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Mapping the Vernacular Landscape in Alice Munro's "What Do You Want to Know For?" and Other Stories

In the autobiographical piece entitled "What Do You Want to Know For?" (*The View from Castle Rock*, 2006),¹ the narrator, whom I propose to call Munro since she refers to Sheila Laidlaw as her sister and Bob Laidlaw as her father (VCR 330), encourages her readers to read the landscape with her as she and her husband drive through the Ontario countryside with "special maps" (VCR 319).² These maps show both the usual towns, roads and rivers, and geological features of the Ontario countryside. With the maps, Munro points to visible features of the landscape and conjures up the hidden features of the glacial landscape the maps help her to identify; she describes actual landscape and recalls absent landscape. In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari oppose tracing (*le calque*) and the map: "what distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real."³ As she reads her maps and the landscape, claiming to uncover realities or pointing to disregarded features, it is soon quite clear that Munro is not simply depicting a landscape; she is instead engaging in an experimentation *in contact* with the real. In spite of the emphasis on the trope of the journey with a map that suggests one can read and interpret the landscape, Munro does not engage in any realistic description of the landscape in "What Do You Want to Know For?" For Munro, who describes kame moraines as "wild and bumpy with a look of chance and secrets" (VCR 321), acts as a "geomancer,"⁴ one who composes the landscape as she maps it. Mapping is a

creative activity, where memory and imagination occupy center stage. The map, Deleuze and Guattari insist, “fosters connections between fields.”⁵ As she maps the landscape, Munro is also exploring connections, such as a character’s connection with space, and through space, the past, either her personal past or her family’s. To understand the landscape that Munro is mapping, I will refer to the concept of the “vernacular landscape” developed by American geographer John Jackson. Jackson bemoaned the fact that most of the interest in landscape studies had focused on few spaces, such as national parks or New England colonial villages, disregarding the rest of the landscape, spaces of “humbler, less permanent, less conspicuous sort.”⁶ Such spaces compose the “vernacular landscape,”⁷ one that is inhabited by communities working the land, and one that was subject to rapid changes in uses and shapes, “leaving no monuments, only abandonment of signs of renewal.”⁸ I propose to use “What Do You Want to Know For?” as an entryway into the landscape of Munro’s fiction since, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the map is “open and connectable” and “always has multiple entryways.”⁹ Specific loci such as houses, cemeteries and swamps will be considered and their respective qualities as loci of time will also be investigated, in stories such as “White Dump” (*PL*), “Passion” (*R*), and “Visitors” (*MJ*). I propose to show that mapping the landscape is for Munro a means to trace connections to the past, and a means to recover lost traces, connections and stories. It is also a means for her to assert that secrets are not to be revealed and gaps are not to be closed or filled. In Munro’s fiction, as “A Wilderness Station” (*OS*) demonstrates, there is no such thing as a fixed version of a story or even a fixed memory.

<1> The vernacular landscape

In “What Do You Want to Know For?” the narrator points to specific features of the Ontario landscape, “the countryside that we think we know so well” (*VCR* 318), with the help

of “special maps.” The remark reads as a warning, since “we,” which refers to the narrator and her husband, can also have a more generic meaning, suggesting that the narrator is already encouraging readers to look beyond what they assume they are familiar with. Furthermore, the narrator asks her readers to look at these maps: “Look at just one map—a section of Southern Ontario south of Georgian Bay” (*VCR* 319). She suggests that deciphering the landscape is easy, as the maps provide codes and clues: for instance kame moraine is a burgundy color on the map. The trope of the map is central to the story, not as a key to reading the landscape, but because it is meant to “foster connections.”¹⁰ In Deleuze and Guattari’s reading, the map does not simply reproduce space, it produces spatial articulations. Pursuing their definition of the map, James Corner insists that mapping “discovers new worlds within past and present ones” and that the agency of mapping “lies in neither production or imposition but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds.”¹¹ The maps seem to enable the narrator to do this as she points to hidden features such as drumlins, eskers, or kame moraines. The narrator also reveals the workings of the glacier, the hidden forces and dynamics—the rivers, the torrents, the huge channels that carried the meltwater—that shaped the landscape as it is today. She insists on her pleasure at recognition and identification, at her being able to see “these little countries lying snug and unsuspected ... in a landscape that’s usually disregarded, or dismissed as drab agricultural counterpane” (*VCR* 322). However, neither the comparison to the counterpane nor the geological clues that are given mean that Munro will explain the landscape for her readers. The very essence of the map means that any reader of a map is also mapping space, producing his or her spatial articulations of disparate phenomena and creating new realities. The map, in Deleuze and Guattari’s reading, is open and connectable in all of its dimensions, it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. In “What Do You Want to Know For?” Munro as narrator maps the

landscape, and points to features that suggest that it is reversible. She draws attention to gravel pits—a recurring locus in Munro’s fiction¹²—and more specifically to the fact that these are hills turned into holes: “in the big gravel pits you could see hills turned into hollows, as if a part of the landscape had managed, in an haphazard way, to *turn itself inside out*” (VCR 319, my emphasis). The kame moraine too is a hole, but one that has been turned into a hill since “it can show where two lobes of ice pulled apart, and the crevice filled in” (VCR 321). Each time, with the modal verb and the verbs (“see,” “show”), Munro also places the emphasis on one’s capability to see things. The focus on reversible landscape is to be understood in connection with her own poetics. Two stories from *Friend of My Youth* show this. In “Five Points,” attention is drawn to the caves and mines that exist under the surface of the lake, invisible to most people: “caverns and pillars, miles out under the lake[,] ... all that underneath, which nobody who hasn’t seen it could imagine” (FY 48). In “Oh, What Avails,” the main protagonist is invited to look at frazil ice, ice structures that actually point to the deep holes under the surface in a river (FY 199). As soon as the narrator of “What Do You Want to Know For?” describes the kame moraines as “wild with a bumpy look of chance and secrets” (VCR 321) or points to the fact that holes were hills, it is clear that Munro is acting as a geomancer, composing a reversible landscape that challenges any opposition between the visible and the invisible, depths and surfaces. Describing the maps, the narrator repeatedly refers to “strokes” (VCR 320-321), suggesting she is composing the landscape as she reads the map. As she draws connections between symbols on the map and features in the landscape she also suggests connections between landscape and body, through animal and human imagery: the maps show “fat or skinny tails” of blue and orange (VCR 319) and a “cluster of freckles” (VCR 319), which in the landscape “appear like partly buried eggs” (VCR 320), and mountain ranges are called “dragon’s backs” (VCR 320). A deep connection is inscribed between the unusual burial mound she once noticed, “a large, *unnatural* mound

blanketed with grass” (VCR 316, italics added) and the lump that has been discovered in her body. Munro uses the adjective “lumpy” to describe clay fields (VCR 320) and the adjective “unnatural” to describe the mound, displacing the possibly malignant lump onto the landscape and erasing the difference between human body and landscape. Then, as Ventura argues, Munro reverses the opposition between life and death as she turns the lump into “a fertile cavity”:¹³ not only have the hills been turned into hollows, but there, “*clumps* of tough flowering weeds” grow (VCR 319, italics mine). Ventura proposes that this reversal enables Munro to turn the hill-like hole into “the site of her refoundation of the world from an original matrix” so that she composes a “landscape of origins.” The comparison of the drumlins to eggs is expanded into an image of fertility as the narrator notes “the glacier did lay them down like eggs” (VCR 320).

The narrator’s interest in geology turns into a quest for genealogy¹⁴ in this story and in the collection. She draws attention to the landscape that is no more, explaining that the Ontario landscape “is a record of ancient events” (VCR 318), and she conjures up the glacial lakes. These she calls the “*ancestors*” of the Great Lakes (VCR 321, italics mine) while a creek is said to be “a *direct descendant*” of an ancient river (VCR 320, italics mine). The vocabulary from genealogy shows connections between the landscape and Munro’s interest in her lineage and family history, as evidenced in the collection. Furthermore, the comparison between Ontario’s agricultural landscape and a “drab” “counterpane” (VCR 322) echoes Del Jordan’s description of ordinary people’s lives as “dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (LiGW 249). A connection can be drawn between ordinary lives and ordinary houses and landscape.

Recalling that the words “landscape” and “countryside” used to refer to “a cluster of small, temporary, crudely measured spaces which frequently changed hands and even changed in shape and size,” and to communities of common people working the land, and

that the word “vernacular” is used to describe local forms of speech art and culture, the American geographer John Jackson suggested that “there can be such a thing as a vernacular landscape.”¹⁵ Its defining features are not only the small size of its spaces, but the fact that they are subject to changes in use, ownership and dimension, and that people who live there are organized in communities governed by custom, and held together by personal relationships. For Jackson, the settlement of Anglo-Americans produced a colonial version of the Medieval vernacular landscape, which is also true of Canadian settlement, as ordinary people cleared the bush and shaped the landscape according to their uses. Jackson insisted that to interpret a landscape, one needs to see the ordinary activity of ordinary people.¹⁶ The vernacular landscape evolves through use by the people whose activities shape it and it reflects the physical, biological, and cultural character of those everyday lives. I would like to suggest that the landscape presented in *The View from Castle Rock* is a vernacular landscape. Gravel pits that suggest a reversible landscape also evidence human activity, as the narrator remembers that her father sold the gravel from their pits. The collection provides Munro with an opportunity to recall her hard-working family and her pioneer ancestors who worked the land. In “What Do You Want to Know For?” the journeys unexpectedly lead to a meeting with a man who knew her family when they worked on a turkey farm. The meeting makes her happy because it has provided her with a “connection” (VCR 331), to the family and the place where they worked: “someone who can remember my father and the place where my parents worked and lived for all of their married lives” (VCR 332). It is the verb “worked” which encourages me to propose that in the collection, one of Munro’s aims is to map a vernacular landscape, enabling her to inscribe the presence of ordinary people in the landscape of Southern Ontario, over several decades and centuries. Several stories from *The View from Castle Rock* illustrate this attempt. “Working for a Living” describes the working lives of the narrator’s parents and grandparents, and their relationship to the land (the farm in the bush as

well as the fur farm). “The Wilds of Morris Township” records the presence of her family in the Ontario region, as they worked on the Huron Tract. The landscape that is conjured up in this story is very similar to the American vernacular landscape Jackson identifies, as he underlined that what survived of this early colonial vernacular landscape was “its mobility, its adaptability, its preference for the transitory and the ephemeral.”¹⁷

Jackson also asserted that the vernacular landscape by essence, as work on the land, implied changes: it kept “changing from generation to generation, leaving no monuments, only abandonment or signs of renewal.”¹⁸ In “What Do You Want to Know For?” the narrator draws attention to one township where “you are *reminded* of what the crop fields everywhere used to look like before the advent of the big farm machinery” (*VCR* 326, italics mine), suggesting that memory plays a creative role when mapping the landscape. Yet she also draws attention to changes and absence. She does the same in the epilogue as she notes the removal of countless houses and farms, leaving the lilac bushes the only survivors and signs that “people have ever lived there” (*VCR* 344). She also lists the family houses that have disappeared: the log house the Laidlaw boys built in Morris Township, the house her father was born in, the house her grandmother lived in as a child, which reveals her desire to recover the traces of what has gone. The fact that such remarks occur in the epilogue suggests that the collection as a whole has served to map the presence of the vernacular landscape, and has inscribed the presence of the people who lived and worked there.

However, the motif of the quest encompasses a larger family history and some of the stories recapture the history of the family as settlers and immigrants. These stories interweave family stories, recorded testimonies, memoirs, and words recorded on stone—on graves. Although “The View from Castle Rock” mainly recounts the crossing of James, Andrew, Walter, Mary, Agnes and James Laidlaw from Scotland to Canada in 1818, the story leads to Andrew’s former farmland, part of which was given, or sold, to the community, which built a

church there. The immigrants (but one) were buried in the graveyard next to the church and the narrator notes that their names are faithfully recorded. “The Wilds of Morris Township” tells the story of the settlement of the Laidlaw cousins (including Munro’s direct ancestor) in the mid-1850s. The narrator then picks up the story to conclude that the body of the brother who died there was eventually moved to Blyth Cemetery. In “What Do You Want to Know for?” the quest leads to burial mounds, a cemetery and tombs that recall the presence of German immigrants and evoke burial practices dating from pre-Christian times in Central Europe, which gives the story a wider scope, both in space and time. The maps have served to help foster unexpected, unpredictable connections which for the narrator are recorded on stone, in the numerous cemeteries that are evoked in the collection. French philosopher Michel Foucault explains that until the end of the eighteenth century, the cemetery was connected to the locations of the society, the village, but then cemeteries became places of exclusion and were relegated to the outskirts of the city: “when people were no longer so certain of survival after death, it became logical to take much more care with the remains of the dead, the only trace, in the end, of our existence in the world and in words.”¹⁹ In “Messenger,” the narrator goes to Joliet, near Chicago, in an attempt to find “some trace” (VCR 344) of her ancestor William Laidlaw whose story she told in “Illinois.” The nominal phrase “looking for a grave, a memory” (VCR 346) suggests she is attempting to recapture and record stories, which the rest of the narrative shows. The quest leads her back to the cemetery in Blyth where she finds William’s name, although he was not buried there, and the family’s attempt to record his name and existence is echoed by the narrator’s own endeavor when she mentions the names she has been “recording” (VCR 348). She has attempted a re-recording, a re-writing, from stone to print, from the cemetery to the space of the story. In the stories, cemeteries are not places of exclusion, but of inclusion and connections. In “Messenger,” the narrator finds names on the tombs, which encourages her to list or “record”

the names of her ancestors and to see that they are “joined to the living people in [her] mind” (*VCR* 348). The cemeteries in Ontario’s vernacular landscape are joined to the churchyard in Ettrick valley whose discovery is narrated in “No Advantages,” the first story of the collection. There the narrator found the names of William Laidlaw, her “direct ancestor” (*VCR* 6) known as Will O’Phaup, of his daughter Margaret, of her husband and of their son, the writer James Hogg, who was, she notes, “Will O’Phaup’s grandson.”²⁰

As “Messenger” and “The View from Castle Rock” make it clear, the cemetery connects with yet another space, which is also a heterotopia according to Foucault—the ships that brought the narrator’s ancestors on her father’s side from Scotland to Huron County, an episode which is reported at length in “The View from Castle Rock.” The story of the family’s immigration is simultaneously inscribed on the surface of the cemetery, the sea as well as the page with the final image that conjures up the sea and her ancestors. The narrator remembers a house with a “magic door stop,” a seashell, which enabled her to hear “the tremendous pounding of my own blood, and the sea” (*VCR* 349). The shell as door stop has magical powers, it prevents the door from closing and so prevents separation from the past; it also enables her to recall and remember her connection to her immigrant ancestors, as Munro clearly plays on the polysemy of blood.

<1> Loci of time

The motifs of the quest and the journey are prominent in “What Do You Want to Know For?” as the narrator and her husband drive through the Ontario countryside. Paradoxically, the place where the narrator’s own family lived, her home, which the people she meets evoke, is the one place that she will not revisit although it is only twenty miles away. The narrator claims that the past “needs to be approached from a distance” (*VCR* 332) and the quest for a house is a favorite way of doing so, and a recurrent trope in Munro’s

fiction; stories such as “Nettles” (*HFCLM*) and “Passion” (*R*) are variations on the theme of approaching the past “from a distance” by looking for a house. “Passion” opens with a quest for a house which the main character visited as a young woman (*R* 159); in “Nettles,” the narrator explains that she has driven around the hills northeast of Toronto looking for a house “in an idly persistent way” (*HFCLM* 156). Both opening pages apparently suggest that finding the house is something that matters for the character, as if it were a ritual to go through, an entryway into the past. In “Passion” the past is the summer Grace spent working at a hotel in the Ottawa valley, when she met Maury Travers and his family, who often invited her to their summerhouse, and the house stands for that summer. The house the narrator of “Nettles” is looking for is a friend’s house, where some years earlier she accidentally met again her childhood love, who was staying there at the same time as she was. However, Munro reverses traditional visions and expectations of a house as a solid space as some of her houses prove to be sites of deterritorialization. In “Nettles,” the house cannot be found again while in “Passion,” Grace finds that the house has not been preserved but has changed a lot. The story challenges and reverses the character’s expectation as the narrator claims that “maybe the worst thing would have been to get just what she might have thought she was after. ... Perfect preservation, the past intact” (*R* 161). The second occurrence of “might” referring to Grace’s desire serves to challenge the first one which could have suggested that the changes in the house would make recovering the past difficult. On the contrary, the fact that the house has not been preserved, resulting in the consequence that the past is not “intact,” is precisely what frees Grace from “confusions” and “obligations” towards the past (*R* 161). The fact that the house has changed enables her to not simply remember the past but to introduce “variations”: “[h]er memory of this day remained clear and detailed, though there was a variation in the parts of it she dwelled on (*R* 182). Furthermore, Grace’s memories are then said to have been “wrong” and “hardly

distinguishable” from her fantasies (*R* 182, 183). Although it is solid space, the house serves as a figure of deterritorialization. It is both punctual (it has been found) and trajectorial; it serves as a prelude, and evokes the house that used to be, as soon as the actual house is mentioned; it is replaced with Grace’s recollections and musings which will enable the narrator to retrace Grace’s “lines of flights” in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms,²¹ such as the wild car ride in “Passion.” At first sight the story depicts the romance between Grace and Maury, who falls in love with Grace and asks her to marry him. Yet, although they spend a lot of time together, nothing much happens between them, as the narrator points out: “This was the thing that had not happened” (*R* 173). Nothing happens either when Neil takes Grace for a ride, although there is sexual tension between them. The reader might wonder why Grace looks for the house or tries to remember that summer as it seems that nothing happened. The car ride however is the moment when, as the wind gives her “the illusion of constant speed, perfect flight” (*R* 183), Grace understands, rather than decides, that her planned future—marriage to Maury, which in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, is a line of rigid segmentarity—will never happen. Such moments when something happens although it might be unknowable or unsubstantial, define the novella as a genre for Deleuze and Guattari who see “lines” as the key components: “the novella is defined by living *lines*, flesh lines, about which it brings a special revelation.”²² Munro has called this “special revelation” an “accidental clarity” (*FY* 243). Both Grace and the narrator of “Nettles” envision “passion” on lines of flight, which are represented by the car ride in “Passion” (as opposed to the rigid pattern on the chairs Grace was trained to cane), and the imaginary marks on the narrator’s and Mike’s bodies in “Nettles.” Deleuze and Guattari argue that in the novella “everything is organized around the question, ‘What happened? Whatever could have happened?’”²³ although nothing might have happened, which both “Passion” and “Nettles” illustrate. The quest for the house is a ritual for the character and serves as a pre-text, a prelude to the telling

of the story. It is positioned at the entryway into the past, which can only be recaptured thanks to imagination as well as memory.

In contrast to the construction of the house as a figure of deterritorialization, there are some houses that do connect a character to her past, such as the family house in “White Dump” (*PL*), once the power of such houses as “loci of time” has been established. First, the changes the house has undergone are underlined. “White Dump” opens with derogatory remarks made by the woman who now lives in her husband’s family house as she points to the changes she has introduced and evokes the house as it used to be. The changes upset Denise, her step-daughter, who used to visit her grandmother there, and although Denise, by her own admission, could see that her grandmother’s house was in bad repair and full of “junk” (*PL* 275), she liked its cave-like rooms and smell of damp, the lumpy cushions she would hug, her grandmother’s unmatched plates and cracked saucers, and the books her grandmother had as a child. Denise’s intimate connection with the house did not include a vision of the house as something to be decorated or arranged. If the house was full of “jumble” (*PL* 278), it was meaningful jumble, while Denise’s stepmother has artistically displayed “calculated” jumble (*PL* 276), which upsets Denise. For her part, the narrator of “Home” notices that the books that used to lie all over the house have been “collared” by her father’s wife and put away inside a bookcase (*VCR* 291). As in Denise’s grandmother’s house, order has been imposed upon what looks like chaos; in other words, both women deprived each house of its meaning. In Denise’s eyes, the jumble was made up of “remainders” that are “reminders” of people and events that took place there, as is suggested by the narrator of “Oh, What Avails” who notes that in the family house, “reminders are all around” (*FY* 183). The resemblance between the words “remainders” and “reminders” suggests that for those who care, remainders (discards and jumble) are reminders of people’s lives. These remainders/reminders recall some of the rubbish heaps/dumps in Munro’s

fiction, such as the rubbish dump Russell is fascinated by in “Lying under the Apple Tree” (VCR). They show that Munro engages in composing her own “Carnaval des objets délaissés,”²⁴ to borrow the title of a painting by Canadian artist Paul-Émile Borduas. The discarded or forsaken objects Russell discovers and examines in the dump (VCR 208) serve the same function as the jumble in Sophie’s house in “White Dump,” even though in “Lying Under the Apple Tree” the existence of the people that the discards evoke has to be imagined rather than remembered. The informal rubbish heap as well as the jumble in the family houses recall Munro’s interest in the “disregarded” (VCR 322), which would include ordinary people’s lives as they are evoked at the end of “Messenger,” when the narrator recalls items such as cans, apples, oil-lamps, wooden drainboards, and stoves as well as animals and coffins that testify to people’s lives, activities and deaths.

Although they are full of rejects, the rubbish heaps and dumps suggest inclusion rather than exclusion. As Robert McGill has argued, they bear resemblance with the *Mundus*, the pit or rubbish dump in the middle of Italy’s Greek towns that Henri Lefebvre analyzes in *The Production of Space*.²⁵ Like the family houses, Munro’s rubbish heaps or dumps are “loc[i] of time,” they include the past and the present. The *Mundus*, Lefebvre explains, was a pit, and was “‘deep’ above all in meaning, it *connected* the city, the space above ground, land as soil and land as territory, to the hidden, clandestine, subterranean spaces which were those of fertility and death, of the beginning and the end, of birth and burial.” The *Mundus* / *immundus* was thus both a hole and a whole, and it “encompassed the greatest foulness and the greatest purity, life and death, fertility and destruction.”²⁶ The swamp that serves as a refuse dump in “Meneseteung” is one such locus: “Bushy and luxuriant weeds grow there, ... there are piles of refuse and debris and crowds of runty children” (FY 55-56). As the syndeton shows, Munro envisions fertility and death together in the swamp, and it is no coincidence that the former swamp is located on Pearl Street, so that it is referred to as the

“Pearl Street Swamp.” It is also the place where the main protagonist will come into contact with the body of a woman, which will then disrupt the course of her life and change her vision of her poetry at the very moment when she understands the (disturbing) power of her own female body.

The *Mundus* was also a passage way, not just a point of entry but of exit too: not only was trash (including dead bodies) cast into it, it also provided a way out through which dead souls could return to the bosom of the earth.²⁷ In Munro’s fiction, the swamp may also play the role of an entryway or way out. “Visitors” (*MJ*), which describes a visit by two couples to the place where the men’s family house once stood, conjures up one such place. The swamp lies in the middle of the “conservation area” that the characters discover when they drive to Hullett Township. The Hullett “conservation area” in “Visitors” offers a variation on the “nature preserve,” the heterotopia which is the central location of “Vandals” (*OS*). The latter is an enclosed space which aims to recreate an ordered version of the natural world and has the function of forming another space, “another real space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state.”²⁸ The nature preserve in “Vandals” is also a world where everything is fake (the cases display stuffed animals), as fake as the “calculated jumble” that Denise’s stepmother has placed in the family house. It is a place that welcomes few visitors, and, since the creator of the preserve will prove to be a pedophile, it is also a very sinister and dangerous place. It is bordered by a swamp, a liminal space that also features predominantly in “Visitors.”

The conservation area in “Visitors” is nowhere as sinister as the nature preserve in “Vandals”; yet, as the title of the story suggests, it turns the men who used to live there into mere visitors if not intruders. There seems to be no-one in the conservation area when the protagonists drive there, and topography and signs are less than inviting. One of the signs clearly signals problems when they arrive: “dead end” (*MJ* 210). When they reach the end of

the road, the characters fail to see any trails although the leaflets in the box under the arrows promise trails. Furthermore, one of the women, Mildred, notices that the wooden arrows all point in the same direction. “Visitors” also questions the purpose of the conservation area, since the swamp has been partly drained (as Albert who used to live there notices), but more importantly, the nature project has entailed the destruction of the brothers’ ancestral home: not a stone, not a trace is to be found. It has caused the destruction of the farm where people lived, worked and died, it has removed every trace of their occupation, and of the farm; as the brothers remark, the conservation people “don’t leave you much” (*MJ* 212). The so-called “conservation area” destroys the vernacular landscape by removing traces of human occupation.

However, the Hullet area still contains a liminal space that challenges the re-organization of nature that has been attempted since part of the swamp has not been drained. After they leave the place, Albert, who has so far been silent, suddenly tells his family a story: as a child, he heard of a man who “went into the Hullett Swamp and remained here” (*MJ* 213). The story, with its mysteries, appeals to both Mildred and Wilfred who ask Albert numerous questions about it. As Albert tells the story, he recovers his connection to the space and its story tellers, by explaining “that’s what they said” (*MJ* 213). He is thus taking on the role of story teller, passing on the story, connecting his own story telling to a local tradition. The story, as he tells it, turns the swamp into a haunted locus; the man remained there and stories started about him and continued to be told, probably long after he was dead. The swamp turns out to be a breeding ground; it is not a breeding ground for birds as promised, but more importantly, it becomes a breeding ground for ghost stories. In “Meneseung” a vision of the Pearl Street Swamp as fertile ground for stories is suggested when the narrator remarks “Pearl Street ... is another story” (*FY* 55). The swamp is both present and past, both real and imaginary: it was drained and turned into a rubbish dump but survives in the name of

the street. In “Visitors,” the present smaller swamp evokes the one that used to be and that Albert remembers. The swamp becomes the most important place in the story, replacing the house that has been destroyed as the locus of time since its role is to foster connections. Mildred and Wilfred ask the storyteller questions, which breaks the silence between the brothers. Furthermore, the story stays with them and the couple wonder about it when they are alone. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, we might say that another line of flight has opened which will probably disrupt the course of the brothers’ parallel rigid lines. The story of the man who disappeared in the swamp will provide what has been missing so far, a connection between the brothers who had long been separated—Mildred describes the brothers as “without a thread of connection between them” (*MJ* 212). Providing such a thread, creating the connection was probably Mildred’s intention when she suggested that the family drive to Hullet Township to look for the family farm. There, however, it is not the (absent) house that provides the connection but the swamp and the stories it has engendered. Recovery of the connection in Munro’s fiction can therefore happen through unexpected, if not unlikely spaces such as swamps that become loci of time.

<1> The snow-covered landscape (“A Wilderness Station”)

I would like to turn to a recurrent feature of Munro’s landscape, that is snow, in order to show that although it evidences her interest in the vernacular landscape and its changes, Munro does not use snow as a realistic element but as material as she composes her landscape. Snow is used as artistic material in stories such as “Fits” (*PL*) or “Pictures of the Ice” (*FY*). It also plays a role in “The Bear Came over the Mountain” (*HFC*) when the male protagonist, who is on his way to a nursing home to visit his wife, notices changes in the landscape, or more precisely his vision changes the landscape: “plenty of snow was left but the dazzling hard landscape of earlier winter had crumbled. These pocked heaps under a gray

sky looked like refuse on the fields” (*HFC* 288). The transformation of dazzling snow into refuse heaps reveals how Grant displaces his own affects onto the landscape, including his fears about his wife’s rapid deterioration. As she approaches the house where she was abused as a child, Liza, one of the main protagonists in “Vandals,” notices that trees are “clotted” with snow, and that the swamp, a “long smudge” on the horizon, “was choked with snow” (*OS* 277). Munro often composes an anthropomorphic landscape through human imagery, drawing connections or creating displacements between affects and landscape; here the word “choked” is the first clue that is given about Liza’s feelings and the weight of her secret and silence. In “Fits” Munro suggests that instead of being an element in the landscape, the snow can change the landscape, or more precisely, *compose* it: “the snow *created* its own landscape (*PL* 127, my italics). In Munro’s fiction snow is usually both the instrument through which secrets are concealed *and* revealed or, in Ventura’s words, “snow ... is the instrument through which traces are simultaneously destroyed and defined.”²⁹ In stories such as “Winter Wind” or “My Mother’s Dream,” snow covers the landscape and its landmarks, concealing much but as the narrator of “Trespases” suggests, snow has the power to reveal things: “snow ma[kes] things visible” (*R* 222).

I believe that “A Wilderness Station” (*OS*) illustrates Munro’s talent as a “geomancer,” as Robert McGill has it, at is relies on her most skillful use of snow as material in order to serve her narrative purposes, and foregrounds connections between local history, family history and landscape. The story is indeed linked to Munro’s interest in family history, as “The Wilds of Morris Township” (*VCR*) shows that the source or blue-print of “A Wilderness Station” was the memoir written by a Munro ancestor, (Big) Rob Laidlaw, who was the son of Munro’s grandfather’s cousin (and Munro’s father’s namesake). In Big Rob Laidlaw’s account, which features in “The Wilds of Morris Township,” his cousins John and James and himself were cutting down trees to build a house when a branch hit James, killing

him. Although it departs from the blue print, as it contains the suspicion of foul play and eliminates the cousin's role, "A Wilderness Station" is based on these men's hard lives and serves to inscribe family history into the vernacular landscape, all the more so as the final section of the story (which takes place in 1907) records changes in the town of Carstairs. The woman who goes back there some fifty years after she left fails to recognize the landmarks she expected; for instance the bush has disappeared and "big fields" have replaced it (*OS* 219).

Secondly, "A Wilderness Station" is also a story that offers yet another version or vision of history, as Munro inquires into Canada's colonial history, focusing on the "eccentric, liminal, unwritten pasts of women's lives"³⁰ with the character of Annie Herron, a girl who leaves the House of Industry in Toronto to be married to a settler in the bush, finds her way to jail after the death of her husband, and spends most of her life as a sewing-woman in a rich man's family. The story opens with a letter from the matron of Toronto's House of Industry, which writes off Annie's fate as either a seamstress or a wife. Then, her departure from her farm and her arrival in Walley trigger literature too: she is the object of a flow of letters between the minister and the Clerk of the Peace. Eventually, her visit back to Huron County is recorded in a letter Christena Mullen writes to a history professor. Annie's story is both written for her (by male authority, a minister, a clerk of the peace, a doctor) and by her (in a secret letter to a friend and through the stories she told the Mullen children).

However, as Adrian Hunter argues, it is impossible to define the story in these terms. "A Wilderness Station" resists interpretation and my contention is that snow plays a crucial role in this, blurring boundaries and vision, concealing *and* revealing monstrous secrets, since in Munro's stories, snow makes things visible. Yet snow introduces confusion as new layers cover previous layers—in the same way as new accounts of a mysterious death cover and cancel out previous versions. The main feature of the story is that it contains several versions

of the death of Annie's husband in the bush as he and his brother George were chopping down a tree. These versions, including Annie's own statements, contradict one another. In these accounts, there is a notable emphasis on snow. At first sight snow seems to be used as part of a realistic background, in a depiction of pioneer life. It seems to emphasize the settlers' trials as they clear the bush in the 1850s: snow hampers the Herron brothers' work as they clear their land. Furthermore, a snow storm prevents George and Annie from getting out for several days after Simon's death and from sending for a priest, thus forcing them to bury the corpse next to the shanty—in the minister's words, George and Annie "were held prisoner" by the snowstorm (OS 198). However, my contention is that snow is *instrumental* to the narrative—it forces George and Annie to bury the dead body, which also prevents it from being examined. In other words, as Annie's first account to the clerk of the Peace suggests, it helps them to conceal evidence of any wrongdoing. According to Annie's secret letter to her friend, snow is instrumental in bringing about a crisis between Annie and George as the blizzard that rages against the house seems to foster passions inside. Every account agrees on the fact that there was a crisis which led to Annie's leaving the shanty. Furthermore, snow constantly disturbs and blurs vision. It has erased traces; in his published account, George notes that his tracks were filled with snow, which hampers his progress back home, while Simon's snow-covered body confuses Annie who mistakes it for a log. Most importantly, snow serves to both hide and reveal the truth. In one of Annie's accounts (her confession to the clerk of the peace), snow is instrumental in *erasing* the trace of murder, because she uses snow to wash away the traces of blood on the stone, while in her second account (her secret letter to her friend Sadie), snow is instrumental in *revealing* the way Simon died: as the snow on his body thaws, blood appears, prompting Annie to turn the body over and see the gash left by George's axe.

In this story, as in “Fits,” snow turns ordinary objects into monstrosities. In Annie’s second version of Simon’s death, the snow which both covers and invades his body also turns it into the site of a horror story. Simon’s mouth “was part way open with snow in it” (*OS* 208), his eyes were open and Annie claims she “had to look in his eyes and mouth” (*OS* 209), and that the dead man’s eyes are watching her. Such description of the dead man’s face irresistibly evokes Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of a face as a “white wall/black hole system” and as “a horror story” in the chapter of *A Thousand Plateaux* entitled “Year Zero: Faciality.” Deleuze and Guattari posit that the face is a “white wall/black hole system” since it is at the intersection of two axes or strata, that of signification and subjectification. So is the landscape, since it is the correlate of the face. The face “constructs” and “constitutes” the wall of the signifier and “digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through.”³¹ In her secret letter, it is the vision of her husband’s face that seems to trigger Annie’s response to his death, as if her emotions, desires, fears came to surface through the black hole. Since the white wall/black hole system—whether a face, a facialized body, or a landscape—exudes a strong force of “capture,”³² the vision of Simon’s face may also be what imprisons Annie, who complains about her terrible dreams.

For the reader, the black hole exerts its force of capture too, as the indeterminacy of the story regarding Simon’s death and the conflicting versions encourage even more questions about Annie’s possible madness, or possible abuse by her husband and by George. In Munro’s story, the snow-covered landscape as a black and white system “constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of it.”³³ The conflicting versions of Simon’s death and the fact that the content of Annie’s conversation with George when she goes back to Carstairs is never known, encourage and challenge the reader’s efforts at interpretation and her attempts to discover the truth. Critics have forcibly argued in favor of this or that version, and therefore disagreed on how to interpret the story and on which

version of events to consider as true. Thus, while Ildikó de Papp Carrington argues that the versions given in Annie's secret letter to her friend Sadie cannot be believed,³⁴ Isla Duncan finds that it is in this letter that Annie tells the truth about Simon's death³⁵. A 2002 adaptation of "A Wilderness Station" by Canadian film-maker Anne Wheeler, which opens with Annie's difficult progress through the snow-covered landscape, tries to *reconcile* the conflicting versions: Annie's letter to Sadie (which is read by Mullen) reveals that she saw evidence on Simon's body proving that George killed him, *and* that she herself hit the body with stones. The film presents Annie's point of view (through flashbacks and her letter to Sadie), and her version is validated at the end of the film, when George meets Annie at his wedding. The viewer supposes that Annie confessed to the murder in order to protect George, whom she loves, and that George killed his brother because he wanted to save Annie from her abusive husband. The film validates Annie's assertions about Simon's brutality since her body shows evidence of this. It shows Annie and George as lovers after Simon's death, filling in the gaps in Annie's mysterious account of the night that follows Simon's death in Munro's story. The film also shows a conversation between Annie and George at his wedding, with Annie telling George he is the father of her child and urging him to do well by them, a scene which might be an attempt to evoke the meeting that Annie has with George many years after the events—a "conversation" that no one hears or reports in Munro's story. The film, in other words, does away with many of the ambiguities in Munro's story, in which the truth is never uncovered as the versions contradict one another. While the vagueness of George's account of Simon's death renders it suspicious, Munro cleverly prevents her readers from believing Annie since several statements, including Christena Mullen's and Annie's, insist on the fact that Annie told many "fibs." Furthermore, in her secret letter to Sadie, Annie tells her friend that the version of Simon's death she told people when she arrived in Walley (her confession) was "the very same lie that George told me so often *in my dreams*" (OS 215, italics mine), which

is also the word that concludes the story so that the distinction between truth and lies, reality and dreams remains blurred. Although it is possible to interpret her eccentricity as a form of resistance, as Duncan does, Annie remains an elusive and unreliable narrator. What is certain is that she is a consummate storyteller, which her letter to Sadie proves: what happens between Annie and George during the night that follows Simon's death is absent from her narrative, as it is cleverly left as a blank: "nothing bad happened after I laid down" (*OS* 213). I agree with Hunter's argument that the highly interrogative, inferential nature of the story "marks a reluctance to 'write out' the experience of others" and that "Munro renders Annie Herron ultimately inaccessible, composing her of narrative statements that are, in the course of the story, devalued, qualified, or even cancelled out."³⁶

Munro's clever use of the snow-covered landscape plays a prominent part in this. We should remember that the short story is composed of letters, and Simon's death is the object of several versions which are printed or written accounts: George's account was published in the *Argus*, while Annie's confession is reported in a letter from the Clerk of the Peace to her former minister. In her hidden letter to Sadie, Annie accuses George of Simon's death, but in yet another version that she gives of the story (and which is reported by Christena Mullen in her letter to the historian), Simon was killed by a bear. The snow-covered landscape is meant to echo these letters and printed texts, or black print on white paper. Tracks and traces in the snow feature in two contradictory versions as George states that their footsteps (their traces) were covered with snow, while Annie claims she followed their tracks to find them in the bush. It is no coincidence that snow covers tracks in George's version, that it both confuses Annie and helps her see the truth about the murder (hiding and then revealing evidence as it melts), or that it is instrumental in erasing evidence of the murder in her first version. Munro plays with snow as instrument and snow in the landscape intensifies the indeterminacy that characterizes the story. The written versions of Simon's death evoke accumulating layers of

snow, as if it were the material on which the story gets written, erased and re-written, and changed in the process. In “A Wilderness Station” Munro does not compose a reversible landscape, but she composes one where snow alters one’s vision, where traces appear and are concealed, as she writes a story with versions that cancel each other out.

The inconsistencies, the gaps, the differences, the silences or lies which serve to stir the imagination are recurring features of Munro’s stories. As Munro’s mapping of the glacial landscape in “What Do You Want to Know For?” makes clear, the drab Ontario landscape is one that contains hidden features and spaces. When she analyzes the changes the landscape has undergone in the epilogue to *The View from Castle Rock*, the narrator explains that one form of farming died (orchards) and with it, the farms, the small barns and houses, fences and hedges. Not only has the landscape changed, so has one’s perspective—one can see farther, but one actually sees less: “as if you could see more then, then now you can see farther” (VCR 344). With the fences and hedges and small barns gone, it is “all that arrangement and shelter for lives that were known and secret,” what “made every fence corner or twist of a creek seem remarkable” that has gone (VCR 344). In other words what is missing are dark spaces that could capture the imagination. The vernacular landscape, together with the vision of lives that were both known *and* concealed, conjures up Munro’s ability to see ordinary lives as reserves of secrets and stories.

Reading the landscape with the map that points to geological features such as kame moraines with “a look of chance and secrets” (VCR 321) is therefore vital to recovering these possibilities. As Munro’s fiction draws attention to gaps and non-congruence, it is difficult not to agree with McGill who argues that her fiction is essentially a geographic metafiction. In “What Do You Want to Know For?” Munro as narrator states that she likes the hidden features, the “little countries lying snug and unsuspected,” for their “pull on the imagination”

(VCR 322); the same holds true of liminal places such as underground mines, swamps, gravel pits and glacial features that abound in her fiction as they too point to the chance of secrets. Secrets however are not to be revealed and gaps are not to be closed or filled. The landscape she maps and composes is essentially a reversible landscape. In Munro's fiction, there is no such thing as a fixed version of a story or even a fixed memory. Although the quest for the cemetery and, then, its identification (as a once private burial ground) is successful in "What Do You Want to Know for?" neither discovery nor identification put an end to its pull on the imagination, as the woman who married into the Mannerow family and attended a funeral there admits that she cannot provide much of an explanation, and the force of tradition is emphasized: "that was the way they had always done it. That was their way." However she too was interested: "she did use to wonder" (VCR 338). The purpose and force of capture of Munro's fiction is to make her readers wonder.

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¹ As the narrator identifies her father as Bob Laidlaw, and her sister as Sheila, we can identify the narrator as Alice Munro.

² The editions of Munro's short story collections used in this chapter are the following:

LiGW: Penguin, 1982; *SBM*: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974; *MJ*: Penguin, 1986; *PL*: Knopf, 1986; *FY*: Knopf, 1990; *OS*: Knopf, 1994; *LoGW*: Vintage, 1999; *HFC*: Knopf, 2001; *R*: Knopf, 2004; *VCR*: Knopf, 2006.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.

⁴ Robert McGill, "Where Do You Think You Are? Alice Munro's Open Houses," *Mosaic* 35.4 (2002): 109.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 33.

⁶ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), xi

⁷ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, xii.

⁸ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 151.

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

¹¹ James Corner, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention," in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion books, 1999), 213-214.

¹² In "Floating Bridge" the main protagonist's eyes are drawn to "a gravel pit that was a great cavity in the center of the hill" (Munro *HFCLM* 68).

¹³ Héliane Ventura, "'What Do Want to Know For?': The Lump and the Lamp, the Cyst and the Crypt, the Tomb and the Womb or Alice Munro's Foundational Ambivalence," in *Border Crossing: Alice Munro's Transatlantic and Intersemiotic Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, publication pending).

¹⁴ See Héliane Ventura, "Genealogy and Geology: Of Metanarratives of Origins," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 34.1 (Autumn 2011): 93-100, and *Border Crossing: Alice Munro's Transatlantic and Intersemiotic Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, publication pending).

¹⁵ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 149.

¹⁶ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 149-150, 154.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 155.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 151.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 354.

²⁰ Munro is also tracing a literary connection here.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 197.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 194.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 192.

²⁴ *Le Carnaval des objets délaissés / Carnival of Forsaken Objects* (1949), Paul-Émile

Borduas, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal.

²⁵ McGill, "Alice Munro's Open Houses," 116.

²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 242, italics mine.

²⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 242.

²⁸ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 356.

²⁹ Héliane Ventura, "Alice Munro's Secret Ort," *Open Letter* 11.9/12.1 (2003/2004): 258.

³⁰ Adrian Hunter, "Taking Possession: Alice Munro's 'A Wilderness Station' and James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *Essays in Canadian Literature* 35.2 (2010): 118.

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167, 168.

³² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 182.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.

³⁴ Ildikó de Papp Carrington, "Double-Talking Devils: Alice Munro's 'A Wilderness Station'," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (1996): 81.

³⁵ Isla Duncan, *Alice Munro's Narrative Art*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 68-70.

³⁶ Hunter, "Taking Possession," 118.