

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Dwelling in Intimate and Grand Spaces: Natural, Bodily and Narrative Landscapes in Alice Munro's "What Do You Want to Know For?"

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Abstract:

This article addresses relationships between natural landscapes, narrative style and women's bodyscapes in Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), concentrating on the final short story, "What Do You Want to Know For?" Focusing on theories of space and place-relations by Yi-Fu Tuan, E. Relph, Henri LeFebvre and Wesley A. Kort, the discussion examines the narrator's return home in these memoir-like stories. The structures and shapes of these narratives of the landscape, the woman's body and the short story stress dynamic processes and evolving presences rather than permanence or stability. The article, referring to Martin Heidegger's concept of dwelling, argues that through sparing and preserving her home-place, the narrator is freed from the compulsion to dig into the earth, the past and memory for knowledge and answers. The mounded shapes of the kame moraine, crypt and narrator's breast, which connect landforms, mortality and the woman's body, allow for the opening of intimate space into grand space, freeing the narrator from curiosity and the need to know.

Keywords: Alice Munro, place and space, women's body, literary landscape, dwelling, short story.

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Introduction

Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) concentrates on change and process through a focus on movements from origins to endings. This short story collection examines connections between the linear and the spatial, based on intersections between time and place as well as relationships between surfaces and depths. Such intersections and relationships highlighting mysteries and secrets are familiar to Munro's readers. Less familiar, however, is *The View from Castle Rock's* acceptance of change and process, including mortality, based on a comfortable willingness to let things go. The mound-shaped kame moraine, crypt and breast in the volume's final story hold within them narratives of geological and physiological processes. Like the fossils collected by the story's narrator and her father, these mounded layers of time and change are promising and powerful in their potential revelation of sought-after information and answers. The valuable clues buried within the three mounds, however, are eventually left alone as the narrator willingly foregoes the compulsion to 'know.' In this paper I argue that the narrator of "What Do You Want to Know For?" discovers what it means to 'dwell' in the Heideggerian sense of understanding 'the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on this earth' (Heidegger 1971: 147). For Martin Heidegger, dwelling is based on an awareness of human mortality 'in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth' (149). It is the narrator's arrival at a sense of mortal dwelling on earth that frees her, I argue, from an insistence on knowing. Through 'sparing' and 'preserving,' the narrator is able to let things go rather than dig them up, thereby 'freeing' dweller and dwelling into a 'preserve of peace' (149).

I thought of Lorraine York's discussion of Munro's 'extremely self-conscious fascination with the topography of fiction' and her 'recognizably metafictional *topos*' (1988: 33) when I first read "What Do You Want to Know For?" In her study of "Miles City, Montana," York argues that 'the line of the road, like the line of prose text, may prove a hiding place for complicated disjunctions and discontinuities' (36). In "What Do You Want to Know For?" the kame moraine, the major landform in the story, holds layers of time and process within its mounded shape of glacial matter just as the story's sentences and paragraphs build with promises of disclosure before closing and falling off without opening up to the narrative beneath the surface. The mounded shape of the moraine, like the structure of the narrative, provides suggestions and hints but ultimately remains closed.

The story's movement is towards an elusive crypt, which is eventually discovered as a rounded heap of earth and concrete, as well as towards a medical diagnosis of the narrator's recently discovered breast lump. The breast contains an alarming and concentrated story in the round, hard lump caused by an accelerated growth of cells gone wild within the softer and more gently developed contour of the breast itself. The crypt houses a story which combines the geological properties governing the kame moraine and the physiological processes of the human body as concentrated in the breast lump. These three mounds—moraine, crypt and breast—both reflect and shape the story's narrative style and structure.

In its focus on mortality, “What Do You Want to Know For?” links geological and bodily sites and processes in an exploration of home, dwelling and place-relations.¹ The landscapes and bodyscapes are not shaped sites of permanence or stability but narratives of process connected to the movement of the prose narrative itself, to the dynamic energy of human lives and to the fluidity of memory. In his discussion of the human ‘need and potential for positive relations to spaces’ in *Place and Space in Modern Fiction*, Wesley A. Kort argues that ‘one feature of a more fully human sense of place-relations—a feature that narrative secures—is the important relation of placement to human mobility and temporality’ (2004: 21). Kort maintains that ‘placement and movement imply, clarify, and stimulate one another’ (21). Through the physical movement of Munro’s narrator, who places more emphasis on leaving, returning and traveling than on ‘arrival or permanence’ (21), and through the movement of the narrative itself,² “What Do You Want to Know For?” does not give prominence to place-relations ‘as though they are fixed and represent “rootedness” in an ‘at-home’ position, but rather gives credence to the ‘important task of retrieving or adumbrating positive place-relations’ by recognizing that ‘people move between places as well as dwell in them’ (21).

A sensitivity to movement imbues the experience of dwelling with an awareness of process and change, not only in the movement of humans between places, but in the impact of people on place and of place on people. For Heidegger, this particular concept of dwelling partakes of the qualities of *bauen*, embracing the desire ‘to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine’ (1971: 147). Munro displays environmental concerns in the spirit of *bauen* for Dutch-elm-diseased trees, weed-coarsened pastures and fertilizer-choked rivers in her essay, “A Walk on the Wild Side,” in which she argues for public access to land (1989: 52). In “What Do You Want to Know For?” she is specifically concerned with the way in which humans and land coexist over substantial periods of time. It is a concern that leads to a position aligned with Heidegger’s very positive ‘sparing,’ which ‘takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace’ (Heidegger 1971: 149). I argue that this is the position arrived at by the narrator of “What Do You Want to Know For?” after she experiences what Kort terms ‘sacred’ space (2004: 22), what Heidegger calls the preservation and presencing of the fourfold (1971: 150-1) and what Henri Lefebvre, studying Heidegger’s and Bachelard’s work, identifies as a link between the intimate and the grand, which invites an understanding of dwelling as ‘a special, still sacred, quasi-religious and in fact almost absolute space’ (Lefebvre 1991: 121).

Jeff Malpas’s discussion of the concept of dwelling in his 2006 book, *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World*, provides contexts and examples of the resonance of the Heideggerian term as it has developed. Malpas’s articulation of the importance of ‘a ‘bringing close’ or *nearing* of what is otherwise apart from us’ (76) highlights a sensation eventually experienced by Munro’s narrator in “What Do You Want to Know For?” Similarly, his treatment of Heidegger’s views on mortality and dwelling as being based in and leading to the belief that ‘death is the limit that opens up the “space” within which our lives can be lived’ (273) describes moments and openings ultimately enjoyed by Munro’s narrator. Paul Harrison, in a discussion of dwelling, offers the thought that

‘dwelling is a middle term,’ which ‘names the inflection of space, the twisting and crisscrossing of interiority and exteriority from which both these horizons gain their sense’ (2007: 628). He goes on to argue that the concept of dwelling deals with much more than simply ‘the nature of place or space’ in its ‘engagement with an exteriority that thought cannot quite master’ (628). Such rich discussions of dwelling as a concept relevant to geography and philosophy, but expanding into other areas—environmental studies, religious studies, poetics, literary studies and gender studies—provide the basis, contexts and inspiration for my study of space and dwelling in Munro’s work.

It is the link between the intimate and the grand, between small signs of human mortality and large geological processes, between the physical and the sacred that I explore in this paper. I begin by studying the narrator’s relationship with the land through the establishment of place-relations and topophilia in several stories in *The View From Castle Rock*, concentrating mainly on the kame moraine and the return home in the final story, “What Do You Want to Know For?”³ which Coral Ann Howells sees as ‘emblematic of this collection’ (2007: 167). Secondly, I examine the search for the lost and found crypt and the wait for the medical diagnosis, journeys that are affected by the narrator’s response to the interior of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, specifically to the words on the wall’s surface. As geological, physiological and cultural movements and processes intersect during this time period of searching and discovery, intimate and grand spaces begin to open up into each other. I argue that an arrival at place-relations based on viewing mortality in the context of larger processes of the earth prepares the narrator to approach the narratives of the breast lump and the crypt in ways that initiate a profound opening of the inner into the outer and the intimate into the grand. Such openings are accompanied by an acceptance and reverence for the unknown and unknowable.

Place-Relations

In “Working for a Living,” the final story in “Part One: No Advantages” in *The View from Castle Rock*, the narrator states that the clearing and early farming of the Huron Tract demanded a ‘masculine approach to the land,’ which was ‘managerial, dictatorial’ (Munro 2006a: 130).⁴ Apparently, ‘only women were allowed to care about landscape and not to think always of its subjugation and productivity’ (130). The narrator’s grandmother, for example, ‘was famous for having saved a line of silver maples along the lane,’ which her husband and son, in their pragmatism, wanted to cut down because ‘their roots interfered with the ploughing and they shaded too much of the crop’ (130). Although the trees were saved for some time, eventually ‘the terrible winter of 1935 finished them off’ (130)—a winter referred to by the narrator of “Home” as ‘the worst winter of my childhood’ (2006b: 314), ‘that extraordinary winter which killed all the chestnut trees, and many orchards’ (315), and the winter that caused the death of the ‘black-and-white cow’ associated with her ‘first clear memory’ (314). The imprint of the nineteenth-century pioneer on the land faded during the narrator’s lifetime as repetitive natural forces, along with changes in farming methods, left behind only shapes and traces of earlier human habitation. In “Messenger,” the epilogue to *The View from Castle Rock*, the narrator notes

that family farms of the past are traceable only through ghostly outlines, gentle shapes and isolated markers, 'identified perhaps by a slight rise in the ground' or 'a clump of lilacs' (2006c: 343). Historical and human narratives lie beneath a surface faintly marked with outlines, shapes and traces.

In "Lying Under the Apple Tree" in "Part Two: Home," the granddaughter of the saviour of the silver maples experiments with extravagant relationships with the southwestern Ontario landscape, confessing to a secret romantic devotion to the aesthetics of nature based on her reading of L.M. Montgomery and her 'private passion' for 'lines of poetry' (2006d: 198). She compares lying down underneath an apple tree and seeing how the trunk rises and loses 'itself in an upside-down sea of blossom' against 'bright-blue fragments on that puffy white sea' with 'kneeling down in church,' a 'formality' she claims she longs for (199). Distracted, however, by the 'hard ridge' of the root, 'last year's apples, dark as chunks of dried meat,' and her body's 'odd and unnatural situation,' she 'was not quite swept into the state of mind, of worship, that [she] had been hoping for' (200). This naive attempt is ironically undercut, but the desire for worship remains strong. This compelling but vague drive, originating in girlhood, plays a major role in the stories in "Part Two: Home," in which the adult narrator's *actual* return home is juxtaposed with earlier returns 'from a distance' through historical research, memory and the imagination (2006e: 332). As the narrator of the present interacts with the earth of the home to which she has returned, she confronts current feelings of desire and worship, which, although elusive and mysterious, are treated as deeply real in their powerful associations with process, change and mortality. In a 2006 interview Munro describes her adolescent relationship with nature as religious, noting that her feeling for nature 'entirely replaced religion, but it was, in a way, of the same quality as religion' (Awano 2006). Years later, in the return home, she is able to openly probe that 'religious' connection with the landscape, realizing with reassurance that she is 'not alone in feeling this way' and that 'now, it's quite common for people to have this feeling and this concern'.

Obviously the farmland settled and cultivated by past generations as traced by Munro's historical research and her own life does not produce a society that tolerates so-called 'fanciful' responses to nature. In "The Hired Girl," for example, the narrator maintains that 'taking any impractical notice of the out-of-doors, or mooning around about Nature—even using that word, *Nature*—could get you laughed at' (2006f: 233). Similarly, in "Home" she explains that 'people who openly admired nature—or who even went so far as to use that word, *Nature*—were often taken to be slightly soft in the head' (2006b: 288). It is not the emotion itself but the articulation of the emotion that is unthinkable. Yi-Fu Tuan, in his study, *Topophilia*, observes that in the case of the working farmer 'aesthetic appreciation is present but seldom articulated' (1974: 97). To suggest the existence of an emotional relationship with natural objects would draw attention to the person suggesting it, a position to be avoided in Munro's world. Although the narrator demonstrates 'soft' behavior during adolescence by lying under blossoming apple trees, her earliest memories are in fact not those of 'mooning around about' nature, but of witnessing practical interactions between humans and nature—of observing her father milking the cow in the barn (2006b: 314) and of watching trucks moving the gravel

off the farm's river flats (2006e: 318). Significantly, neither memory is isolated or static. They are remembered as parts of larger processes: the cow dies from the harsh winter and the removal of the gravel leaves 'pits and hollows' that hold water and eventually grow 'weeds, then grass and bushes' (319).

Humanistic geographers Edward Relph and Tuan theorize places as 'fusions of human and natural order' (Relph 1976: 141) in which those who work with the land do 'not frame nature into pretty pictures,' even though they 'can be profoundly aware of its beauty' (Tuan 1974: 97). According to Tuan, the farmer's topophilia comes from a combination of 'physical intimacy' to which 'muscles and scars bear witness,' 'material dependence' and the knowledge that 'the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope' (97). Munro's returned narrator experiences a physical intimacy with the land, acknowledges a dependence on it and values the memories and hopes associated with it. Practical views from childhood observations are juxtaposed with romantic ones from youth while more recent adult memories also come into play. A less idealized, less soft, less vague version of nature—one less likely to elicit laughter or scorn—emerges from the return home; it is a version solidly and specifically grounded in history and geography, beginning with the 'fossils of weird creatures of another age,' which tell accurate, complex and layered stories of the 'gravelly country' in which they lie (2006a: 168). Containing fact rather than fancy, the fossils are taken seriously.⁵

The story of the natural world contained in the fossil is a study that prepares the narrator to read other layers of story which are both protected and revealed by the landscapes, documents, human minds, memories and narratives that contain them. In "What Do You Want to Know For?," the narrator—and I will call her Munro here as she identifies herself in the story as the daughter of Bob Laidlaw—joins her geologist husband, Gerry Fremlin, in using Lynman Chapman and Donald Putnam's *The Physiography of Southern Ontario* complete with maps as a reference guide for their drives around the region. The two of them refer to it 'familiarily but somewhat reverentially, as Put and Chap' (2006e: 319). The first sentence of the preface, 'This is a description of the surface of Southern Ontario' (Chapman and Putnam 1984: xxi), provides Munro with the top layer, fascinatingly attractive in itself, but at the same time enticing her as always to explore what lies beneath. Munro and her husband pursue the stories told by the land and specifically search, 'puzzled and disconcerted' (2006e: 318), for the mysterious and elusive crypt, initially stumbled upon by chance but later lost when deliberately sought. The re-discovery of the evasive crypt is similarly unpredictable; it is not found by 'doggedly covering' territory, but by a friend 'miraculously' finding a scrap of paper (323)—a fragmented, vulnerable and casual document when compared with the solid and authoritative atlases and maps at the centre of the story. The discovery is a random and serendipitous event.

Despite deriving 'a naive and particular pleasure' (2006e: 321) from identifying forms of the landscape through information about drumlins, spillways and eskers provided by 'Put and Chap,' mapping, classification and facts carry the travellers and the narrative only so far as seen in the narrator's powerful attraction to her favourite land form, the kame moraine. The kame moraine is less explicable and less predictable than the other physiographical elements with which she is becoming familiar. The palimpsestic

quality of the material map, indicating geological layers below the surface of the earth by piling up marked layers on the map's surface, carries a sense of correspondence by inversion. The maps as practical documents are useful as markers and guides, but they will not stay stable; they become independent aesthetic entities, morphing into intriguing works of art divorced from their counterparts in the landscape. As reviewer A.O. Scott notes, Munro's reading and treatment of these 'special' (319) geological maps render them so attractive that they 'come to resemble poems, runes or magic spells' (Scott 2006), not unlike Michael Ondaatje's mutable maps of colonized Ceylon in *Running in the Family* (Ondaatje 1993: 53-54).

The present journeys by Munro and Fremlin are also augmented by journeys of memory. The removal of gravel from the home farm, as remembered by Munro, is accompanied by an awareness of the land as part of a process—in flux rather than stagnant—telling long stories of natural events, such as ice ages, and of shorter, more recent interactions between human communities and the natural world. The memory of gravel forms an example of dwelling that encompasses less pastoral activities than those of cherishing, protecting, preserving and tilling. The narrator notes that the local roads are made passable through the use of gravel, 'easy to get at, easy to scoop out' from the 'chewed-up hills, the plundered terraces that have been turned into holes in the land' (2006e: 318). The diction is violent and the images are warlike. But there is, at the same time, an understanding of how gravel participates in longer term dwelling. The narrator notes that 'in the big gravel pits you see hills turned into hollows, as if a part of the landscape had managed, in a haphazard way, to turn itself inside out' (319). An appreciation of the shape of the process is accompanied by the realization that certain parts, such as the erased 'tracks of the glacier' (319), can still be discerned by those who look. Vigilance is required: 'So you have to keep checking, taking in the changes, seeing things while they last' (319). In "Working for a Living" a similar shape and process is evoked in the image of dredging the rivers and piling up the dredged earth. Specifically, the earth dredged out of Blyth Creek running through the woodlot of Munro's grandfather's farm provided 'a high, hummocky bank on which thick clumps of cedars grew' (2006a: 131). This is where Munro's father, Robert Laidlaw, began his trapping life. The attempt to 'tame' and 'straighten' (130) the landscape through dredging ironically provides a mounded margin of wilderness. For every digging out of gravel and earth by farmers or glaciers there is a corresponding raising up. The mounded material explains, compensates for and balances the hollowed out space.

The Crypt and the Breast

In the search for the crypt, the narrator is guided through St. Peter's Lutheran Church by 'a believer,' a woman known as Rachel's mother. During this visit the narrator experiences 'a slightly lost feeling, or a feeling of bewilderment, of having got things the wrong way around' (2006e: 334) as she—the non-believer—is the one moved by the experience. The German words on the two side walls—'*Ich hebe meine Augen auf zu den Bergen, von welchen mir Hilfe Kommt*' on one side wall and '*Dein Wort ist meines Fusses Leuchte und ein Licht auf meinem Wege*' on the other, translated for the reader as 'I will lift up my eyes

unto the hills, from whence cometh my help and *'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path'* (333)—have been hidden by paint and were only revealed when the walls were cleaned after a fire. The words 'strike [the narrator] to the heart,' but she insists 'I am not a believer and they do not make me a believer' (334). When Rachel's mother mentions the need to replace a piece of paint that has flaked off the 'L' in the word *Licht*, the narrator responds with the thought: 'It seems as if you must always take care of what's on the surface, and what is behind, so immense and disturbing, will take care of itself' (334). The statement, existing in the narrator's mind only, is tentative in its dependence on the verb 'seems' and is ambiguous in its use of the pronoun 'you,' which, like the 'you' of the story's title, is both vague and inclusive. Here, the pronoun could refer to 'you' in the sense of 'one' in general; it could refer to Rachel's mother and other believers; and/or it could refer self-reflexively to the narrator and other non-believers. The spirit of the statement then encompasses a range of possibilities, including the approaches of a non-believer, a superficial and naive believer or a trusting believer of deep faith. Dealing only with the surface can be a strategy that minimizes the depths, denies the depths *or* demonstrates absolute faith that the depths will function as they should. The ambiguity of this large statement suggests that the various positions of belief are evasive and not necessarily exclusive; trust and disengagement, belief and skepticism, faith and doubt, can be held simultaneously and often are. The non-believer is, and can be, full of desire, wonder and even worship.

Through her strong attraction to the words and the surface of the wall, the narrator is, as always, drawn behind to the causes, the reasons and the stories in a way that the more accepting and faithful women she meets are not. And yet, these other women are patient with her questions and do not consider her curiosity strange or annoying. She is grateful and surprised by this unexpected tolerance that did not exist in the world of her childhood, where she perceived that religious belief was judgemental and demanded a 'terrible docility' (2006d: 212) which repulsed her. Something in this significant shift—in the way in which she is not faced with the invasive and threatening question 'What do you want to know for?'—releases her from a defensive position against belief. The story's title is the question asked by those who are less curious and driven. The need to dig for knowledge in order to uncover secrets and mysteries becomes less compelling and urgent in this climate where the question is not asked and where others are tolerant of the dig rather than suspicious or adversarial.

The response to the crypt when it is finally discovered and named the Mannerow family crypt, like the response to the flaking paint on the letter 'L,' rests on surfaces and an awareness of the 'immense and disturbing' (2006e: 334) depths behind or below the surface. The immense depths buried within the two discovered crypts are the Mannerow family bodies and stories. Mrs. Mannerow, a spouse of one of the family's descendants, is consulted and, like Rachel's mother, is a believer. Mrs. Mannerow's perplexing acceptance of the burial crypt complete with oil lamp and table puzzles the narrator who interprets the woman's 'tremulous nods' as signs of faith, translating them into words and belief: 'As if to say, it's beyond us, isn't it? A multitude of things beyond us. Yes' (339). Again, this statement exists in the narrator's mind only as she gives words and thoughts to Mrs. Mannerow's actions. The narrator seems to agree that there *is* a layer of

life beyond, but she does not share the religious faith that explains away the magic and mystery. She recalls that during her childhood, geology and science were at ‘loggerheads with the Bible in the matter of the creation of the Earth’ (321), which explains why she did not learn about all of this geology at school. But now, in the return home, geology and religion are toned down, rendered less absolute. A softer geology of colours and shapes and a gentler ‘religion’ based on the insubstantiality of faith converse with each other. It is the narrator and not Mrs. Mannerow who has come up with ‘a multitude of things beyond us.’ Mrs. Mannerow’s tolerance of the narrator’s curiosity seems to open a way, in the narrator’s mind, for a world beyond the material one. Neither curiosity nor conventional faith is adopted by the woman lacking it, but in the opening of one into the other, judgement and exclusion are broken down.

‘What is behind, so immense and disturbing’ (2006e: 334) for the narrator herself is, of course, the breast lump. While absorbing the news of a potential tumour, she stays, to her surprise, very much on the surface of her life, ‘answering letters and cleaning up my house and going through my files and having people to dinner’ (317). The failure of former radiologists to tell the narrator about what lay behind in earlier mammograms is put down to the probability that ‘they must not have seen it’ (339) while the advice of the current doctor to ‘let it [the breast lump] alone’ (339) for now is based on medical practices that require a degree of trust and faith on the part of the patient. Surprisingly, the narrator seems to accept the earlier oversights and the current decision to leave the lump alone—not to dig beneath the surface. Cancer ‘is a disease of the body,’ as Susan Sonntag points out, and ‘far from revealing anything spiritual, it reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body’ (1977: 18). Although the narrator would agree with this interpretation and does not push the breast lump into anything more meaningful than its physical manifestation, its ‘place-relation’-ship with the kame moraine and crypt in terms of shared shape, timeframe and narrative contextualizes it through connections that expand its own specific space, time and meaning.

The breast lump coexists with the narrator’s observations of the scientific and aesthetic qualities of the landforms of her home country, particularly the kame moraine. The interplay and parallels of geological and human energy form the shape of the narrative. The dynamics of geology—the forces of heat and pressure that are always at work but are rarely discernible as they transform the very elements that make up the land—speak to the heat and pressure at work in the human body, bringing about elemental changes there as well. Limited to representations by mapping and mammography, the interiors of the kame moraine and the breast remain somewhat unknown. Kame moraines, described colloquially by the narrator as ‘blobs’ on the map representing places where a ‘heap of dead ice sat, cut off from the rest of the moving glacier,’ are, in her words, ‘wild, bumpy, unpredictable,’ not unlike cancer cells and growing tumours. Both kame moraine and breast have ‘a look of chance and secrets’ (2006e: 321). Similarly, the crypts or vaults are mounds holding secrets that reflect process, change and mortality. When opened up, the crypt reveals only so much and the brief glimpse offers no guarantee of fullness or accuracy. Concrete, made from the gravel scooped out of the land, lines the inside surfaces of one vault and covers both the interior and exterior of the second vault. The crypt, which has raised the land and kept

things hidden, exists in relationship to, and at the expense of, the hill that has been hollowed out. The female contours of rounded breast and hollowed out chest following a mastectomy are evoked here, the result of a process similar to that of the hill and the crypt. In the case of the mastectomy, the convex shape is replaced by a flat or slightly concave surface with no new form shaped by the flesh that has been scooped out. The process is one of loss and absence rather than digging and building. There is no replacement, no new form emerging from the scooped out material.

The Opening of Space and Time

Critic and reviewer John Moss proposes that the stories in *The View From Castle Rock* ‘do not develop or evolve, but, like a shipwreck rising magically out of the depths, they emerge—the high bits first; confusing bits declare themselves; surfaces connect, imply places unseen; the entire vessel floats, and still the sleek and ravaged hull beneath the waterline is secret’ (2006: 4). Like the stories themselves, the echoes, parallels and intimate correspondences between the female body and the land rise, emerge, declare, connect and imply even as they retain the mysterious, the unknowable and the unspoken.

The monumental vaults, lined with concrete, recall the ‘deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum,’ that familiar image from the epilogue to *Lives of Girls and Women*. The linoleum-lined caves provide glimpses into interior lives that are both ‘amazing and unfathomable’ (Munro 1971: 210). The buried stories in the crypt in *The View from Castle Rock* are less puzzling than the caves partly because the drive to capture, know and understand has been relinquished. The narrator seems to be saying that this is what occurs—this is what ‘takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace’ (Heidegger 1971: 149). This is what happens when we ‘dwell’ rather than merely exist, when we see ourselves within the larger contexts of forces we do not know or understand and do not need to know or understand. This is what happens when we stop asking ourselves what we want to know for—when we no longer need to know or to ask.

The interior and exterior spaces in “What Do You Want to Know for?” work as ‘frames’ in the sense proposed by Mieke Bal in her theory of narratology: the ‘opposition [of inner and outer space] gives both spaces their meanings’ (1985: 94). Similarly, Relph talks of the ‘inside-outside division’ of space as a ‘basic dualism,’ ‘fundamental [he says] in our experience of lived-space and one that provides the essence of place’ (1976: 49), but Relph warns that the dualism is not as clearly defined as it seems and refers to Bachelard’s theory that ‘outside and inside are both intimate’ and ‘always ready to be reversed’ (Bachelard 1994: 217-8). Lefebvre emphasizes time in his theorizing of space when he claims that ‘the whole history of life has been characterized by an incessant diversification and intensification of the interaction between inside and outside’ (1991: 176).

In Munro’s work surface and depth are frequently poised to reverse themselves and to partake momentarily of each other in profound and elusive ways. The intersection of the human and the natural in the form of the mounded crypt, however, invites more

than just a fleeting reversal—it leads to an opening of inner and outer space into each other in a way that invites each to partake of the other without slipping back to what it was. This motion of turning spaces into each other reverses the way in which these spaces were originally formed when one structure provided the dug-out material for the other's formation, becoming its opposite and re-forming itself in the process.

The View From Castle Rock focuses on relationships between temporal spaces: 'the past makes sense of the present and the present makes sense of the past, and the two are both a continuum and a divorce' (Miller 2007: 21). In their commentary on each other, these spaces still retain their own shape and position as seen, for example, in the dredged earth on the banks of Blyth Creek. The opening of the physical shape and space of the crypt into the expanse of mortality, however, means that the interior and exterior touch each other into a new space which is neither divorce nor continuum. The result is that neither the interior of the crypt nor the exterior immensity of mortality needs to be pursued any further. The brief opening of one into the other is enough. When the source of the crypt's concrete in the form of the gravel taken out of the earth is considered, there is a further opening of the crypt backwards and downwards, which intensifies human-place connections and provides the realization that there is no need to interpret or analyze a process that is already, in its own nature and properties, profound beyond that which can be perceived through intellectual understanding.

The movement from the earlier examination of the town in *Lives of Girls and Women*, which Munro says she has 'used [. . .] up' (2006b: 300), to the exploration of the landscape surrounding the town in "Part II: Home" of *The View from Castle Rock* reflects an expansion of considered space in Munro's fiction of home. The narrator explains that the town 'stays very much the same' but 'has changed for me' (2006b: 300), the result of the fact that 'we keep losing ourselves and the worlds we used to live in,' which Munro muses is perhaps 'a factor in modern life' (Wachtel 1993: 109). While she sees the small town as static, she views the home landscape as evolving and changing around the centre of that small town. The narrator's family house and farm at the edge of town, for example, have been transformed into a 'car-wrecking operation' (2006e: 332), illustrating 'the notion [that as] farming fades, unexpected enterprises spring up to replace it' (327), particularly in the marginal spaces that are neither town nor country. This intrusion of the current 'unexpected enterprise' imprints itself on the remembered forms of land and home still present in the mind and imagination of the narrator. Bachelard's belief that 'the space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed' and that it 'deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory' (1994: 53) comes into play here as the narrator in a palimpsestic layering sees former layers of place beneath the most current imprint. Margaret Atwood, trying to articulate what Munro does with her home landscape, concludes that 'celebrated' is not quite the right word' and 'anatomized' is 'too clinical' (2006: x). According to Atwood, 'what goes on' in the work of Munro is a 'combination of excessive scrutiny, archaeological unearthing, precise and detailed recollection, the wallowing in the seamier and meaner and more vengeful undersides of human nature, the telling of erotic secrets, the nostalgia for vanished miseries, and rejoicing in the fullness and variety of life' (x). It is the 'archaeological unearthing' that Munro relinquishes in *The*

View from Castle Rock as she leaves behind the writerly digging for connections in favour of a faith in the grander and less insistent processes of time and memory. In their discussion of “What Do You Want to Know For?,” Ansgar Nünning and Michael Basseler ask ‘how accurate are our representational models that are employed to encode, store and decode knowledge?’ (2003: 205). Maps, mammograms, local archival records, archaeological digging and deliberate scrutiny unearth limited answers and knowledge.

The secrets in *The View from Castle Rock* consist of intimations of mortality along with wisps of worship and faith, perceived through sudden moments of transformation. But Munro does not deliberately pause at the intersection of time and place or movement and permanence to accentuate tremors and reverberations or to encourage slippages and reversals. Neither does she probe or tease the intersections into mystical moments. Rather than pushing at them she simply leaves them alone and lets them be. There is no deliberate attempt to sustain or extend the expansion into transcendence or illumination. Instead, the opening remains an experience and phenomenon which acknowledges the existence of a realm that depends on the intersection of the inner and the outer—but it is a realm that cannot be known or understood. Therein lies its attraction and its power—and the primary response is wonder verging on awe. The inside-out revelation of the depths as part of a grand process provides context but not content, as noted by Nünning and Basseler, who believe that the story ‘emphasizes the larger contexts into which individual human lives are embedded’ (2003: 205). “What Do You Want to Know For?” ends with a question—‘Do you think they put any oil in that lamp?’ (2006e: 340). There is no answer, but there is a close human connection in a husband and wife’s easy sharing of casual wonder. What seems to have been reached, to use Sonntag’s words, is ‘a sense of death [. . .] as natural,’ which counteracts death as ‘the obscene mystery, the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled’ (1977: 55). Munro has reached a place where she does not want to know or does not need to know. In an interview in the early 1970s she proposed that writing ‘has something to do with the fight against death’ and that ‘it’s partly the feeling that I can’t stand to have things go’ (Gibson 1973: 243). In a 1990 interview she talked of the importance of change: ‘Cherished beliefs change. Ways of dealing with life change. The importance of certain things in life changes’ (Wachtel 1993: 109). One change by 2006 seems to be that of writing *into* mortality rather than against it and letting things go rather than resisting the release.

Despite the geological and human narratives imposed on and buried beneath the hollows and hills, and despite the marks and signs on the surfaces of documents, maps and landscapes, the narrator notes that ‘the trend is no longer towards a taming of the landscape’ and that even though ‘the bush will never again take over completely [. . .], it is making a good grab’ (2006e: 327). The world of exclusive views and approaches—masculine versus feminine, practical versus romantic, religious versus scientific—no longer holds in this return home. Lines are blurred, opposites are deconstructed and the unknown and unknowable are allowed to emerge and exist. Alison Lurie, in her review of *The View from Castle Rock*, says that ‘Alice Munro’s commitment to indeterminacy and the essential confusion and mystery of life remains’ (2006: 30). But there is a difference. Munro signals the importance of difference in “Maxwell,” her 2004 essay, when she says that the story about the shattered family is ‘told again and again in Maxwell’s fiction, in

stories that seem autobiographical but may not be as autobiographical as they seem—as there is something new with each telling, some new action at the periphery or revelation near the centre, a different light or shading, a discovery, as there must be in the stories at the heart of our lives, stories that grow and change as we do and never go away’ (40).⁶ The indeterminacy, confusion and mystery in “What Do You Want to Know For?” puzzle Munro’s readers, but the stories also contain moments of expanded space and time based in the grounded relationship of the gravel road and concrete vault to the landscape from which they come. Questions remain but are allowed to settle rather than tease. The interior and exterior are connected and held simultaneously without an emphasis on reversals, on riding the edge—on pushing for discoveries through evasive slippages back and forth between inner and outer—as the compulsion to ‘know’ is released.

In her eagerness to match Put and Chap’s markings with the formations of the land, the narrator claims ‘it is exciting [for me] to spot the boundaries’ (2006e: 322), but boundaries are blurred. Farm boundaries, such as fences and walls, are covered with ‘hawthorn trees, chokecherries, golden-rod, old-man’s beard’ (327). A ‘good-sized cedar tree grow[s] out of the crack in the concrete’ of the crypt (325). Lefebvre observes that ‘every spatial envelope implies a barrier between inside and outside, but that this barrier is always relative and, in the case of membranes, always permeable’ (1991: 176). In the case of the crypt, the plant, stone and whatever is underneath co-exist in an integrated relationship that has defied attempts to separate them. Heidegger’s discussion of space allows for a view of boundaries as ‘not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*’ (1971: 154). The narrator’s temporary reprieve from facing mortality in the form of breast cancer allows for the boundary between life and death to be treated as a presence and a beginning. It allows ‘tiffs,’ ‘trivialities’ (2006e: 339), ‘raggedness, carelessness, even a casual possibility of boredom’ (340) to emerge. Knowing about the breast lump, but leaving it for now, takes away the ‘hard edges’ (339) associated with the compulsion to identify and act on correspondences between surfaces and depths, mammograms and flesh, maps and landscapes, monuments and history. It also diminishes the need to research and explain those things that appear strange, such as the presence of the oil lamp in the crypt. To use Heidegger’s term once again, this strangeness is responded to and treated by ‘sparing’ rather than by digging—by simply letting it exist as it is.

Conclusion

Leaving the breast lump alone—letting it go—is a most challenging and difficult action which informs all others; it goads and prods in its encouragement to leave other ‘things’ alone. In its own profound blending of two kinds of space—‘the space of intimacy [the breast] and world space [mortality]’ (Bachelard 1994: 203)—it does not provide any discernible opening or any visible glimpse into what lies beneath. Its call to relinquish the desire and need to know has to be taken with trust and in faith. The breast lump, like the formation of the kame moraine and the narrative of the Mannerows buried in the crypts, is not fully explained or explainable, but enough has been suggested in the blending of

the intimate and the grand to invite certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt, to exist simultaneously and comfortably without the need or desire for reversals, slippages and separations.

By the end of the volume, the layers of fossil and land formations are put aside in favour of the image of inner and outer space opening into each other, producing barely discernible glimpses and whispers that can be left behind in wonder rather than pursued with curiosity. *The View From Castle Rock* ends with the narrator's memory of a 'magic doorstep' in one of the lost houses of the past—'a big mother-of-pearl seashell that I recognized as a messenger from near and far, because I could hold it to my ear—when nobody was there to stop me—and discover the tremendous pounding of my own blood, and of the sea' (2006c: 349). Private, transitory, powerful and suggestive, the moment of listening is not one of mystical transcendence, but of physical sensations. The emphasis is on the opening up of one space into another—on the connection between internal and external, intimate and grand—which simply *is*—and which is more than enough.

Notes

¹ Please see Wesley A. Kort's "Introduction: Narrating Place-Relations" in *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (2004: 1-22) for a comprehensive discussion of the term and concept of 'place-relations,' which he divides into cosmic or comprehensive, social or political and personal or intimate.

² "What Do You Want to Know For?" is itself a process rather than a static piece. Written in 1993 (Thacker 2011: 473) and first published in *Writing Away: The PEN Canada Travel Anthology* in 1994, it was revised and published in 2006 in *The View from Castle Rock*. Robert Thacker uses Munro's essay on William Maxwell to discuss the ways in which Munro rereads and revises what she has previously lived and written, particularly with respect to the autobiographical pieces in *The View from Castle Rock* (Thacker 2011: 527-9). In her 1988 essay, "The Novels of William Maxwell" (reprinted in 2000 and revised in 2004 as "Maxwell"), Munro writes 'I wish I could go back and do everything of mine over more simply and more naturally, and with more respect' (2000: 23). Thacker suggests that this is what she does in her 2006 collection (2011: 529).

³ "What Do You Want to Know For?" is followed by an epilogue entitled "Messenger."

⁴ Although many of the stories in *The View From Castle Rock Part* have qualities of the memoir, in the Foreword Munro insists that "These are *stories*." The issue of the identity of the narrator in the stories in *The View from Castle Rock* is a complicated one. The narrator is and is not Alice Munro. I refer to her as the narrator. In the odd instance where the autobiographical strain seems particularly strong and the use of 'the narrator' too awkward, I refer to her as Munro.

⁵ According to Tuan, the 'profound attachment to the homeland' is based on the *apparent* contrast between the 'permanent' and 'reassuring' aspects of place as opposed to the 'frailty' of the individual and the detection of 'chance and flux everywhere' else (1977: 154). The contrast is apparent rather than actual. Tuan, like Relph and Heidegger, argues

for the close relationship between time and place based on the fact that experiences of place are 'bound up with flux or continuity' (Relph 1976: 33).

⁶ Interestingly this section is not part of the early 1988 version, so these thoughts about difference have occurred between the 1988 and 2004 versions of Munro's essay on Maxwell.

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