has to imagine the "father's life" flowing out of the back of the moving car, like a huge cloud of dust or like a gigantic human form that flows out of the rear of the

car and blankets everything that is visible. The "last of the afternoon," the crepuscule, the going down of the sun, obviously is getting darker because the descending sun makes for less light. The darkening of the end of the day, the becoming-night, is not only the becoming night of the last part of the afternoon. This darkening afternoon is the same thing as the darkening "father's life": grammatically, "darkening and turning strange" can modify, and does modify, *both* "father's life" and "the last of the afternoon," such that the pathetic fallacy is great enough to equate time itself, the day, with the father's life. The father's life filling the atmosphere and the atmosphere itself are one and the same thing, or at least, so thoroughly mixed as to make it impossible to separate the one from the other, to distinguish the one from the other.

This pathetic fallacy operates also on the word "like" in "like a landscape": the father's life becomes (like) an enchanted landscape. The "en*chant*ment" has much to do with the singing of the father, the song also filled Nora's house. The father's life has all the volume, in the sense of three-dimensional space, of the earth and sky and air, and this volume has the volume, the sound level, of a magical tune, an enchantment. Three words stand out in this description, and they reinforce the sense of a threshold being crossed, in double directions. These words are "turn," "back," and "kind." The word "back" appears in "flowing back from" but also in "once your back"; the word "turn" is in "turning strange" but also "back is turned"; and "kind" is in "making it kindly" and also "all kinds of weather." The recurrences of these words create a threshold that is crisscrossed.

The word "back" is first used as a preposition, for the word "behind," but the second use of "back" is as noun. The two instances of "back" record opposite things. The first is used for when the father's life enchants the surroundings in the way the exhaust fumes and dust clouds fill the air behind a moving car. The second is used in an opposite way. "Once your back is turned" means that one is vulnerable, can be attacked from the back, and "back turned" also means that misbehavior can happen when the person who is supposed to be watching is no longer watching. When the young girl looks at the past of her father's life, her father's life is strictly speaking enchanting, and seeing the past of her father's life makes the past world seem friendly and normal ("kindly, ordinary and familiar"). The unknown, which can be your father's life before you were born, and the

world you'll never know, becomes known when seen through the filter of how your father lived that world prior to yourself.

The word "turn" is also used in two different ways. The flowing backwards father's life turns strange, although this trope of strangeness is magical, pleasant. But when the "back is turned," that flowing backwards father's life "changes" the landscape, converts the landscape into the unknowable: "something you will never know." The words "back" and "turn" are the markers by which a reverse motion is recorded. The crossing of the threshold, whereby nature and the world became seen through the element of one's father, occurs then in the other direction, such that the landscape that had become known becomes inaccessible and unimaginable.

The word "kind" perhaps marks what is at stake. "Kind" comes from the word for "birth," "race," "species." It also means "child." The first occurrence of "kindly" makes space and time, the "landscape" and "afternoon," into something "familiar," that is, of the "family," and therefore "kindly" enables the child to identify with space and time as of her own nature, from her own father. Nature (landscape, the afternoon) is seen through her progenitor, her father. One could perhaps even say that she imagines what and who she would have been, if Nora had been her mother, instead of the woman who in the beginning of the story is described ambivalently as her mother. The second occurrence of "kind," in "all kinds of weathers," tells of something very different. The noun "kinds" means here "types, sorts, species." The words "weathers" and "distances" equally merit brief observation. The word "weather" is a homophone with "whether," itself a synonym of "if." "Whether you do this or that, whether you marry her or her, whether you marry a Protestant or a Catholic, whether you live a strict frustrated life with a woman concerned with appearances or a different life with a earthy, physical, sensual woman who likes to have a drink, to listen to music and to dance," well, whether you do the one or the other, your children will come out differently depending on whether it's the Protestant or the Catholic wife. "All kinds of weathers" tells, first of all, of all different types of climates, a late afternoon landscape that might be experienced in sunlight, in stormy rain, in freezing cold, beneath snow or the continental hot sun. Yet the expression "all kinds of weathers," in this reflection by a child upon the mother she has and the

wife her father has and also upon the mother she might have had and the former girlfriend her father had been with before, this expression, "all kinds of weathers," might be a way of saying the different sorts of children that come out of the alternative decisions one makes when one decides to marry this one and not that one. Keep in mind that "alternative," i.e., "whether this or whether that," means an "other-birth," "alter-native." This reading of "all kinds of weathers," which is based on reading words in a literary, and therefore unprove-able way, based on reading "kind" as related to birth and to child as well as reading "weather" as "whether" (where you cannot know *whether* **weather** is **weather** or *whether*: Munro's story "Spelling" makes this explicit, when recounting the senile woman who spells whatever word you say to her:

> 'Can you spell weather?'
>
> [...]
>
> 'Weather', said the old woman, She strained forward, grunting, to get the word. Rose thought she might be going to have a bowel movement. 'W-E-A-T-H-E-R'. That reminded her.
>
> 'Whether. W-H-E-T-H-E-R.'
>
> "Spelling" *Who Do You Think You Are?* 1978, 227),

this reading of "all kinds of weathers" might make us alert to the word "distances," in this story about "dances" that take place outside the circle of the father's zone. Munro would surely know that "distance" in German is "Distanz" and that "Tanz" means "dance." Dance, as metaphor for sexual intercourse, is obvious enough, and the child dancing with Nora therefore is in the utterly strange, but, like a bowel movement, pleasurable, if it's done right, position of making love with her father's former lover, or girlfriend, such that the daughter dancing with Nora is living what her father had lived with Nora. This "distance" is recorded as unimaginable, "distances you cannot imagine": the fact that one is unable, or that one should not, imagine such gaps, such separations, such distances, and such dances, and the fact that one will never know the "something" into which the "familiar" is changed, does not, however, mean that one stops trying to know or trying to imagine it. If Wittgenstein famously said, in the *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus*: "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one

must remain silent," we have to counter with the Geo-ethic of Munro. "Whereof one cannot speak or know or imagine, thereof one must write, think and conceive."

Thus, a threshold is crossed, from the unknown to the known, from the world outside the world known to the children to that world becoming known through the filter of the father. Something unknown, because outside her sphere (like sexuality), becomes thus known. Yet this threshold is also crossed in the other direction. That world that belongs to the father before the child existed and that belongs to other realities, alternative worlds in which the child would have been a different person had she lived in them, that world becomes the figure of other realities she will never have, and thus her movement encounters the unknowable. The threshold is double because the unknown becomes known, but what ultimately they come to know is that they are excluded, by nature, by definition, from staying on the other side of the threshold they seem to have reached: an alternative existence.

Because what is at stake here is seeing the unseeable, or, simply, imagination, one should return to the opening of the story (the segment: "We leave my brother [...] dirt or writing in it with a stick" [1-2]). The dance of happy shades ("shaded" [1]) is the palimpsesting movement of the paleo-ontological, the pre-Anthropocene or the pre-historic, and, contrarily, the historical: the differ*a*nce of then and now, erased in a common, complex, unequal, "cracked" time (1). Like the "*Children Playing*" (TVFCR 318), like "Child's Play" (*Too Much Happiness*), the earth and the world are created, as Heraclitus held ("Time is a game played beautifully by children," fragment 52), by "children [who] are still playing" (1). Yet even these "evening games" are "dissolving" (2). Children are geological formations ("islands"[1]); each individual is a world (every man is an island, solipsistic, solitary). Such is writing, the genesis of the world, the earth, and the writer, their display: "as I do all day, planting pebbles in the dirt or writing in it with a stick" (2).

The story, then, is about the time before imagination (and therefore before inscription, before impressions, and therefore also before memory, before the possibility of memory), and thus about a time before time, a time before anything can be remembered, which is a timeless time of non-event and non-

inscription. That problematic explains why the brother is incapable of vision: "My brother takes this for straight truth and gets up on his knees trying to see down to the Lake. 'I don't see any Baptists,' he says accusingly. 'Neither do I, son,' says my father. 'I told you, they're down in the Lake'" (7). The brother has no capacity to see the invisible, the gone, the imaginary. The father puts the Baptists not "on" the Lake, but "in the Lake." They are *in* the Lake, which means they are dissolved, they are in memory, in the reservoir.

The brother, who cannot see insofar as he does not have imaginative vision, nonetheless starts to *sing*: "'Pee, pee', *sings* my brother ecstatically" (10). The ecstasy, the ex-stasis, here is the brother's seeing what is, and not what is not. Therefore, the father insists upon seeing the invisible: "'Just don't tell your mother that', my father says. 'She isn't liable to *see* the joke'" (10). Working the invisible into the visible is a matter of art, though, and the father promises to try to integrate the invisible joke, the malicious genius of occurrence, in short, *fate*, into his song: ("'Is it in your song?' my brother wants to know. My father says no but he will see what he can do to work it in" [10]).[10] Because of this play on seeing and not seeing, and because of this major turn here, this revolution really, in the story, the next sentence inscribes the motif of "noticing" and of "turning": the daughter remarks, "I notice in a little while that we are not turning in any more lanes, though it does not seem to me that we are headed home" (10).

If the story is about imaginative vision (the mother's non-notice, and the brother's not seeing, are generally related to "see" and "look" [eight and two times, respectively, in the story]), then the word "notice" also has to be *seen* and *looked at*. In this story about seeing what's not there, the not-there inside the there, the "ice" that is not there in the "Lake," the daughter's separation from her mother consists in the fact that the mother doesn't seem to "notice," whereas, in the only other occurrence of "notice," the girl, at this precise moment of the father's "seeing" how to put the pee *not* in his song *into* it, notices. Her "notice" denotes her entrance into the imaginative vision to which she, as child by the "Lake," prior to this turn, had not yet accessed.

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[10] Sometimes, however, such elaboration requires the time of boring gravel: "'Sing', my brother commands my father, but my father says *gravely*, 'I don't know, I seem to be fresh out of songs'" (18, my emphasis)

And this is where the father leaves his "territory." They leave their known earth for unknown earth. The experience with the pee propels the father to visit his former girlfriend, she whom he could not marry, she with whom he could not have children. The entrance into this extra-territory, this almost extra-terrestrial, but more specifically this *unhomely*, this *uncanny*, place, is the entrance into vision, and hence the exchange between daughter and father reads as follows:

> Daughter: "I thought we were out of your territory."
>
> Father: "We are."
>
> Daughter: "Then what are we going in here for?"
>
> Father: "You'll see." 10

This vision is recorded when the father appears to Nora. Nora, seeing him, exclaims surprised, "'Oh my Lord God', she says harshly, 'it's you'," to which Ben Jordan responds, "'It was, the last time I looked in the mirror'" (10). Like the Lake of which one cannot be sure that it is there, unless one goes to see it, Ben Jordan might not be there, even for himself, unless he looks in to the mirror, in the *glace* if one might evoke the might of ice here ("the old ice-cap had a lot more power behind it than this hand has" (3). But looking in a mirror is not seeing oneself. It merely or mirrorly sees itself in a reflection. Similarly, as glossed earlier, when the daughter sees the Lake, capital L, she wants only to see the lake, lower-case l, until the end, when seeing the Lake, capital L, is for her not a physical perception, but always only merely a reflection upon the reservoir of things that the Lake contains and is the site, and sight, of. In a story in which Nora's mother is blind, insight is not physical vision *per se*, but a vision inside vision, or an insight into the non-present, into the in-visible, which is less absence than it is the memory that is constitutive, and therefore *de-stitutive*, of so-called pure perception, vision or sense.

Perhaps the boring gravel and literary earth of Alice Munro, like Marianne Moore's "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," enable vision of its "'green poppies'" (12).

Poppies? Green? eYes, you red-write, green poppies.

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