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Geology and story in Alice Munro's "Axis"

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Abstract

"Axis" appeared in 2011 in *The New Yorker* but never made it into *Dear Life* (2012), Munro's final collection. The story includes a brief but crucial description of the Niagara Escarpment and other geological features that interrupt the otherwise bland landscape of Southern Ontario. This focus is in keeping with the "deepening geological sensibility" of Munro's later work (Thacker 2016: 12). As Munro writes in "Axis," the Escarpment is a "tower of ancient-looking rock that seem[s] quite out of place" among the flat roads west of Toronto (2012: 131). This paper argues that Munro uses geological symbolism with an overtness not seen elsewhere in her work. The Cambrian and the emotional converge in "Axis" and geology serves as a model for how a story can be put together. The geological model appears to mirror a predictable map, but Munro complicates the parallel between geological or geographical mapping by adding the unpredictable human element.

Key words

Alice Munro; "Axis;" Canadian literature; geology; landscape

1. Introduction

Much of Alice Munro's fiction takes place in an unspectacular landscape. Anyone who has glimpsed the Alps or the Rockies or the Grand Canyon would find Huron County, the setting of most of Munro's stories, dull. The fields of south-western Ontario by the shores of Lake Huron are flat, even by Ontario standards – that is, even by the standards of a province whose highest point is Ishpatina Ridge (which rises to a mere 693 metres above sea level).

That Huron County is horizontal is of course no secret. Publishers and biographers, critics, and Munro herself have loudly proclaimed the flatness of the land. What has come to be known as "Alice Munro Country" is, writes publisher Douglas Gibson in *Stories about Storytellers*, "an undramatic landscape" endowed with "no striking natural features" (2011: 349). In case a reader had missed this emphasis on featurelessness, just a few pages later in *Stories* Gibson repeats the adjectives "flat" and "undramatic" (352). Munro has noted that the flat roads and rocky farmland around Goderich, Ontario, form "a landscape that's usually disregarded, or dismissed as drab agricultural counterpane" (Munro 2006: 322). Munro's "counterpane" metaphor is telling: a quilt or bedspread can be beautiful and striking, and a lot can go on even under the drabbest of bedding. As I aim to show in my analysis of "Axis," plainness and the apparent lack of striking features is crucial in Munro precisely because the chaos that lies hidden threatens to emerge. "Axis" juxtaposes the plain and the chaotic to a remarkable extent.

2. Munro's Geology before "Axis"

Already in "Princess Ida," from the 1971 collection *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro combines the possibility of lurid or unlikely action bubbling up from beneath an unassuming surface. She describes a house that "stood at the end of a long lane [...], in the middle of fields where the rocks – part of the preCambrian Shield – were poking through the soil like bones through flesh" (1971: 73). Her simile links the materiality of the landscape to the materiality of a human body: the coldness of rock poking through soil gives way to the violence of bones penetrating through flesh. The next 89-word sentence in "Princess Ida" marches towards direct violence, concluding in another simile:

The house which I had never seen in a photograph – perhaps none had ever been taken – and which I had never heard my mother describe except in an impatient, matter-of-fact way ("it was just an old frame house – it never had been painted"), nevertheless appeared in my mind as plainly as if I had seen it in a newspaper – the barest, darkest, tallest of all old frame houses, simple and familiar yet with something terrible about it, enclosing evil, like a house where a murder has been committed. (1971: 73)

The concluding simile differs from the earlier one because it points to a feeling rather than a visual image; "like bones through flesh" can be visualized, but how can one picture the smell or feel of "murder" in the air? The juxtaposition of "bones through flesh" and the mention of "murder" link the soil and its underlying "preCambrian" foundation to brutality. As Magdalene Redekop points out (referring albeit to the house rather than the fields), the "very familiarity is uncanny" (2014: 188). In other words, the macabre is eerie precisely because it is so close to home and to what the narrator intimately knows. Home entails the predictability of routine, the comfort of the known. That is why we have the trope of horrifying events occurring in an unlikely place, in a small town that oozes security and community. The ominous statement *It can't happen here* is, of course, a precursor to the unlikely or the horrific occurring in Everytown, Indiana, or Nowhere, Manitoba.

We may degrade a landscape through dismissing labelling, but the personified landscape fights back and breaks through the surface. To return to Gibson, and admittedly to a well-worn argument in Munro studies, the point of place in Alice Munro, "is that what you see around you is so ordinary. It's a dull, everyday landscape. And Alice Munro the magician has waved her wand over this undramatic scene, and made it the setting for some of the most astonishing and thrilling short stories ever seen" (2011: 351–2). Where Gibson sees an incongruity between the "ordinary" landscape and Munro's "thrilling" stories, others see a more organic connection between her plain and familiar fields and the extraordinary tales played out there. Marilyn Simonds argues that "place forms a kind of bedrock to [Munro's] stories, wild and unpredictable as kame" (2016: 42). Simonds' phrasing shows a tension between the obdurate and stable bedrock of the Canadian Shield and the volatile kame that sits atop it – that is, between the rock-solid subter-

ranean base and the sand and gravel deposits that shift with retreating glaciers, like marbles scattering over a smooth table. Just as protuberance and elevation depend on flatness, so too does the instable depend on the stable.

Simonds' comment dovetails with Janet Beer's observation of Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, where "stories lie upon stories [...] palimpsestically, glimpsed through cracks and fissures in the landscape and the memory" (2009: 149). As with the earth, we may only see the top layer, but that does not mean nothing goes on beneath. Coral Ann Howells similarly speaks of "mapping" a "series of overlapping spaces" as a "useful analogy for Munro's narratives" (2009: 169). Relevant for this paper and "Axis" is that Simonds, Beer and Howells each use geographical and geological vocabulary to explain Munro's fiction. Each states that the reader should recognize that Munro's stories rest on a solid foundation that allow for many narrative possibilities, only one of which will be played out.

Nowhere in Munro's oeuvre is an analogy between story structure and geologic structure more tempting than in her 2011 story "Axis"; nowhere in Munro are geology and narrative possibilities more tightly and overtly connected. The titular "Axis" refers to the Frontenac Axis, an area near Kingston, Ontario, where the Precambrian Canadian Shield, the bedrock of North America, becomes visible. There is an eruption (not the mere poking seen in "Princess Ida") as the Canadian Shield bursts through the surface (Munro 2012: 143). Elsewhere, the Shield is buried beneath the earth. Just as history¹ and geology converge in the toponym "Frontenac Axis," so too does Munro marry tale-telling and rock-sounding in "Axis." Indeed, the character Royce, who converts from lackadaisical student to impassioned geologist, mentions having "written a little book about the Rideau" Canal (a 200-kilometre waterway running from Kingston to Ottawa) and having "managed to get a good deal of the geology into it as well as the history" (Munro 2012: 142).

3. "Axis" and Genre Conventions

Aside from its appearance in *Best American Short Stories 2012*, "Axis" has never appeared in book form. For that reason, a brief overview of the story is in order before I look at it (and its geology) more in depth. "Axis" begins like this: "Fifty years ago, Grace and Avie were waiting at the university gates, in the freezing cold. A bus would come eventually, and take them north, through the dark, thinly populated countryside, to their homes" (Munro 2012: 131). The bus would take them over the flat farmlands they'd left in search of husbands and an education the young women would not put to use. These lines set the generic scene for the entire story – and much of "Axis" reads like a self-parody of Munro, as if Munro were imitating her own tried-and-true themes and story structures.

Grace and Avie have boyfriends at university, named Royce and Hugo, respectively. Avie and Hugo sleep together and she fears getting pregnant, a fear that clearly comes out in a symbolically crucial dream she tells Grace about a "baby, who cried day and night. It howled, in fact, till she thought she would go crazy. [...] At last she picked up this baby – picked her up, there never was any doubt

that it was a girl – and took her down to some dark basement room and shut her in there, where the thick walls insured that she wouldn't be heard. Then she went away and forgot about her" (Munro 2012: 132). The dream establishes a subterranean theme that runs through "Axis" and parallels the underground geology of the story.

Royce visits Grace at her family farm, which leads to a sudden break-up as Royce deserts her, after Grace's mother catches them having sex. Grace, who had appeared to be the focal point of the story, disappears from "Axis." A half-century later, Royce runs into Avie on a train and they chat about old times and their post-university lives. About Avie we learn this: "She and Hugo had six children in the end, all grown now. Hugo has been dead for a year and a half. Except for those couple of years in Kenora, he spent his entire teaching career in Thunder Bay" (Munro 2012: 141). Royce has become a geologist.

"Axis" is one of Munro's final stories, and if at times it reads like a response to critics, it also has a touch of aforementioned self-parody. Munro seems to be self-consciously, self-ironically crafting the quintessential Munro tale. Like so many Munro stories, "Axis" jumps back in time before circling back to the present. As Christopher Tayler notes in an August 15, 2009, review of *Too Much Happiness* published in *The Guardian*, Munro is "not afraid to shift chronology around." Writing fifteen years and a half dozen story collections earlier than Taylor, Ajay Heble observes that Munro often "uses a series of melding and overlapping events, subtly undermining the distinction between past and present, and bringing to the fore the distinction between chronological and narrative order" (1994: 75). Each of these observations holds true for "Axis."

The "Fifty years ago" that sets "Axis" in motion, meanwhile, lies somewhere between *once upon a time* and modern history, where living memory fades into unreliability. Munro revels in the analeptic – that is, a retrospective or flashback technique – and there is a numerical neatness in her opening. Her omniscient but coy narrator does not reveal all that happened five neat decades ago. Most significantly, she dispatches Grace from the story; the reader does not learn what becomes of her. One can only surmise the damage Royce has caused by breaking Grace's heart.

There is further symmetry in Munro's quartet of characters: two young men and two young women (again, familiar Munro terrain). Grace and Avie (two female students) and Hugo and Royce (two male students). "Unlike Avie," writes Munro, "Grace was in love. She believed that her virginity and her refusal to let Royce dispose of it – not what he was used to – was a way of keeping him interested" (2012: 132). If university is where one meets men, sex is a tool for snaring a husband, and Grace abstains not for prudish but for strategic reasons. The pre-sexual-revolution world of c. 1960, in other words, is a seemingly ordered and easily mappable world of stable gender relationships: "They [i.e. Grace and Avie] understood – everybody understood – that having any sort of job after graduation would be a defeat. Like the sorority girls, they were enrolled [at university] to find somebody to marry. First a boyfriend, then a husband. It wasn't spoken of in those terms, but there you were" (131). Marriage is set up as a zero sums game of winners and losers, the rules of which "everybody understood." The

lines following “everybody understood” have a declarative confidence to them that function as a pedantic explanation of what Munro’s narrator has just stated. It is as if the elder Munro, through her narrator, is explaining antiquated social norms to a younger readership, speaking clearly of what once went unstated. The phrase “somebody to marry” is telling, since what matters for Grace and Avie is not *who* they marry, but *that* they marry – a theme that resurfaces at the end of “Axis” when Avie reflects on her long marriage to Hugo. Meanwhile, the verb-free phrase “First a boyfriend, then a husband” implies the predictable, step-by-step approach to life that is as ordered as romantic comedy conventions: two boys and two girls leads to two married couples by the end of Act 5.

All early signs in “Axis” intimate that Munro is working within a neat generic convention, laying down a neat layer of plot leading to marriage, though not necessarily love. As Emma Smith wryly remarks in a podcast lecture on *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the “inevitable comedy conclusion [is that] four lovers must make two couples” (2012). But even in a traditional romantic comedy that inevitability of resolution doesn’t mean that the path to the marriages will be smooth. In “Axis,” the complications are these: Avie has a crush on Royce; Royce fancies Avie. When Royce, later, is travelling by bus to see Grace at her family farm, he happens to see Avie near a rural bus stop. He briefly toys with the idea of disembarking in order to court her, but decides that wouldn’t be right (“I couldn’t very well not turn up where I was expected...,” he tells her decades later, when he turns up in an unexpected place [Munro 2012: 143]). So Royce continues his planned journey to Avie’s family farm, and Grace makes elaborate plans to sleep with him. Her parents and siblings will be out, Grace will pretend to be visiting a friend, but will double back on her bicycle to a waiting farm and a waiting Royce; they will do the deed and eventually the marriage plot will be consummated.

At the farmhouse, when Grace and Royce are about to have sex and are “far enough advanced not to have heard the car” on the gravel driveway, Grace’s mother, who has – by chance or protective maternal design – storms into the room, causing coitus interruptus (Munro 2012: 137). The mother’s livid reaction is described with sexually-charged vocabulary: “She was not able to speak. She shook. She stuttered. She steadied herself by holding the bed frame” (138). Grace, meanwhile, “had her head buried in the sheets, her bare buttocks now somehow exposed” (138). Having carefully set up a comic scenario or what seems will be comic generic inevitability,² Munro seems to be mocking puritan mores of yore. The mother literally stands between the young lovers and prevents their physical union – “Once [Royce] had to say ‘Excuse me’ to the mother” as he passed her to gather his belongings (138). *It will all work out in the end*, the reader might be thinking. For what serious writer could combine the boisterously alliterative “bare buttocks” with anything remotely tragic? Looked at from a 2020 perspective, the scene reads like slapstick, perhaps a superfluous set-piece.

However, Munro’s narratives hijinks soon spill over into what will apparently be Grace’s tragedy. Grace rises from the bed, “perfectly naked,” and says to a departing Royce, “Take me. Take me with you” (Munro 2012: 138). The sexual slapstick gives way to literal and emotional exposure. Grace stands denuded of clothing and dignity, issuing an imperative that is not an order but a plea. We are

harshly reminded that Grace is a young woman who was sent to university only to meet a husband. We may laugh at old mores and Southern Ontario prudery, but that does not lessen the pain of those born a few crucial decades before the *Summer of Love*. Royce rejects her and, “as if he hadn’t even heard her” (138), leaves the scene of the crime on foot and heads out into the country roads, into the unknown landscape, into geology.

4. Unsubtle Symbolism and Geological Conversion

The geological symbolism in “Axis” is both unsubtle and striking. Munro uses geological features as a model of how stories are constructed, pinning much of the plot development on the stability of how rock is layered – before upending that model. “Axis” itself, with its emphasis on geology, urges us to see how the geological structure of the land reflects the characters’ lives and the narrativization of those lives. The “ancient combustion” of rock “cutting through the limestone” which breaks through the surface of the Canadian Shield at the Frontenac Axis parallels the long-ignored event ignored that threatens, it seems, to resurface decades later (Munro 2012: 143).³ Personal history and geology come together, much in the way historical time (measured in decades and life-spans) and geological time (measure in millions of years) come together in the “Frontenac Axis.”

Especially in her later works, Munro uses arcane geological vocabulary so frequently that Robert Thacker writes of her “deepening geological sensibility” (2016: 12).⁴ Munro’s understanding of this earthly science was aided by her second husband, Gerald Fremlin, a physical geographer she married in 1976. Geological map in hand, the two would often drive through Huron County and marvel at its hidden delights (13). In “Boring Gravel: Literary Earth, Alice Munro’s Ontario Geolithic,” Thomas Dutoit goes even further than Thacker in pointing out the importance of geology in Munro. He contends that “geologically-based stories” are a *type* of Alice Munro tale, catalogues them and observes that “the geological or more accurately the geo-literary composition crystalizes around words” such as “gravel,” “lake,” and “cracks” reveal the fleetingness of human time against that of “geological, or deep, time” (80, 78) (Dutoit 2014, 80, 78).

Yet even if we accept the possibility of a geological Munro, “Axis” stands out for its overt highlighting of geology as a parallel to story structure. “Axis” is not only a chronological follow-up to the autobiographical “What Do You Want to Know For?” from *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), in which Munro applauds and venerates a geological map and book – *The Physiography of Southern Ontario* by Lyman Chapman and Donald Putnam.⁵ She and her husband refer to the cartographers “familiarly but somewhat reverentially, as Put and Chap” (319). “Familiarly” bespeaks the intimacy we feel for our favourite and thumbed-through books, while “reverentially” refers also to the gorgeous maps themselves. Munro goes on to describe the images: “These maps show the usual roads and towns and rivers, but they show other things as well” (319) – the catch-all noun “things” itself indicates phenomena that are sensed or felt but remain tricky to label because they lie below the surface.

Maps, like all human creations, are of course limited to the human perspective. Like narratives, they depend on omissions, silences, and, as Bertrand Westphal notes, the cartographer “delivers a work, just like a writer” (2013: 147) – much as Royce squeezes geology into his “little book about the Rideau” and its “chain of forts” (Munro 2012: 141). At best, maps and other pictorial or verbal narratives are a useful intellectual imposition upon a landscape that benefits a single perspective and implies a desire to control and differentiate through charting, naming and random colouring. As Yi-Fu Tuan writes with exquisite irony, “the world’s nations appear as a mosaic of clashing colors. Pink Canada looms large over butter-tinted United States; there can be no doubt about where one ends and another begins, nor of their sharply contrasting identities” (1977: 178). At worst, maps can be tools of power that are used to help us divide lands into arbitrary political units, often with dire consequences – as in *King Lear* or the fateful carving-up of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884/5. These states were born of mere “sets of lines drawn on the map according to [imperialist] interests” (Young 2003: 35). In history and story-telling alike, *who* is doing the mapping is what matters most.

However, in contrast to those who regard maps and mapping solely as impositions of power or instances of Western or white privilege, Munro celebrates her Chapman and Donald Putnam book of maps⁶ as a work of art. Engaging in ekphrasis, she uses words to describe the book’s

patches of bright yellow, fresh green, battleship gray, and a darker mud gray, and a very pale gray, and splotches or stretches or fat or skinny tails of blue and tan and orange and rosy pink and purple and burgundy brown. Clusters of freckles. Ribbons of green like grass snakes. Narrow fluttery strokes from a red pen. (2006: 319).

Though the phrases “narrow fluttery strokes” and “splotches or stretches” do not sound rigorously scientific, they remain a reminder that maps are also things of beauty. Still, the maps do reliably indicate where one type of rock gives way to another, and “What Do You Want to Know For?” points out how the hard science of cartography or geology and the softer ways of the arts can work together.

After a one-sentence paragraph (“What is all this?” [2006: 319]), Munro’s story moves to beauty of another sort. The colourful and “fluttery strokes” on the map indicate “drumlins” and “moraines” and “eskers” and “kame, or kame moraine” and other scientific terms that separate the lay-reader from the geologist (319, 320). Munro’s argument is that maps are not random impositions on the landscape, as one might have believed with the “fat or skinny tails” (since the antonyms hint at artistic whimsy or randomness rather than selection); these lines are in fact firm demarcations of natural boundaries. “It’s the fact you cherish,” writes Munro, merging the assertiveness of “fact” with the affective verb “to cherish” (321). Here it appears that language can pin down physical realities, and here Munro is in line with Gerald Fremlin, who said, “at its core, [geography] is an injunction to *explain* the landscape that its name commits it to depict” (quoted in Simonds 2016: 41). “Axis” Munro parallels the human geography of narrative with the geology that lies beneath the surface of the earth. In other words, she

deals with people who turn space into place by mapping lives and considering the meaningful strata that underlie both stories and the surface of the earth.⁷

Munro's rock symbolism in "Axis" is comically heavy-handed. When Royce flees Grace's mother, Grace, and the farm, he sees something remarkable near the flat roads: "a tower of ancient looking rock that seemed quite out of place there, even though it was capped with grass and had a small tree growing out of a crack" (Munro 2012: 140). The seemingly unnatural phenomenon of the root growing through a crack upsets Royce's worldview. The rock rising from the flat roads that are devoid of "striking natural features" (to re-quote Gibson) startles and amazes Royce.

The narrator pinpoints Royce's geographical location and his benightedness:

He was on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, though he did not know that name or anything about it. But he was captivated. Why had he never been told anything about this? This surprise, this careless challenge in the ordinary landscape. He felt a comic sort of outrage that something made for him to explore had been there all along and nobody had told him. (Munro 2012: 140)

Before, Royce had been living in puerile darkness, since any southern Ontarian who is ignorant of the Niagara Escarpment is geographically incompetent. Moreover, there is an infantile element in the phrases "never been told" and "nobody had told him," as if Royce is blaming the Ontario education system or society at large for hiding this tower of rock from him. The passage is a clear movement from ignorance to knowledge, a loss of geological virginity that echoes the bedroom scene that precedes this discovery. The Shield is now somehow exposed like Grace's "bare buttocks" were before. Enthralled by this glimpse of the sublime, Royce suddenly "knew. Before he got into the next car, he knew that he was going to find out; he was not going to let this go. Geology was what it was called. And all this time he had been fooling around with arguments, with philosophy and political science" (140).

In other words, the playboy Royce had been busying himself, "fooling around" with fleeting words and thus ignoring the apparent solidity of the physical geography and adamant demarcations Munro praises in Put and Chap's maps. The drumlines and moraines charted there are real, *natural*, turning-points in the landscape, not mere arbitrary labels. Royce ponders the rock ridge with a sense of wonder, for the rock bursting out of the earth is a wonder also in the etymological sense of a *wound*. The Escarpment is a lengthy tear in the earth's fabric that, like a private miracle, rips Royce from his quotidian expectations, unsettles his sense of the normal and the usual, and points to the impossible.⁸ The Escarpment opens Royce up to new possibilities in life. He turns from thoughts of romance (or sex) and of philosophy to the solidity of rock. This rock-sighting marks what Robert Thacker calls Royce's "first geological epiphany" (2016: 15). "It wouldn't be easy" to study geology, thinks Royce, "it would mean saving money, starting again with pimpled brats just out of high school. But that was what he would do" (Munro 2012: 140).

The very blatancy of this turning-point in Royce's life lampoons narrative causality precisely because it is so sudden and unpredictable (bringing it closer to the unfathomably mysterious motives of real life). After all, up to this point in "Axis," there is no evidence that Royce is a man of the dedication and resolve a career in geology would require. We have already learned that Royce is a man who regularly walks out. He walked out on Grace, he almost walked off the bus in pursuit of Avie when he was on his way to visit Grace, and he did not graduate from university – "he'd walked out on his last exam because the questions were idiotic" (Munro 2012: 133). He is also lazy. When a farmer picks up Royce after he'd abandoned Grace, this delightful exchange ensues:

"Well, aren't you getting a bit old [. . .] to be hitching rides? You got through college and all – aren't you of the opinion that you should be getting a real job?"

Royce considered this, as if it were a truly novel idea.

He said, "No." (140)

Here, Royce is both duplicitous and honest – duplicitous because he pretends that he did graduate from university; honest because he does not even pretend to want to work. Against this character background, it is hard to expect Royce to return to the university he'd just left in hopes of toiling away at the hard sciences – not least because his firm conviction that he "was not going to let this go" (140) immediately follows his letting-go of Grace.

Because Royce's conversion is so immediate, and because Munro pinpoints the location of that conversion, she has prompted us to read the rock symbolically. Munro is portraying Royce's Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment. In a flash of rock, Royce grows up and resolves to prove himself a responsible man among mere urchins. Indeed, the unsubtle Escarpment passage is out of place in Munro's oeuvre, since as Francine Prose generalizes, "Alice Munro writes with the simplicity and beauty of a shaker box. Everything about her style is meant to attract *no* notice, to make you *not* pay attention" (Prose 2006: 25). Compared to similar passages in other Munro stories, the scene between Royce and the rock, including Royce's intention to convert to geology, is too improbable to serve as a credible textual clue. As Michelle Gadpaille writes in *The Canadian Short Story*, Munro's prose "forces the reader to play detective, to comb the text for clues to the 'full story' behind the selected revelations of the narrative" (1988: 58).

Royce turns the rock into a key element in the story of his new life as a geologist: "Later, he *often* told people about the trip, about the sight of the escarpment that had *turned his life around*" (Munro 2012: 140; my emphasis). Seeing that rock on the Niagara Escarpment was clearly a life-changing event for Royce; clearly, too, he has spent many an hour explaining and narratizing this event for his various listeners. In other words, Royce puts the Escarpment to use for stylizing the tale of his vocation as a geologist. A sceptical reader might still be concerned about Munro's convenient use of the rock as a plot device, but that hasty conversion is

undercut by what Royce leaves out of his version of his life-story: "If asked what he'd been doing there, he'd wonder and then remember that he'd gone up there to see a girl..." (140). The words "he'd wonder and then remember" ring insincere because they indicate feigned remembering and thus the constant forgetting of Grace.⁹ Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Royce tells and retells the story of what befell him years ago; unlike the *Ancient Mariner*, Royce is able to forget some of the less savoury details. Royce's story of his life is not a manic repetition of a wondrous event but a re-telling of a fiction. Grace, the girl whose inner life "Axis" has previously revealed to us, is reduced to nothing more than "a girl" in the autobiography he relates to Avie. In narrative terms, Royce is aware of what must be left out of a story in order "to make life more bearable"; living "here and now in the present" requires closing off the past or "rewriting it as if it were something which could be invented at every step" (Heble 1994: 185, 191).

5. What If's?

Grace disappears from both "Axis" and Royce's version of his life. Royce may have "turned his life around," but he's also turned Grace's life upside down by disposing of her. He "went into the field [geology] a bit late to make his mark," but "Axis" suggests that he marked Grace in some important way. Lauren Groff thinks, for example, that Grace was impregnated by Royce, despite the interruption (2011). There is, however, no evidence of this in the story – which is precisely why reader participation is required. I can disagree with Groff's assumption, but I can see why she has to make assumptions about "Axis." Because Grace has gone missing, the reader is invited to play the game of *what if?* Or *where is she now?* What if Grace's mother hadn't stormed into the room as her daughter was being deflowered? What if Royce hadn't seen the Niagara Escarpment? Would that have given us a comic ending with its requisite a pair of marriages?

Munro suggests another *what if* in the story. In the final pages of "Axis," a now-retired Royce chances upon a now-widowed Avie in a train travelling through Kingston, Ontario. Royce recognizes Avie immediately, showing that the past does not remain entirely buried. He confesses his half-century-old attraction to Avie and tells her he saw her from the bus as he was heading to Grace's – or, as he puts it, using the same phrasing as previously, "I was going to see a girl I knew then" (Munro 2012: 142). That he uses the exact same words implies that he is reproducing a rehearsed story. What follows is an emotional probing as Royce fishes to hear that he was adored once by a young woman, as he longs to know whether the attraction he felt while staring out of a bus window was mutual. He reveals that he had imagined a plan to desert Grace and to court Avie on the way back from Grace's farm, and, fifty years on, he wants to know whether the plan would have worked:

"If I'd said, 'Be at such-and-such a place, such-and-such a time,' would you have been there?"

Avie doesn't hesitate. "Oh, yes," she says. (143)

Having already learned that Avie would have given up her late husband Hugo and their six children for a fleeting shot at Royce, he persists in his inquisition:

“With the complications and all?”
 “Yes.” (143)

And so “Axis” presents yet another near-miss, paralleling the bedroom incident back at Grace’s home, but adding complexity and layers of what could have been, of the other ways in which Munro could have told this story after having laid the foundations for what looks like a comedy. This train conversation is, after all, a conjecture within a fiction. Had Avie known about and acted upon Royce’s plan, she might not have had her six children with or marriage to Hugo. In the comedy-style symmetry with which “Axis” begins, presumably Grace would have married Hugo and Society would have gotten what “everybody understood” was the purpose of university in the early 1960s: marriage.

When reading fiction, it is of course a slippery slope to think of *what might have happened* – that would be like a modern cartographer writing absolute conjecture into a map rather than including an honest blank that indicates where the knowledge ends (Westphal: 2013 148).¹⁰ As mentioned, however, in “Axis” Munro forces the reader into such musings because the story’s characters themselves partake of such imaginings. Perhaps Royce and Avie would have had a happy life, perhaps Royce would have found true love instead of a rock. In any case, having let Avie emotionally expose herself just as Grace had literally exposed herself all those years ago, Royce rejects this Hugo-less alternative history with Avie. He calls it “water under the bridge” (Munro 2012: 143) – that is, he resorts to cliché, to using a phrase stripped of emotional meaning. Having heard the answer he wanted to hear, Royce emotionally distances himself from his own life, also in linguistic terms. “Then he leans back into the headrest and closes his eyes” (143), rejecting further conversation with Avie just as he had rejected Grace five decades before – but not before uttering a closed-eye imperative: “‘Wake me up before we’re into Kingston if I’ve gone to sleep,’ he says. ‘There’s something I want to be sure to show you’” (143).

At this point in “Axis,” Munro dispenses with the narrative symbolism she puts to use in her story. After delivering symbolism of the Niagara Escarpment that concretely shows how stories work, Munro rejects all sense of orderliness and causality. The line “Wake me up...” is remarkable for the imagined storyline it undoes, the alternative romance narrative it eradicates. Avie, moments after giving in entirely to Royce – moments after having forgotten about her six children and her long marriage to Hugo – reflects on what this man in the train has said to her. “Not so far off from giving her automatic orders, like a husband” (Munro 2012: 143) observes Avie (Munro 2012: 143). Slipping away from the conventions of comedy, Munro furnishes what seems to be the real message: it is not couples that are interchangeable, but men.

What Royce wants to show Avie is another geological breaking point. It is another bit of geology that parallels but also complicates the multi-layered structure of “Axis” – namely, “what is known as the Frontenac Axis” that breaks

through the regular, hard and flattish Canadian Shield (Munro 2012: 143). Munro describes “great slabs of limestone packed in order, one on top of the other, like a grand construction” (143). It is tempting to think of this as a metaphor or allegory¹¹ for the traditional, well-built story whose careful construction sets a tragedy or comedy in motion.

However, the Frontenac Axis itself resists allegory-style decoding. Rather, the Frontenac Axis “is nothing less than an eruption of the vast and crazy old Canadian Shield, all the ancient combustion cutting through the limestone, pouring over, messing up those giant steps” (Munro 2012: 143). Here there is a tension between the mappable and the unpredictable that we have seen earlier in Munro’s musings on Put and Chap’s *Physiography of Southern Ontario*. Again, Munro dances between aesthetic language and terminology.¹² The words “eruption” and “vast” collide with the personifying adjective “crazy” to bring psychology or human geography and physical geography together. Moreover, the phrase “messing up those giant steps” teases us into contradictory thinking. “Steps” suggests the 1–2–3 causality of traditional narrative and order, while “messing up” tells us *not* to think of such order. The image of messiness requires the easy-to-follow image of steps in order to make sense. In a way that is far less subtle than in most of Munro’s work, we are urged to read the “ancient combustion” – the ancient burning or consuming – as suppressed matter.

Avie’s reflecting on the eruption of dead rock makes her reflect also on Grace; she recalls a letter she received from Grace after Royce had left her in the lurch: “You may not have heard I have dropped out of college, due to some troubles I have had with my health and my nerves” (Munro 2012: 144). The understated phrasing – the whiff of accusation in “You may not have heard” and the euphemistic “some troubles” – indicate an attempt to conceal real pain through casual diction. Bereft of any other information about Grace, the reader assumes that the incident with Royce has ruined her life; the reader projects stories into the blank space left behind when Grace exits the story. Grace had pinned all her hopes on finding a husband and failed to do so. She vanishes from the story, leaving us to conjecture about the elements that remain underground, hidden, unstated.

6. Conclusion

A map of “Axis” might look something like this: Munro gives us Royce and Grace, then dismisses Grace (as Royce does); she glosses over fifty years of marital life (for Avie), then serves up a would-be love story (Royce and Avie), and then rescinds it, reducing the racy Royce to a generic would-be husband (who gives orders), before finally turning him into a “louse.”¹³ When Avie asks Royce whether he had ever contacted Grace, he replies, “No. No. Why should I?” (Munro 2012: 144) The present tense suggests that Grace still looms in Royce’s mind; he does not reply, “Why should I *have?*” Protesting too much, perhaps, Royce follows his initial negation with yet another “No” and with “Not a good idea” (144). The repeated negation and the grammatical evidence of the present tense signals that Grace is still a part of Royce’s life, if not of his preferred life story. And yet, there is no clear

indication that he harbours regret. The final lines of “Axis” are in the present tense, specifically the present perfect. Munro gives us a grammatical reminder of the fifty years this story has travelled before the coming-together of past and present. Writing of Munro in general, Isla Duncan praises her Munro’s “dexterous” “use of aspect and tense” as she “shifts between narrative past and present” (2011: 108): “She [Avie] has disappointed him. Prying. Trying to get at some spot of live regret right under the ribs. A woman” (Munro 2012: 144). The story’s last word echoes Royce’s reductive assessment of Grace as a “girl”; however, the fragment is focalized through Avie, who realizes that her attempts to penetrate and probe Royce’s emotions have irked him. The final sentence reveals what Avie assumes Royce is thinking about her, namely, that she can be categorized in gender terms.

“Axis” is structured in geological terms and uses overt geological symbolism in a few key places. Munro’s geological symbolism is overt because the Cambrian and the emotional converge, changing and “messing up” lives (143). However, unlike the combusting but dead rocks under the earth’s surface, the “live regret right under the ribs” is not mappable because the narrator remains silent about whether Royce does feel regret. The subterranean remains hidden, stowed away, always threatening to burst forth, but only in the mind of the reader. As we catalogue, demarcate and narrate the emotions of our own lives, the “[n]arrow fluttery strokes from a red pen” (Munro 2006: 319) do not accurately reflect kames and the like. Rather, these strokes reflect aspects of our existence that remain hidden underground, under our own skin. In “Princess Ida,” rocks poke “through the soil like bones through flesh” (Munro 1971: 73). The tension of “Axis,” in contrast, lies in the fact that “live regret right under the ribs” (Munro 2012: 144) always threatens to emerge, though Munro does not choose to travel this path. However, she boldly points us towards a narrative path not travelled. It is left for the reader to fill in the blank spaces in her story.

Notes

¹ The name Frontenac refers to Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac, and Governor General of New France. A latecomer to the land and the four-billion-year-old Shield, Frontenac – as one contemporary blithely wrote – “had guarded his people from the tomahawk and the scalping knife. With prescient eye he had foreseen the imperial greatness of the West” (quoted in Black 2014: 74).

² After a day at the farm (and with thoughts of sex in his head), Royce imagines he “might slip into a bucolic life amid picturesque dumb animals and bursting orchards, with time on his hands all winter to cultivate his mind” (Munro: 2012: 134). These imaginings echo Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, namely, where he sees comedy moving from confusion and conflict to the “green world [that] has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desire” and where the genre is “an elaborate ritual of the defeat of winter” (2015: 183).

³ In Avie’s dream, the theme of resurfacing is evident when a second daughter “spoke to her mother about her sister hidden in the basement. It turned out that she had known about her all along [...]” (Munro: 2012: 132).

⁴ I thank Robert Thacker for answering several queries about Munro.

- ⁵ Munro herself has spoken of such stories as forming a “separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact” (Quoted in Howells 2016, 79). As Howells wryly comments, in *The View from Castle Rock* “any distinction between non-fiction and fiction begins to look decidedly slippery” (ibid. 9). Munro’s interest in geology is happily indisputable, even before marrying a geographer, she had “an enthusiasm for *The Physiography of Southern Ontario*, a geographical text” (Thacker 2011: 286).
- ⁶ For a taste of the map, see: http://ftp.geogratis.gc.ca/pub/nrcan_rncan/raster/atlas_3_ed/eng/environment/land/014.jpg
- ⁷ See also the section “A Stratigraphic Vision” in Westphal (2013: 137–143).
- ⁸ A classic definition of a miracle is that it “entails a breach in the order and harmony of the universe” (“Miracles”).
- ⁹ The modal use of “would” implies past habits and typical behaviour – as in “On Saturdays, I would go to the market.”
- ¹⁰ Peter Turchi writes, “a blank on a map became a symbol of rigorous standards; the presence of absences lent authority to all on the map that was unblank” (quoted in Westphal 2013: 148). Denis Cosgrove observes a more unsettling aspect: “‘Blank’ spaces within the frame also generate and reflect aesthetic and epistemological anxiety; they are thus the favoured space of cartouches, scales, keys and other technical, textual or decorative devices which thereby become active elements within the mapping process” (1999: 10).
- ¹¹ Robert Thacker speaks of “Axis” as a “vivid illustration” of how “in Munro’s work metaphor transmutes into allegory” (2016: 16).
- ¹² The split between the natural sciences and the humanities is not absolute, and Munro is of course not alone in mixing vocabularies. Rick Van Noy has this to say about geologist Clarence Rivers King’s *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872): “King’s language, ‘yawning fissures and ruptured axes,’ seems intended to meet his audience with the same force he describes” as he opts for “descriptive, metaphorical language rather than static taxonomy” (2003: 81).
- ¹³ *New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman recalls Munro describing Royce as a “louse,” which the *ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary* defines as a “mean or despicable person.”

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