



Autobiography in the Anthropocene: A Geological Reading of Alice Munro

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ABSTRACT

In the autobiographical stories of Nobel Prize award-winning author Alice Munro, questions of ontology and mortality are inextricably connected to matters of space and place. Fundamental existential dilemmas expressed in Munro's corpus – signaled by the title of her second short story collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* – are linked to basic questions concerning orientation. Although autobiographical fiction frequently interweaves concerns about identity and deceased parents with recollections of ancestral spaces, as the literary critic Northrop Frye famously stated, the question 'Where is here?' is characteristic of the Canadian imagination. It is now also fundamental to the epoch of the Anthropocene. Although critics frequently praise Munro for her skill in presenting haunting, epiphanic moments, she is less often credited for her far less conventional tendency to tell stories covering years, even decades. My paper explores Munro's preoccupation with these vast temporal arcs and their impact on her recursive autobiographical fiction. I argue that Munro's penchant for 'return and revision' in her non-fictional works affords an opportunity for her protagonists and, by extension, her readers to revisit and ponder ancestral connections and the non-human dimensions of existence, which include sublime geological features and deep time.

Keywords: Alice Munro, autobiography, Anthropocene, sublime, geology, deep time

Over the course of her career, Nobel Prize-winning writer Alice Munro has written a series of loosely autobiographical stories. I use the term ‘loosely’ because Munro has repeatedly insisted on the difference between factual autobiographical accounts and her own life writing – the autobiographical and memoir stories that feature recurring characters and episodes which, in her view, are quasi-fictional texts. As she explains in the Foreword to *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), ‘These are *stories*. You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on.’ Her final collection, *Dear Life* (2012), contains a suite of stories that she likewise describes as ‘autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact.’ Nevertheless, she characterizes these ‘stories’ as ‘the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life.’

In her autobiographical stories, questions of ontology and mortality are inextricably connected to matters of space and place. Fundamental existential dilemmas expressed in Munro’s corpus – signaled by the title of her second short story collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* – are linked to basic questions concerning orientation. Although autobiographical fiction frequently interweaves concerns about identity and deceased parents with recollections of ancestral spaces, as the literary critic Northrop Frye famously stated, the question ‘Where is here?’ is characteristic of the Canadian imagination. It is now also fundamental to the epoch of the Anthropocene.

With respect to the issue of textual space, as Mark Levene observes, the very form of the short story – the genre that Munro has transformed and perfected – underscores the paradox of control and transience. Simply put, the form ‘is short and so is life.’¹ According to Levene, the relative brevity and imminent closure of the short story and of Munro’s stories, in particular, announce ‘a fragility that lacerates even as it confirms the reader’s common, everyday sense of transience.’² Like many scholars, Levene praises Munro for her skill in presenting haunting, epiphanic moments. Yet, as Robert McGill contends, Munro is less often credited for her far less conventional tendency ‘to tell stories covering years, even decades.’³ In contrast to critics who emphasize epiphanic moments, as McGill astutely observes, Munro’s portrayal of ‘such broad temporal scopes has allowed her to represent life in terms of longer paths of development than that suggested by the short story’s generic emphasis on epiphanic transformations.’⁴ Although the use of the word ‘development’ might seem to suggest the potential for progress, as Munro herself admitted, ‘I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere.’⁵ On this point, I agree with both Munro and McGill. Ultimately, he argues that Munro’s fiction ‘challenges any inclination readers may have to attribute development to individuals,

regions, or humanity as a whole.⁶ Recognizing the validity of his critical insights concerning her fiction, I explore Munro's preoccupation with vast temporal arcs and its impact on her recursive autobiographical fiction. In what follows, I argue that Munro's penchant for 'return and revision' in her non-fictional works affords an opportunity for her protagonists and, by extension, her readers to revisit and ponder ancestral connections and the non-human dimensions of existence, which include sublime geological features and deep time.

Munro's unique approach to the relationship between personal identity, space and place is perhaps best conveyed by the famous description in *The Lives of Girls and Women* of people's lives as 'dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable – *deep caves* paved with kitchen linoleum.'⁷ The pairing of domestic and geographical spaces characterizes Munro's aesthetic, which repeatedly draws parallels between the mystery and complexity of personal identity and the hidden, 'unfathomable' geographic spaces and places in southwestern Ontario. For Munro's characters, exposure to these uncanny physical spaces can instigate 'a revision of inner landscapes.'⁸

The short story serves as the ideal genre to reveal these depths largely because traditional writers and critics codified and domesticated its structure and teleology. Put differently, they have 'paved' its features with 'linoleum' – features that Munro frequently treats ironically and, on occasion, entirely subverts to reveal its ability to index sublime temporal and geographical dimensions. B.J. Eijzenbaum, for example, likens the story to a 'bomb dropped from an airplane,' and insists that 'it must speed downward so as to strike with its war-head full-force on the target.'⁹ Although Edgar Allan Poe emphasizes the story's 'immense force,' he insists that its power is derived from the reader's experience of its 'totality' – an experience he asserts must be derived from 'a perusal' that can 'be completed at one sitting.'¹⁰ In contrast to these descriptions, Munro's stories meander – some for upwards of seventy-five pages – and they do not so much strike their 'target' like a 'bomb.' Instead, they deftly and persistently excavate beneath the surface to reveal different strata and vastly different life forms.

My aim in comparing works, such as 'The Peace of Utrecht,' from her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to later stories, such as 'What Do You Want to Know For?' in *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), lies in demonstrating that Munro's narratives consistently register and symbolize human and geological interdependence – what Jason Moore calls 'the problem of the double internality' – the fact that 'human social and economic forms at once shape and are shaped by biological and geological conditions.'¹¹ The pervasive entanglement in Munro's stories of existential and geological plots, with their profoundly disparate temporal

and spatial vectors, resonates with particular urgency in the Anthropocene.¹² Reflecting over time on the implications of human impact on the environment and climate change, in her most recent collections, Munro's fictive depictions of individual mortal endings have shifted from the hopeful visions of elegiac, intergenerational and communal futures in her early works to more emphatically Gothic accounts of degeneration, loss, and metamorphosis. In the early stories, Munro's narrators glimpse the sublime facets of the landscape and deep time. Attentiveness to the implications of deep time, as Tobias Menely and Jess Oak Taylor explain, allows one 'to see human eventuality in the mineral world, a natural prophecy of petrified lifeless nature – a prophecy that applies to the historical world in which he himself lives.'¹³ But the narrators ultimately reject the implications of the ancient geographical features particular to Munro's southern Ontario birthplace in the town of Wingham on the shores of Lake Huron.

In contrast to the youthful protagonists in these earlier stories, who eschew the implications of lithic narratives, the mature narrators in Munro's later fictions accept and, at times, gratefully embrace the sublime facets of the landscape and their vertiginous geographic and temporal dimensions. I would suggest that Munro's recent autobiographical fictions are formally and thematically aligned with what is termed 'stratigraphy' – the branch of geological science associated with focusing on layers of earth and on matching rocks in different locations – literary writing about layers. Reading Munro stratigraphically does not simply entail trading one metaphor for another; instead, it instigates a shift in perspective. In her essay on Munro's life writing, for example, Coral Ann Howells describes Munro's tendency to embed excerpts from her father's published writing in her stories as 'a fine example of what [Susanna] Egan calls "mirror talk" when father and daughter become reflections of each other.'¹⁴ Conceiving of this textual layering as stratigraphy rather than mirror talk, however, allows readers to move beyond the looking glass, the limited anthropocentric and often solipsistic perspective of ancestral relations, to contend with workings of non-human forces and elements. In *The View from Castle Rock*, the narrator writes about both biographic and lithic layers as she ponders her own mortality. In Munro's corpus, this stratigraphic, posthumanist approach, which 'broadens our conception of signs, agents, and relations so as to resituate humans and human meaning making in a broader constellation of beings,'¹⁵ increasingly eclipses the earlier stories' monolithic promise of stability and continuity. In the later stories, reflections on the deep past as 'the theatre of reiterated change' and 'never-ending fluctuations' afford glimpses of life lived otherwise. In Munro's later stories, which adopt a geological approach

and thereby eschew the myth of progress, time circles backward. Futurity is also no longer safely embodied in the traditional figure of the child or literary realism. Instead, the retrograde orientation of these later stories instigates a return of the repressed and forges relationships with the past and narratives inflected by romance, wonder, and magical thinking.

On one level, my approach to Munro's writing recalls Thomas Dutoit's insightful, imaginative and capacious account of Munro's fascination with geography and the 'geo-literary.' Unlike Dutoit, however, I do not adopt a nationalist perspective and, as a corollary, read her preoccupation with the relation of the world and the earth as 'Canadian.'¹⁶ Nor does my praxis entail imposing a critical apparatus that unequivocally reads the Munro's complex array of images and diction solely in terms of this supposedly Canadian preoccupation. I would add that this type of praxis becomes ethically dubious when it is applied to stories featuring illness and disease.¹⁷ As Susan Sontag famously argued and as disability scholars continue to emphasize, viewing references to illness and disability solely as metaphors vaporizes the experience of people living with health challenges.¹⁸

Rather than aspire to a reading that accounts for every and 'all arrangements,'¹⁹ my far more limited reading of Munro's autobiographical fiction in light of geology and the Anthropocene foregrounds the longstanding entanglement between human and geological forms. It also affords a transcorporeal paradigm for engaging with her later autobiographical stories' sensitivity to catastrophe and death. More precisely, critical frameworks that register the impact of climate change help explain why, in her later stories, humans and the Earth itself are portrayed as equally vulnerable to degeneration. Reading in light of the Anthropocene sheds light on Munro's longstanding fascination with catastrophic events associated with biological and natural forces that overpower and petrify her characters. Her later autobiographical fictions dwell on a host of catastrophes and vibrate with a sense of vertigo and panic. As Bruno Latour argues, these sensations currently traverse 'all contemporary politics [...] owing to the fact that the ground is giving way beneath everyone's feet at once, as if we all felt attacked everywhere, in our habits and in our possessions.'²⁰ Echoing Frye's pronouncements on Canadian characteristic disorientation, Latour maintains that owing to climate change, disorientation now affects everyone on Earth: 'We don't know where to go, or how to live, or with whom to cohabit. What must we do to find a place? How are we to orient ourselves?'²¹

Unlike the nuclear threat, with its images of bombs that 'bring about revolutionary dimensions of blast, heat, and radiation,' which appear in the mind's eye in the iconic form of the mushroom cloud, 'climate threat

offers no new event or new physical entities.’²² Instead, the mind must grapple with ‘an incremental sequence of increasingly inhospitable habitat.’²³ Despite its uncanny familiarity, advanced global warming – like the nuclear threat – has instigated the apocalyptic speculation that we have ushered in the terminal phase of human development, a speculation that triggers profound fears of death and ‘death anxiety.’²⁴

In an early interview, Munro admits that her aesthetic is predicated on an awareness of transience and death:

With me it has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you’re doing something about this. [...] [I]t’s partly the feeling that I can’t stand to have things go [...] I was talking about the external world, the sights and sounds and smells – I can’t stand to let go without some effort at this, at capturing them in words.²⁵

In the earlier stories, however, the fight against death primarily concerns the loss of parental figures. As Nancy K. Miller observes, the trajectory of autobiographical writing and of the memoir, in particular, dovetails with that of the traditional elegy and, by extension, with Freud’s work of mourning:

Memoirs that write a parent’s death share many generic and thematic features of the elegy. Traditionally, the performance that the elegy entails for poets is the act of taking up and revising the precursor’s task in their own voices. This is a part of the mourning process and requires a break with the past, a separation, and a replacement.²⁶

Elegies, as Sarah Carson explains, ‘typically include eulogies to the dead, affirmations of the reassuring cyclicity of the natural world, moments of discovery or revelation (anagnorisis), and images of ascension or departure that depict a deceased other’s transcendence into a heavenly world.’²⁷ The stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which contend with both maternal and paternal loss, likewise tentatively hold out the promise of natural and familial continuity and, as a corollary, consolation.

But the elegiac tone of Munro’s fiction extends beyond the loss of parental figures – a feature that, as Miller observes, frequently links the genres of the elegy and the memoir – to encompass the loss of our relationship to spaces and places. Put differently, recalling the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth’s elegiac sonnets, Munro’s fiction registers the losses that arise when the built world, with its political and economic striving, is ‘too much with us,’ eclipsing our more fundamental relationship with nature. In essence, Munro invokes elegy to memorialize both the spaces and places and parental figures associated with her childhood.

Children and intergenerational relationships are central to 'Walker Brothers Cowboy,' the first story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The narrative opens with a father inviting his daughter on a walk to see 'if the Lake's still there.'²⁸ As they gaze at Lake Huron, as the narrator explains, '[h]e tells me how the Great Lakes came to be. All where Lake Huron is now, he says, used to be flat land, a wide flat plain. Then came the ice, creeping down from the north, pushing deep into the low places.'²⁹ Pressing his fingers spread against the rock-hard earth, he draws his daughter's attention to traces of sublime geographic transformations left by the Ice Age. Hidden in plain sight, these geographical and temporal 'open secrets' attest to the transience and unheimlich qualities of both human life and the landscape. Try as she might, however, the young narrator cannot orient herself in deep time:

The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility [...] He was not alive when this century started. I will be barely alive – old, old – when it ends. I do not like to think of it. I wish the Lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown.³⁰

Although she attempts to imagine the plain with dinosaurs walking on it, her psyche clings to a more consoling illusion of an eternally safe, unchanging home.

Munro's life-long preoccupation with the themes of degeneration, loss, and death may spring, in part, from her personal experience growing up as the child of an ailing mother in a poor farming family whose hopes for prosperity were dashed during the Depression.³¹ As the child of a mother with Parkinson's disease, who also served as her mother's caregiver, Munro lived under the literal sign of degeneration and death. 'The Peace of Utrecht,' from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, constitutes Munro's most autobiographical account of her mother's illness. The story portrays the intimate and conflicting emotional responses of two daughters, Helen and Maddy, to their mother's degenerative disease. Whereas Helen, the narrator, leaves home to study at college, and eventually marries and has two children, her sister, Maddy, remains in the small Ontario town of Jubilee. Never marrying, Maddy dedicates herself to caring for their mother for ten years until she dies. The story unfolds during Helen's brief visit to the family home. Munro's characteristic fusion of inner and outer landscapes – deep caves paved with linoleum – occurs in the story when Helen's guilt at deserting sister and mother, combined with the oppressive summer heat conspire to instigate an uncanny return of the repressed. As Helen says, 'it was brought home to me, as I walked across the front yard to

the steps, that after all these summers on the Coast I had forgotten the immense inland heat, which makes you feel as if you have to carry the whole burning sky on your head.’³² Returning to the locus of disruption and death transforms the narrator’s home into a site of hellish, Gothic imprisonment.

The malevolent, biological force of disease unleashes a host of uncanny elements in the text. In the eyes of her children, the mother’s degenerative disease effected a monstrous transformation: kinship roles and identities were fraught and in flux as the narrator’s mother became childlike and demanding, and the children were unwillingly thrust into the adult role of caregivers, who were understandably ashamed of and, at times, horrified by their monstrous charge. The story also invokes Gothic images of live burial to link the mother’s and the daughters’ fates. Early on, the narrator insists that her mother ‘must have wept and struggled in that house of stone [...] until the very end.’³³ The mother’s struggle is echoed by Maddy’s struggle to claim a life after her caregiving role is over. At the end of the story, Helen enjoins her sister to take her life. To go away and leave the house and the small town.³⁴ Although the story concludes with a Gothic tableau of both sisters paralyzed by guilt and grief, their stasis is countered by the image of Helen’s children heedlessly racing through the adult’s legs – a powerful and hopeful image of kinetic, intergenerational futures. Like ‘The Walker Brother’s Cowboy,’ ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ acknowledges the Gothic and sublime forces of nature, but tempers this awareness with an elegiac, child-oriented approach to loss.

The View from Castle Rock registers a profound shift from elegy to catastrophe that, I argue, registers the impact of the Anthropocene and Munro’s engagement with stratigraphic writing – a recursive engagement with the vast, non-human dimensions of existence. In this collection, as noted earlier, Munro’s narrators disavow elegiac promises of consolation and continuity afforded by the symbol of the child. As the narrator of ‘Home’ explains, ‘When our personal futures close down and we cannot imagine – sometimes cannot believe in – the future of our children’s children, we cannot resist this rifling around in the past [...] hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life.’³⁵ In accordance with this view, in the titular story about her family’s emigration from Scotland to Canada, the deaths of beloved, precocious children are treated as ironic and brutal facts of life. The story ‘The View from Castle Rock’ for example, concludes with the narrator’s dispassionate account of the fate of a two-year-old child James, a mischievous rascal who means the world to his doting aunt. At one point, James disappears for a few minutes on the ship carrying them to the New World only to be found ‘peeping out from under an empty bucket listening to the hubbub.’³⁶ When he is

returned to the family, his aunt Mary realizes the impossible depths of her love for him, which, she says, ‘she could not give up [...] any more than stop her heart beating.’³⁷ Yet the story ends with a solemn and implacable pronouncement: ‘Those travelers lie buried – all but one of them – in the graveyard in Halton County.’ The narrator goes on to explain that ‘[y]oung James was dead within a month of the family’s landing at Quebec [...] Dead of some mishap in the busy streets of York, or of a fever, or dysentery – of any of the ailments, the accidents, that were the common destroyers of little children in his time.’³⁸ Although the narrator finds the graves of the adults, both the child’s body and his grave remain untraceable. Unlike the fossil trace or a grave, which offers a ‘kind of residual quasi-material insistence that disrupts [...] negation and negativity,’ this story emphasizes the power and fragility of narrative traces – the capacity of stories rather than stones to index a ghostly ‘presence that negates negation.’³⁹ Like fossils, Munro’s stories offer material traces of past life forms that, ‘by refusing to vanish into the abyss of time, prevent time from becoming merely abyssal.’⁴⁰

Reading for the literary dimensions of geology and, more precisely, of the Anthropocene in Munro’s autobiographical stories operates, in Dana Luciano’s words, ‘as a gateway to a vastness that explodes the human.’⁴¹ Equally critical, as Luciano contends, it affords ‘a way for humans to find themselves otherwise.’⁴² In her account of Thoreau’s writings on natural, Juliana Chow observes that his work offers ‘a concurrence of biological, literary, and historical forms’ predicated on ‘partialities,’ and ‘dispersals’ as opposed to ‘organic wholes’ or ‘monologic continuity.’⁴³ Munro’s later stories recall both Thoreau’s writings in this regard and the work of early geologists like Edward Hitchcock (1793–1864), who grasped both ‘the Earth’s high antiquity (what we now know as ‘deep time’) and species extinction,’⁴⁴ and founded the science of ichnology – the study of fossils. In keeping with these geologically-minded writers, Munro’s stories forge connections ‘among thought, energy, flesh, mud, minerals, sediment, wind and water, emphasizing this preservation as a collaborative or compositional process, as well as a matter of chance of speculation.’⁴⁵

Reading Munro’s stories in light of the Anthropocene also revises our understanding of what it means to historicize and to return to one’s origins – a typical feature of the autobiographical genre. Although Munro’s life writing is characterized by ‘return and revision,’ as McGill emphasizes, her stories ‘caution readers against assuming that such return and revision will necessarily bring improvement.’⁴⁶ Rather than fulfill readers’ expectations of progress, generation, and revelation, Munro’s life writing, which dwells on death, circles backward. The stories’ preoccupation with Sigmund Freud characterized as ‘magical’ or ‘primitive thinking’ likewise

highlights degeneration rather than generation. In Munro's stories, particularly the later stories, genealogy and geology coalesce, and both shade off into improbable fictions about ancestral lands populated by inhabitants whose supernatural beliefs spring from their sense of vulnerability to catastrophic forces at work in the ancient landscape. Again, Munro's turn to the past and her romantic descriptions of her ancestors recall the writings of early geologists in the nineteenth century. Their geological conversations about humans in the sweep of geological time also took their readers 'backward to earlier moments in history' and betrayed a similar 'fascination with romance as a literary form.'⁴⁷ Munro's retrospective, coarticulation of human and natural history raise an important question about what it means for authors to write out of an awareness of geological notions of vast spaces and deep time. As Menely and Taylor ask, 'What if the history implied by the dictum "always historicize" turns out to be not the internality of social relations but rather social relations as they shape and are shaped by thermodynamic, biospheric, atmospheric, and hydrological processes?'⁴⁸ To return to Egan's metaphor of the mirror, Munro's life writing invites us to consider both the mirror – 'the internality of social relations' – and the ground on which the mirror stands – the non-human forces that impact and are impacted by social relations.

In registering the centrality of the landscape and moving humans into the background, Munro's geologically inflected stories double back to earlier genres that feature enchanted, vital landscapes, most notably, romance. In Munro's hands, the realist short story enfolds the romance genre and its characteristic engagement with marvelous phenomena and expressions of 'wonder.'⁴⁹ As Dutoit observes, Munro's repeated references to 'wonder' recall the 'Greek verb lurking nearby, *thaumazein*'⁵⁰ and, by extension, Aristotle's insistence in *The Metaphysics* that a love of knowledge begins with wonder. Aristotle recognized that humans have the capacity to wonder – 'to be awed by puzzles and to pursue knowledge for its own sake; this is what he thought distinguished humans from other animals, which pursued things purely for the sake of survival.'⁵¹ Yet, in Munro's fiction, wonder is frequently bound up with near-death experiences, which supports my view that in her fiction wonder resonates more profoundly with the romance genre than with its Greek origins.

Munro's stories forge connections to lost and 'backward' people and places in Scotland including her ancestors' birthplace in the Ettrick Valley, 'where the people is all believing in old stories and seeing ghosts.'⁵² Although the tracing of genealogy could be mistaken for the familiar and consoling motif of futurity and continuance, Munro's retrospective glance focuses sharply on catastrophic events: the family's protracted experience of darkness, loss, and encounters with primitive, spectral and

malignant forces. As Munro's narrator explains, the Ettrick Valley nurtured beliefs and stories born of 'truly dark times [...] before the Christian missionaries came across the sea from Ireland.'⁵³ In the story 'No Advantages,' Munro conjures her great-great-great-great grandfather Will O'Phaup – the last man to commune with fairies. She insists on her kinship with her forbearers, who lived in a place and an age of faith in creatures such as fairies and ghosts belonging 'to times of bad powers and evil confusion [...] [whose] intentions were oftener than not malicious, or even deadly.'⁵⁴

In keeping with the shift to the Anthropocene, *The View from Castle Rock* links the psychological capacity for regression and degeneration – which sears the imagination and elicits a sense of wonder – to the physical, geographic evidence of degeneration in the New World, specifically, Huron County, Munro's birthplace. Her evocations of a degraded landscape recall Latour's apocalyptic comments on the effects of climate change:

Little by little, we find that under the ground of private property, of land grabs, of the exploitation of territories, another ground, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved. A sort of earthquake, if you like, that led the pioneers to say: 'Watch out, nothing will be as it was before; you are going to have to pay dearly for the return of the Earth, the outburst of powers that had been tame until now.'⁵⁵

In 'What Do You Want to Know For?' the narrator likewise observes that the land, once viewed as an inert object, is actively fighting back:

In country like this, the trend is no longer towards a taming of the landscape and a thickening of population, but rather the opposite. The bush will never again take over completely, but it is making a good grab. The deer, the wolves, which had at one time almost completely disappeared, have reclaimed some of their territory. Perhaps there will be bears soon [...] Perhaps they are here already.'⁵⁶

Whereas Latour's writing locates an awareness of nature's power in the Anthropocene, for Munro, however, degeneration and disaster are familiar and uncanny aspects of both her ancestral and childhood homes. In keeping with her ancestor, Will O'Phaup who was lured by the fairies, Munro's vision is tinged with a malevolent sense of the sublime power of nature, but it also speaks the new-world fear of the wilderness. Whereas *Dance of the Happy Shades* manages to keep this uncanny sense of nature's power at bay, *The View from Castle Rock* coolly analyzes the terror unleashed by nature's chaotic force.

In the story 'Home,' which recounts the father's final illness, the narrator recalls that while her father's fever raged, he suggested that rather than moving forward in a teleological fashion, perhaps humanity was, in fact, moving backward. As he says, 'Evolution [...] We might've got the wrong end of the stick about that.'⁵⁷ According to him, what may be coming is a 'new Dark Ages.'⁵⁸ Far from being anxious about the possibility of degeneration, he concludes his feverish musings with a faint smile, mouthing the word 'wonder.'⁵⁹ Both the father in 'Walker Brothers Cowboy,' who maps the vast changes associated with the Ice Age, and the father in 'Home' recall the early geologists who insisted on empirical and rational study, but nevertheless, remained open to aesthetic and sensory enchantment – to an experience of 'wonder' – instigated by geological matter and to philosophical musings drawn from the rocks.⁶⁰ As Luciano observes, 'wonder, as distinct from awe, [and, I would add the sublime] does not annihilate the subject, so much as redirect it.'⁶¹

The narrator, however, registers the father's experience of wonder from her own position as a survivor of a series of ongoing catastrophes that precede and extend beyond her lifetime. Later, for example, she describes the uncanny sensation of moving backward and finding herself at home again, tending her father's sheep when he is rushed to the hospital. While performing chores on the farm – the same chores she performed as a child – she is overcome with panicked feelings of stasis and entrapment – feelings that, in turn, recall the sense of entrapment and paralysis that pervade the story about her mother's illness and death, 'The Peace of Utrecht.' In 'Home,' however, the narrator reflects on her panic and observes that it erupted in the midst of a pastoral scene when she was tending her father's sheep. As she explains:

When I think about all this later, I will recognize that the very corner of the stable where I was standing, to spread the hay, and where the beginning of panic came on me, is the scene of the first clear memory of my life. [...] I remember I am sitting on the first or second step watching my father milk the black-and-white cow. I know what year it was – the black-and-white cow died of pneumonia in the worst winter of my childhood, which was 1935. Such an expensive loss is not hard to remember.

And since the cow is still alive and I am wearing warm clothes [...] it is probably late fall or early winter. Maybe it was still 1934. Just before the brunt of the season hit us.⁶²

In the uncannily fractured perspective afforded by the mature narrator's psyche – which divides the panicked 'I' in the story from both the child and the narrator – the safety of the home is exposed as dreadfully

ephemeral and threatened by malevolent, natural forces. Alluding to but never directly addressing her mother's devastating terminal illness, which struck in the 1940s, Munro's narrator catalogues seemingly innocuous and domestic external features that, like the fairies, are later revealed as malicious and even deadly:

outside the small area of the stable lit by the lantern are the mangers filled with shaggy hay, the water tank where a kitten of mine will drown some years into the future; the cobwebbed windows, the large, brutal tools – scythes, axes and rakes – hanging out of my reach. Outside of that, the dark of the country [...] And the cold which even then must have been gathering, building into the cold of that extraordinary winter which killed all the chestnut trees, and many orchards.⁶³

Munro relies on the same ominous and prophetic tone in the story 'Working for a Living,' which describes her mother's short-lived success selling furs to American tourists in the summer of 1941. As the narrator explains, 'She couldn't have foreseen how soon the Americans were going to get into the war, and how that was going to keep them at home, how gas rationing was going to curtail the resort business. She couldn't foresee the attack on her own body, the destruction gathering within'.⁶⁴ In the face of these ongoing catastrophes, the story functions as what might best be described as a narrative trace that embodies the paradox of persistence, 'the possibility of having one's death and surviving it too'.⁶⁵

The final story in *The View from Castle Rock* entitled 'What Do You Want to Know For?' – which uncannily echoes the title of her second collection 'Who Do You Think You Are?' – indexes both the fragility of both human life and Munro's native landscape. The changes wrought by humans have altered the local geography to the extent that 'the tracks of glaciers are gone for good'.⁶⁶ The narrator's comments recall the father's playful invitation in 'The Walker Brother's Cowboy' to check 'if the Lake is still there'.⁶⁷ Whereas the father was teasing, the mature narrator in the later story earnestly maintains that 'you have to keep checking, taking in the changes, seeing things while they last'.⁶⁸ As noted earlier, as a child, Munro's narrator could not tolerate more than a glimpse of deep time. As an adult, however, she adopts her father's cooler, objective approach. Like him, she is able to contemplate vast geographic and temporal changes with acceptance and, on occasion, with wonder.

In 'What Do You Want to Know For?' Munro embarks on a geological and autobiographical quest to locate a mysterious crypt, 'something like a mound burial [...] that had survived in Central Europe from pre-Christian times'⁶⁹ – hidden in plain sight in Huron County. Recalling the opening story, the final story likewise invokes the symbol of the child

to insist on the precarity rather than certainty of futurity. As the narrator explains, the crypt is 'said to have been built in 1895 to receive the body of a three-year-old boy.'⁷⁰ Death and death anxiety hover over virtually every aspect of story, in light of the search for the crypt and the fact that Munro and her second husband, a geographer, set out on their journey to distract them from the unsettling discovery of a lump in Munro's left breast. Just as her mother's degenerative disease lay in wait, inscribed in the cells of her body and evidenced by odd symptoms prior to its diagnosis, the narrator learns that the lump in her breast had, in fact, been visible in several previous mammograms. When she asks her doctor why she had not been told about it when it first appeared, the radiologist tells her, 'they must not have seen it.'⁷¹ The juxtaposition of the search for the crypt and the discovery of a lump within her breast affirm that both inner bodily and external physical territories house uncanny, open secrets. Instead of paralyzing the narrator with terror, however, the traces of these uncanny catastrophes spur Munro's characteristic 'fight against death.'⁷² Rather than flee death, she and her husband run toward it, gleefully traversing the landscape in search of clues as to the location of the hidden crypt, finding wonder in a landscape that is 'articulated and active.'⁷³ As Munro's narrator explains, 'it was a pleasure, as always, to be together in this part of the world looking at the countryside that we think we know so well and that is always *springing some sort of surprise on us*.'⁷⁴ This experience of shock and surprise represents less a fight against death than the pleasure derived from Munro's geological ability to read and translate lithic narratives into textual forms.

While scholars have commented previously on the ability of forms such as the novel and the lyric to register geohistory, my contribution to this discussion lies in demonstrating that the short story – the genre that Munro transformed and perfected over a lifetime – is particularly well-suited to illustrating what Mark Levene terms 'the paradox of control and transience' – a paradox that has taken on decidedly apocalyptic dimensions in the Anthropocene. I would argue further that Munro's stories, like the writings of early geologists, draw profound attention to 'scale variance' owing to their repeated juxtaposition of human and non-human temporal scales. As I have illustrated, Munro's autobiographical stories emphasize the vastness of both psychic life and of biological and natural forces. As in Thomas Hardy's stories, 'the slow time of stone'⁷⁵ in Munro's writing serves as the vital and fragile ground that inscribes and is inscribed by the more rapid plots of equally fragile human lives.

A geological reading of Munro's autobiographical fiction in no way diminishes the loss and terror instigated by Munro's intimate encounters with degeneration and death. Instead, it allows us to appreciate how Munro's narrators explicitly use these traumatizing and catastrophic

experiences as fuel for creativity. Munro's encounters with powerful, destructive forces, including the imbricated human and natural forces encountered in the Anthropocene registered in the later autobiographical stories, instigate the desire to catalogue, narrate, and celebrate what will inevitably be buried and, potentially, lost.

In 'Home,' for example, as in 'Walker Brother's Cowboy,' Munro's narrator ponders the death of the father. Both stories also contextualize this loss within vast geographical changes and deep time. Although the youthful narrator in 'Walker Brother's Cowboy' 'does not like to think of it,' the mature narrator in 'Home' acknowledges the sublime power of chaotic forces and the hidden traces of the Ice Age. And whereas the father's hand pressing against the ground makes no impression in the earlier story, in 'Home,' the geographic formations resonate forcibly with the act of mark making and, by extension, with Munro's globally acknowledged powers as a writer. Both geographic and literary forms of mark making serve as alternatives or, perhaps, complement biological reproduction and anthropomorphically embodied futures associated with children and domestic spaces. In the final story, for example, Munro describes her favourite geographic features, kame moraines, which are more akin to caves than linoleum. As she explains, kame moraines are 'all wild and bumpy, unpredictable, with a look of chance and secrets.'⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, these lithic traces bear a striking resemblance to her own marvelous narrative designs.

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NOTES

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- 4 Ibidem.
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- 6 McGill, 'Alice Munro', 136.
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- 8 Levene, 'It Was about Vanish,' 845.
- 9 Qtd. in May, Charles. *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens, Georgia: Ohio UP, 1994 (81).
- 10 Qtd. in May, *New Short Story*, 61, 60.
- 11 Qtd. in Menley, Tobias and Jess Oak Taylor. 'Introduction.' In: Tobias Menely and Jess Oak Taylor (eds.), *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*. Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2017 (4).
- 12 See also Thomas Dutoit's essay 'Boring Gravel: Literary Earth, Alice Munro's Ontario Geolithic.' *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies* 77 (2014) 77–109.
- 13 Menley and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 1.
- 14 Howells, Coral Ann. 'Alice Munro and Her Life Writing.' In: David Staines (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*. Ottawa: Cambridge University Press, 2016 (87).
- 15 Menley and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 11.
- 16 Dutoit, 'Boring Gravel,' 77.
- 17 See Dutoit, 'Boring Gravel,' 83–84.
- 18 Referring to Bobby Sherriff, a character in *Lives of Girls and Women*, who is 'mad,' Dutoit links 'mad' to 'crazy,' which, in turn, recalls 'raze or crack,' which, when the mad Bobby 'spits' on the ground, supposedly 'brings rain to the most dried out earth on Earth, literally restoring the geological to the geoliterary' (83).
- 19 Dutoit, 'Boring Gravel,' 85.
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- 31 See DeFalco, Amelia. 'Caretakers/Caregivers: Economies of Affection in Alice Munro.' *Twentieth Century Literature* 58:3 (2012) 377–398; see also Thacker, Robert. *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005, 57.
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- 36 Munro, 'The View from Castle Rock,' 51.
- 37 Ibidem.
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- 39 Menley and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 100.
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- 44 Luciano, 'Romancing the Trace,' 97.
- 45 Idem, 107.
- 46 McGill, 'Alice Munro,' 137.
- 47 Menley and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 132.
- 48 Idem, 12.
- 49 Luciano, 'Romancing the Trace,' 98.
- 50 Dutoit, 'Boring Gravel,' 85.
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- 54 Ibidem.
- 55 Latour, *Down to Earth*, 17.
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- 57 Idem, 307.
- 58 Ibidem.
- 59 Ibidem.
- 60 See Heringman, Noah, 2017, 63.
- 61 Luciano, 'Romancing the Trace,' 98.
- 62 Munro, Alice. 'Home,' 314.
- 63 Idem, 315.
- 64 Munro, Alice. 'Working for a Living' In: *The View from Castle Rock*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006 (152).
- 65 Menley and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 100-101; see also Morgenstern.
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- 67 Munro, Alice. 'Walker Brother's Cowboys,' 3.
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- 69 Idem, 325.
- 70 Idem, 328.
- 71 Idem, 339.
- 72 Gibson, 'Alice Munro,' 244.
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