

**THE ROLE OF MEMORY AND THE ART OF LIFE-WRITING IN ALICE MUNRO
AND MARCEL PROUST**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The present study seeks points of contact between the works of Alice Munro and Marcel Proust beyond the chronological, geographical and cultural distances that separate the two authors, arguing that they similarly regard the role of memory in creativity and the relationship between art and life. In the construction of their fictional universe both Munro and Proust uncover the inconsistencies of the act of remembering, a cognitive operation of selection and interpretation which follows the laws of narrative. Focusing on extracts from *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust and on the short stories 'The Peace of Utrecht,' 'Princess Ida' and 'The Ottawa Valley' by Munro this study aims to demonstrate that the investigation of memory reveals that the past is a subjective rather than objective category of experience. A survey of the definitions of the genre of autobiography situates the kind of writing of the self which is peculiar to Munro and Proust. Both authors do not disregard the richness of their lives but instead find inspiration in their autobiographical experience, creating works of fiction that challenge the boundaries between history and story-telling, truth and imagination. Considering Munro's autobiographical novel, *The View from Castle Rock*, and Proust's *Search* this study seeks to bring to light the connections between the authors' poetic that are grounded in the intersection between art and life. Munro and Proust's vision converge in suggesting that man constantly shapes his life into narratives; looking backward therefore implies a recognition of the fluctuation of the sense of identity. The significance of art lies not in grasping reality, which is subjective and transformative, but in escaping subjectivity through art, thus transcending the individual to reach the universal, where the connection with the audience is possible.

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Introduction.

The present study intends to explore the similarities present in the work of Alice Munro and in the novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) by Marcel Proust in regard to the role of memory in the creative act and the relationship between life and literature. Despite the specificity of memory and the uniqueness of the artist's experience, Munro and Proust's works suggest that the significance of art lies in transcending the individual experience to reach the universal. This study argues that both Munro and Proust explore the richness of their lives to create fictional structures that resonate with worldwide audiences, suggesting that art connects the individuals beyond the chronological, geographical and cultural distances.

The first chapter investigates how the theme of memory inspires and informs the work of Munro and Proust. According to Gilles Deleuze the *Search* can be defined as the apprenticeship of the narrator toward the comprehension of the literary vocation, supported by the awareness of man's condition as determined by the laws of time.¹ The protagonist of the extensive novel is a young man who, endowed with an artistic sensibility, retraces his intellectual and emotional journey, from childhood to maturity, leading him to conceive the foundations of an aesthetic philosophy which justifies the composition of a work of literature. It has been argued that the universe of the *Search* is leibnizian: in it each monad, each individual, is imprisoned within the bars of consciousness and thus unable to establish a meaningful connection with other individuals. The perception of physical reality is entirely dependent on subjectivity. Each man inhabits a universe without doors or windows, a victim of the illusion of communicating with others through social intercourse, friendship and love. The latter modes of relation, however, perpetuate the original misconception. It is impossible to decipher the pattern of indistinct messages informing the language of others or, in the

¹ This study considers the editions of *Proust et les Signes*, written by Gilles Deleuze, published by Quadriège in Paris in 2007, and *Proust and Signs*, published by Athlone Press in London in 2000.

case of sentimental relationships, to ever fully possess the beloved. The laws of existence dictate the ultimate dissolving of consciousness in death, thus menacing the extinction of thoughts, emotions, reminiscences, all that which the mind registers since birth. Within such pessimistic horizon man would leave no trace of his passage on earth, being destined to disappear from the memory of others. In the agnostic universe of the *Search* the only ray of hope, whose intensity however radiates through historical eras and across geographical distances, is the realm of art. Thanks to the countless works of art created by humanity since the beginning of time the individual can escape his own subjectivity and perceive the world through the eyes of another. Proust insists that the gift of art is vision, determined by the artist's sensitivity and conveyed through the universal language of literature, architecture, the visual and the plastic arts.² Through the enjoyment of art the laws of time are vanquished, as the artist's vision travels through time and space to reach the audience. Creativity thus ensures man's freedom from the constraints of a limited existence. In the context of such vast theoretical architecture the exploration of the mechanisms of memory is the first step of the narrator's apprenticeship. The protagonist's investigation of the act of remembering reveals that every passing minute is lost, never to be retrieved except in the elaborate form of a creative work. The first section of the chapter discusses the types of memory described by Proust in the *Search*, the voluntary and the involuntary. The first is the conscious intellectual effort, from the part of the narrator, to remember physical objects and emotions, following a sudden reaction of joy or pain whose origin he ignores. He senses, however, that the past might yield a message of relief in regard to such inarticulate emotions. The second type of memory is the spontaneous, accidental stimulation of the senses, which generates a mental association between a sensation experienced in the past and a circumstance in the present. Each type of memory bears a signification in relation to the narrator's philosophic trajectory. From the experience of both voluntary and involuntary memory he learns the impossibility of preserving a fixed, albeit impartial image of the past in his mind. He becomes aware, furthermore, of the similarities

² In his theoretical meditation on the nature of art Proust does not seem to consider the problem of translation.

between the creative act and the act of remembering. Such discovery contributes to the meditations on the nature of creativity condensed in the last volume, *Time Regained*.

The second section of the chapter considers the theme of memory in stories selected from Munro's extensive body of work. Different forms of memory, both individual and collective, are connected to creativity specifically in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1973).³ In *Lives* the characters, by reflecting on the past and by being exposed to accounts of it given by others, are led to question the very existence of an objective version of past events. It is necessary for them to come to terms with the subjectivity of the past and the unreliability of memory, definable as a mental process of cognition based on the principles of selection and interpretation. When the past is charged with emotional urgency, as in the case of intimate recollections of the maternal figure, the protagonists find that they cannot find solace in memory. The stories "The Peace of Utrecht", "Princess Ida" and "The Ottawa Valley" revolve around the figure of the mother, who suffers from a degenerative illness that gradually disintegrates the equilibrium of the family. The heroines, whose lives bear similarities with the autobiographical experience of the author, linger on the memories of the departed mother knowing that they cannot preserve even such a frail, distorted image of her unaltered. Despite the discrepancies and inconsistencies of memory Munro's characters are attracted to the way the past is remembered, as it nurtures their instinctive creativity. A connection between memory and art is detectable, in various forms, both in *Lives* (1973) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), two collections of stories depicting the young artist's gradual awareness of the artistic vocation.⁴ Being instinctively attracted by the mechanisms of memory, both individual and collective, the heroines are exposed to the complexities of language as an imperfect system of signifiers with which the individuals attempt to express the past. The re-elaboration of events presiding to the formation of memories and the consequent verbalizing of them according to the individual's cultural and social background is a

³ Hereafter *Lives*.

⁴ Del, the protagonist of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), is endowed with a literary talent while Rose, the heroine of *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), is predisposed for the stage. The first eventually pursues a writing career while the second, at the time of the narration, is a successful actress and television presenter.

process in which an essential part of human experience is revealed. The memories connected with the close-knit, rural communities in which the protagonists live are subject to a similar process of creative re-elaboration. As exemplified by the figure of Uncle Craig in *Lives*, whose ambition is to write the detailed chronicle of Wawanash county, the need to rescue the past of the community from oblivion is substantial, yet the task to render it objectively and exhaustively through oral or written means proves impracticable. The tension in Munro's fiction is between the desire to explore the past and the impossibility of conciliating different versions of it. Stylistically such tension corresponds to the oscillation between the writer's aspiration and the instability of language on the one hand, and the inadequacy of any fictional account on the other.

The second chapter examines the relation between autobiography and fiction in regard to *The View From Castle Rock* (2006) by Munro and *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust (1871-1922).⁵ The introduction to the chapter considers the critical contributions to the definition of the subgenre, approached from different perspectives such as the narrative, the philosophical and the linguistic. A survey of the critical literature suggests that scholars recognize the interest of the various forms of writing of the self, whose boundaries intersect the spheres of literature and history. The arguments of Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and of those modern scholars attempting to find an intersection between the fields of psychology, literature and the cognitive sciences, such as James Olney and John Paul Eakin, testify to the strength and variety of the debate on the genre. The interest of the present study is in the observation that distinguishing factual from imaginative elements in the context of autobiographical writing is a questionable operation. The nature of language, an imperfect, arbitrary system of signifiers, and the dynamics of memory, a cognitive process of selection and re-elaboration, imply that any writing of the self is a creative act, in which the imagination is involved not dissimilarly than in a work of fiction. The very act of narrating, whether it is the events of a life or, on a wider scale, the history of a nation, corresponds to a subjective act of interpretation and transformation of reality. The

⁵ Hereafter *Castle Rock* and the *Search*.

argument can expand to consider the ontological status of reality, to which an autobiographical text, as well as an historical chronicle, is supposed to adhere. In Munro's work reality seems to depend on individual experience and to form a continuum of seemingly objective perception and subjective interpretation. The commonly assumed categories of experience conveyed by language, such as 'truth' and 'lie,' 'reality' and 'imagination,' are not unquestionably subscribed to by either characters or author. In order to consider the case of Munro and Proust's oeuvre in the light of these arguments this study follows a general comparative approach, in regard to similarities in the content and style of *Castle Rock* and the *Search*, to subsequently examine the particularities of the two books separately. The chapter also reads together two instances, in Munro and Proust's extensive body of work, in which the same strand of material can be observed inspiring both an autobiographical piece and a work of fiction. Such is the case of Munro's autobiographical story 'Fathers', first published in the *New Yorker* in 2004, and 'Royal Beatings', appeared in the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* in 1978; and of Proust's autobiographical article 'Journée de lecture', published posthumously with the title *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* in 1894, and a passage contained in *Swann's Way* (1913).⁶ The ties between life and literature, and the transformation from the autobiographical writing to a narrative in which the imagination is unrestricted by preoccupations with autobiographical accuracy, throws a revealing light on the creative process. The chapter proceeds to consider separately the cases of *Castle Rock* and the *Search*. It is possible, as criticism has attempted, to investigate parallels and similarities between the narrators of Munro and Proust's works and the biographies of their respective authors. The genesis of *Castle Rock* reveals those aspects that in turn approach and distance it from the genre of autobiography, however controversially the latter appears to be defined. In her Foreword Munro suggests that *Castle Rock* is a hybrid form of autographical and fictional writing.⁷ Munro retraces the

⁶ Hereafter *Swann*. The present study considers the editions of *À recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Jean Milly, published by Garnier-Flammarion in ten volumes in Paris, between 1984 and 1987, and *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, published by Wordworth Editions in London in 2006.

⁷ The argument will be further discussed in chapter II.

history of her paternal genealogy, the Laidlaws, from their original dwelling in the Scottish Borders in the eighteenth century to their settling in North America. In the first section extracts from magazine articles, personal memoirs and correspondence are inserted in the narrative framework. In the second section Munro explores the lives of the generations closer to her time of life, the northern American descendants of the Laidlaw pioneers, ending with the present time of composition of the book and with her own life. In this section the author draws on oral contributions, mostly originated within the family, to reconstruct the lives of her immediate relatives. She relies on her own memories to retrace the significant events of her youth and adulthood that are narrated in 'Lying Under the Apple Tree,' 'Hired Girl,' 'Ticket,' 'Home,' and 'What Do You Want to Know For?' The boundaries between factual and fictional, as discussed in the second chapter of the present study, are particularly blurred in *Castle Rock* as Munro's artistic project challenges the definition of both genres, creating a suggestive contamination of autobiographical and fictional writing. *Castle Rock* opens new perspectives of investigation in the field of the literature of the self and encourages reflection on the cognitive operations of memory and imagination.

Similarly the genesis and evolution of the *Search* stimulates interrogatives concerning the intersection of life and literature. The nucleus of the *roman fleuve* can be detected in Proust's prolonged meditation on the principles of biographical criticism, as endorsed by the novelist and literary critic Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869). In its *Lundis* Sainte-Beuve argues that the necessary premise for judging a work of literature is the knowledge of the author's life and character. The young Proust intends to deliver a counter-argument to such approach in a narrative essay commenced in 1908 and abandoned in 1922, posthumously published with the title *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.⁸ The latter lays the foundations of the future aesthetic philosophy informing the *Search*. In *Sainte-Beuve* Proust postulates the separation between the 'moi social' and the 'moi de l'œuvre', between the social personality of the author and the intimate, secret self who is

⁸ Hereafter *Sainte-Beuve*. This study considers the editions of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, edited by P. Clarac and Y. Sandre, published in the series 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' by Gallimard in Paris in 1971, and *Against Sainte-Beuve*, translated by John Sturrock, published by Penguin in London in 1998.

responsible for the creation of a work of art. Proust thus envisages an opening narrative scene, involving the narrator and his mother, whose aim is to introduce the critical speculation on the Sainte-Beuve method in the form of a debate. Proust struggles, however, between the two modes of expression, the narrative and the speculative, until the narrative prevails and the theoretical part is temporarily set aside. The scene between mother and son expands to the description of a number of location, characters and episodes which constitute the kernel of the future *Search*. Thus the major novel originates from the author's questioning of the mechanisms of creativity. Throughout his life, both in the writing of literature and criticism, Proust continues to meditate on the intersection of life and literature, so much so that the central theme of the major novel is the discovery, from the part of a young artist, of the literary vocation. Naturally the autobiographical elements of the *Search* have been a concern of criticism since the appearance of the *roman fleuve*. The vicinity of the narrator to the life of Marcel Proust has been explored in several directions. The geographical references of several fictional locations of the novel have been retraced, the resemblance between accidents and behavioural patterns of Proust's life and the relevant circumstances and characters of the novel have been investigated. The elliptic figure of the narrator, whose surname remains unknown throughout the *Search*, whose description is intentionally vague, has given rise to speculations on Proust's intentions to camouflage his protagonist, lest he could be too closely associated with himself. Recent criticism, however, is oriented toward considering the narrator not as the disguised autobiographical voice of the author but rather as the central figure of the philosophical trajectory of the novel. The *Search* narrates the apprenticeship of a young man in the comprehension of life through the discovery of a literary vocation. The two parts of the apprenticeship, one of which is set in the immanent world and the other oriented toward the abstract realm of art, merge in the consciousness that life becomes endowed with meaning only in literature, which is timeless and universal. The narrator is thus detached from the author's personal experience in order to illustrate the complex, narrative and philosophical, trajectory of the *Search*.

The third chapter extends the lines of argument previously followed, seeking points of contact between two works, *Castle Rock* and the *Search*, that are otherwise distant in terms of cultural, geographical and chronological background. The similarities pertain both to the narrative structure and the conceptual trajectory of the works. The chapter is divided in four sections, examining the opening of *Castle Rock* and the *Search*, the figure of the narrator, the treatment of time and the conclusion. The first suggested parallel regards the incipit. Both *Castle Rock* and the *Search* open with an atmosphere of indeterminacy and a sense of anguish connected with the idea of death. *Castle Rock* begins with the description of the starting point of Munro's research, the churchyard of Ettrick, a village in the Scottish Borders. The scene portrays the author seeking the graves of her forefathers in the typical uncheerful weather, a circumstance which stimulates a meditation on mortality and the need of interrogating the past. Munro, herself an agnostic, frequently addresses in her fictional stories the theme of religion. In the first section of *Castle Rock*, dedicated to the lives of her Scottish ancestors, Munro considers the influence of the Presbyterian creed on the character of the rural communities. The pages dedicated to the life of the reverend Thomas Boston (1676-1732), Minister of the Ettrick Parish, the preacher and thinker involved in the so-called 'Marrow controversy', a theological dispute within the Presbyterian congregation, is the occasion for Munro to investigate the conflicts that the acceptance of a religious faith is apt to provoke in the mind of the believer. At the centre of the Christian faith is the doctrine according to which the physical world corresponds to the order of the metaphysical, and that such order is conveyed through the word of the divinity contained in the Bible. The concept of 'truth' is thus linked, in the Christian perspective, to the written word. In Munro's essentially agnostic fictional universe the characters struggle to conciliate such tenet with their perception of reality as an indistinct flow of objective phenomena and subjective impressions. The author's questioning of the commonly assumed categories of 'reality', 'truth' and 'imagination' is at the centre of her poetics. Instead of a single interpretation of events Munro's narratives present many possible, without pronouncing itself for any. The act of writing, unlike religious faith, is stimulated by doubt. The opening of the *Search* is similarly suffused with an atmosphere

of indeterminacy, in which the protagonist struggles to draw a line between objective reality and subjective impression. The first pages of *Swann* describe the moments between consciousness and sleep, in which time is not fixed and the mind revolves in the historical eras and geographical locations inhabited by the protagonist during his lifetime. The feeling generated by such loose play of mental association is, however, not entirely of a positive nature. The underlying sentiment of fear is caused by the presentiment that the mind will one day no longer be able to anchor itself to physical reality. The protagonist will eventually awake no more to recognize the outlay of the bedroom where he went to rest. The indeterminacy of sleep prefigures the dissolution of consciousness in death. In the proustian universe, where the divinity is absent, the protagonist harbours such anguish until he conceives of a dimension of permanence, namely the realm of art. The *Search* traces the trajectory of the protagonist towards the conception of an aesthetic religion, in which the yearning for an escape to man's mortal condition is directed not towards a transcendent world but to man's capacity to create and enjoy works of art. Through the latter, produced in different historical eras and geographical locations, the individual is able to escape the constraints of subjectivity and to establish a meaningful communication with his fellow beings. Proust's aesthetic philosophy thus represents a substitute of religious faith, offering the remedy to man's solipsistic condition and the possibility of communion with the rest of humanity.

The second parallel between *Castle Rock* and the *Search* regards the figure of the narrator. At the centre of both works is a protagonist who bears significant similarities with its creator. The case of *Castle Rock* appears of difficult interpretation, as Munro directly hints at her connection with the material and, in the second section of the book, declares that her self is at the centre of the events described. The Forward to *Castle Rock*, which apparently resolves the vicinity of protagonist and author in the sense of an autobiography, blurs the distinction between the categories of fiction and chronicle. Whilst acknowledging the historical sources, the journals, diaries and personal correspondence available to her, Munro undermines her own task as impartial storyteller by drawing attention to the fictional supplement which she inserts within the historical background. Similarly the enigmatic figure of the narrator of the *Search*

stimulates the critical debate and raises interrogatives concerning the intersection between life and literature. Although his gradual comprehension of the literary vocation is accurately described, Proust's protagonist remains veiled in an atmosphere of indeterminacy. The author takes particular care in revealing little of his physical description. He limits his participation to direct dialogue and erases his name from the final drafts of the novel.⁹ The narrator of the *Search* thus appears less as a flesh-out character than a functional element of the philosophical trajectory of the novel. He is the experimenter of the mechanisms of memory, the explorer of the social world and of intimate relationships, gathering impressions that gradually converge in the discovery and justification of the literary vocation. In Proust's *roman fleuve*, as in *Castle Rock*, the vicinity of the protagonist to the life of the author can be interpreted as the mere material from which the central discourse can develop.

The last two points of connection between *Castle Rock* and the *Search* concern the treatment of time and the conclusion. The latter suggests the role of creativity in the prospect of man's limited existence. This study argues that Munro's aim in composing *Castle Rock* exceeds the task of reconstructing the history of the Laidlaw genealogy. The creative elements that enable the book to resonate with a worldwide audience transcend the strict boundaries of autobiography. By dwelling on the circumstances of composition of *Castle Rock* and by suggesting the reasons that determine her interest in the past, the author gestures towards the role of art in the prospect of mortality. In Munro's immanent world an awareness of the transience of life stimulates the need to look backward. In mapping the history of her ancestors Munro discovers the necessity of connecting the living people in her mind, the immediate relatives and close acquaintances who reside in the native land of South Western-Ontario, to the lives of the past. The creative work succeeds in achieving what is denied to the individual because of his or her limited life span. The act of writing connects the self to the continuum of life, illuminating the metaphoric chain of which Munro herself is a link. The *Search* equally confronts the

⁹ Marion Schmid, 'The birth and development of *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. by Richard Bales, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 58-74. Hereafter *Companion to Proust*.

protagonist with the constraints of a limited existence. The narrator is haunted with the idea of death in crucial circumstances of his intellectual growth. His mind recoils from the prospect of the disappearance of the beloved and ultimately of his own self. Fear accompanies the idea of loss, of time as well as of identity. The impossibility of establishing a meaningful connection with other beings paralyses the protagonist as he becomes aware that the walls of each separate consciousness resemble the bars of a cage. The universe of the Proustian novel is configured as a leibnizian space, in which each monad, each individual, would be isolated if a form of communication were not possible in the realm of art. The artistic act transcends the laws of time and speaks a language that is universal, thus unveiling the significance of man's existence.¹⁰ The protagonist must experience the joys and pains of the social world, of friendship and love, in order to find in his vocation the instrument to order the multiplicity of experience. The impending fear of death, implying the loss of time and of identity, is dissolved by the urgency of the literary vocation. It is mastered by the certainty that in the work of art the individual finds the intellectual instruments with which to overcome the constrictions of that invisible force, time. The connection between two literary works, *Castle Rock* and the *Search*, that are otherwise remarkably distant in terms of linguistic, historical, cultural and geographical background, are to be found in their following a similar conceptual trajectory. At the centre of both works is an individual who interrogates memory in search for a connection with the past. In that possible connection something crucial of human experience is revealed. The figure of the narrator, in both Munro and Proust's novel, bears similarities with the author, suggesting that individual experience is essential for the creative enterprise. Thanks to these narrators' acute capacity to observe reality and scrutinize their own self, memory is disclosed as a subjective, altering lens through which the individual interprets the past. Despite the inconsistencies and discrepancies of memory it is necessary to look backward, to investigate the traces of those who lived before us and with us, in order to

¹⁰ The Proustian meditation considers the entire universe of art which includes literature, music, the plastic and visual arts, architecture. When the author refers to the universality of the language of literature, however, he does not seem to consider the problem of translation.

comprehend how they have confronted the constrictions of time and attempted to give a meaning to their existence. The instrument with which both authors set to investigate their experience, writing, participates of two orders. It is entirely immanent and yet it transcends the limits of the author's existence.

I. The role of memory in the work of Alice Munro and Marcel Proust

Memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Man's relationship with the past, how it is comprehended by the mind and conveyed through language, is an early interest for both Munro and Proust. Since the beginning of their career as story-tellers their glance is oriented backward, to the past of their fictional characters, and inward, to the emotional and intellectual response to the act of remembering. In Munro's first collection of stories, entitled *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), as well as in Proust's early articles and essays published posthumously with the title of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, an interest emerges in childhood memories and the discrepancies between youthful and mature perception. The protagonist of the story 'Walker Brothers Cowboy' and the narrator of 'Journée de lecture', respectively at the centre of an early story by Munro and an autobiographical essay by Proust, share a vision of the years of life preceding adolescence as a sphere of perception different from the adult. In early memories of life physical reality appears altered. The natural and urban landscape, the expanse of the Ontarian countryside and the size of Tante Léonie's house at Combray seem to have proportions that in adulthood are proven inaccurate. The car in which the young daughter travels through the countryside in 'Walker', the width of the river and the extension of fields and meadows; the size of the buildings and the church of Combray, the setting of the various bedrooms occupied in the narrator's childhood; all these are examples of the alteration of space in memory registered by Munro and Proust's narrators. The child's understanding of physical reality, and the emotions that derive from it, are unfamiliar to the adult conception to the point to seem almost mysterious, and to be on the verge of yielding a message, no longer audible in maturity, on the nature of the past.

In the *Search* Proust accurately describes a phenomenon in which the discrepancies between youthful and adult perception remain veiled for a considerable number of years,

as if they were crystallized in memory. The two ways of Combray, as described in *Du Côté de chez Swann*, the first volume of the *Search*, are explicated and retraced in *Time Regained*, the last of the extensive novel. In the narrator's childhood the country village of Combray is the central pivot of two walks chosen by the family for their regular exercise. The two paths are distinctly separated in memory in reason of their starting and finishing point, located through gateways disposed on different sides of Tante Léonie's house. The differentiation is accentuated by the boy's mental construction of two scenarios associated with the walks, where the elements of nature combine with the architectural components of the landscape to form the conception of two distinct social orders. The Méséglise way runs along wide stretches of meadows, alternating private gardens and open views of hilly country, culminating with the distant profile of the steeples of the neighbouring village of Martinville. It is the shorter, more familiar walk, offering the panorama of the stockbroker Charles Swann's pond, as well as the beloved hawthorn bushes, the harbinger of the early sense of beauty overwhelming the narrator. In *Swann* Proust associates the flora and fauna of the Méséglise excursion with the attributes of the bourgeoisie, to which the protagonist's family belong. In this part of the countryside it is represented by the figures of Swann and Vinteuil, the composer of the sonata, the leitmotif of the novel announcing the philosophical meditations on the nature of art. The Guermantes way, on the contrary, customarily starting in the opposite direction from Tante Léonie's house, via a longer itinerary along the banks of the river Vivonne aims at Guermantes castle, the ancient seat of the homonymous aristocratic family, historically connected with the village of Combray. Although the child never succeeds in completing the walk, which reaches the source of the river, earlier sections of it are coloured in memory by the vision of the ruined castle of the counts of Combray, a branch of the Guermantes family, and by the beauty of the water vegetation, described as exotic and associated with an elitarian taste. The walk, whose extensive range and distance from the house suggests the unattainability of the aristocratic world, represents in the boy's mind the image of a social order that is unknown, desirable, and accessible only to the imagination.

Between the events narrated in *Swann* and *Time Regained* are approximately three decades, during which the narrator succeeds in attaining the aristocratic circles of Paris, and in frequenting the long admired members of the Guermantes household. Furthermore he discovers the complexity of Swann's identity, a bourgeois by birth who is welcomed in the aristocratic salons thanks to his intelligence and taste for the arts. The outbreak of the First World War causes the disruption of the apparently immovable social hierarchy. The protagonist's perception of the world he once knew is dimmed by his unstable health, the cause of repeated retirements in a sanatorium in the vicinity of the Paris. The process of aging and the idea of death, of his friends as well as of his own frail body, penetrate his meditations. The two walks of Combray, long disappeared from the pages of the novel but never from the protagonist's consciousness, reappear on his return to Combray, during a visit he pays to Swann's married daughter, his childish unrequited love. Thus it is Gilberte Swann who uncovers the stupefying truth: the ways are not separate but instead they intersect in the middle, in the vicinity of the battlefield of Méséglise, where the French and German armies recently confronted.¹¹ The paths are thus not irreconcilable, pertaining to parallel universes that cannot be both attained in the course of the same day; on the contrary it is possible to direct one's steps to Méséglise in order to reach Guermantes, and vice versa. The distance covered by the paths appears reduced. The two mental scenarios are revealed to be intercommunicating, just as in real life Gilberte, the daughter of a stockbroker, is united in marriage to a member of the Guermantes family, Robert de Saint-Loup. The narrator fulfils his childhood desire to reach the source of the Vivonne, which is revealed to be a modest, bubbly spurt of water seeping from the rocks.¹² In retracing his steps a revolution is accomplished in the mental map of his youth, uncovering the mechanisms of memory. Not only the perception of physical reality appears to change in the course of time, but the intellectual

¹¹ 'C'est comme si elle m'avait dit: "Tournez à gauche, prenez ensuite à votre main droite, et vous toucherez l'intangible, vous atteindrez les inaccessibles lointains dont on ne connaît jamais sur terre que la direction, que (ce que j'avais cru jadis que je pourrais connaître seulement de Guermantes, et peut-être, en un sens, je ne me trompais pas) le "côté." *Le Temps Retrouvé*, ed. by Jean Milly, p. 408.

¹² 'Je trouvais la Vivonne mince et laide au bord du chemin de halage.' *Le Temps Retrouvé*, ed. by Jean Milly, p. 408.

and emotional response to it alters. It is therefore possible to postulate the existence on an objective past?

Not only the universe trapped in memory, Combray and its countryside, appears lost, that is nowhere present but in the protagonist's recollections. More radically it is suggested that the 'reality' of the past is questionable. The discovery that the past is not an objective category of experience is concordant with the growing awareness, in the protagonist's maturity, that each individuality is ultimately unknowable, presenting as many sides as the angles from which it is perceived. The individual is essentially trapped within the bars of his own consciousness. The impossibility of communication is a stark reality which is veiled in the rituals of the social world and hidden by the illusion of the intimacy of two souls united in friendship or involved in intimate intercourse.¹³ It follows that the perception of reality is in fact a subjective interpretation of it, liable to misconceptions and false impressions. Thus the mysterious name of Guermantes does not prefigure the high moral and intellectual qualities of the aristocratic family of the boy's imagination. Instead Oriane and the Duke of Guermantes are skilled, cynical leading characters of the vast game of society. Swann is not simply a reserved stockbroker but a refined art collector, the friend of royalties and nobles, and ultimately the devotee of Odette de Cr cy, a woman of unaristocratic birth and ambiguous past. As the perception of reality depends on the individual consciousness and alters in the course of time, with every passing minute a portion of that which the narrator refers to as 'reality' dissolves. The concept of time lost is suggested by the ending of *Swann*, the first volume of the *Search*. It is posed as the first stone of the philosophical architecture of the novel. *Swann* ends with a discomfiting meditation on space, which is lost together with time: the streets, buildings, the enchanted Champs-Elis es of the narrator's memory are not retraceable on the map nor can they to be seek on foot, by

¹³ 'The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. Memory as it grows fainter loosens them, and notwithstanding the illusion by which we want to be duped and with which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, duty, we dupe other people, we exist alone. Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying.' *The Fugitive in Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, p. 130.

strolling in the heart of Paris. The places he once knew are as fleeting and evanescent as the passing years.¹⁴ Proust's protagonist is thus confronted with the paradox of time. Only the present can be experienced, although the concepts of past and future inform the perception of the self and the relation with others. The protagonist is threatened by the abysmal thought that nothing is fixed, neither in the world nor in his consciousness. What is therefore the nature of memory? What is preserved by the mind if not a fragment of reality?

The act of remembering in the *Search* follows two patterns. In the first, which the narrator calls 'voluntary', the mind performs a conscious effort to recollect physical objects, locations, emotions experienced in the past in consequence of a sudden reaction of joy or pain. Memory offers the illusion to find a remedy to the interrogatives that disrupt the surface of daily life. When inarticulate emotions of unknown origin are provoked in the young narrator at the sight of the steeples of Martinville appearing in the midst of the countryside, he struggles to recapture that precise emotion in order to convey it in words, thus attempting his first creative piece of writing. The effort, however, fails, as the intellectual faculties are unable to proceed beyond that sudden inarticulate response. In another circumstance, years later, the protagonist desperately seeks in his memory the instrument to disclose the lover's repeated lies. Albertine, his captive and companion, continues to haunt him even after her accidental death. The narrator is convinced that through his memories he can interpret her infidelity, even though it is too late for him to derive any satisfaction from it.¹⁵ The *Search* is interspersed with similar examples of the exercise, on the part of the protagonist, of his

¹⁴ 'Les lieux que nous avons connus n'appartiennent pas qu'au monde de l'espace où nous les situons pour plus de facilité. Ils n'étaient qu'une mince tranche au milieu d'impressions contiguës qui formaient notre vie d'alors; le souvenir d'une certaine image n'est que le regret d'un certain instant; et les maisons, les routes, les avenues, sont fugitives, hélas, comme les années.' *Du Côté de chez Swann*, ed. by Jean Milly, p. 573.

¹⁵ 'We see the jealous man employing all the resources of memory in order to interpret the signs of love – the beloved's lies. But memory, not solicited directly here, can furnish only a voluntary aid. And precisely because it is only "voluntary," memory always comes too late in relations to the signs to be deciphered. The jealous man's memory tries to retain everything because the slightest detail may turn out to be a sign or a symptom of deception, so that the intelligence will have the material requisite to its forthcoming interpretations. [...] In short, memory intervenes in the interpretations of the signs of love only in a voluntary form that dooms it to a pathetic failure.' Deleuze, p. 52-53.

voluntary memory, an effort which however only leads to dissatisfaction and to further interrogatives concerning the past. Of different origin and nature is the involuntary memory. The narrator has no control over it and can only register the sudden disruption it causes in his psychophysical equilibrium. The episodes of involuntary memory can be provoked by the accidental stimulation of the senses, which connect an impression of the past to a circumstance in the present. Relevant examples are the madeleine dipped in tea giving rise to Combray in the mind, the uneven pavement in the Guermantes' courtyard stimulating the memory of the voyage to Venice or the particular stiffness of a table-napkin at the Guermantes' table recalling the sensorial impression given by the bathroom towel at the hotel in Balbec. The episode is generally brief and leaves the narrator in a state of intense vulnerability. The reaction to it can be of a violent nature, such as the sudden burst of tears and consequent illness provoked by the simple act of unlacing a boot, reminding the narrator of that same act performed for him by the lost grandmother.¹⁶ Following the intense flow of emotions the intellectual faculties struggle to investigate the origin and meaning of the episode. Despite the repeated efforts, however, the force of it gradually subsides before the protagonist can trace its full signification. The episodes of involuntary memory in the novel are several, stimulating a diverse range of meditations. In *Swann* the episode of the madeleine unfolds the reconstruction of the lost world of childhood, while others, such as the accident of the unlaced boot or Albertine's false letter in Venice, is the origin of meditations on the transience of love and life.¹⁷

¹⁶ 'But no sooner had I touched the topmost button that my bosom swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I shook with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. [...] I had just perceived, in my memory, bending over my weariness, the tender, the preoccupied, dejected face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother whom I was astonished – and reproached myself – to find that I regretted so little and who was no more of her than just her name, but of my own true grandmother, of whom for the first time since that afternoon in the Champs-Élysées on which she had had her stroke, I now recaptured, by an instinctive and complete act of recollection, the living reality.' *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, p.141.

¹⁷ The trip to Venice, dreamed by the protagonist since his early youth but always prevented by his poor health, occurs after the rupture with Albertine. The beloved flies to her aunt's house in Touraine and dies accidentally after falling from her horse. The letter received by the narrator is in fact from Gilberte Swann, whose irregular handwriting induces him to mistake her signature for Albertine's. the episode is described in *The Fugitive*.

Gilles Deleuze argues that there is an important difference between involuntary and voluntary memory, exemplified by the episodes of the crisis in the Balbec hotel and of the failed joy at receiving Albertine's letter in Venice. An episode of involuntary memory is always meaningful, regardless of the pain or joy which it causes. The exercise of voluntary memory, on the contrary, being a consequence of a conscious effort of the mind, only gives the illusion of comprehending the past. The explication of the two ways, as conveyed by Gilberte during their conversation in war-stricken Tansonville, redesigns the map of an unknown country, altogether different from the Combray of his mind. It is received by the narrator, however, not as a spontaneous readjustment of coordination but as an interpretation, which, although convincing, originates outside of his own consciousness. Gilberte's words fail to affect him to the extent of an episode of involuntary memory. The importance of voluntary compared to involuntary memory is thus unequal. Proust's theory not only concerns the content of memory but also the act of remembering itself. Why does the conscious effort to reminisce fail to disclose as much as an accidental epiphany? Why does the exercise of voluntary memory is associated with fatigue and dissatisfaction, while the inarticulate, unexpected psycho-sensorial moment of insight is able to provoke pure joy or pain, both considered inestimable? The questioning of memory is at the very heart of the philosophical meditation informing the *Search*. The initial step towards the understanding of memory is that what is preserved by it is not the past, which is lost. The latter is not an objective category of experience but a subjective, transient interpretation of reality which depends on individual consciousness. Memory can only capture what the author calls the 'essence of time', the individual perception of reality stored in the mind in the form of a narrative. The fragments that resurface thanks to a voluntary or involuntary episodes of memory are elements of that vast array of perception, portions of the various stories that inform the narrator's sense of identity. Time is irretrievably lost. These 'essences,' however, similarly to captives of a realm that transcends time, do not abandon human consciousness. Proust's aesthetic philosophy poses on the postulation that memory is the necessary instrument to discover the nature of man's condition. In *Time Regained*, at the end of the narrator's extensive

meditations on memory, the anguish which in *Swann* is originated by the concept of loss, of time and space, is vanquished. The instrument which vanquishes it is the artist's creativity, which enables him to access the realm of art and thus to escape the constraints of his limited existence. Proust, maintaining that the individual is trapped within the bars of his consciousness, nonetheless offers to his protagonist an escape to man's essential solipsism, thanks to the creation and enjoyment of works of art. Through the latter the individual can see the world through the eyes of another, establishing a communication which is otherwise denied. The protagonist's discovery of the treacherous mechanisms of memory is therefore a necessary step toward the understanding of man's condition in time, and of his ultimate freedom from it.

Memory and story-telling in the work of Alice Munro.

In the work of Alice Munro memories of the past, regarding specific individuals as well as geographical space, affect the characters' perception of the present. The narration of events, which attempts to follow the trajectory of the characters' thoughts, is therefore often affected by the breach of chronological order, the frequent use of flashbacks and the proliferation of temporal perspectives. Such approach to story-telling corresponds to a specific interest frequently mentioned by Munro:

Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories—and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories. We can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative. And underneath all these edited, inspired, self-serving or entertaining stories there is, we suppose, some big bulging awful mysterious entity called THE TRUTH, which our fictional stories are supposed to be poking at and grabbing pieces of. [...] One of the ways we do this, I think, is by trying to look at what memory does (different tricks at different stages of our lives) and at the way people's different memories deal with the same (shared)

experience. The more disconcerting the differences are, the more the writer in me feels an odd exhilaration.¹⁸

Munro's observation suggests a two-fold meditation on the relationship between the individuals and their past. According to the author the existence of the 'truth,' meaning one supposedly objective version of past events, is arguable. When the individual attempts to convey fragments of the past in a linguistic form certain laws intervene, akin to the principles of story-making, to shape and alter them. The author's observations on memory seem to imply a certain familiarity of experience in the readership, evident in the use of the plural pronoun as follows: 'we can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative.' It is suggested, however, that the implications of the instinct to narrate are particularly evident to the artist's gaze. It is argued that 'the more disconcerting' the discrepancies in people's memories are the more the writer 'feels an odd exhilaration.' This sentence signals a connection between the act of remembering and that of writing. Mark Turner writes: '*Story* is the basic principle of the mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories.'¹⁹ Recent cognitive studies suggest that memory is 'dynamic; elaborative; generative; transformatory; dependent on context, meaning, and emotion; biologically unique, and yet, equally, shaped by social environment.'²⁰ It can be argued that memory is an altering lens through which humans see their past and story-making as the principle that governs it. The very structure of the brain is oriented towards the production of continuous narratives: 'From the simplest quotidian acts to the most complex literary achievements, the mind relies on the concepts of parable and story to interpret the world.'²¹ The present

¹⁸ 'A Conversation with Alice Munro,' Randomhouse. 24 November 2006

<<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/goodwoman/munro.html>>.

¹⁹ Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*, 1996, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Preface.

²⁰ Marion Joan Francoz, 'Habit as Memory Incarnate,' *College English*, Vol. 62, no. 1 (Sept.1999), p. 1-29.

²¹ Alan Richardson argues: 'Everyday experience is organized by a "constant yet unnoticed" narrative flow, beginning with the "small spatial stories" we rely on in tracking a moving object, crossing from one room to another, pouring coffee into a cup.' Richardson adds: 'Turner emphasizes the importance of story – "narrative imagining" – as the "fundamental instrument of thought," crucial for

chapter will argue, in accordance with the thesis of the philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) in his work *Temps et le Récit* (1983-1985), that the chronological dimension of life is perceived and shared by the mind according to the laws of fiction. Ricœur argues: ‘le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé sur un mode narratif, et [...] le récit atteint sa signification plénière quand il devient une condition de l’existence temporelle.’²² Both fiction and history, although invested with a different authority in claiming as their object the depiction of ‘reality,’ share the essential quality of being a human attempt to give meaning to the experience of time. Without the endeavour to shape time into the categories of past, present and future, that which is between the instants of birth and death, the physical and spiritual alterations that are a constant matter of our discourse, would be forever enclosed in the paradox of non-being. What is past is past, the present is escaping and the future is not yet. It seems impossible to define time, however the individual can monitor the effect of it passing on his or her own skin, day by day, and he or she can certainly form hopes for the future.²³ The controversial nature of time is reflected by language:

Ainsi le paradoxe ontologique oppose non seulement le langage à l’argument sceptique, mais le langage à lui même: comment concilier la positivité des verbes “avoir passé”, “survenir”, “être” et la négativité des adverbes “ne...plus”, “pas...encore”, “pas toujours”? La question est donc circonscrite: *comment* le temps peut-il être, si le passé n’est plus, si le futur n’est pas encore et si le présent n’est pas toujours? (Ricœur, 23)

planning, evaluating, explaining, for recalling the past and imagining a future [...]. In this Turner could find allies among artificial intelligence researchers, such as Roger Schank and Jerry R. Hobbs, who similarly place narrative forms (stories, scripts, schemas) at the centre of human cognition.’ Alan Richardson, Review of *The Literary Mind* by Mark Turner, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 24 November, 2006 <<http://www2.bc.edu/%7Erichardad/lcb/rev/mt.html>>.

²² Paul Ricœur, *Temps et Récit*, vol. I, Paris: Du Seuil, 1983, p. 83.

²³ At this point of the argument Ricœur analyses Augustine’s approach to that essential question in the *Confessions*.

The intellectual operation which permits the individual to be able to think of the past and to recollect it is that he or she instinctively transforms it into a narrative act, according to a process that Ricœur terms *mimesis*, which occurs in the realm of language. Memory can be described as the human faculty of selecting, re-ordering and giving form, consequently a meaning, to events occurred in the past according to a narrative model. Conversely it is necessary for a work of fiction to undergo the experience of time: 'le récit atteint sa signification plénière quand il devient une condition de l'existence temporelle.' The vast body of history composed by men in the course of the centuries, although claiming the authority of sources such as documents, inscriptions and findings, is not alien to the laws of creativity. An historical account follows the same principles of plot-making, implying the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, involving the creative imagination necessary to recreate a world that is beyond the historian's reach. Similarly to the fanciful *récit*, *le récit historique* is a linguistic product of selection and interpretation and is equally subject to the law of the *mimesis*. Ricœur observes that the opposition between the two branches of human thought revolve around a debatable concept of 'truth': 'l'ambition de la vérité, par laquelle l'histoire, selon une expression heureuse de Paul Veyne, prétend au titre de récit "véridique" ne revêt toute sa signification que quand on peut l'opposer à la suspension délibérée de l'alternative entre le vrai et le faux, caractéristique du récit de fiction' (Ricœur, 315). The divergence between fiction and history rests in history's relationship with the sources, connecting it directly with the reality of past events as opposed to the admitted imaginative elements of a fictional plot. According to Ricœur whether the past is conveyed from the perspective of individual memory or of written chronicle it is never alien from the laws of narrative. It can be argued that numerous authors of fiction discover in memory a connecting point between their inner life and the wider realm of human experience:

In the writing of their fictional works, novelists often have to reflect on the functioning of memory, for memory lies at the heart both of inner life and of human experience in general. It is indeed in the works of writers such as Marcel Proust or Jorge Luis Borges that the best exemplifications of the

subjective experience of memory are to be found. However, from a strictly mnemonic point of view, literature provides more than a means of reflecting on memory: it is also the site of the rebirth and construction of individual and collective memories, which can then serve as a foundation for the writing of fictional works. Creative writing has a meiotic function and is as such a powerful tool capable of rescuing memories from oblivion and bringing them back to life, thus reconciling the past with the present.²⁴

The literary text, by meditating on memory, gestures towards a connection between the individual and his community. The artist attempts to rescue from oblivion elements of the past that do not pertain to the experience of a single individual but rather to that of his or her community. A fecund empathy with the native land is a characteristic of Munro's fiction.²⁵ Alice Laidlaw was born in Wingham, a city located in South-Western Ontario, counting a population of 2885 in the year 2001. She spent her childhood and early youth in Lower Town, a working-class suburb of the city, amongst a family of rural background.²⁶ In social environments such as a village, a rural settlement or a

²⁴ François-Xavier Lavenne, Virginie Renard, François Tollet, 'Fiction, Between Inner Life and Collective Memory: A Methodological Reflection,' *The New Arcadia Review*, Vol. 3, no.2 2005, 111-121.

²⁵ In the introduction to *Carried Away*, the Everyman's Library volume dedicated to Munro, Margaret Atwood suggests that Munro's work belongs amongst the finest literary representations of 'Sowesto,' as is called the region which lies between Lakes Erie and Huron in South-Western Ontario. Atwood observes that although the majority of her stories are set in 'Sowesto,' an area that is culturally and geographically specific, nonetheless, thanks to Munro's artistic talent, her fiction has found favour with a worldwide readership: 'The country is mostly flat farmland, cut by several wide, winding rivers prone to flooding, and on the rivers – because of the available boat transport, and the power provided by water-driven mills – a number of smaller and larger towns grew up in the nineteenth century. Each has its red-brick town hall (usually with a tower), each its post-office building and its handful of churches of various denominations, each its main street and its residential section of gracious homes, and its other residential section on the wrong side of the tracks. Each has its families with long memories and stashes of bones in the closet. [...] Lush nature, repressed emotions, respectable fronts, hidden sexual excesses, outbreaks of violence, lurid crimes, long-held grudges, strange rumours – none are ever far away in Munro's Sowesto, partly because all have been provided by the real life of the region itself.' Margaret Atwood, *Carried Away: A Selection of Stories*, Everyman's Library, New York: Random House, Introduction, X. Hereafter *Carried Away*.

²⁶ Robert Thacker thus describes the author's native town at the time of her youth, between the nineteen thirties and the nineteen fifties, suggesting its relevance for her future fictional work: 'Wingham is located just over twenty kilometres northeast of Blyth, where Bob Laidlaw grew up and his parents still lived. The town developed at the point of confluence of the Middle branch of the Maitland River, which flows from the south, and the North branch, which flows from the northeast. Joined at Wingham, the river continues south and west to Lake Huron. Called the Meneseteung by the Natives, the river was renamed

provincial town the individual is more apt to construe his or her sense of identity in relation to the mores of the community, whose sense of belonging is more distinct than in cities or in larger settlements. In such close environments an array of elements, fragments of past events delivered though gossip or street chat, opinions, small narratives, flow into an inventory of collective knowledge which integrated members are encouraged to preserve. Thus the individual is apt to share something of the intimate act of remembering with the community:²⁷ ‘the idea of an individual memory, absolutely separate from social memory, is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning. [...] different social segments, each with a different past, will have different memories attached to the different mental landmarks characteristic of the group in question. [...] within kinship groups, within religious groups, and within classes.’²⁸ The community is apt to form a judgement of the individual according to its sense of morality and even to suggest a role, which reflects the individual’s conspicuous traits, physical or moral. It can be observed that in a village fortunes or misfortunes are frequently decided by the public opinion once and forever. It follows that it is not uncommon for the individual to suffer from the silent and yet masterful control by the community. Not dissimilarly an adolescent will harbour controversial feelings towards the embrace of a family. ‘In small towns,’ Munro argues, ‘you have no privacy at all. You have a role, a character, but one that other people have made up for you. Other people have already made your self.’²⁹ Munro’s characters frequently experience similar frictions between the individual and the local

for an early governor general, Sir Peregrine Maitland, as the Huron Tract was opened. [...] While Munro has maintained for some time that her various fictional towns – Jubilee, Dalgheish, Hanratty, Logan, Carstairs, Walley – are not models of Wingham, there is no doubt that Wingham’s geography, economic bases, demographics, and cultural ethos have been shaping presences in her fictional imaginings.’ Robert Thacker, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005, p. 42-43. Hereafter *Writing Her Lives*.

²⁷ A relevant study in the field is Maurice Halbwachs’s *On collective memory*, written in the nineteen thirties and widely influential. An example of a type of cultural and religious community with which Munro is familiar are the descendants of the Presbyterians who settled in various parts of Ontario since the early nineteenth century. The Presbyterian communities can be traced as a source of inspiration for Munro’s fiction particularly in the collection *Friend Of My Youth*, published in 1990.

²⁸ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.37.

²⁹ D.J.R. Bruckner, ‘An Author Travels to Nurture Ideas About Home,’ *The New York Times*. 24 November 2006 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/munro-travels.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=login>.

community. Del, the young protagonist of *Lives of Girls and Women*, struggles with the intellectual constrictions of growing up and receiving her education in a suburb of the provincial town of Jubilee, which, as Robert Thacker suggests, closely resembles the atmosphere of Wingham.³⁰ He argues that ‘probably no more than most professional writers of fiction, yet nonetheless very precisely and so verifiably, Alice Munro has drawn on the factual details of her life - where she has been, whom she has known, her roots, what has happened, how things have turned out - in the fiction she has published’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 17). Munro frequently delivers an acute sense of the landscape, the fascination with the nature of South-Western Ontario felt throughout her career but recoils from assuming responsibilities that exceed her competence as a fictional writer:

I don't think of myself as being in any way an interpreter of rural Ontario, where I live. I think there's perhaps an advantage living here of knowing more different sorts of people than you would know in a larger community [...]. The physical setting is perhaps "real" to me, in a way no other is. I love the landscape, not as "scenery" but as something intimately known. Also the weather, the villages and towns, not in their picturesque aspects but in all phases.³¹

The author is particularly sensible to the richness of local folklore and is able to reflect the silent interplay between the individual and the community in a variety of characters and situations. Not always, however, does the setting of a story mirror the author's original background. A considerable body of her work reflects the spell of twenty years

³⁰ The biographer thus describes the social, religious and economic characteristics of Wingham in the years nineteen thirties and forties: ‘Wingham evolved into a centre that in many ways encapsulates Huron County; most people were descendants of emigrants from the British Isles and, in religion, Protestants of many sects considerably outnumbered Roman Catholics. [...] There is little doubt that Wingham was a place where religion was taken seriously. Not too many years ago its Baptist church identified itself on its sign out front as a “Bible Believing, Soul Saving” church. For most of its history, Wingham was dry, and it was populated mostly by people for whom virtue came from hard work, who often felt guilt, who were quick to remember a slight but would seldom recall a compliment. Such was the world Alice Munro came to know.’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 44).

³¹ ‘A Conversation with Alice Munro,’ Randomhouse.

in which she resided in Vancouver, or even distant locations such as Scotland or Australia. The tone and atmosphere of social interaction observable in small communities is subtly rendered with various stylistic nuances, regardless of the specific setting. Munro investigates the individual and collective response to the social and geographic transformations observable in small-scale communities throughout her career, from *Lives* to *Castle Rock*, which seems to culminate the author's reflection on memory. Munro's poetic is inspired by the observation that the universal need for 'stories' connects the individual to his or her past and simultaneously to that of the community.

The present chapter will consider three short stories, 'The Peace of Utrecht,' 'Princess Ida' and 'The Ottawa Valley', appeared in three collections, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives* and *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974). The stories explore the possibilities of individual, collective and historical memory in the context of a turbulent relationship between a mother and her daughter. The latter is a recurrent theme in Munro's fiction. The story 'Friend of My Youth,' published in 1990 in the homonymous collection, seems to offer a temporary closure to the exploration of the theme. Coral Ann Howells argues that 'Friend of My Youth' 'dedicated by Munro to the memory of her mother is a re-vision of that ongoing autobiographical narrative which critics have described as the ground base of her art: the writing daughter's conscious failure to understand or represent the mother remains at the heart of Munro's aesthetic.'³² The discrepancies between various recollections of the past regarding the maternal figure reveal that her remembrance is charged with emotional urgency. The daughter harbours a sense of guilt when she recalls the transformations caused by a degenerative illness, which gradually alters her mother's personality as well as the balance within the household. Memory, despite its unreliability, is the sole aid to preserve an image of the past prior to the onset of the illness, a task that ultimately proves unsustainable. In a process involving the reconstruction of the threads of their own identity along the way, the heroines finally come to terms with the illusion that

³² Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.102. Hereafter *Munro*.

anything can ever be preserved unaltered. They learn to accept that the figure of the mother shall be forever beyond their grasp.

‘The Peace of Utrecht.’

At the opening of ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ the protagonist, Helen, returns to the town where she spent her childhood in the spring following her mother’s funeral, which she did not attend. There she spends three weeks in the company of her sister, who has nursed their mother through the physical and mental downfall caused by an incurable disease, until her death. After years of absence her mind struggles to make contact with the past, in the midst of the new impressions caused by people and objects once familiar. The simple act of re-viewing those memories implies a degree of alteration of the events that she shared with her sister and a metaphorical separation from the sisterly communion. Helen observes: ‘as for the past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim.’³³ The protagonist is thus pervaded by the radical impression that she and Maddy do not share a common past. The latter, unlike Helen, never married nor left the provincial town of Jubilee. Helen senses a disagreement not only in their sisterly affection, which has deteriorated during the years when their lives followed different courses, but even in the recollection of the years they have spent together. The expression ‘each of us keeping it jealously to herself’ seems to imply the existence of two different pasts. The words and gestures of the lost mother would be preserved in each of their consciousnesses differently, to the point that Helen suspects that these versions will never be made to reconcile. Howells argues that in ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ ‘Munro constructs a duplicitous world where everyday actuality is overlaid by memory and fictitious stories about the past, when at every turn the sisters confront their doubled selves as adults and as the adolescents they were ten years earlier’ (*Munro*, 20). The discrepancy between the different ‘biographies’ of the maternal figure, voiced by various characters including the aunts Annie and Lou, constitutes the main concern of the narrative:

³³ Alice Munro, ‘The Peace of Utrecht,’ *Dance Of the Happy Shades*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1998, p. 190. Hereafter ‘Utrecht’.

And now that she is dead I no longer feel that when they say the words 'your mother' they deal a knowing, cunning blow at my pride. I used to feel that; at those words I felt my whole identity, that pretentious adolescent construction, come crumbling down. ('Utrecht', 194)

The passage suggests Helen's gradual awareness of the distance between her past and present self, stimulated by the familiar sights of Jubilee and by the encounter with former acquaintances. She senses that identity, 'that pretentious adolescent construction,' might be precisely that, a construction, a narrative that can be made and unmade. The reflection extends to the fictitiousness of the self in its continuously changing form. The reading of the present seems to be suspended: 'To change the subject, people ask me what it is like to be back in Jubilee. But I don't know, I'm still waiting for something to tell me' ('Utrecht', 194). Magdalene Redekop argues: 'Munro displaces and contains the situation by using the time of a visit as a framing device. [...] Helen is both the girl who was once at home and the woman who is watching that girl. The eerie doubleness makes it possible to explore the issue of identity without collapsing inward into the claustrophobic centre of the story.'³⁴ The narrative follows the adult woman gradually re-appropriating the physical space of her youth. She equally attempts to reconnect to the emotional memories of the ill mother, beyond the sense of guilt deriving from having deserted her when most needed. The native landscape appears to be frozen in oblivion. On her arrival in Jubilee Helen is suddenly confronted with the view of the city from the surrounding hills, reminding her how she wished to escape the dread of being buried in provincial life and certainly not encouraging feelings of nostalgia.³⁵ On reaching home the void in her emotional memory seems to linger: 'The

³⁴ Magdalene Redekop, *Mothers & Other Clowns*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 51.

³⁵ In regard to Jubilee's closeness to Wingham, mirroring the vicinity of the fictional plot to the autobiographical experience of the author, Thacker observes: 'One of the two major watersheds in Huron County, the Maitland [river] reaches Lake Huron at Goderich, adjacent to its harbour. At Wingham it encircles the town on three sides so that, as Munro describes Jubilee in "The Peace of Utrecht", the town's

big brick house that I knew, with their wooden verandas and gaping, dark-screened windows, seemed to me plausible but unreal' ('Utrecht', 194). As Helen walks into the hall she notices her sister's touch on the furniture, a smell of cleanness that she does not recognize and when she looks into the hall mirror and sees the face of a 'Young Mother' instead of that of the schoolgirl she is struck with the hallucination of a sound: 'I realized I must have been waiting for my mother to call, from her couch in the dining-room, where she lay with the blinds down in the summer heat, drinking cups of tea which she never finished, eating—' ('Utrecht', 194) The cry for help, described as 'undisguised, oh, shamefully undisguised and raw and helpless,' which the sisters grew accustomed to ignore, reawakens a series of images, gestures, habits of the ill mother as well as the strategies her children adopted to survive her dramatic claims. Howells argues that the tension between mother and daughter, which cannot be resolved even by the mother's death, is connected with the ancestral struggle to determine female subjectivity.³⁶ She further observes: 'this is really a Gothic plot about female imprisonment and betrayal; it deals with the uncanny as it hovers around the emblematic Gothic fear that what is dead and buried may not be dead at all but may come back to haunt the living' (*Munro*, 20). The picture resulting is indeed that of a 'Gothic Mother,' which nonetheless seems partial. Helen is suddenly eager to reconstruct, hungry for the exactitude of what appears to be faded or simply missing:

But I find the picture is still not complete. Our Gothic Mother, with the cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features,

buildings, and especially its distinctive town hall, can be seen from a considerable distance as Wingham is approached from the south, the river flats opening the view.' (*Writing Her Lives*, 42-43).

³⁶ 'Why is the sick mother such a scandal to her daughters that they wish to shut her up, to 'get rid of her' as the narrator puts it in "The Ottawa Valley," Munro's next unsuccessful attempt to "deal with Mother"? Why do the daughters so cruelly deny her the love and sympathy she craves? And how to assuage the guilt and repair the damage in their own lives in the present? These are the questions hovering over the story, and the answers would seem to lie in a darker region of the psyche which is intimately bound up with the dilemmas of female subjectivity and a daughter's identity: my subjectivity is attached to the presence of the other woman... the woman-in-me is not silent, she is part of a symbolic referential system. (*Munro*, 22)

shuffling, weeping, devouring attention whenever she can get it, eyes dead and burning, fixed inward on herself; this is not all. ('Utrecht', 196)

At this climactic point the narrative introduces the historical event to which the title of the story alludes. The treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1713. It sanctioned peace between the English and French armies at the end of the war of the Spanish Succession, concluding the hostilities in the northeastern US and Canada, finally recognizing the British control over Newfoundland, part of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The French population inhabiting the region was mainly forced to emigrate to the southern US states, such as Louisiana and Mississippi, and were later known as Cajun. The loss of overseas territory is of minor concern for the royal houses in Europe but the linguistic and cultural shift that followed the Treaty in Northern America is considerable. The mention of the Treaty echoes the controversial relationship of the former colony towards the mother country, Britain, and hints at the development of Canada's linguistic and cultural identity. A significant moment in the national past penetrates the protagonist's journeys into her private recollections, allowing the reader to make associations of various kinds. Metaphorically speaking peace follows an extensive, silent war between sisters over the duty of looking after their mother. It is finally reached between the disease and the conquered, rendered body. It can equally be negotiated between one's own remorse for escaping a familiar drama and the acceptance of a sister's disputable behaviour. All of these are plausible interpretations, allowed by the presence of that particular historical reference in the title. Munro succeeds in suggesting such array of meanings through the simple handwriting of a schoolgirl. Helen opens the drawer of the washstand in her childhood room and finds a page from an old notebook.³⁷

³⁷ Thacker observes: 'When Munro first drafted the story it was called "Places at Home" – but the title, like Helen's life, is to be found in that washstand since her handwritten notes from the years before read "The Peace of Utrecht, 1713, brought an end to the war of the Spanish Succession.' (*Writing Her Lives*, 151)

I read:

'The Peace of Utrecht, 1713, brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession.' It struck me that the handwriting was my own. Strange to think of it lying here for ten years—more; it looked as I might have written it that day. ('Utrecht', 201)

In the passage the paradox of time is made manifest not dissimilarly to Augustine's depiction of it in the *Confessions*, a passage to which Ricœur refers in *Temps et Récit*. The handwriting is the only element that has not undergone alteration. Helen observes an element of sameness traced on the paper in the letters drawn by the hand of the schoolgirl, resulting in a note that looks 'as I might have written it that day.' Yet Helen perceives simultaneously the evidence of change, in the aged body sitting in front of the desk and in the intellectual faculties of the adult woman reading the note. Past and present self are confronting the same fictional space, suggesting that it is possible for the protagonist to comprehend, in her meditation, a fourth dimension, the chronological:

For some reason reading these words had a strong effect on me; I felt as if my old life was lying around me, waiting to be picked up again. Only then for a few moments in our old room did I have this feeling. The brown halls of the High School (a building since torn down) were re-opened for me, and I remembered the Saturday nights in spring, after the snow had melted and all the country people crowded into town. ('Utrecht', 201)

A Proustian reference seems relevant to the passage. In *Swann's Way* the church of Saint-Hilaire in Combray is thus described: '[...] a building which occupied, so to speak, four dimensions of space – the name of the fourth being Time – which had sailed the centuries with that old nave, where bay after bay, chapel after chapel, seemed to stretch across and hold down and conquer not merely a few yards of soil, but each successive

epoch from which the whole building had emerged triumphant [...]’³⁸ Brian Rogers argues: ‘Proust’s cathedral-novel itself functions in the same manner: by laying down impressions in the reader’s mind – magic-lantern projections on the walls of his consciousness – which become layered in memory in a vertical ‘fourth dimension’ where they coexist simultaneously, like the stratifications of different centuries in the Church of Combray’ (*Companion to Proust*, 56)

The note stimulates Helen’s memory. The latter, however, is unable to render a genuine portrayal of the lost years. The protagonist observes that the small habits of country schoolgirls, Al’s dance hall, ‘the smell of the earth and the river’ coming through the windows in spring, every detail of the past seems fresh again (‘Utrecht’, 202). It is, however, a delusion. The memories are accompanied by comments that suggest that the adult self performs a creative rearrangement of the schoolgirl’s perceptions. These ‘snapshots,’ as the protagonist defines her memories, form an altogether new album. The intellectual operation is exemplified by the image of Al’s dance house, described as ‘an experience that seemed not at all memorable at the time’:

[It] had been transformed into something curiously meaningful for me, and complete; it took in more than the girls dancing and the single street, it spread over the whole town, its rudimentary pattern of streets and its bare trees and muddy yards just free of the snow, over the dirt roads where the lights of cars appeared, jolting towards the town, under an immense pale wash of sky. (‘Utrecht’, 202)

The verb ‘transformed’ and the adverb ‘curiously’ imply a response by the adult woman. The adjective ‘complete’ refers to a particular emotion that was not experienced in the past but is in the present, in the creative re-elaboration of it. The life ‘waiting to be picked up again,’ Helen’s youth, ‘spreads over the whole town’ which, however, is no longer the lost one. Despite their fictitious quality, these pictures rescued from the

³⁸ *Swann’s Way*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, p. 80. ‘Swann in Love’ is contained in *Swann’s Way*.

otherwise undisturbed flow of the past transform the present in Jubilee into an experience more precise, described as ‘concentrated’ and thus unreal. Similarly certain events in the life of an author can be selected, interpreted and creatively rearranged to construct a pattern of meanings that eventually flows into a work of fiction.³⁹ The secondary characters, such as the aunts Annie and Lou, offer Del a contribution to the multiple readings of the mother’s story, confirming that the narrative is oriented towards the constant shift of boundaries between the commonly assumed categories of ‘truth’ and ‘invention.’ Aunt Annie relates her sister’s flight from the hospital, in consequence of Maddy’s refusal to rescue her from it. Annie describes an old woman escaping from her room at night, in her nightgown and slippers. Were this version accepted it would introduce an altogether different picture of Maddy and of her dedication throughout the years, thus affecting Helen’s lingering sense of guilt. Annie feels the urge to relate the sick’s woman confession as she heard it on her last visit to the ward, yet how much of it is true proves impossible to establish. The mother in the last phase of the illness was scarcely lucid and her words not easily understandable, the muscle of her mouth being gradually numbed by the disease. Did the flight really take place, in such a fashion, or can it be a conscious dramatization, an error of interpretation or even a speculative fantasy?

*The snow, the dressing gown and slippers, the board across the bed. It was a picture I was much inclined to resist. Yet I had no doubt that this was true and exactly as it happened. It was what she would do; all her life as long as I had known her led up to that flight. (‘Utrecht’, 208)*⁴⁰

³⁹ The relationship between fiction and autobiography, in which the dynamics of memory are directly involved, will be discussed in Chapter II.

⁴⁰ Thacker argues that the episode is inspired by the real circumstance of Munro’s mother escaping from the Wingham hospital, where she was recovered during the last phase of Parkinson’s disease. The old woman would have escaped from her ward at night, barefoot in the snow. Thacker suggests that ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ is a turning point in the author’s career since the first time Munro approaches autobiographical events of a very intimate and distressful nature, feeling that a sense of urgency stimulates the creative process: ‘Munro has called this story her “first really painful autobiographical story... the first time I wrote a story that tore me up”; it was one “I didn’t even want to

Helen transforms the aunt's tale into a fictional scene in which the snow, the dressing gown and the slippers can be defined as a double re-elaboration of events that may not have taken place. Helen seems conscious of the questionable nature of the image however she is not perturbed it. In it she sees 'a picture I was much inclined to resist,' one which she has actually never seen ('Utrecht', 202). She focuses on the details, such as her mother's clothes and unsteady gait, constructs a narrative around them, involving the dark chilled night, the snow on the pavement outside the hospital and the night gown, and finally derives from such fictional reconstruction feelings of comprehension and empathy with the lost parent that are more authentic and persistent than any of the recently gathered impressions. She concludes that 'this was true, all this was true and exactly as it happened ('Utrecht', 202).' The last theatrical rebellion of the mother corresponds to her understanding of the audacious, uncompromising character of the old woman, though perhaps such rebellion is entirely fictitious. This fictional recreation of events allows Helen to finally make contact, a late and vicarious one, with the last years of life of the 'Gothic Mother,' constructing a new emotional equilibrium. The daughter realizes that all that she can do is to accept that the past is lost and that memories are treacherous. Inaccurate recollections of the past, however, can convey a sense of 'reality,' which she does not altogether reject. In the memoir entitled *Lives of Mothers & Daughters* Sheila Munro describes the extent to which the knowledge of her maternal grandmother depends on the fictional accounts Alice Munro has given of her, in stories such as 'The Peace of Utrecht,' 'The Ottawa Valley' and 'Friend of My Youth.' Munro's daughter argues that through a work of fiction the individual can form an image of the past which is perceived as more accurate and meaningful than any direct knowledge of it.⁴¹ 'The Peace of Utrecht' ends with a sense of tacit unresolvedness with

write." [...] And more than this, "The Peace of Utrecht" represents Munro's imaginative homecoming to Wingham after her years away in Vancouver, home to the personal material that would subsequently become her hallmark.' (*Writing Her Lives*, 149-150)

⁴¹ I see her [Sheila Munro's grandmother] as a composite of Ada in *Lives of Girls and Women*, the mother who runs away from the hospital in "The Peace of Utrecht," the mother whose arm won't stop shaking in "The Ottawa Valley," the mother who rises from her sickbed to paint flowers on the kitchen cupboards in "Winter Wind," the light-hearted teacher planning her wedding in "Friend of My Youth."

the past. The interaction between the individual and the various forms of personal and collective memory is reflected in the enigmatic title. As Margaret Redekop argues: ‘The “Peace” is an “understood” historical allusion which, by inversion, points to what we do not understand. It is in this sense that it is like the mother who also eludes possession and understanding (Redekop, 54).’

‘Princess Ida.’

‘Princess Ida’ continues to explore relationships between the act of remembering and the creative reconstructions that are necessarily involved in it. The story, which is collected in *Lives*, is also an autobiographical reflection on the realisation of the artistic vocation. ‘Princess Ida’ originally ended the manuscript of the novel entitled *Real Life*. The genesis of *Lives* is particularly laborious, as Munro hesitates over the insertion of the epilogue, ‘Photographer,’ in the final draft of the novel. Thacker observes:

[Munro began] with what she calls a “regular novel” with the “Princess Ida” section of the finished book. Munro kept at the material in this way until sometime in March the structure of a regular novel was “all wrong” for what she was doing, so she went home and started to break the material into sections. [...] For reasons biographical as well as aesthetic, Munro’s struggle with the epilogue of *Lives of Girls and Women* is

My grandmother was someone I never knew in person, but I feel I know far more about her, even things my mother might not know, through these fictional recreations and what I read into them, than most of us can even hope to know about a grandmother. [...]

Reading is like dreaming; images flickering in our consciousness as our eyes move across the page. Usually these images come entirely from the imagination, we have to invent them, but when I read a story such as “The Peace of Utrecht,” I cannot help but putting people I know and places I’ve seen into my dreaming of the story. The effect is a heightened realism, like an Andrew Wyeth painting. Conversely, when I visit the places and people that gave rise to the stories, Wingham for instance, or the house where my mother grew up, they assume an added dimension for me, and I feel the rush of recognition, an intimacy, as if it’s a movie set I’m visiting, and I know every single camera angle very well. Sheila Munro, *Lives of Mothers & Daughters*, New York: Sterling, 2008, p. 143; p. 140.

indicative, a key moment in her life, as well as in her career. (*Writing Her Lives*, 211)

In regard to the epilogue Munro herself argues: ‘Up until now this was not the story of the artist as a young girl. It was just the story of a young girl. And this introduced a whole new element, which I felt I had not been sufficiently prepared for. And yet, I found eventually that the book didn’t mean anything to me without it’ (cited in *Munro*, 35). *Lives* has been defined as a *bildungsroman*, the intellectual and emotional trajectory of the writer from her provincial origins to the fulfilling of the literary vocation. The book, similarly to the *Search*, closes as the narrator’s creative enterprise is expected to begin. The similarities between the two works, that are otherwise notably different in terms of geographical, historical and cultural background, are to be found in the similar intellectual trajectory of the narrators. Del Jordan in *Lives* and the unnamed protagonist in the *Search* discover the existence of a connection between memory and creativity. *Lives*, structured as a sequence of interrelated yet independent stories, is an attempt to depict, as accurately as the literary medium would allow, the native land, the family and social structure surrounding the narrator during her early youth. In the light of such an ambitious, realistic project, it is necessary to observe how Munro’s understanding of the term ‘reality,’ intended as an ontological category, is problematic. Howells argues that in *Lives* different perceptions of reality coexist with imaginative elements. The characters as well as the audience are often in the position of questioning the distinction between the factual and the fanciful:

Told from Del’s point of view, the stories make connections between different perceptions of reality, slipping from everyday ordinariness into imagined worlds and the hidden topography of fantasy. Though Munro is not a fantasy writer her stories expose the limits of realism by working within a referential framework and then collapsing it by shifting into a different fictional mode. Her narrative method provokes the question which she asks in a different context, “What is real?” [...] Both realism

and fantasy are revealed as narrative conventions for translating reality into words though they work according to different principles, each leaving out a dimension which the other includes and each disrupting the other's design. (*Munro*, 32)

Since childhood Del's predisposition for creativity and story-telling is connected to the pleasure she derives from hearing people's recollections of the past, which she freely reassembles into personal narratives. Subsequently she will attempt to reconstruct that world on the page. Del will become both the narrator of family chronicles and the central character of *Lives*. Similarly in the *Search* the origin of the protagonist's discovery of the artistic vocation is retraceable to an episode of involuntary memory involving Combray, the country village of his youth. On that episode are metaphorically poised the foundations of the entire edifice of the novel.⁴² The *Search*, however, is interspersed with meditations on the task of writing 'the Book,' which awaits the narrator. In *Lives*, reflections of a similar nature are concentrated around the figure of Uncle Craig who, during Del's childhood, attempts to write the history of the Wawanash County in the form of a yearly, small-scale chronicle. His method of work is described as follows:

Uncle Craig's files and drawers were full of newspaper clippings, letters, containing descriptions of the weather, an account of a runaway horse, lists of those present at funerals, a great accumulation of the most ordinary facts, which it was his business to get in order. Everything had to go into his history, to make it the whole history of the Wawanash County. He

⁴² Combray is the fictional village in the vicinity of Rouen where the protagonist spends the holidays of his childhood. In the vicinity of Combray, while unconsciously registering the beauty of nature, he has his first glimpses of the literary vocation. In the cited episode of involuntary memory the narrator, while tasting a *madeleine* dipped in tea in his room in Paris, is struck by the obscure sensation that in that flavour is hidden something crucial, a secret which torments him. He eventually succeeds in connecting the particular sensation with the memory of Tante Léonie's bedroom in Combray. Thus the remembrance of the village of his youth rises in the mind and initiates the exploration of modes and mechanisms of memory.

would not leave anything out. That was why, when he died, he had only got as far as the year 1909.⁴³

Craig's enterprise is presented as his lifelong attempt in 'Heirs of the Living Body' and constantly referred to, in ironic terms, by the protagonist and by several other female members of the family. Howells attempts a feminist interpretation of the opposition between Craig's solid, detailed, patriarchal chronicle and Del's novel, whose style is ironic and imaginative. The latter attempts to convey a perspective on reality which encompasses both men and women's lives:

Del discovers that she is her uncle's true heir, though with a difference, for she presents another possibility for women not even envisaged by Uncle Craig but entrusted to by her aunts. [...] As a female chronicler she writes in the women's stories which her uncle has omitted, while as a novelist she knows how traditional realistic writing can be made to include moments of intense subjectivity and visionary perception, illuminating some of the dark secrets hidden within the living body of history.' (*Munro*, 41)

Del laments the narrow scope of Craig's work and resents the adherence of the narrator to the morality of a social world that, being eminently patriarchal, disapproves of her artistic ambition. Despite her ironic distancing from it, however, as an adult Del retraces his uncle's footsteps. She attempts to depict the social mores of the semi-rural outskirts of Jubilee, a provincial town of the Wawanash County. Her ambition coincides with Craig's, which is to retrace 'the whole solid, intricate structure of lives supporting us from the past' ('Heirs', 37). Del succeeds in portraying the quotidian life of the community to which both her and Craig belong; yet she professes a style, which Craig consciously tried to avoid in its projected chronicle. Several circumstances in Del's story

⁴³ Alice Munro, 'Heirs of the Living Body', *Lives of Girls and Women*, London: Vintage, 2001, p.37. Hereafter 'Heirs'.

are open to multiple readings: the characters' intentions and feelings are often concealed in impenetrable shadows, the narrative is purposely elliptic. Howells thus argues the extent to which the categories of chronicle, autobiography and *bildungsroman* fail to describe the complexity of *Lives*:

Double vision is implicit within the form of fictive autobiography as the story is told by an older Del who reveals that she had become the writer she desired to be in the "Epilogue" to this book. Similarly, any attempt to map the development of female subjectivity will be characterized by multiplicity as a girl like Del endlessly invents and reinvents personae for herself, some of them idealised and imaginary, some of them created in resistance to the role models offered by her mother and the women in her family and social community. Del's "self" is constructed very like a text as it offers a variety of images, a tangle of signifiers, made up through stories whose meanings are continually unsettled by the next episode, for Del is in process of forging her identity as a woman and an artist. (*Munro*, 32)

In the opening of 'Princess Ida' Del recalls her childhood fascination for the encyclopaedia, which her mother used to sell in the countryside around Jubilee, driving over 'gravel roads, dirt roads, cow tracks, if she thought they might lead her to customers.'⁴⁴ The child was attracted by and could easily memorize historical details, drawings and reproductions of paintings whose fictional nature she seems to have a preconception of:

But I shared my mother's appetite myself, I could not help it. [...] They might open to show me a steel engraving of a battle, taking place on the moors, say, with a castle in the background, or in the harbor of Constantinople. All the bloodshed, drowning, hacking off of heads, agony

⁴⁴ Alice Munro, 'Princess Ida', *Lives of Girls and Women*, London: Vintage, 2001, p. 72. Hereafter 'Princess'.

of horses, was depicted with a kind of operatic flourish, a superb unreality. And I had the impression that in historical times the weather was always theatrical, ominous; landscapes frowned, sea glimmered in various dull or metallic shades of grey. Here was Charlotte Corday on her way to the guillotine, Mary Queen of Scots on her way to the scaffold, Archbishop Laud extending his blessing to Stafford through the bars of his prison window – nobody could doubt this was just the way they looked, robes black, lifted hands and faces white, composed heroic. [...] I preferred history. ('Princess', 72)

Comments such as 'bloodshed, drowning, hacking off of heads, agony of horses, [was] depicted with a kind of operatic flourish, a superb unreality' seem to reveal an awareness of the imaginative nuances of the encyclopaedia, generally regarded as an authoritative, objective source' ('Princess', 72). Del relishes what she already senses to be aesthetic beauty, surpassing in her interests verisimilitude. As previously seen in 'The Peace of Utrecht,' by juxtaposing the double vision of present and past self, and by allowing the adult narrator to comment on the child's impressions, Munro succeeds in conveying the numerous temporal dimensions of the story. As an adult narrator Del ponders over her early awareness of the problematic nature of art, in this case the reproductions of historical paintings and illustrations within the encyclopaedia: 'I had the impression that in historical times the weather was always theatrical, ominous; landscapes frowned, sea glimmered in various dull or metallic shades of grey' ('Princess', 74). Another sign of Del's precocious artistic sensibility is to be found in her linguistic curiosity. Unknown words or familiar ones in unusual contexts inspire her to create brief narratives. These serve the purpose of interpreting events whose meaning she cannot grasp or to characterize stories heard within the family:

Her mother died. She went away for an operation but she had large lumps in both breasts and she died, my mother always said, on the table. On the

operating table. When I was younger I used to imagine her stretched out dead on an ordinary table among the teacups and ketchup and jam.

Heart *attack*. It sounded like an explosion, like fireworks going off, shooting sticks of light in all directions, shooting a little ball of light – that was Uncle Craig’s heart, or his soul – high into the air, where it tumbled and went out. Did he jump up, throw his arms out, yell? (‘Princess’, 51, 86)

The passages suggest the extent to which mysterious words seem to disclose both the complexity of perception and the imaginative possibilities of language. Such linguistic curiosity, accompanied by a fervid imagination, produces ironic effects when Del’s fanciful interpretations are finally checked by the adult world. The child’s early predisposition for story-telling also implies willingness to believe in images or elements of an entirely fictitious nature. The subject of a painting belonging to the house of her childhood matches the young narrator’s understanding of her mother’s humble life preceding her birth, to the point of provoking an actual disappointment when Del eventually learns the truth:

[It] showed a stony road and a river between mountains, and sheep driven along the road by a little girl in a red shawl. The mountains and the sheep looked alike, lumpy, woolly, purplish-grey. Long ago I had believed that the little girl was really my mother and that this was the desolate country of her early life. Then I learned that she had copied the scene from the *National Geographic*. (‘Princess’, 78)

Despite the inevitable contrasts of characters and the tensions peculiar to the relationship between mother and daughter, Del shares with her mother two traits, the predisposition for story-telling and the fascination with the past. A consistent part of ‘Princess Ida’

retraces the dialogue between mother and daughter, a sort of ritual happening during Del's childhood consisting in the mother narrating the tales of her youth and in the child eagerly listening to them and letting her imagination run freely. The narrator thus comments on this sort of mythical well on which the infantile imagination feeds:

My mother had not let anything go. Inside that self we knew, which might at times be blurred a bit, or sidetracked, she kept her younger self strenuous and hopeful; scenes from the past were liable to pop up any time, like lantern slides, against the cluttered fabric of the present. ('Princess', 82)

'Princess Ida' presents multiple stories of the mother as related by herself and her siblings. Munro's technique exposes the problematic nature of the biographical as well as autobiographical act. Redekop argues:

The retrospective pattern characteristic of traditional autobiography is replaced by a kind of circus parade of stories. A clownish mother figure, "Princess Ida", is positioned in the middle of this parade. *Lives Of Girls and Women* began, in a sense, with this story since Munro began with the intention of writing a conventional novel about Princess Ida [...] As an abortive novel, "Princess Ida" demonstrates that Munro's experiments with genre are directly related to her exploration of maternity. (Redekop, 62)

Del is eager to pose a distance between herself and her mother's youth, however she feels compelled to explore its ambiguities. The figure of Princess Ida becomes, as Redekop observes, 'both a character and a text':

The best example of the invasion of self as text is the name Ida – or is it Ada or Addie? The multiplication mocks the daughter's efforts to reproduce the mother. [...] There are many words, many lives, many selves, many stories. Adam, Ada, Addie, Ida: the slipping of the letters in the proper noun reflects the instability of the language and of the self. The name Del forms part of the name Adelaide, reflecting the difficulty a woman has in saying I when her identity threatens to merge with that of her mother. (Redekop, 62)

Del reformulates Addie's autobiography and appropriates her tale to serve her own narrative, as observable in the following passage:

And my mother, just a little girl then named Addie Morrison, spindly I should think, with cropped hair because her mother guarded her against vanity, would walk home from school up the long anxious lane, banging against her legs the lard pail that held her lunch. Wasn't it always November, the ground hard, ice splintered on the puddles, dead grass floating from the wires? Yes, and the bush near and spooky, with the curious unconnected winds that lift the branches one by one. ('Princess', 82)

Comments such as 'spindly I should think' and 'the curious unconnected winds that lift the branches one by one' signal the presence of the narrator's voice providing a fictional supplement to the maternal recollection. The contradictions inherent in the act of imagining the past are directly exposed when a male figure, Addie's brother, is introduced. Del has never met the man, who lives at a considerable distance from the family, but has pictured him according to her mother's recollections. Such a male figure appears as an unknown visitor unexpectedly knocking at the door. When he is revealed to be Addie's brother the shock of recognition is considerable. One particular word, heard in connection with him, stimulates Del's awakening sense of sexual drive, giving rise to a reflection with sexual undertones:

[...] the younger brother she hated. What did he do? Her answers were not wholly satisfactory. He was evil, bloated, cruel. A cruel fat boy. He fed firecrackers to cats. He tied up a toad and chopped it to pieces. He drowned my mother's kitten, named Misty, in the cold through, though he afterwards denied it. Also he caught my mother and tied her up in the barn and tormented her. Tormented her? He *tortured her*.

What with? But my mother would never go beyond that – that word, *tortured*, which she spat out like blood. So I was left to imagine her tied up in the barn, as at a stake, while her brother, a fat Indian, yelped and pranced about her. [...] I had not yet learned to recognize the gloom that overcame her in the vicinity of sex. ('Princess', 86)

The discrepancy between the image of the boy and the man whom Del sees stepping out of the car, accompanied by a young, estranged wife, later sitting at the table 'hanging low over his plate and eating steadily, as old people do,' is considerable' ('Princess', 87). It provokes a sudden jolt in Del's perception of reality. The man's behaviour contradicts the boldness, tinged with a suggestion of feminine passivity on the part of her mother, of the boy of her imagination. In an excess of unjustified generosity the visitor purchases a number of goods, especially sweets, in a scene that the narrator defines 'idiot largesse, which threw the whole known system of rewards and delights out of kilter' ('Princess', 87). Generosity and frailty, however, do not pertain to that 'Indian' brother created by Del's fantasy:

Her brother! This was the thing, the indigestible fact. This Uncle Bill was my mother's brother, the terrible fat boy, so gifted in cruelty, so cunning, quick, fiendish, so much to be feared. I kept looking at him, trying to pull that boy out of the yellowing man. But I could not find him there. He was gone, smothered, like a rattled spotted snake, once venomous and sportive, buried in a bag of meal. ('Princess', 87)

The man's complexion and stance suggest poor health. The purpose of his visit is to announce that he is affected by a terminal disease. The disappointment following the discovery of the man's identity provides the conclusion to the story, giving a measure of the unreliability of memory and of the tendency to imagine past. The distance between memory and reality has to be constantly re-negotiated and still the impossibility of ever grasping the essence of someone lingers. Similarly the task of depicting the mother, which 'Princess Ida' attempts to accomplish, eventually proves impracticable. Actual and imagined elements are no longer discernible in the fragments of identity provided by the story, such as the child in the painting inspired by the *National Geographic*, the rebellious girl escaping from home, the fiercely anti-religious adolescent, the puritanical bride and finally *Princess Ida*, the pen name of the enthusiastic contributor to the Jubilee *Herald-Advance*. The partial images of the mother, reconstructed by the adult narrator, invariably fall short of reflecting her complexity. The maternal figure proves too close and influential to be resolved, or rescued, by her daughter's fictional attempt.

‘The Ottawa Valley.’

The story ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ which appeared in the year 1974 in the collection *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, continues to explore the fictional possibilities of autobiographical experience and to be concerned with the maternal figure.⁴⁵ Howells observes:

Munro reworks the sick mother story again and again, and her second version ‘The Ottawa Valley’ (written fifteen years after [‘The Peace of Utrecht’]) rejects Gothic horror for a more realistic account of a twelve-years-old girl’s response to the first intimations of her mother’s illness. The most unashamedly autobiographical of all Munro’s stories, it traces the attempts of an adult daughter to construct a fitting memorial to her mother, though the compassionate remembering of her mother’s life is continually played off against the child’s pain and shock, and there is no elegiac sense of reconciliation at the end. (*Munro*, 24)

Similarly to ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ and ‘Princess Ida,’ ‘The Ottawa Valley’ unfolds in the context of a close-knit rural community located in South-Western Ontario, identifiable with the surroundings of Carleton Place in Lanark County. Sheila Munro thus describes the geographical and social context in which her maternal grandmother, Anne Clarke Chamney, who descended from Irish immigrants, grew up and which she eventually relinquished for Wingham and married life with Robert Laidlaw:

⁴⁵ The following stories can be argued to form a narrative cycle centred on the figure of the mother, suggesting that Munro has been reflecting on the theme for over a decade: ‘The Peace of Utrecht,’ published in 1968 in *Dance Of The Happy Shades*, ‘Princess Ida’ in *Lives*, ‘The Ottawa Valley’ and ‘Friend of My Youth,’ published in 1990 in the homonymous collection. In an interview to Jane McCulloch appeared in 1993 Munro has declared that ‘the material about my mother is my central material in life... and it always comes the most readily to me. If I just relax, that’s what will come up.’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 513)

Anne Clarke Chamney came from a family of Irish Protestants who arrived in the Ottawa Valley from County Wicklow in 1820, at about the same time that the Laidlaws came from Scotland to Toronto. They settled at a place called Scotch Corners, near Carleton Place in Lanark County. Apparently they were enticed to come to Canada because of a movement to settle sturdy Protestants in the Ottawa as a buffer against Catholic Quebec to the north. But the land was rockier and the soil thinner than it was in the places the Laidlaws settled, and the family was very poor. (Sheila Munro, p.143)

It is concerned with the lives of a number of blood-related characters. Munro admits that 'The Ottawa Valley' contains autobiographical elements and that it was inspired by memories of a particularly distressful nature. Munro's mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1943, when Alice was twelve, and died when she was aged twenty-nine. Several critical contributions and interviews mention the relevance of this event in the author's work. Thacker argues:

When Anne Laidlaw started showing symptoms of 'Parkinson's disease or shaking palsy,' as it is described by Fishbein [the medical encyclopaedia quoted in "The Ottawa Valley"], the family did not know what it was; in fact, it took about three years from the onset of symptoms to get a clear diagnosis. Even then there was nothing to be done – it was incurable. This fact exacerbated an already difficult situation: at the time, the family's economic circumstances were already faltering, and they would continue to deteriorate during Munro's high school years. [...] More pointedly, the onset of Anne's Parkinson's disease came just as Munro had reached puberty and was realizing her vocation as a writer. (*Writing Her Lives*, 73)

According to Redekop 'The Ottawa Valley' 'is more explicitly autobiographical than any other story by Munro but it controls and objectifies subjective expression in a way that moves beyond "The Peace of Utrecht" and that could not have been possible

without the experimenting Munro did in the preceding stories' (Redekop, 104). The story opens, however, with an observation that does not pertain to memory:

I think of my mother sometimes in department stores. I don't know why, I was never in one with her; their plenitude, their sober bustle, it seems to me, would have satisfied her. I think of her of course when I see somebody on the street who has Parkinson's disease, and more and more often lately when I look in the mirror.⁴⁶

The construction of the paragraph indicates the intersection of memory and fictional elements in the unfolding of the narrator's meditation on the maternal figure. The connection suggested, between a contemporaneous space and the deceased parent, is seemingly arbitrary. The woman in fact lived before department stores were invented. The mental association gestures toward the presence of a certain desire, soon taking the form of a metaphorical quest. The improvised connection between disparate elements awakens a memory, the signs of the mother's physical degeneration stimulated by the sight of equally unfortunate passers-by. Finally the narrator's own image in the mirror, through which the mother's traits seem to emerge, suggests that personal identity depends on the maternal influence absorbed in early life. The sentence closing the paragraph grounds the initial yearning with the memory of one particular day, thus initiating the narrative sequence:

Also in Union Station, Toronto, because the first time I was there I was with her, and my little sister. It was one summer during the War, we waited between trains; we were going home with her, with my mother, to her old home in the Ottawa Valley. ('Ottawa', 227)

⁴⁶ Alice Munro, 'The Ottawa Valley,' *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*, 1990, Toronto: Penguin, p.227. Hereafter 'Ottawa'.

Similarly to the historical reference contained in ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ the Ottawa Valley evoked in the title can mislead the audience into expectations that are not to be fulfilled. The toponym serves the purpose of stimulating memories of the narrator’s youth. Analogously the reflection on the place-names of Combray, Balbec and Doncières accompanies specific remembrances in the *Search*. Redekop observes:

These specific details [Union Station, Toronto in a summer during the War] ought to be reassuring. Coming along with the invocation of the old quest pattern – departure and return home – the prologue ought to unite myth, history and geography in a satisfying wholeness. Precisely the opposite happens as the quest for identity is replaced by a confrontation with separation and difference. The fact that the mother is already dead is the most important historical detail. It lends a spatial quality to the whole story, as though the story admits, from the beginning, to being “slightly beside the point.” (Redekop, 106)

The narrative follows the pattern of a metaphorical quest in the past, which, however, ends in failure. Consequently there is a return to the origin, the death of the mother, who is also the figure metaphorically pursued. Howells argues that ‘the plenitude and satisfaction which the daughter would like to offer in these opening sentences are then inexorably withdrawn in a story which denies her mother both’ (*Munro*, 24). Similar to ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ and ‘Princess Ida’ in ‘The Ottawa Valley’ different chronological times intersect in the dialogue between characters pertaining to the juvenile memories of the narrator. Various tales, whose protagonists are the relatives on the maternal line, result in ‘a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parent’s old camera used to take’ (*Munro*, 246). Munro explores the fictional possibilities of autobiographical circumstances related to her youth in a variety of characters and situations displayed across at least four collections of stories.⁴⁷ In ‘The

⁴⁷ As previously mentioned the collections are *Dance of the Happy Shades*, *Lives of Girls and Women*, *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* and *Friend of My Youth*.

Ottawa Valley' Uncle James and the aunts Dodie and Lena remind respectfully of Uncle Craig, the author of the chronicle of the Wawanash County in *Lives*, and of the characters Annie and Lou in 'The Peace of Utrecht.' Analogously James, Dodie and Lena are repositories of a temporal dimension from which the child is excluded, the mother's youthful years. Similar to Del in 'Princess Ida' the young narrator of 'The Ottawa Valley' finds in informal conversations and various forms of family gossip a source of intellectual as well as of linguistic curiosity:

'Did you know,' [Aunt Dodie] said, 'that I was jilted?' My mother has said that we were never to mention it, and there was Aunt Dodie in her own kitchen, washing the noon dishes, with me wiping and my sister putting away (my mother had to go and have her rest), saying 'jilted' proudly, as somebody would say, 'Did you know I had polio?' or some such bad important disease.

'I had my cake baked,' she said. 'I was in my wedding dress.'

'Was it satin?'

'No, it was a dark red merino wool, because of it being a late fall wedding. We had the minister here. All prepared. My dad kept running out to the road to see if he could see him coming. It got dark, and I said, time to go out and do the milking! I pulled off my dress and I never put it back on. I gave it away. Lots of girls would've cried, but me, I laughed.'

My mother telling the same story said, 'When I went home two years after that, and I was staying with her, I used to wake up and hear her crying in the night. Night after night.' ('Ottawa', 230)

The character of Aunt Dodie has been read as a counterpoint to the maternal figure. Although similarly reserved in regard to the sphere of sexuality, Dodie's temperament is differently shaped by the singular course of her life. Within the context of rural society, soon to be affected by the First World War, Dodie fails the crucial passage into

wifehood and motherhood. She suffers abandonment on her very wedding day, causing her to assume the role of independent and bashful single person amongst a conservative society. Her usual dress, a 'milking outfit, which was many-layered and –colored and ragged and flopping like the clothes of a beggarwoman might wear in a schoolplay,' her rustic habits and unconstrained speech suggest that she enjoys such freedom of expression in consequence of having been marginalised by the social order' ('Ottawa', 234). Dodie is 'the old maid who never marries,' 'the one who mothers her own parents at it is she who bears (like Maddy in "The Peace of Utrecht") the burden of the old ideology' (Redekop, 106). Dodie's figure enlarges as the narrative unfolds. She is described in greater detail than her sister, her life being described with a precision and an intensity that seem to darken, by comparison, the shadowy maternal figure. The empathic dialogue between them, sustained by a strong sense of irony, assumes the role of a chorus commenting the small events of their community, involving the young narrator in an atmosphere of playfulness and lightheartedness. In the eerie quiet preceding the dramatic onset of the mother's illness the sisters sit in the house 'cutting up yellow beans,' recalling a joke played in their youth ('Ottawa', 235). The victim of the women's jest is a boy aged seventeen at the time, who later becomes a notorious personality of the county. Frequently Munro juxtaposes description of the childhood or adolescence of a character and his or her profound transformation in adulthood, showing the consequences of time passing not only on the body but also on the individual's personality. On a hot day of work in the fields the women prepare a jar of lemonade after mending the boy's trousers and sewing up its fly, which circumstance soon unfolds in a comically prurient scene:

'He just finally went past caring and gave up and ripped down his overalls altogether and let 'er fly. We had the full view.'

'He had his back to us.'

'He did not! When he shot away there wasn't a thing he couldn't see. He turned himself sideways.'

'I don't remember that.'

'Well, I do. I haven't seen so many similar sights that I can afford to forget.'

'Dodie!' said my mother, as if at this too-late point to issue a warning. (Another thing my mother quite often said was, 'I will never listen to smut.')

'Oh, you! You didn't run away yourself. Did you? You kept your eye to the knothole!' ('Ottawa', 235)

The sexual connotation of a seemingly innocent event, frequently depicted by Munro as a discovery that happens in childhood, provokes opposite reactions in the sisters. Such disagreement is explainable by their different roles and statuses in society, spinsterhood and motherhood, rather than to a radical divergence in their character. According to Redekop in Aunt Dodie 'Munro challenges, as she does elsewhere, the unsexing of the mother figure. [...] Aunt Dodie's disarming entertainments enable us to venture close to the brutalities inherent in the system. Sexuality, for Aunt Dodie, seems to be a juvenile joke' (Redekop, 107). It seems however that the main concern of the author in relating such anecdotes is to show how the sense of identity modifies in time and to what extent it depends on social as well as cultural factors. In the memories related to the years she spent in the Ottawa Valley the mother seems another woman, a younger and more audacious self, belonging to the social microcosm of relatives living in that particular rural context in the years preceding the War, rather than to the familiar background in which the narrator is accustomed to think of her. Similarly in the *Search* the individuals, including the closest and most beloved, are ultimately unknowable because their identity is not fixed but rather modifies in time and, as consequence, in space. Furthermore the sense of identity changes according to the unique perception of the observer. The young mother of the Ottawa Valley has ceased to exist long before the woman affected with

Parkinson's disease passes away, leaving behind her memories that still have the power to disquiet the narrator.

The lightness of spirit and jocular mood of these conversations soon reveal the difficulty on the part of the narrator in approaching memories of the dramatic years of the mother's unstable health. The extent of narrative space granted to anecdotes whose protagonist is Dodie, who can be seen as the mother's antagonist in the social order, suggests the daughter's incapacity to concentrate her mind on the maternal figure. Not dissimilarly Albertine in *La Fugitive*, despite her incidental death, haunts the protagonist who is affected by a sentiment of jealousy for a ghost. The narrator tries to collect the traces of her life in an attempt to secure a late possession which, however, never comes. The more desperate the efforts to chase the dead lover's secrets, by interrogating friends, relatives and acquaintances, the more the lover's personality expands into a constellation of 'Albertines.' The narrator of 'The Ottawa Valley' proceeds through similar diversions and oblique patterns until the dramatic diagnosis of the illness related by Dodie. The announcement seems to strike a more distinct note. Even on such occasion, however, the versions of the sisters diverge:

'Your mother's had a little stroke. She says not, but I've seen too many like her.

'She's had a little one, and she might have another little one, and another, and another. Then some day she might have the big one. You'll have to learn to be the mother, then.

[...]

'What are you crying about? I never meant to make you cry! Well, you are a big baby, if you can't stand to hear about Life!'

Aunt Dodie laughed at me, to cheer me up. In her thin brown face her eyes were large and hot. She had a scarf around her head that day and looked like a gypsy woman, flashing malice and kindness at me, threatening to let out more secrets that I could stand.'

“Did you have a stroke?” I said sullenly.

‘What?’

‘Aunt Dodie said you had a stroke.’

‘Well, I didn’t. I told her I didn’t. The doctor says I didn’t. She thinks she knows everything, Dodie does. She thinks she knows better than a doctor.’
(‘Ottawa’, 237)

Hints at the severity of the mother’s illness, whose consequences the reader with a more extended temporal perspective on the events foresees, are more and more interspersed in the memories of the last serene days. The motif of the unknowability of the mother returns in the episode of the Sunday mass, in which the mother lends the child a safety pin for her torn underwear.⁴⁸ Described as uncompromising and rigidly conservative the mother sacrifices the device holding her own slip strap to save the daughter from the intimate humiliation of ‘rising to sing the hymns, sitting down, in *no pants*. The smooth and cool boards of the pew and *no pants*’ (‘Ottawa’, 243). The shameful consequences of the incident hint at the already mentioned tension between mother and daughter regarding sexuality. A detail revealing the woman’s own frailty following this act of generosity prefigures the dramatic loss of control which is soon to overwhelm her:

When the choir was in place and the minister had turned to face the congregation, my mother set out boldly to join Aunt Dodie and my sister in a pew near the front. I could see that the grey slip had slid down half an inch and was showing in a slovenly way at one side. (‘Ottawa’, 243)

⁴⁸ The episode is inspired by a real incident happened to Munro during her puberty. Thacker observes: ‘As in the story, it was here that Alice, then eleven or twelve, suffered the humiliation of a broken elastic in her underwear just before church at St. John’s Anglican, Innisville. Also in the story, Mrs. Laidlaw sacrificed her own safety pin, to her daughter’s humiliation, so her own slip showed.’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 5)

Thacker argues: 'Much of what is [in the story "The Ottawa Valley"], Munro has said, is autobiographical – the elastic on her underpants did break and she did insist on taking a safety pin from her mother, whose slip showed as a consequence. However, its central scene, when the narrator confronts her mother about the symptoms of her illness, is imagined' (*Writing Her Lives*, p.72). On the way out of the Church a dramatic dialogue ends the child's questioning in regard to the mother's health:

"Is your arm going to stop shaking?" I pursued recklessly, stubbornly.

I demanded of her now, that she turn and promised me what I needed.

But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me. She went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent. She withdrew, she darkened in front of me, though all she did in fact was keep on walking along the path that she and Aunt Dodie had made when they were girls running back and forth to see each other; it was still there. ('Ottawa', 241)

The mother's withdrawal into distance, the first emotional shock experienced by the narrator prelude her death, gives the measure of the future deterioration of the relationship. The mother overwhelmed by the disease becomes blurred in the narrator's memory, where only sentiments of distress, anger and guilt are detectable. Howells argues:

Realism and slippage into unknown psychic territory sit side by side in these astonishing sentences, as the daughter remembers the traumatic experience of abandonment by her mother. As the most crucial moment in the story, it records a terrifying cluster of failure and loss – failure on the mother's part to live up to her all-powerful maternal image, loss of the daughter's infantile fantasy of that maternal omnipotence, and perhaps from the adult narrator's perspective, her later recognition of her own

failure to allow any independent life outside her maternal role. (*Munro*, 25)

In the closure of the story the daughter's admission of her failure to grasp the maternal figure intersects with Munro's own voice commenting on the possibilities of fiction to reconstruct the past. The writer meditates whether the tremendous effort of recollection is justified by the artistic achievement of a tale, which ends with a sense of failure. Munro seems to suggest that her subject, the maternal figure, shall remain forever fleeting and that the act of writing does not liberate the writer from the metaphorical burden of the past:

If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose, because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. Now I look back at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parent's old camera used to take. In these snapshots Aunt Dodie and Uncle James and even Aunt Lena, even her children, come out clear enough. [...] The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. ('Ottawa', 246)

The expressions 'what tricks I have' and 'what skills I know,' referring to the instruments of story-telling, only succeed in conveying the essential solitude of the artist

facing the challenge of narrating what she perceives to be unstable even in her memory. Munro thus voices the feeling of inadequacy as she attempts to confront the past with the sole aid of her sensibility and intelligence. Writing, however, projects such apparent failure in the sphere of aesthetic achievement. Thacker argues that in “The Ottawa Valley” Munro

confronted memories that, as she worked on the stories that became *Something [I've Been Meaning to Tell You]*, led her to question her very practice as an artist during the years since she left in 1951. Given the autobiographical cast of much of her work, such questions doubtless occurred to her previously but here such questions come into the fiction in a way that had not previously. Munro had come home and found it much the same and yet different, its facts laying about, teasing her mind, urgent. (*Writing Her Lives*, 262)

The story ‘Winter Wind,’ also collected in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, directly confronts the question of the ethics of storytelling. The narrator’s voice suggests that the act of narrating is instinctive and inherent in the individual regardless of cultural, geographical and historical factors. Such argument, however, does not cancel the underlying ‘compunction,’ which the artist feels when her autobiographical experience is directly addressed:

And how is anybody to know, I think as I put this down, how am I to know what I claim to know? I have used these people, all of them, but some of them, before. I have tricked them out and altered them and shaped them any way at all, to suit my purposes. I am not doing that now, I am being as careful as I can, but I stop and wonder, I feel compunction. Though I am only doing in a large and public way what has always been done, what my mother did, and other people did, who mentioned to me my grandmother’s story. Even in that closed-mouth place, stories were being made. People carried their stories around with them. My grandmother

carried hers, and nobody ever spoke of it to her face. (cited in *Writing Her Lives*, 262)

The following chapter will examine the relationship between factual and fictional elements in stories intending to portrait the life of their author. The questions arising from the ethicality of storytelling and the problematic nature of the autobiographical act will be addressed with particular reference to *Castle Rock* and the *Search*.

II. Autobiographical elements in the work of Alice Munro and Marcel Proust.

Theoretical attempts to define autobiography, a word coined at the beginning of the nineteenth century, are recent if compared to the origin of the genre, which is generally taken to begin with the *Confessions* written by Augustine (353-430) in 397 A.D.⁴⁹ Laura Marcus maintains that 'whereas autobiographical writing as a genre has proved very difficult to define and regulate [...] there is a distinctive genre of autobiographical criticism.'⁵⁰ When critical attention is first drawn to autobiography, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it emerges that the genre is

a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object. In an intellectual context in which [...] these are seen as irreconcilable distinct, autobiography will appear either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation. (Marcus, 7)

Since Augustine's pioneering work, which attempts to investigate the self in search for divinity, autobiography has been practised with assiduity, reaching a peak of appreciation in the Romantic period. During the latter a new sensibility allowed the self and its claims to be regarded as a field of interest equal in importance to the investigation of the sensible world. Nalbantian observes that 'simple curiosity about people's lives may have first led critics into [...] theorising, but then more sophisticated questions of referentiality, mimesis and the issue of the ontology of the self began to

⁴⁹ According to Suzanne Nalbantian in *Aesthetic Autobiography* the word first appeared in 1809 in an article by Robert Southey published in the *Quarterly Review*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, the origin of the word is antecedent, being quoted in the *Monthly Review* in 1797 as follows: 'It is not very usual in English to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet *autobiography* would have seemed pedantic.'

⁵⁰ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, p.1.

dominate the inquiries.’⁵¹ A preoccupation with conceptualizing the peculiarities of autobiography in respect to the neighbouring forms of writing of the self arises in the late nineteen seventies, most notably with *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975) by Philippe Lejeune (1938-). The influence of Lejeune’s study is evidenced by the number of counter-arguments it inspired. Lejeune defines autobiography along the lines of a contract stipulated between author and reader, based on verifiable and unchangeable constants regarding the content of the text, as follows: ‘Retrospective prose narrative that a real person makes of his own existence, when he emphasises his individual life, especially the history of his personality’ (cited in Nalbantian, 28). Lejeune’s definition implies that both the signature and the main character of the narrative are identifiable and that this identity is subscribable by the reader in the act of accepting the title ‘autobiography’ given to the text. Such argument is based on the presumed existence of an individual external to the text, pre-existent, who is able to convey his or her own intellectual development. Furthermore it implies that such an individual is able to distinguish between a truthful and a fictional approach to the facts of a life. Thus Lejeune is ‘intent on maintaining firm boundaries between autobiography and the novel,’ on the grounds that ‘in contrast to all forms of fictions [...] autobiography and for that matter biography, like social or historical discourse, offers information about an exterior reality’ (Nalbantian, 29). Lejeune’s position is questioned, however, as soon as the concept of self, within and without the text, and that of physical reality as an object of depiction becomes the territory of philosophical enquiry, specifically in the works of the so-called Deconstructionalists. The latter scholars are active between the late sixties and the early eighties. Works such as ‘Death of the Author’ (1968) by Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and ‘What is an Author?’ (1969) by Michel Foucault initiate the debate on the relationship between the text and its author. Both Barthes and Foucault suggest that on the completion of the creative process the text is detached from its author and the construction of meaning is transferred on to the reader, leaving the text in a position of essential independence from the mind which created it. Within such new theoretical

⁵¹ Suzanne Nalbantian, *Aesthetic Autobiography*, London: Macmillan, 1994, p. 27.

horizons the debate on autobiography, in which the interconnection of author and text is central, attracts critical attention. Amongst a group of scholars⁵² commenting on Lejeune's study Paul De Man in 'Autobiography as De-Facement' (1979) observes that:

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighbouring and even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of the tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.⁵³

De Man interprets autobiography not as a genre but rather as a figure of reading, suggested by the author in the title and subscribed by the readership. The autobiographical is therefore an interpretative key engendering the illusion that factuality and fiction can be distinguished when relating the facts of a life. De Man argues that the general assumption that autobiography is drawn by the life of the author and therefore chronologically follows it does not consider that the opposite can occur. It can happen that the writer conforms his experiences to the necessities of the work which he has planned and whose subject is himself:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of

⁵² Significant contributions to the debate on the nature of autobiography, contemporaneous with De Man's study, are *A Structural Study of Autobiography* by Jeffrey Mehlman (1974), 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography' by Michael Sprinker (1980) and 'The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography' by Louis Renza (1980).

⁵³ Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement,' *MLN*, Vol.94, no.3 (1979), 919-930.

self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium? (De Man, 920)

At this juncture De Man mentions the example of the *Search*. Gérard Genette observes that distinguishing autobiography and fiction in Proust's novel is not only impossible but inappropriate, as the voice of the narrator is shaped by the author to serve specific necessities inherent in the narrative.⁵⁴ It has been observed, however, how the young man, future author of the *Search*, orients his early years to the discovery of certain experiences, for instance homosexuality, while meditating as to how they might inspire and flow into a work of fiction, in a way not dissimilar to the circumstance suggested by De Man when he argues that the autobiographical project can determine the life pattern of the author. In this circumstance criticism treads perilous ground, since determining with certitude the origin of themes, episodes and characters of a work of art is at the least a controversial operation. The conclusion which De Man draws is that the truthful versus fictional opposition in a text is unsolvable. The specific interest of autobiography lies therefore in its exposing the logic giving rise to such opposition. De Man infers that 'the autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution' (De Man, 922). The audience subscribing to the autobiographical contract agrees to read the account of the life of the author by himself, when in fact he or she is exposed to a work of fiction responding to the same narrative laws that govern any literary text. De Man thus argues that 'any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical' (De Man, 922).

The ambiguity of the signature to the text, a theoretical aspect which Lejeune does not consider, draws the attention of Jacques Derrida in the context of his wider speculation on the nature of writing. Derrida precisely investigates the nature of what, in Lejeune's formulation, is considered to be 'outside of the text'. In Lejeune's definition the latter

⁵⁴ Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, collection Poétique, Paris, 1983.

seems to refer both to the public sphere of civic and legal identity, in which the author is a 'real person', and to the 'information' about the author which exists 'outside' the narrative or textual sphere, but inside the book as material object. Derrida draws attention to the fact that the separation between authorship and readership, that invisible line separating the writer, the constructor of meaning, and the audience, the receiving end of the message, is in fact the result of a conventional interpretation. Derrida's concern is with the relationship between the mind responsible for the creation of the text, active in a certain time and space, and the human being responding to the name appearing at the foot of the page. The act of reading can be separated from the creative act by a considerable number of years, which makes the signature a twofold process sealed by the reader, who is active within its specific geographical and chronological context. The reader is both the receiver and the producer of meaning of that signature. Joseph Knock observes:

The signature sacrifice itself: the "here, now" of the performative event must already be marked by an iterability without which it could not come into its own, be the mark of a singularity, but which, at the same time, opens it to the impurity of circulation. [...] I sign myself *there*, but the there is not situated "here" or "there" but is a pledge to what is to come by coming back. The signature is an engagement with the other, which makes it a strange autobiography, one haunted by the spectral logic of a truth still to be made. (De Man, 922)

In *L'Oreille de L'Autre: Autobiographies, Transferts, Traduction* (1982) Derrida suggests that the audience exclusively can confer significance on the autobiographical text, which he calls 'otobiographie' as a play on words with the prefix '-oto,' 'ear' in the Greek language. Derrida thus hints at the essential role played by the reader. The meaning of any written text is made possible at the receiving end of the communicative act, which is the audience, in whose ear the signature of the author resonates through geographical as well as chronological distance. The concept of the construction of

meaning as an interactive process in which the reader is the necessary, ultimate agent has implications regarding the reception of a written work. The meaning of a work is therefore not unique but must be considered with an historical perspective which takes into the account the chronological distance between the author and the reader. In discussing *Ecce Homo* by Friedrich Nietzsche, and its controversial influence on the early theorists of Nazism, as well as possible manipulation of it for political purposes, Derrida argues that

Il est assez paradoxal de penser à une autobiographie dont la signature serait confiée à l'autre et à un autre tellement tardif et tellement inconnu. Mais ce n'est pas l'originalité du texte de Nietzsche qui nous a mis dans cette situation. Tout texte répond à cette structure. C'est la structure de la textualité en général. Un texte n'est signé que par l'autre beaucoup plus tard et cette structure testamentaire ne lui survient pas comme accident, elle le construit. [...] C'est à nous que politiquement, et historiquement, [...] au sens plus ouvert de ce mot, c'est à nous qu'est confiée la responsabilité de la signature du texte de l'autre, qui nous est laissé en heritage.⁵⁵

It has been observed that in the works of the Deconstructionists a connection emerges between the autobiographical act and the death of the subject writing the chronicle of his or her life, which looms as the inevitable conclusion of it. The logic ending, however, cannot be described by the protagonist for an evident biologic reason: 'as Wittgenstein noted in the *Tractatus*: "Death is not an event of life. One does not experience death" (Marcus, 208). Yet the sense that 'death, as much as life, motivates or determines autobiographical discourse' can be said to permeate the trajectory of Munro and Proust's works (Marcus, 208). By casting a backward glance at the past which embraces the unfolding of the generations preceding them the narrators of *Castle Rock* and the *Search*

⁵⁵ *L'Oreille de L'Autre: Autobiographies, Transferts, Traductions, Textes et Débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Claude Lévesque et Christine V. McDonald, Montréal: VLB, 1982, p. 71-72.

address the inevitable question of their own limited life span in the context of a narrative which will outlive them. In the nineteen eighties the debate on autobiography, which seems to be restricted to philosophical arguments regarding the proliferation of the self and the validity of the signature, returns to examine the motivations of the writer in attempting to convey his or her personal life. Both James Olney and Paul John Eakin consider cognitive and psychological perspectives to suggest that autobiography attempts to relate the construction of the self, a creative process that they define as being dependent on historical as well as social factors.⁵⁶ Olney sees the ‘autobiographer’s mind as a metaphor-making mechanism with an impulse to order: specific elements of lived “reality” such as places, times and individuals are rendered universal, timeless and poetic’ in the text (Nalbantian, 37). Olney stresses the relevance of objectifying metaphors as the cognitive process with which the mind elaborates experience, subsequently organising and shaping it in a linguistic form:

Metaphors adopted by the self are a way of mediating and objectifying the inner self as an *experience* of that self and, via the mediation of metaphor, the experience of self can be communicated to others. Metaphors also becomes the term used to describe ‘all the world views and world pictures, models and hypotheses, myths and cosmologies’ created by human beings to order reality. Thus metaphors are used to represent both outside reality and the self. (Marcus, 187)

Similarly Eakin argues that the distinction between truthful and fictional elements in the account of a life is meaningless since any autobiographical effort, including the simple act of remembering, implies the self’s re-elaboration of its own history. Eakin observes that ‘fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any

⁵⁶ *Metaphors of the Self* by James Olney appeared in 1972 and *Fictions in Autobiography* by Paul John Eakin in 1985.

life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life.’⁵⁷ Unlike the Deconstruction critics, who focused on the autobiographer as a timeless and universal subject, Eakin stresses the relevance of the cultural context shaping the writer’s sense of identity and social belonging, which in turn determines his or her approach to the text:

When it comes to self, then autobiography is doubly structured, doubly meditated, a textual metaphor for what is already a metaphor for the subjective reality of consciousness. [...] ontogenetically considered, the self is already constructed in interaction with the others of its culture before it begins self-consciously in maturity (and specifically in autobiography – where it exists) to think in terms of models of identity. This is what I mean when I say that the self of an autobiographical text is a construct of a construct, and that culture has exerted a decisive part, through the instrumentality of models of identity, in the process of identity formation, whether literary or psychological. (Eakin, 65)

Eakin’s argument is not dissimilar to Ricœur’s understanding of narrative as the attempt to give a meaning to the experience of time, operated by the self who is individually and culturally determined. Similarly to Olney, Ricœur indicates in the mind’s re-elaboration of events the consequence of the adaptation to the laws of time. Metaphor is the medium to convey such cognitive operation in the text.⁵⁸ For Marcus ‘the distinction between fact and fiction is therefore invalidated, because fact or reality shares the same form as fiction or narrative, while “intention” is made identical with “reference – the biographical truth to which the autobiographer refers is his or her “intention” (Marcus, 244). Nalbantian argues that ‘life, human experience, has what Ricœur calls a “pre-narrative quality”’; in that condition it is a potential to be configured by narrative’ (Nalbantian, 40). As discussed in the first chapter memory, according to Ricœur, is

⁵⁷ John Paul Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 35.

⁵⁸ This aspect of Ricœur’s thought is particularly evident in *La Métaphore Vive*, published in 1975.

therefore oriented toward a narrative re-elaboration of the past. Despite the growing volume of critical contributions the debate on the genre of autobiography does not seem to subside. The recent flourishing of the neighbouring genre of ‘autobiographical novel,’ a definition that recurs in regard to *Castle Rock*, provides new terrain for critical enquiry.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Recent examples of autobiographical novels bear the signature of established writers from different countries and continents such as Frank MacCourt, author of *Angela’s Ashes* (1996), Amélie Nothomb, author of *Stupeur et Tremblements* (1999), J.M. Coetzee, author of *Youth* and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2002 and 2008), Doris Lessing, author of *Alfred & Emily* (2008).

The View From Castle Rock and the genre of autobiography.

The present chapter will investigate the genesis of *Castle Rock* in order to unearth the aspects that in turn approach and distance it from the autobiographical genre. *Castle Rock* retraces the trajectory of Munro's paternal family from the life of the ancestor William Laidlaw, born at the end of the seventeenth century in the vicinity of Selkirk, in the Scottish Borders, to his descendants' settlement in South-Western Ontario, where Munro was born and still resides. In the first part entitled 'No Advantages,' which considers the time span between the events which occurred in the Ettrick Valley in the seventeenth century and the marriage of Robert Laidlaw, Munro's father, in the early nineteenth hundreds in Wingham, Ontario, references such as personal correspondence, extracts from journals, magazines and from the novel *The McGregors* are quoted.⁶⁰ The second part, entitled 'Home,' bears similarities with the genre of autobiography as Munro describes her own life, from childhood to the beginning of the research leading to the composition of *Castle Rock*. In this section the author relies on her memories and on the accounts given by close relatives, many of whom are no longer living. The creative project resulting in *Castle Rock* undergoes at least one substantial transformation. In the initial phase of composition Munro, who intends to work within a non-fictional framework, becomes aware of the fictional supplement which she inserts in circumstances when, as Virginia Barber, Munro's long-standing editor, observes, the 'real material' is lacking.⁶¹ In the course of over thirty years, Munro has explored the

⁶⁰ The magazine referred to is *Blackwood's Magazine*, first published in Edinburgh in April 1817. *The McGregors: A Novel of an Ontario Pioneer Family*, written in mature age by Robert Laidlaw, Munro's father, was published posthumously in 1979. Munro recalls that her father 'in the last years – really in the very last months – of his life [...] became a writer. He had been working on the first draft of a novel about Ontario pioneer life when he went into the hospital for a check on his worsening heart condition... When I visited him in the hospital all he wanted to talk about was his characters, and the ways he had thought of strengthening his book. During the last three weeks he had left he produced a second draft that I read with astonishment after his death. He had made a wonderful leap, in organization, in grasp, in love, of his material. His book *The McGregors* was published in 1979.' (*Writing Her Lives*, 315)

⁶¹ Barber thus describes the genesis of *Castle Rock*: '[...] it would begin as historical – for example, she would be describing the Ettrick Valley where the Laidlaws had lived, quoting from letters, journals, this, that, and the other, and then she would come upon a moment where she needed a fact, and none existed. There was a hole in the story. And it became obvious that she needed some sort of material

form of the novel as a series of interrelated stories, as in *Lives* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, of the essay and of the short story. She has, however, never attempted the genre of memoir.⁶² The laborious genesis of *Castle Rock*, which gathers stories composed during a considerable number of years according to an order successively superimposed, suggests that the book is distinct from the rest of Munro's career as a fictional writer. As announced on its publication, *Castle Rock* cannot be assimilated to her previous fictional work for reasons concerning both the material which inspired it and the narrative genre to which the book can be ascribed.

The distinction from the rest of Munro's oeuvre is perceivable in the uncertain attitude which the author adopts in regard to several autobiographical stories that she has been composing throughout her career. Before the year 2006 certain uncollected stories circulate thanks to the literary magazine *New Yorker*, with which Munro has an established collaboration since 1980. Others are chosen to be included in anthologies.⁶³

to fill it. Then she would say that maybe it happened this way, or perhaps it went that way, or maybe again it was such and such. So, I said one day – I don't think I even finished the sentence – 'Alice, why don't you just turn it into stories?' 'Exactly what I've been thinking!' she replied.' Virginia Barber, 'An Appreciation of Alice Munro,' *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, ed. by Lisa Dickler Awano, (Summer 2006 issue), 92-94.

⁶² *Who Do You Think You Are?* was published in the United Kingdom and United States by Penguin Books with the title *The Beggar Maid*. The official reason is that the original title, referring to the attitude of suspicion and mild disapproval toward calling attention to oneself by unconventional doings or intellectual claims, which according to Munro is typical of her native land, might not have resonated with non-Canadian audiences.

Thacker qualifies as 'essays' the following: the afterword to *Emily of New Moon* (published by Montgomery), 'Author's Commentary,' 'Changing Places,' 'The Colonel's Hash Resettled,' 'Everything Here is Touchable and Mysterious,' 'Going to the Lake,' the introductions to *The Moons of Jupiter* and to *Selected Stories*, 'Lying Under the Apple Tree,' "On Writing 'The Office'", 'An Open Letter,' 'Remember Roger Mortimer: Dickens' 'Child's History of England' Remembered", 'Stories,' 'What Do You Want to Know For?'

Amongst the mentioned genres Munro's stylistic preference is clearly for the short story, as suggested by the interview conducted by Mervin Rothstein for the *New York Times* and published on November 10th, 1986: 'I never intended to be a short-story writer [...] 'I started writing them because I didn't have time to write anything else - I had three children. And then I got used to writing stories, so I saw my material that way, and now I don't think I'll ever write a novel. [...] I don't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story. There's a kind of tension that if I'm getting a story right I can feel right away, and I don't feel that when I try to write a novel. I kind of want a moment that's explosive, and I want everything gathered into that.' 'Canada's Alice Munro Finds Excitement in the Short Story Form,' *The New York Times*, 10 May 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/munro-excitement.html>>.

⁶³ 'Hired Girl' appears in the *New Yorker* in 2002. 'Home' is published in *New Canadian Stories* in 1974. 'What Do You Want to Know For?' is inserted under the rubric of 'essay' in the volume

None of the six that form the second part of *Castle Rock*, : ===== ‘Home’, appears in any of Munro’s previous collections. The cases of ‘Fathers’ and ‘Lying Under the Apple Tree’, not included in the contemporaneous *Runaway*, seem significant. The author intends to set them apart for a future creative project, which in the year 2004 still bears the title of *Power in the Blood*. At the time Munro envisaged the latter as her ‘last book’, a collection of explicitly autobiographical pieces. It is not possible to know what proportion of truth and fiction that original, consequently dropped creative idea, the precursor of *Castle Rock*, would have displayed. All that is apparent is that several autobiographical stories appear in the course of the years without a premise, comment or authorial note to distinguish them from the rest of Munro’s literary production. A light on such pattern of uncertainty is finally shed in the prologue to *Castle Rock*. The previously uncollected or unpublished stories included in the book are described as follows: ‘they were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than the other stories I had written, even in the first person.’⁶⁴ In the context of creativity in general, and of Munro’s poetic in particular, attempting categorical definitions of genre, as well as drawing lines between the real-life material of inspiration and the rendering of it by the imagination, is perilous. Criticism has suggested that autobiography is embedded in Munro’s work, that she can be seen as always “writing her lives”, the lives she has both lived and imagined’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 16). Frequently quoted is the author’s observation that ‘there is always a starting point in reality’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 17). From a mere superficial confrontation between certain characters and circumstances in her fiction and Munro’s biography it is evident that the author is peculiarly attentive to her personal, social and geographical background. Arguing that in Munro’s fictional universe ‘the cherished fact is never far distant’ Thacker suggests that her

‘progress’ [alluding to the collection *The Progress of Love*] has been one of using the factual details of her own life – at each stage of being: child,

published in support of the Canadian Centre of International Pen in 1993. ‘The Ticket’ is previously unpublished.

⁶⁴ Alice Munro, *The View From Castle Rock*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2006, Foreword.

adolescent, young adult, mother and wife, single person, remarried, older person – as the litmus paper of her characters' beings. She imagines their connections and wonderings, she articulates their feelings, she creates the very sense of being that all humans feel moving from birth to death. (*Writing Her Lives*, 18)

If autobiographical experience is to an extent unseparable from Munro's creativity, as it affects her vision of the world, *Castle Rock* seems to represent a further step in a direction that Munro has not yet explored, one which questions the very nature and purpose of writing. The Foreword to *Castle Rock* confirms that the uncollected autobiographical stories that Munro has been producing over a considerable number of years have not risen in the author's estimate to a level of conscious distinction from her fictional work until, precisely, the publication of *Castle Rock*. Both the genesis and the presentation of the book by the author suggests two considerations. Firstly, the authorial uncertainty in deciphering the genesis of her own creative work signals that the intellectual passage from autobiographical experience to fictional form can be obscure even to the artist who is the subject of the first and the creator of the second. The expression 'autobiographical experience,' furthermore, describes an intricate web of cognitive operations that include the perusal of memory and the construction of a sense of identity. Secondly, it can be observed how a certain uneasiness is present, in Munro's Foreword, in regard to the effectiveness and the ethics of story-telling. Reflections on the limits of story-telling are interspersed in fictional passages throughout Munro's work. Robert McGill observes:

For Rose, as for many of Munro's narrators, the challenge is to record what is real, but to do so with complete verisimilitude is impossible, so that every story seems to be a failure, and potentially an unethical one. The narrator of "Meneseteung" worries that "she might have got it wrong", and in "Home", when the narrator thinks of her own representation of reality, she declares: "*I can't get it, I can't quite bring it out... I feel a bit treacherous and artificial*". Munro herself has said: "I

am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking), an unavoidable lie".⁶⁵

The questioning of the efficacy of the literary medium is not uncommon amongst fictional writers. In Munro's case such concern seems to intensify in circumstances when the autobiographical material becomes preponderant. Where less imagination seems to be required in order to satisfy the necessities of the narrative, as the material for the story is intimate and thus supposedly well-known, the more the author seems to feel the need to intervene and creatively manipulate certain elements. The instinct to fictionalize gives rise to reflections explored by Munro in the essay 'What is Real?' as follows: 'I need it there and it belongs there. [...] I am not concerned with any methods of selection but my own, which I can't fully explain.'⁶⁶ Similar instances, in which Munro attempts to define her craft while distrusting the possibility, and the opportunity, of accomplishing it through the medium of words, are recurrent. The instinct of storytelling, however, is stronger than the skepticism and ethical qualms it engenders. McGill argues that Munro 'seems to agree with the narrator of her story "Tell Me Yes or No," who calls her narrative inventions "tricks and trap doors," but who also says: "I don't understand their workings at the present moment. [...] I have to be careful, I won't speak against them' (McGill, 877). Margaret Atwood suggests that '[Munro's] fictional world is peopled with secondary characters who despise art and artifice, and any kind of pretentiousness or showing off. It's against these attitudes and the self-mistrust they inspire that her central characters must struggle in order to free themselves enough to create anything at all' (*Carried Away*, XX). Amongst the recurrent examples in Munro's fiction of narrators distrustful of the ethicality of their own task is the protagonist of

⁶⁵ Robert McGill, 'Daringly Out in the Public Eye: Alice Munro and the Ethics of Writing Back,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 76, no.3 (2007), 874-889.

⁶⁶ John Metcalf, 'What is real?', *Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*, Toronto: Methuen 1982.

McGill, Robert, 'Daringly Out in the Public Eye: Alice Munro and the Ethics of Writing Back,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 76, no.3 (2007), 874-889.

‘The Ottawa Valley’ who, in the closure of the story, admits that she is applying ‘what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same’ (‘Ottawa’, 214). She thus confesses that she will always be powerless in grasping the maternal figure.

The oscillation between the artist’s trust in the medium of literature, proved by the density of her œuvre, and the questioning of its efficacy often bespoken by her characters, calls into question the larger issue of the object of literature. Munro’s fiction has been described as tending to realism, at the beginning of her career and particularly with *Lives*. It has been suggested, however, that that very ambition stimulates the eye of the storyteller to discover what is beyond the surface of reality.⁶⁷ Del, the protagonist of *Lives*, wishes to describe ‘every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark on the walls, every smell, pot-hole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together, radiating, everlasting’ (cited in *Munro*, 45). She ends, however, by investigating a very specific, narrow territory, that of home, of the circle formed by relatives and neighbours speaking a sort of lingua franca, and by getting lost in its complexity. The very question of what is reality, in the ontological sense and as an object of depiction for literature, is Munro’s concern. Her vision in this respect is far from being predictable. McGill suggests that the metafictional comments on the limits of story-telling reveal Munro’s problematic sense of reality, one that seems to reject the essential empirical argument that only what is visible is real:

For Munro there is a sense in which fiction, as much as non-fiction, is tied to the “real”: the original title for *Lives of Girls and Women* was “Real Life”, while the manuscript title for “Material” was “Real People.” Munro’s anxiety about the real in her fiction suggests that, for her, fiction and non-fiction are vitally connected to one another and that she holds fiction to the same standards as non-fiction in terms of verisimilitude, if not in terms of referentiality. (McGill, 877)

⁶⁷ *Munro*, p.102.

Munro suggests that 'real life' includes the entire range of possible reflections of the self. The 'alternate lives' contained within the mind contribute to the essential human experience as much as the impact of empirical reality on the senses: 'all the things that happen in fantasy, the things that might have happened, the kind of alternate life that can almost seem to be accompanying what we call our real lives' (*Writing Her Lives*, 45). The Foreword to *Castle Rock* alludes precisely to that essential aspect of literary creation. The autobiographical material does not constrict the author's imagination nor should it limit the exploration of the artist's interests. Munro explicitly declares: 'I want to move away from what happened, to the possibility of this happening, or that happening, and a kind of idea that life is not just made up of the fact.'⁶⁸ Such subtle understanding of reality explains Munro's attitude of recoiling in front of a specific definition of *Castle Rock* as a memoir, a fiction or even an autobiographical work. If the category of reality expands to include what does not objectively happen, or is not empirically provable, but is vivid in and truthful for the characters' imagination, a solid barrier of referentiality is abated. The strictly autobiographical account of a life can proliferate into several narrative directions. The conclusion of the Foreword seems to orient the audience toward a similar interpretation:

I put myself in the centre and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took on their own life and color and did things they had not done in reality. They joined the Salvation Army, they revealed that they had once lived in Chicago. One of them got himself electrocuted and another fired off a gun in a barn full of horses. In fact, some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with.

These are *stories*. (*Castle Rock*, Foreword)

⁶⁸ Peter Gzowski, 'Interview with Alice Munro,' *Morningside*, [broadcast on cbc Radio on 30 September 1994].

Munro begins with the following premise: 'I put myself in the center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could' (*Castle Rock*, Foreword). Since the subject is so intimate the intervention of the imagination is unavoidable. According to Ricœur the authorial mind attempts to give meaning to the experience of time according to the laws of fiction. This operation implies the intervention of imaginative faculties that are responsible for the occasional 'invented,' 'fake' or 'unjustified' element. The opposition between factual and fictional once again loses its apparent strength. In the introduction to the *Everyman's* volume dedicated to Munro, entitled *Carried Away*, Margaret Atwood observes: 'What is fakery, what is authenticity? Which emotions and modes of behaviour and speech are honest and true, which pretended or pretentious? Or can they be separated?' (*Carried Away*, XX, XV)' The present study will now read together a passage of *Castle Rock*, which draws on autobiographical experience, and an extract from the story 'Royal Beatings' included in the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?.* The two texts bear unquestionable similarities in regard to their content. This comparison will serve the purpose of illustrating Munro's complex vision of reality along the lines of Atwood's intuition.

Thacker argues that in the story 'Fathers,' published in the *New Yorker* in 2004 and subsequently included in *Castle Rock*, 'Munro explicitly uses an autobiographical incident – her father's 1943 near-electrocution in a neighbour's barn – as the basis of a fiction' (*Writing Her Lives*, 513). The biographer makes an observation which confirms the complex nature of Munro's autobiographical stories, in their seeming oscillation between factuality and imagination. Thacker observes that 'Fathers' is a work of fiction 'for the father in the story is nothing like Robert Laidlaw and, besides, he is electrocuted' (*Writing Her Lives*, 513). A passage in the story directly recalls a precedent in 'Royal Beatings,' included in *Who Do You Think You Are?.* Both 'Fathers' and 'Royal Beatings' consider an episode of domestic violence perpetrated by Munro's father on his daughter, then adolescent. The memory, itself of a disquieting nature, is characterized by the humiliation caused by the subsequent conduct of the three

protagonists involved, young Alice and her parents. In 'Fathers' Munro's mother, who called for the punishment, afterwards succeeds in conciliating the outraged daughter with an offer of food, thus enabling the family shortly afterwards to act as if nothing has happened. Reunited over their meal the family discusses a similar episode which occurred in a nearby farmhouse as follows:

My mother said that it was a shame, what a man like that had made of his daughter.

It seems strange to me now that we could conduct this conversation so easily, without its seeming ever to enter our heads that my father had beaten me, at times, and that I had screamed out not that I wanted to kill him, but that I wanted to die. And that this had happened not so long ago – three or four times, I would think, in the years when I was around eleven or twelve. (*Castle Rock*, 194)

The circumstance stimulates a reflection on the difficulty of conciliating antithetical patterns of behaviour displayed by the same individual in different circumstances. In the present case the father manifests almost two personalities, the beater and the condemning observer of violence outwith the household. The clash between dissonant components within a single personality is a recurrent theme in Munro's fiction. Munro displays a subtle intuition of the arbitrary and transient factors that engender the construction of the sense of identity. Referring to the example of 'Royal Beatings' Howells observes: 'Is it possible to enclose different perceptions of reality within the same textual space where, as Rose realises, "only a formal connection could be made?"' (*Munro*, 115) According to circumstance Munro's characters are apt to appear remarkably transformed. Such chameleon quality of their personality often prefigures the effects that the passing of time has over their emotional and intellectual faculties. The concern of the scene in 'Fathers,' however, seems to be the experience of physical and emotional humiliation, the various forms of shame that the protagonist feels in

opposition to her relatives. Munro's mother judges the neighbour's violent transactions with his daughter to be 'a shame.' The narrator recalls her feelings subsequent to the beating as: 'Shame. The shame of being beaten, and the shame of crying from the beating. Perpetual shame. Exposure' (*Castle Rock*, 195). The author meditates on her father's motivation for humiliating her, thus throwing a light on the relevance of the dramatic memory beyond the physical consequences that, Munro seems to imply, are not severe. The protagonist observes that 'I felt as if it must be my very self they were after, and in a way I think it was. The self-important disputatious part of my self that had to be beaten out of me' (*Castle Rock*, 194). The disposition, which the author recognizes in her younger self, to be despised by her father, is that intellectual boldness, the irreverent tendency to argue, a 'shaky arrogance' which she sees as the premature signs of her adult personality. This 'brazen quality' of her temperament, as Munro describes it in 'Royal Beatings,' prefigures the character of the novelist who will dare to challenge the maternal sense of propriety and conventionalism in general.⁶⁹ The artistic vocation cohabits in the time of her youth with an ambitious, occasionally audacious character which, as suggested by the title of the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*, is not met with general approval in the context of the Ontarian provincial society. The narrator, who finds pleasure in imitation and in the liberal exercise of her fantasy, reveals that 'when the belt was raised – in the second before it descended – there was a moment of terrible revelation. Injustice ruled. I could never tell my side of things, my father's detestation of me was supreme. How could I not find myself howling at such perversion in nature?' (*Castle Rock*, 195) Despite the admission of a precocious awareness of the complexity of language and a certain mischievousness of character in attempting to profit by it, the protagonist is outraged at having to suffer, by a similar logic, that her

⁶⁹ Sheila Munro observes in regard to the clash of personalities between her grandmother Anne Laidlaw and Alice Munro: 'Essentially Anne was a conventional person, not an intellectual or a rebel. What she really wanted was to have the kind of life "where she could have ladies over for tea." My mother is convinced that if she had lived long enough to see them in print, she would never have approved of the stories her daughter wrote; she would have been horrified by the sex in them. And she wouldn't have wanted the life of an artist for her daughter. She would have wanted her to be a genteel lady writer like L.M. Montgomery, preferably married to a doctor or a lawyer.' '[Anne] was a very controlling person but her control was not just a personal control, it was the control of a moral order she believed in and projected on to others.' (Sheila Munro, 155-152)

mother's inaccurate version of events should be endorsed by her father. The account which Sheila, Munro's daughter, gives of the episode in her memoir, entitled *Lives of Mothers & Daughters*, is concordant on this point:

The arguments between mother and daughter would escalate. My mother would refuse to go back down, daring to "talk back" rather than capitulate. Finally her father would be called in from the barn, and Anne would tell her version of events. What my mother would find most painful was her perception that "a story was being told on me that wasn't true" and that she was never allowed to tell her side of the story. (Sheila Munro, 152)

'Royal Beatings' precedes the composition of 'Fathers' of over twenty-five years, and is centred on an episode which occurs in the protagonist's youth in West Hanratty, a suburb of a provincial town bearing the characteristics of several fictional toponyms invented by Munro on the model of native Wingham.⁷⁰ Rose succeeds in her acting career after leaving the humble familiar background, a decision that causes her to feel an unresolved emotional tension towards her father and stepmother, who remain in West Hanratty and with whom she has sporadic contact. The autobiographical resonance of Rose's coming of age story is suggested by several critics, most notably Howells.⁷¹ Rose's trajectory as a young artist in *Who Do You Think You Are?* is considered similar to Del's in *Lives of Girls and Women*. In 'Royal Beatings' the setting of the scene, the kitchen within the farmhouse, the protagonists, the father, the adolescent daughter and the watching female figure who invokes the punishment, the mode of the beating; each of these is unaltered in respect to Sheila Munro's account in her memoir and to Alice Munro's description in 'Fathers.' The character of Flo, on whose fictional nature Munro

⁷⁰ Relevant examples include Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Walley in *The Love of A Good Woman*, Carstairs in *Open Secrets*, Dagleish in 'Chaddeleys and Flemings,' Logan in 'Wood.'

⁷¹ *Munro*, p.82.

has commented, is the stepmother substituting the maternal figure.⁷² Flo's independent, satirical character is associable with that of the mother portrayed in the 'Ottawa Valley,' 'The Peace of Utrecht' and 'Princess Ida.' The reason for Flo's remonstrance to Rose's father is an irreverent play on words, invented by the young woman, whose undertone is scurrilous.⁷³ The reason for the silent tension between the women, which in the circumstance explodes into a proper altercation, is substantial. Both Flo and Rose's father resent in the girl a quality in her temperament which faithfully mirrors a trait of Munro's character:

What do they have to say to each other? It doesn't really matter. Flo speaks of Rose's smart-aleck behavior, rudeness and sloppiness and conceit. [...] Brian's innocence, Rose's corruption. Oh, don't you think you're somebody, says Flo, and a moment later, Who do you think you are? Rose contradicts and objects with such poisonous reasonableness and mildness, displays theatrical unconcern. ('Royal', 105)

The adjective 'theatrical' is revealing of Rose's personality as it alludes to her future career on the stage. Sheila Munro comments on her mother's ability to adapt to the most diverse circumstances by orienting her behaviour in a manner not dissimilar to the technique used by an actress: 'So often she has spoken of how she was skilled in the art of deception, of how she lived the surface of everyday life and also the "real life" of her writing. She told me that in those days she didn't really have a self. [...] Paradoxically, she had to be deceptive with most people, accommodating herself to their reality, so she could remain the observer, so she could be honest and truthful in her writing' (Sheila Munro, 80). In this passage Munro seems to be inspired by the memory of her own disposition, reflecting it both in the character of Rose and in that of the stepmother. Flo's

⁷² Munro quite literally argues that Flo is 'not a real person.' Mona Simpson, 'Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage: A Review,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, (December 1st 2001). 12 May 2008 <http://www.powells.com/review/2001_12_04>.

⁷³ 'Two Vancouvers fried in snot!/Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot!.' Alice Munro, 'Royal Beatings,' *Selected Stories*, London: Vintage, 1996, p.106. Hereafter 'Royal'.

reaction to Rose's tenacious irreverence is described as being similar to the perverse, histrionic quality of the girl's character which her father intends to correct:

Flo goes beyond her ordinary scorn and becomes amazingly theatrical herself, saying it was for Rose that she sacrificed her life. She saw a father saddled with a baby daughter and she thought, What is a man going to do? So she married him, and here she is, on her knees. ('Royal', 106)

The tendency to dramatize, coupled with a fervid imagination, is evident in Rose's meditation on the meaning of the expression 'royal beatings.' In the opening of the story Rose describes a fantasy engendered by the father's threat to punish her along the lines of a bizarre, truculent performance. The description of the fantasy alludes to Rose's artistic talent, which distracts her even from the harshness of the beatings that she risks if she persists in the display of her audacity. Howells observes that 'such slippage from realism encouraged by the voluptuousness of language merely masks for a moment the girl's dread of pain and humiliation, for she knows there will be none of the formality of public ritual when her father beats her (*Munro*, 106).' The painful autobiographical experience is no longer detectable in the following passage, whose aesthetic achievement is ascribable exclusively to the writer's imaginative talent:

Royal Beating. That was Flo's promise. You are going to get one royal beating.

The word "Royal" lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: How is a beating royal? She came up with a three-lined avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. An occasion both savage and splendid. ('Royal', 96)

The passage distances 'Royal Beatings' both from the memoir written by Sheila Munro and the autobiographical account composed by Alice Munro in 'Fathers.' The stylistic strength of it is achieved precisely thanks to the story's detachment from the mere autobiographical experience.⁷⁴ The singularity of a domestic event in Munro's youth cannot account for the imaginative transformation occurring in the story. A further example of the strength of the fictional story in conveying the depth of the autobiographical experience is the passage describing Rose's contrasting emotions as Flo tries to conciliate her with offers of food, a temptation which challenges both her pride and her perception of suffered injustice. The narrator of 'Fathers' concludes the dramatic episode with the following reflection: 'If he were alive now I am sure my father would say that I exaggerate, that the humiliation he meant to inflict was not so great, and that my offenses were perplexing and that whatever other way is there to handle children?' (*Castle Rock*, 195) 'Royal Beatings' instead follows the young protagonist's reaction in the aftermath of the violent episode. Munro succeeds in portraying the internal struggle of a young person who comes to terms with the experiences of pain and the necessity to compromise: 'Flo comes into the room without knocking, but with an hesitation that shows that it might have occurred to her. She brings a jar of cold cream ('Royal', 111).' The moment of insight which occurs while the violent episode is unfolding gradually dissolves:

She has since wondered about murders, and murderers. Does the thing have to be carried through, in the end, partly for the effect, to prove to the audience of one – who won't be able to report, only register, the lesson – that such a thing can happen, that there is nothing that can't happen, that the most dreadful antic is justified, feelings can be found to match it? ('Royal', 111)

⁷⁴ 'Royal Beatings' appears in every selection of stories composed by Munro, including the volume *Carried Away* published in the Everyman's collection. The story is evidently considered by the author to be amongst her most significant achievements.

Howells remarks that ‘with all her faculties sharpened by fear Rose has a terrible flash of insight into the contradictory nature of reality, into that “treachery” which is “the other side of dailiness.”’ (*Munro*, 58) By creating a detailed and realistic scene in the adolescent’s room Munro is able to investigate Rose’s tribulation, the inevitable re-absorption of her outrage into a domesticity where ‘a queer lassitude, a convalescent indolence, not far off satisfaction’ lingers, although not for long (‘Royal’, 112). The extent to which the details are autobiographical is of scarce relevance in light of the aesthetic achievement of the following passage:

Later still a tray will appear. Flo will put it down without a word and go away. A large glass of chocolate milk on it, made with Vita-Malt from the store. Some rich streaks of Vita-Malt around the bottom of the glass. Little sandwiches, neat and appetizing. Canned salmon of the first quality and reddest color, plenty of mayonnaise. A couple of butter tarts from a bakery package, chocolate biscuits with a peppermint filling. Rose’s favorites, in the sandwich, tart and cookie line. She will turn away, refuse to look, but left alone with these eatables will be miserably tempted; roused and troubled and drawn back from thoughts of suicide of flight by the smell of the salmon, the anticipation of crisp chocolate, she will reach out a finger, just to run it around the edge of one of the sandwiches (crusts cut off!) to get the overflow, get a taste. Then she will decide to eat one, for strength to refuse the rest. One will not be noticed. Soon, in helpless corruption, she will eat them all. She will drink the chocolate milk, eat the tarts, eat the cookies. She will get the malty syrup out of the bottom of the glass with her finger, though she snuffles with shame. Too late. (‘Royal’, 111)

Certain considerations arise when *Castle Rock* is considered in regard to the genre of autobiography, and in the light of the theoretical perspectives examined at the beginning of the chapter. For this purpose it is useful to temporarily set aside the observations contained in the Foreword, in which Munro recoils from defining *Castle Rock* either as a

memoir or as an autobiographical text, preferring to focus on the origin of her creative project and to advance prudent metafictional statements regarding the 'truthfulness' of her material.

Lejeune's definition of *le pacte autobiographique* has been undermined by criticism on the grounds that it implies that self and reality are identifiable and pre-existent to the text. In Lejeune's contract autobiography is defined as a 'récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.' Not considering the counter-arguments exposed by deconstructionists, such definition could apply to *Castle Rock*. Munro's book is a retrospective prose narrative at the centre of which is the persona of the author, yet this seemingly simple factor of Lejeune's equation is apt to disorient the reader in search for the truthful account of a life. Beyond the oppositions raised by criticism in regard to the possibility of defining the self as exterior to the text and separable from it, in *Castle Rock* the 'I' corresponds to an artist who attempts to retrace the gradual awareness and consolidation of her vocation. The condition penetrates not only every recollection of the past, it permeates the author's experience of the world. The act of writing one's memories, which Ricœur would define as an attempt to order events according to a narrative model, is explored in a work of fiction in which the author aims at conveying something transcending the episodes of her personal life. Following De Man's argument in 'Autobiography as De-Facement' *Castle Rock* cannot be defined according to Lejeune's pact. In fact the book might little profit by its distinction from the neighbouring literary genres. Munro chooses to put her own self at the centre of the book, a circumstance which implies that referentiality is subordinate to the interests of the narrative voice intent on explaining how it came into being. The risk arises of being trapped into the 'revolving door' of an undecidable situation, as De Man describes it. The audience might fail to discern whether the 'referent determines the figure,' whether Munro's life determines the content of the book, or vice versa. It is possible that the 'illusion of reference' is 'a correlation of the structure of the figure,' that is the text offers the illusion of adherence to reality but is necessarily influenced by the authorial project. De Man concludes that autobiography 'is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of

reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts' (De Man, 919). In *Castle Rock* the protagonist cannot but present herself as the result of certain meaningful events that she chooses to relate. The relevance of the book, therefore, does not lie in its adherence to reality but in what can be conveyed through narrating a portion of it. De Man infers that 'the interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization [...] of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions. (De Man, 922). Corroborating the hypothesis that Munro's concern in *Castle Rock* is other than the accurate recollection of her life, therefore rendering the definition of autobiography inadequate, is the structure of the book. *Castle Rock* presents itself as a journey retracing family history from the life of the ancestors to Munro's own. It is concerned with the settlement of a family rooted in Europe in Northern America. The book's trajectory suggests that a transatlantic connection is searched for a specific purpose.⁷⁵ Derrida's observation that autobiography, as any text bearing the signature of the author, is a dead message until it is received by the ear of the audience, across geographical and chronological distance, seems particularly relevant. A passage of *Castle Rock* uses a similar metaphor. At the close of 'Messenger,' the book's epilogue, Munro suggests that she has tended her ear to the past in order to convey it through the individual perspective of her family history:

And in one of these houses – I can't remember whose – a magic doorstep, a big mother-of-pearl seashell that I recognized as a messenger from near and far, because I could hold it to my ear – where nobody was there to stop me – and discover the tremendous pounding of my own blood, and of the sea. (*Castle Rock*, 349)

Eakin's intuition that autobiography is 'doubly meditated,' a re-elaboration of the mind according to the principles of story-making and determined by the socio-biographical

⁷⁵ The argument will be discussed in the following chapter.

background of the writer, is relevant to the understanding of *Castle Rock*. Munro's art is permeated with the atmosphere of her native region. Her most recent book, however, which describes the Ettrick Valley in the eighteenth century and a portion of South-Western Ontario in the twenty-first, is oriented beyond the cultural and historical specificity of these locations. *Castle Rock* seems to point to wider horizons. It investigates the reason for the interest in the past and the efficacy of writing as the means to record it. The book thus ceases to be strictly concerned with the journey of the Laidlaws to North America, since it also considers the essential role of art in the prospect of mortality. Such issues are not a specific preoccupation of the genre of autobiography. In her definition of 'aesthetic autobiography' Nalbantian considers 'not a psychological revelation of authorship, not [...] the disappearance of the author in the text, nor [...] the truth or fictional factor in autobiography 'strictly speaking,' but rather [...] the transformation of autobiographical data into literary *écriture*' (Nalbantian, 44). Nalbantian's argument is supported by the reading of Proust's *Search* as a 'misrepresentation' of autobiographical elements freely composed in the work of art. Her definition of the genre limits the preoccupation with referentiality and concentrates on the dynamics of memory. Investigating the correspondences between Proust's life, the beloved figures who played a major role in it, the geographical and social places that informed it, and the relevant passages of the novel does not only provide useful material for psychological and biographical criticism. Such investigation throws a light on the creative process, one which proceeds from the individual vision and emotional response to reality, to the universe of a fictional creation. Undoubtedly it is a process which is of a different nature than simple referentiality. The interest of an 'aesthetic autobiography' does not lie in the specificity nor in the reliability of the account of a life but rather in what it yields in artistic terms and what it can reveal of the nature of artistic creation. Nalbantian remarks that:

even close to the life material, [the author of aesthetic autobiographies whose models are indicated in Proust, Joyce, Woolf and Nin] construed literary methods to distance themselves from it. This genre of fictional

autobiography was creating techniques of artistry used for the simultaneous revealing and concealing of the self. And within this mode there lies the heart of the creative process whereby the truths of fact were becoming the truths of fiction. (Nalbantian, 61)

In conclusion, it appears that *Castle Rock* does not respect the conventions of the autobiographical genre, as controversial as they seem to be. The book exceeds the boundaries of autobiography both in terms of content and scope. The definition of ‘autobiographical fiction’ seems to approach a more satisfactory description of it, although the general agreement on the meaning of the expression is at present unstable. Gérard Genette infers that ‘if words have meaning (or even multiple meanings), then “narratology” – whether in its formal aspect, as the analyses of the sequences of events and actions related by this discourse – ought by rights to concern itself with stories of *all* kinds, fictional and otherwise.’⁷⁶ Munro, by deciding to harmonize historical reference, personal memories and fictional material in one set of narratives, and openly admitting the complexity of the project, has dared to challenge literary conventions and perhaps stimulated the birth of a new form of art.

From *Contre Sainte-Beuve* to *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

The first scenes of the monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu*, an endeavour which occupies Marcel Proust between the years 1909 and his death in 1922, are sketched in an essay begun in 1908 and abandoned when content, structure and title are still undefined. A note written in a contemporary *Cahier* suggests that the uncertainty regarding the composition of the essay is connected with the difficulty of bringing to the light themes that will be canvassed in the future novel: ‘La paresse ou le doute ou l’impuissance se réfugiant dans l’incertitude sur la forme d’art. Faut-il en faire un roman, une étude

⁷⁶ Gérard Genette, ‘Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative,’ *Poetics Today*, Vol.11 n.4 (Winter 1990), Duke University Press, p. 755.

philosophique, suis-je romancier?’⁷⁷ Stimulated by ideas concerning the nature of art and the role of criticism, that Proust had been forming since the year 1905, the genesis of *Sainte-Beuve* suffers from the author’s indecision between two modes of writing, the narrative and the argumentative. In Proust’s mind the two struggle to merge in one hybrid structure, in which meditations on creativity can find expression:

I am going to write something about Sainte-Beuve... I have two articles constructed in my head in a sense (review articles). One is an article traditional in format... The other would start as the narrative of an early morning, Mother would come to my bedside and I would tell her about an article I want to do on Sainte-Beuve. And I would expand it to her...
(*Sainte-Beuve*, Introduction, xii)

The criticism to Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869), novelist and literary critic whose *Lundis* examine a vast array of writers and span over thirty volumes, is introduced by the example of the dismissals Sainte-Beuve accorded to such as Stendhal, Nerval and Baudelaire on account of extra-literary motivations.⁷⁸ ‘La méthode de Sainte-Beuve’ is based on the assumption that the necessary condition for the full appreciation of a work of art is the knowledge of the author, from direct and indirect sources including personal acquaintance, accounts of relatives and intimates, correspondence etc. Sainte-Beuve seeks to explore the spirit or ‘soul’ of the writer that, according to him, will determine the work of art. The latter cannot be assessed positively if the first is discovered to be unworthy or unsatisfactory, according to the critic’s standard. Despite the extensive exercise of the method and the relative appreciation of the contemporaries certain authors incensed by Sainte-Beuve disappear from the literary

⁷⁷ Cited in Anne Henry, *Proust*, Paris: Balland, 1986, p.47.

⁷⁸ In the article ‘Sur la Lecture,’ published by the review *La Renaissance Latine* in 1905 and appeared as the preface to *Sésame et les Lys* in 1906, Proust argues: ‘Sainte-Beuve a méconnu tous les grands écrivains de son temps [...] Cette cécité de Sainte-Beuve en ce qui concerne son époque contraste singulièrement avec ses prétention à la clairvoyance, à la préséance.’ *Sainte-Beuve*, ed. by P. Clarac and Y. Sandre, p. 820.

chronicles while others, who receive almost a censure, are widely considered in the age of Proust to belong to the canon. A relevant case cited in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* regards the acquaintance with Henry Beyle, which must, according to Sainte-Beuve, precede the pronouncing of a fair judgement on Stendhal's work.⁷⁹ Sainte-Beuve, not dissimilarly from a biographer, proposes to investigate the writer's social status, habits, morality, religious beliefs, intimate life, defining the critical enterprise as a 'botanique littéraire' and concluding in Stendhal's case: 'je viens de relire, ou d'essayer, les romans de Stendhal; ils sont franchement détestables' (*Sainte-Beuve*, 222). This allows Proust to oppose to Sainte-Beuve's method his notion of a separation between the 'moi social' and the 'moi de l'œuvre,' inferring that while the first is knowable and subject to the general assessment the second is hidden to all but the artist. 'Le moi de l'œuvre' is silent, buried where the tensions of the physical and social world are non-existent. It constitutes the artist's organ to decipher the world and convey it in linguistic form:

cette méthode [de Saint-Beuve] méconnaît ce qu'une fréquentation un peu plus profonde avec nous-même nous apprend: qu'un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c'est au fond de nous-même, en essayant de le recréer nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir. (*Sainte-Beuve*, 222)

A philosophical premise to Proust's argument in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is that the individual is a self-sufficient, enclosed universe whose hopes of communication with others invariably fail as the barriers of consciousness are impenetrable. Gilles Deleuze argues that a fundamental figure of the *Search* is the 'vase clos,' the hermetically sealed vessel, which describes the condition of the individual, of inanimate objects as well as of places. In Proust's view 'there is no totality except a statistical one that lacks any

⁷⁹ Henry Beyle (1783-1842), author of *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) and *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), adopted the *nom de plume* of Stendhal.

profound meaning' (Deleuze, 123). The escape from such impasse is in the effort to establish temporary and arbitrary connections between sealed vessels:

As between the Méséglise Way and the Guermantes Way, the entire work consists in establishing *transversals* that cause us to leap from one of Albertine's profiles to the other, from one Albertine to another, from one world to another, from one word to another, without ever reducing the many to the One, without ever gathering up the multitude into a whole, but affirming the original unity of precisely that multiplicity, affirming without uniting *all* these irreducible fragments. (Deleuze, 126)

The role of the artist is to overcome the barriers of incommunicability between separate consciousnesses, by projecting his view of the world on to the sphere of art, which is timeless and universal. It follows that attempting to understand a work of art through the acquaintance of the man who created it, through 'la biographie de l'homme,' 'l'histoire de sa famille,' 'la correspondance,' 'la conversation' and other wordly manifestations of him as Sainte-Beuve recommends is purposeless. The attempt to connect the 'moi social' with the 'moi de l'œuvre' reiterates the illusion of communication, which is observable in social interactions, in friendship and in love. According to Proust the knowledge of the author's individual history is irrelevant, if not misleading, for understanding what is conveyed through his work. In the case considered by this study the historical facts relating to the Laidlaw family and to the author's own biography remain peripheral to the core of *Castle Rock*.

Originally *Sainte-Beuve* was conceived as a critical discourse to be introduced by a narrative scene, in which the mother joins the protagonist in his bedroom. The woman announces the publication in the *Figaro* of one of the articles written by the son, which circumstance introduces the literary disquisition revolving around the *Sainte-Beuve* method. Over the course of months, however, the narrative structure enlarges to encompass a number of narrative threads, such as the dream and the voyages, and a variety of themes, including the narrator's childhood, the unfaithful lovers, the entrance

into the social world, homosexuality etc. By the end of the year 1908 three hundred pages of narrative are composed. These are recognized to be the first nucleus of the *Search*. Although the transformations of places, characters and situations prior to the publication of *Swann's Way* in 1913 is considerable, founding elements such as Combray, the Méséglise and Guermantes ways, a water-place called Querqueville, the figure of the grand-mother and that of Charles Swann are to be found in this primitive narrative core. Proust alternatively refers to it as 'une idée,' 'un article,' 'un chapitre,' 'un livre,' 'un roman.'⁸⁰ The dialogue with the mother is therefore delayed until the end of what already has the length, if not the organic structure, of a novel. Proust considers disjoining the two threads, the narrative and the argumentative, and leaving the second for later completion but, as Jean-Yves Tadié observes, in 1909 the critical discourse on Sainte-Beuve is abandoned in favour of the growing novel: 'le roman désormais l'absorbe tout entier et ne cessera de se ramifier. L'essai, au contraire, est mis à côté et reste inachevé. Il ne sera jamais repris.'⁸¹ Tadié suggests that the autobiographical relevance of the scene between mother and son opening the original essay is 'illusory.' In the opening of *Contre-Sainte Beuve* Proust inaugurates the technique of rearranging and altering events, geographical locations and personalities belonging to his life to serve the necessities of the growing work of fiction. The transformation of autobiographical experience into fictional components of an organic structure prefigures the creation of the voice of the narrator of the *Search*:

Le ton est trouvé, et c'est lui qui sépanouit sur le projet sur Sainte-Beuve:
Proust préfère à la formule de l'essai celle de la conversation avec sa
mère; le caractère autobiographique de cette conversation est tout à fait

⁸⁰ In a letter dated 1908 to Alfred Vallette, editor of the *Mercure de France*, Proust for the first time mentions the title of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. The work would be published posthumously in 1954: 'Je termine un livre qui, malgré son titre provisoire: *Contre Sainte-Beuve. Souvenirs d'une matinée* est un véritable roman extrêmement impudique en certaines parties. Un des principaux personnages est un homosexuel. Le nom de Sainte-Beuve ne vient pas par hasard. Le livre finit bien par une longue conversation sur Sainte-Beuve et l'esthétique.' (*Sainte-Beuve*, 825)

⁸¹ Jean-Yves Tadié, *Proust et le Roman*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p. 827.

illusoire, puisque M^{me} Proust est morte depuis trois ans: c'est dans un récit imaginaire que le narrateur fait sa véritable apparition. (Tadié, 21-22)

Tadié's position on the autobiographical content of the *Search* is similar to Proust's as expressed in *Sainte-Beuve*. According to Tadié the author, in the attempt to distance the protagonist of his novels from himself, gradually erases the autobiographical references in *Jean Santeuil*, as well as in the major novel. The early work, whose protagonist bears significant similarities with both the author as a young Parisian intellectual and the future narrator of the *Search*, is narrated in third person. Tadié argues that the stylistic choice was a conscious device, on the part of Proust, to dissociate his protagonist from a too close bond with his own personality. It is not a question of resemblance of biographical details, between the author and the fictional character of Jean, but rather of emotional correspondence, which is felt to limit the writer's vision. The *Search*, on the contrary, although it is a first person narrative which inherits the geographical and social milieu of the early novel, the Paris of the belle époque, the main characters and the setting of several key scenes, displays a central character who is considered ambiguous and mysterious. Julia Kristeva thus argues the stylistic transformation between the early novel and the magnum opus: 'Proust takes up the project of *Jean Santeuil* again and transposes it. He searches for lost time in the innermost signs of his experience, infusing the singularity of his own grief into the universal pattern of an intelligence which is accessible to all.'⁸² The opposition of biographical criticism argued in *Sainte-Beuve* has oriented the scholarly interpretations of the *Search* toward one of the most debated aspects, the narrator. His voice accompanies the reader throughout the entire length of the novel, excepting the section 'Swann in Love,' contained in *Swann's Way*, which is narrated in third person and centred on the figure of the stockbroker Charles Swann. The 'I' of the *Search* has been described as the repository of sensations and memories, an organ of reflection and meditation rather than a fleshed-out character conveying a

⁸² Julia Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, trans. by Spethen Bann, London: Faber and Faber, 1993, p. 16-17.

definite sensorial impression on the audience. Tadié remarks that 'il est plus aisé de dire ce qu'il n'est pas que ce qu'il est, car l'auteur a évité d'en laisser ces images frappantes que nous gardons de Charlus, d'Odette, de la duchesse de Guermantes' (Tadié, 29). Deleuze defines him as 'un énorme Corps sans organes,' a spider that remains in the darkness and spins the web of the novel:

The Search is not constructed like a cathedral or like a gown, but like a web. The spider-Narrator, whose web is the Search being spun, being woven by each thread stirred by one sign or another: the web and the spider, the web and the body are one and the same machine. Though endowed with an extreme sensibility and a prodigious memory, the narrator has no organs insofar as he is deprived of any voluntary and organized use of such faculties. (Deleuze, 182)

Deleuze interprets the narrator as the apprentice who is intent on deciphering the signs emanating from the physical as well as the social world. The narrator's intellectual trajectory terminates in the comprehension of life through a literary vocation. The French scholar observes, however, that the narrator is at a loss to proceed in his apprenticeship with the sole aid of his intellectual faculties. The original impulse which forces him to seize life's meaning must arrive from without, in the form of suffering caused by love or of joy provoked by a certain alignment of the natural elements.⁸³ These circumstances compel the narrator to appeal to his intelligence to confront his emotional reactions. Such experiences, however, imply a subsequent state of dejection: 'We search for truth only when we are determined to do so in terms of a concrete situation, when we undergo a kind of violence that impels us to such a search' (Deleuze,

⁸³ In the first case the examples are innumerable, including the narrator's unrequited love for Gilberte and Oriane de Guermantes and his passion for Albertine. In the second case relevant examples are the sudden reactions to the sight of the Martinville steeples or of the apple trees in Hudimesnil, in the surroundings of Balbec.

15). Kristeva observes that ‘in the beginning was suffering’ (Kristeva, 79).⁸⁴ Deleuze depicts the narrator as a blind, perceptive spider responding to external agents. He is subject to the tyrannical laws of ‘contrainte’ and ‘hasard,’ his prodigious memory serving to connect the different circumstances in which these emotional jolts have occurred. The intricacy and complexity of the novel result from the incessant spinning of the web by the blind narrator-spider: ‘The spider too sees nothing, perceives nothing, remembers nothing. She receives only the slightest vibration at the edge of her web, which propagates itself in her body as an intensive wave and sends her leaping to the necessary place. Without eyes, without nose, without mouth, she answers only to signs, the merest sign surging through her body and causing her to spring upon the prey’ (Deleuze, 182).

Proust criticism agrees on describing the ‘I’ of the *Search* as an elliptic protagonist who remains in the shadows despite being the centre of a philosophical novel whose length and scope are unmatched in the western canon. Roger Brian observes that “[the Narrator] has no name, we have no clear idea what he looks like. For long stretches of his books he disappears leaving the reader to eavesdrop on the conversations of people who seem oblivious of this man’s existence. He is passive and transparent, everywhere and nowhere, sometimes a spy, often a voyeur turning up in unlikely situations, a disembodied presence unlike that in any novel before” (*Companion to Proust*, 98). On the rare occasions when the narrator is physically described his traits seem vague. Indirectly, through Albertine’s comments, the audience is informed that he is generally endowed with “jolis cheveux” and “beaux yeux” (Tadié, 29). Although every room he occupies in life is recorded in detail Proust is careful not to expose him in a context in

⁸⁴ Kristeva specifies: ‘People whom we love necessarily make us suffer. The sole recourse that we have in the face of this inevitable affliction is the art of living, which is indeed dependent on a special form of intelligence. It consists in being able to regard the person who tortures us as a ‘reflection’, ‘fragment’ or ‘stage’ of an Idea, ‘a divine form’: in other words, as a type of ‘divinity’. Over and beyond the accidents of our unhappiness, as if we were a victim submitting to a torturer, the vision of this archetype can serve as a source of joy. [...] Art alone is capable of taking its point of departure from the painful and the sordid, of building up a character of universality and thus of “joyously peopling our life with divinities.”’ Kristeva, unlike Deleuze, suggests that Proust’s narrator is intent in discovering and deciphering not ‘signs’ but ‘impressions,’ provoked on his ‘deeper self’ by external agents such as the natural landscape, the beloved women etc. (Kristeva, 440-441)

which the dialogue might betray his physical description or that of his quarters.⁸⁵ The surname remains unknown, a rare case in the novel, his identity veiled in the midst of an accurately characterized social world.⁸⁶ The name is perhaps the most controversial aspect of his identity. Recent criticism prefers to address him simply as the narrator, thus ignoring the two instances in the novel in which 'Marcel' appears, one of which uttered by Albertine in an uncorrected draft. Early commentators on the *Search* are not equally sensible to this apparent inconsistency in the authorial strategy.⁸⁷ The protagonist appears as the passive experimenter of different *social milieus*, of passion, intended both as physical desire and emotional involvement, of the experience of travelling. He is, most of all, both the subject involved in the painful experience of love and a keen observer of the phenomenon. He registers with acute sensibility the effects of time passing. The narrator thus remains an undetermined figure. The process of gradual awareness of the literary vocation is instead accurately described. Tadié suggests that in him literally 'la vocation supplante la vie.' The narrator resembles a disembodied voice registering the necessity of the artistic enterprise and gathering the intellectual instruments to initiate it. The *Search* is an apprenticeship culminating with the comprehension that each event in life leaves a mark on the narrator's highly receptive nature, but nonetheless is destined to dissolve. Memory, whose functioning is unconsciously stimulated by certain arbitrary circumstances, is unable to preserve the fragments of the past unaltered.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ An exception is a scene in *The Captive* where Charlus addresses the narrator with: "Comme c'est laid chez vous!" (Tadié, 29)

⁸⁶ The clues regarding the narrator are restricted to the family's *milieu*. His father is employed as a permanent secretary in an unnamed ministry of the French government, working in close contact with the Ambassador Norprois, while his mother is a cultivated lady belonging to the middle class.

⁸⁷ Several critical studies of Proust's novel have suggested a closer relationship between the figure of 'Marcel' and its author. It has been observed how Proust erased the name 'Marcel' in his *Cahiers* before the publication of the volumes that appeared during his lifetime, all excepting *The Captive* (1923), *The Fugitive* or *The Sweet Cheat Gone* (1925) and *Time Regained* (1927). For further reference confront *Proust* by Jean-Yves Tadié, Paris: Belfond, 1983, p. 29 and p. 181-197.

⁸⁸ Several passages in the novel explore the mechanism referred to as 'involuntary memory.' Relevant examples are the taste of the *madeleines* dipped in tea reminding the narrator of Tante Léonie's bedroom in Combray, the uneven pavement in the Guermantes' courtyard stimulating the memory of the voyage to Venice, the particular stiffness of a table-napkin at the Guermantes' table recalling the sensorial impression given by the bathroom towel at the hotel in Balbec.

In discussing Proust's novelistic debut with *Jean Santeuil* Henry quotes from a note written on the margin of the unfinished manuscript from which André Maurois extracts the publication. It has been argued that the narrative voice of *Jean Santeuil* is a 'thinly veiled,' autobiographical first person, as can be evinced by Proust's revealing critical meditation: 'Puis-je appeler ce livre un roman? C'est moins peut-être et bien plus, l'essence même de ma vie, recueillie sans y rien mêler, dans ces heures de déchirure où elle découle. Ce livre n'a jamais été fait, il a été recolté' (cited in Henry, 120). The future author of the *Search* seems at the beginning of a critical trajectory, which finds expression in the argumentative section of *Sainte-Beuve*. The question of the source of the literary inspiration seems accompanied by the intuition that 'the essence of life' is the exclusive concern of the creative project. In Proust's note there is no uncertainty in regard to the process of transformation of life into art. *Jean Santeuil* 'n'as jamais été fait, il a été recolté.' Henry remarks that, even less ambiguously, Proust defines the manuscript as 'vérité.' Such observation suggests that Proust attributes a significance to the word not dissimilar to that which is suggested by the original title of Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, 'Real Lives.' In Munro's book the concept of reality expands to encompass 'the things that might have happened, the kind of alternate life that can almost seem to be accompanying what we call real lives.' The events depicted on the page thus present a fictional difference from the factual events that nonetheless must inspire them.

Similarly to *Castle Rock* the *Search* is undeniably close, in its historical, social and geographical context to the life of the author. In the case of Proust's novel, however, there is no intention to unveil the proximity of the text to the autobiographical events that might have inspired it, as Munro intends in *Castle Rock*. The proliferation of Proust's biographies, in measure of the escalating success of the *roman fleuve*, and the ambivalence of the correspondence on the subject have stimulated Proust scholarship to explore parallels between the author's life and the work. In regard to the similarities between the locations of the novel and the places Proust inhabited or visited during his lifetime a rich literature has flourished. By struggling to apply a consistent method of interpretation criticism seems to approach to the core of the creative enigma. It is

eventually obliged, however, either to offer questionable conjectures or to admit that the mechanisms of creativity are inscrutable. The construction of fictional place-names is, for instance, a phenomenon in which the mechanisms of creativity can be observed with the aid of extra-textual material such as the author's biography, personal correspondence, memoirs. The ground of inquiry, however, remains unstable. The origin of the names of Combray, Méséglise, Montjouvain and Tansonville are amongst the most discussed, leading critics to investigate the possible mental associations with, and linguistic metaphorphosis of, real geographical locations frequented by Proust, such as the villages of Combres, Méréglise, Mirougrain. The volume of biographical studies of the *Search* gives rise to proliferating interpretations that do not always coincide. Despite the authoritative critical position adopted by Roland Barthes, who argues the independence of Proust's novel from any autobiographical influence, a significant portion of scholarship is still drawn to explore the autobiographical elements that are presumed to be antecedent to the text.⁸⁹

Similarly to the parallel between 'Royal Beatings' and the autobiographical account of the same episode in 'Fathers,' it is possible to juxtapose a passage from *Swann's Way* to an autobiographical article published in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (1894).⁹⁰ In *Swann's Way* the narrator recalls the experience of his early readings in Combray, described as the immersion in a parallel universe capable of engulfing everything else. The child is conscious of the occasional familiar noises, such as the footsteps of the maid walking into the room or the distant sound of the church bell, and of natural elements such as the sunrays streaming from the garden or the changing tints of the sky, while he is completely absorbed by the world of imagination. The process of absorption begins with the awareness of a pulling force within the text, which the narrator calls 'croyance,' that is belief, a premise to the gradual abandoning of the physical world for the sake of the intellectual:

⁸⁹ Roland Barthes argues that 'Proust himself despite the apparently psychological character of what he called his analyses, was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme substilization, the relation between the writer and his characters.' (Nalbantian, 88)

⁹⁰ *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* is a collection of prose poems and novellas published by Calmann-Lévy in 1894.

Upon the sort of screen, patterned with different states and impressions, which my consciousness would quietly unfold while I was reading, and which ranged from the most deeply hidden aspirations of my heart to the wholly external view of the horizon spread out before my eyes at the foot of the garden, what was from the first the most permanent and the most intimate part of me, the lever whose incessant movements controlled all the rest, was my belief in the philosophic richness and beauty of the book I was reading, and my desire to appropriate these to myself, whatever the book might be. (*Swann*, 111)

While time progresses another life, the life of the text, is superimposed on the organic life of the body. The intellectual universe is equally marked by the passing of time and by the consuming of the boy's forces. The day draws to an end and 'la chaleur tombe.' The textual world, however, seems to stimulate in the boy the discovery of the 'truth' which refers to the world of his bodily existence:

Next to this central belief, which, while I was reading, would be constantly in motion from my inner self to the outer world, towards the discovery of the Truth, came the emotions aroused in me by the action in which I would be taking part, for these afternoons were crammed with more dramatic and sensational events that occur, often, in a whole lifetime. These were the events that took place in the book I was reading. It is true that the people concerned in them were not what Françoise would have called 'real people'. (*Swann*, 112)

The suggested 'reality' of fictional characters hinted in the passage recalls Munro's conception of reality as the life of the mind rather than exclusively as the world of

physical phenomena. Proust's description of reading intends to convey what is indiscernible to the external eye. The memories of the boy are condensed around the events of the fictional plot and the characters of the book, which he is reading. He registers only isolated images and sounds that pertain to the physical reality surrounding him. The occasional sensory impressions, however, are heightened by the intellectual working of his mind. Only through the process of immersing himself in a world of imagination the boy senses that there is an essence beyond the appearance of things whose discovery brings joy. Similarly the actions and feelings of the fictional characters seem to hold a significance and to be endowed with a 'reality' more tangible than that of real people:

A 'real' person, profoundly as we may sympathise with him, is in a great measure perceptible only through our senses, that is to say, he remains opaque, offers a dead weight which our sensibilities have not the strength to lift. [...] After which it matters not that the actions, the feelings of this new order of creatures appear to us in disguise of truth, since we have made them our own, since it is in ourselves that they are happening, that they are holding in thrall, while we turn over, feverishly, the pages of the book, our quickened breath and staring eyes. (*Swann* , 113)

Although the quoted passage, whose protagonist is the child narrator who has yet to undergone the laborious journey leading to the discovery of his vocation, is extracted from the first volume of the *Search*, the philosophical meditation contained in it already anticipates the conclusion in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. It is generally understood that Proust composed the beginning and the end of the novel simultaneously, inaugurating the technique of writing independent episodes that would eventually be woven together in the final draft of the book.⁹¹ Thus, when the author describes the child's early encounter with literature he already envisages the culmination of the adult narrator's meditation on

⁹¹ *Companion to Proust*, p. 94.

art, to be found in the final volume of the *Search*. The atmosphere and details of the scene in *Swann*, whose autobiographical relevance is retraceable, provide the setting for the foundations of the author's aesthetic philosophy. At the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé* art is revealed as the only bearer of meaning. It is nurtured by and yet survives the manifold, transient impressions of life. The youthful, all-absorbing joy of reading acquires significance in the light of the narrator's final discovery that 'la vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c'est la littérature' (*Time Regained*, 88).

In 'Journées de lecture,' collected in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, a first-person narrator describes the pleasure of reading first encountered in childhood. The setting, 'au temps des vacances,' a country house whose park recalls Léonie's garden in *Swann's Way*, the characters of 'la cuisinière,' 'l'oncle,' 'la tante' are mirrored in the novel. The division of the day is respected. The boy escapes the family walks in order to plunge into his readings but he is not allowed to miss the luncheon, the dinner nor the religious functions that are a regular duty to the household. The sights of the garden, the occasional noises such as the chiming of the bells and the brief dialogue between the young labourer and the cook, even the species of trees under which the boy finds shelter are retraceable in the fictional Combray described a decade later. Proust's accuracy and intensity of description is apt to yield an extensive list of similarities between the early autobiographical article and the *Search*, or even of the literal transpositions from one to the other. It can be argued, however, that what differentiates the two texts is the philosophical quality of the reflection concerning the experience of reading. In 'Journée de lecture' the descriptive passages are more detailed than the depiction of the garden and bedroom in *Swann's Way*. The philosophical argument concerning reading is concentrated at the end of the paragraph and contains only the nucleus of the meditation, which unfolds in the novel. The narrator tries to express the significance of the hours spent within a world of imagination, tracing the opposition between fictional and real life, 'invented' and 'real' people:

These creatures on whom one had bestowed more attention and affection than on those in real life, not always daring to admit to what extent you loved them, and even, when my parents found me reading and seemed to smile at my emotion, closing the book with studied indifference or a pretence of a boredom; never again would one see these people for whom one has sobbed and yearned, never again hear from them.⁹²

The narrator does not proceed, however, beyond the feeling of nostalgia towards characters whose existence is fictional, meanwhile observing the distance between his sensitivity and that of the others for whom art is not a necessity. Similarly in the *Search* the protagonist recalls the premature, still inarticulate pleasure of reading, yet he forces his mind beyond the mysterious feeling of joy provoked by it. In the course of the years and to the detriment of his health he discovers the profound reason of joy fostered by literature, painting or architecture. Deleuze defines such experience of learning as deciphering the 'signs of art.' In the major novel the passage regarding the early experience of reading acquires a different significance. Similarly to the aesthetic achievement of 'Royal Beatings' compared to the autobiographical essay 'Fathers,' the passage in *Swann's Way* exceeds, on artistic grounds, the breadth of the memoir in 'Journée de lecture.' In the novel Proust seems to profit from the freedom of constraint of the autobiographical genre. The significance of the episode expands in the direction of a philosophical meditation.

⁹² 'Days of Reading,' *Sainte-Beuve*, p. 204

III. Connections.

The opening.

The present study will now attempt to synthesise the lines of argument followed in the preceding chapters, regarding the *Search* and *Castle Rock*, seeking points of contact between works that are otherwise remarkably distant in terms of geographical, cultural and linguistic background. Both books open, directly or indirectly, with an allusion to the idea of mortality. The opening scene of the *Search* depicts the protagonist oscillating between consciousness and sleep, surrounded by an atmosphere of indeterminacy. According to Malcolm Bowie the dominating elements are ‘silence loss, emptiness, departure, abandonment [...] and the narrative voice itself, playing upon these childhood memories, hovers between utterance and extinction.’⁹³ In such mental state time is not determined, therefore the disposition of the walls and the furniture of the bedroom is unfixed. The narrator is mentally occupying a variety of spaces displayed across a variety of times: ‘Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes. Il les consulte d’instinct en s’éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de la terre qu’il occupe, le temps qui s’est écoulé jusqu’à son réveil; mais leur rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre’ (*Swann*, 140). The depths of sleep prefigure the state of non-being, that inaccessible cavern where even memory fails to penetrate, from whence the dreamer eventually resurfaces. Kristeva suggests a parallel with Plato’s cave, in which man, a prey to false illusions, struggles to comprehend the nature of reality: ‘ce sommeil, que nous croyons sans conscience, ressemble étrangement à la caverne des ombres de Platon, et pourtant il est encore plus pesant, plus inaccessible: “bloc obscur, non défini”. [...] Aucune clarté, seule l’intensité des sensations baigne et bouleverse le dormeur’ (Kristeva, 414). The narrator, however, succeeds in stopping the revolving of the years and even the succession of historical eras

⁹³ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, London: Hammersmith, 1998, p. 56.

that precede his existence, suggested by the allusion to ‘other worlds’ that cross his imagination in the space of the brief waking moments. By connecting momentary physical perceptions to the memories of the bedrooms he has occupied in life the protagonist finds a point of connection between his individual existence and the timeless experience of being:

My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would make an effort to construe the form which its tiredness took as an orientation of its various members, so as to induce from that where the wall lay and the furniture stood, to piece together and to give a name to the house in which it must be living. Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness. And even before my brain, lingering in consideration of when things had happened and of what they had looked like, had collected sufficient impressions to enable it to identify the room, it, my body, would recall from each room in succession what the bed was like, where the doors were, how daylight came in at the windows, whether there was a passage outside, what I had had in my mind when I went to sleep, and had found there when I awoke. (*Swann*, 48)

The overture is essential to the comprehension of the *Search*. During his apprenticeship the narrator realizes that through the exploration of the mechanisms of memory he gains awareness of the consequences of time. The individual is rescued from the oblivion of consciousness and the fear of non-being, which threatens him during sleep, only when he becomes conscious of his own history.⁹⁴ Henry argues that the essential problem of

⁹⁴ The narrator thus continues his meditation: ‘[...] when I awoke at midnight, not knowing where I was, I could not be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness; I was more destitute of human qualities than the cave-dweller; but then the memory, not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope let down from

the narrator is the apparent impossibility to reconcile the different selves within his mind that change according to the circumstances and the different stages of life: 'il lui manquait la clé essentielle, celle de la continuité de son être profond' (Henry, 164). Thanks to the sensuous experience gathered over the course of years, creating precise memories preserved in the mind, the protagonist realizes that his sense of identity is not fixed but transforming. The discernment occurs when he compares his memories and perceives a vast gulf between the different selves that he has shed: 'à chaque expérience nouvelle, il éprouvait le sentiment affligeant de devenir un autre. Le moi qui avait aimé Gilberte n'avait-il pas été anéanti par celui qui désirait Albertine, lui-même oublié dans la poursuite de l'élégante duchesse?' (Henry, 165) Identity is thus inconstant, determined by the circumstances and shaped by accidents. It can be described as an organic continuum of different selves proceeding from the instance of birth until death. The mature individual is thus comparable to a towering church spire in whose frail structure is hidden the secret of its destruction. Thus Proust describes the Duc de Guermantes at his matinée in *Le Temps Retrouvé*:

I now understood why the Duc de Guermantes, whom I admired when he was seated because he had aged so little although he had many more years under him than I, had tottered when he got up and wanted to stand erect - like those old Archbishops surrounded by acolytes, whose only solid part is their metal cross - and had moved, trembling like a leaf on the hardly approachable summit of his eighty-three years, as though men were perched upon living stilts which keep on growing, reaching the height of church-towers, until walking becomes difficult and dangerous and, at last, they fall. (*Time Regained*, 1283)

heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: in a flash I would traverse and surmount centuries of civilisation, and out of a half-visualised succession of oil-lamps, followed by shirts with turned-down collars, would put together by degrees the component parts of my ego.' (*Swann*, 4)

The fourth dimension of existence is thus invisible and is namely time. Such is the philosophical trajectory of the novel, opening with the atmosphere indetermined of sleep, which prefigures the end of consciousness in death, advancing towards the appropriation of time through the composition of the literary work. Without the awareness of man's mortality the effort to understand the multiplicity and often incomprehensibility of life would not be undertaken. The narrator needs the sense of urgency, communicated to him by the disappearance of the beloved and by the frailty of his own health, in order to penetrate the mystery of life, one which is connected with the necessity to create and find solace in art. The creative process rescues the narrator from the void of non-being, which was present at the beginning of the novel and recurs on the death of certain central characters, such as the grandmother and Albertine.

The similarities between *Castle Rock* and the *Search* can be argued on the basis that both works confront reality from the perspective of a protagonist who ponders over the concept of mortality. Similarly to the narrator of the *Search* the protagonist of *Castle Rock* meditates in the opening over the stark reality of man's finitude, exemplified by the vision of the graves of her European ancestors. The first part of the book, entitled 'No Advantages,' introduces some of the references concerning Munro's ancestry, unearthed by the author during and after her Scottish sojourn. The first historical document to appear in the narrative is the 'Contribution by the Minister of Ettrick Parish, in the county of Selkirk, to the Statistical Account of Scotland.' Dated 1799, it is a description of Ettrick and its surroundings, pictured as a settlement possessing 'no advantages': 'there are ten proprietors of land in this parish: none of them resides in it' (*Castle Rock*, 5). The second historical reference, inserted in the paragraph named 'Men of Ettrick,' is the epitaph engraved on William Laidlaw's tombstone, composed by his grandson James Hogg. It was found by Munro in the Ettrick Kirkyard and reads as follows: 'Here lyeth William Laidlaw, the far-famed Will o'Phaup, who for feats of frolic, agility and strength, had no equal in his day...' ⁹⁵ In the opening of the book Munro hints at the moment of inspiration which propels her research and the

⁹⁵ 'Here lyeth William Laidlaw, the far-famed Will o'Phaup, who for feats of frolic, agility and strength, had no equal in his day...' (*Castle Rock*, 7)

composition of the text itself. It occurs in a geographical space that naturally orients the thoughts of the visitor on the idea of mortality, a churchyard, in characteristic local uncheerful weather: 'I felt conspicuous, out of place, and cold. I huddled by the wall till the rain let up for a bit, and then I explored the churchyard, with the long wet grass soaking my legs' (*Castle Rock*, 7). The author is struck by a perception that the inscriptions on the tombstones refer, even if only by virtue of a distant and until then abstract connection, to her own self. Such revelation unfolds in a 'disturbing' reflection on the connection between past and present:

I was struck with a feeling familiar, I suppose, to many people whose long history goes back to a country far away from a place where they grew up. I was a naïve North-American, in spite of my stored knowledge. Past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined. (*Castle Rock*, 7)

Not dissimilarly Sheila Munro describes the visit that her mother, her second husband Gerald Fremlin and herself paid to the country cemetery of Blyth, in South-Western Ontario, in search of the graves of their Scottish pioneer ancestors, descendants of the Laidlaws of Ettrick. The erudite interest prior to the discovery of the graves, connected with Munro's artistic project, results in the scrutiny of the stark reality of the tombstones. The latter gives rise to a private meditation on death:

Today my mother, Gerry and I visit the cemetery on a hillside just south of Blyth. We find the stone erected to the former Scottish shepherd William Laidlaw, the one who died of cholera in faraway Illinois, and his wife Mary, who later died of cholera also, in an 1868 epidemic, along with Robert's two children. Laboriously we decipher the inscription, piecing together the chiselled words eaten away by time and lichen, until we are able to read out the words of the lugubrious Presbyterian verse:

Both old and young O death, must yield to thee

And day by day thy powerful arms we see

In vain the tear, in vain the heartfelt sigh

All that are born to live are born to die. (Sheila Munro, 132)

Castle Rock traces the lines of a religious meditation from the point of view of an acute external observer. Munro, an admitted agnostic, is nonetheless a keen observer of the impact of religion on the lives of both the faithful and the sceptical, in various historical and contemporary contexts, in Europe as well as in North America. Born in the years when rural Ontario was largely populated by the descendants of Scottish and Irish immigrants, Munro was raised in a devout community. The Anglican, Presbyterian, and to lesser extents Episcopal, Evangelist, and Catholic Churches informed the life of the suburban quarter of Wingham in which Munro lived.⁹⁶ Religious questioning, whether giving rise to intimate consolation or causing an intellectual rejection, yet somehow imposed on the individual during the crucial years when he or she is formed, is a phenomenon not unknown to the writer. The internal struggle provoked by religious meditation stimulates Munro's perceptiveness toward unearthing the contradictions of daily life. A reference inserted in *Castle Rock* pertains to an historical figure, not belonging to Munro's lineage, whose writings are centred on the problem of mortality and on the survival of the soul beyond death. Thomas Boston (1676-1732) was the preacher of the Ettrick Parish when William Laidlaw, the first ancestor of whom Munro gives account, inhabited a local farm. The epitaph engraved on the monument dedicated to Boston in the Ettrick churchyard ends with the following verse from Luke (Xi,11,24): 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and

⁹⁶ Munro argues that the religious spirit of her native community is not comparable, for intensity and commitment, to the climate of faith present in the Scottish village of Presbyterian creed in which her ancestors lived: 'A little bit when I was growing up, but not very much. Though there are lots of fundamentalists churches here. But the major churches, like the one I belong to, are not notably fundamentalist anymore. Rules were stricter when I was growing up, but even then I don't think people spent a lot of time privately agonizing over it.' Munro observes that in that part of Canada individual creed is generally associated with social status.' *Carried Away*, XX.

will not be able' (*Castle Rock*, 15). Boston is the author of the *The Crook in The Lot* and of *Human Nature in its Fourfold-State*, a collection of sermons written during his service at the Ettrick parish, where he was ordained in 1707, on the day of the union between England and Scotland. His figure recurs in connection with the 'Marrow Controversy,' a theological dispute on the doctrine of grace originated by *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, written by Edward Fisher in 1646.⁹⁷ In *Castle Rock* Munro interprets Boston's internal struggles with faith, the conditions of his household affected by a general state of poverty. The preacher's house is subject to the same austere, occasionally miserable conditions that the humble families of the parish suffer. It is equally visited by untimely deaths:

Sometimes God hears him, sometimes not. [...] Meanwhile the roof of the manse is leaking, the walls are damp, the chimney smokes, his wife and his children and he himself are often sick with fevers. They have septic throats and rheumatic aches. Some of his children die. The very first baby is born with what sounds to me like spina bifida and she dies soon after birth. His wife is distraught, and though he does his best to comfort her he feels bound also to reprimand her for complaining against God's Will. He has to reproach himself for lifting up the coffin lid to get one last glimpse of the face of his own favorite, a little boy of three. How wicked of him, how weak, to love this sinful scrap of flesh and to question in any way his Lord's wisdom in taking him. There must be further wrestlings, self-castigation, and bouts of prayers. (*Castle Rock*, 15)

Munro's interest in Boston, who does not appear to be connected to her lineage, emerges in another fictional context, in the story 'A Wilderness Station,' included in *Friend of*

⁹⁷ Edward Fisher and the religious scholars known as the 'Marrow men' believed that assurance is the essence of saving faith. According to them good works and man's righteousness have no part in justification. The creed was condemned by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1722. Thomas Boston was amongst those censored for having commented and published a version of the *Marrow* in 1721.

My Youth (1990).⁹⁸ In it the description of Boston's life, as can be gathered from the Memoirs published in 1776, expands to a meditation on the strict ordinances of Presbyterian Scotland following the National Covenant (1638), which penetrates even the remotest villages such as Ettrick. Munro thus describes the consequences of the teachings of John Knox on contemporary Scottish society: 'John Knox had wanted them educated so that they could read the Bible. And they read it, with piety but also with hunger, to discover God's order, the architecture of his mind. They found a lot to puzzle about' (*Castle Rock*, 15). Thus Boston's personal history and the reactions of the congregation to his preaching attract the writer's attention in *Castle Rock*. Boston's struggle with faith is observed from the divergent perspective of the reverend himself and from that of her ancestor, William Laidlaw, described as 'a near pagan, a merry man, a brandy drinker, one upon whom wages are set,' yet nonetheless a believer (*Castle Rock*, 17). Boston's obsessive meditations, which cause him physical miseries and indirectly aggravate the conditions of his household, revolve around the problem of the soul's mortality and the destiny of man. The stronger faith responds in him the more annihilating the shadow of doubt threatens to be:

In his autobiography he speaks of his own recurring miseries, his dry spells, his sense of unworthiness and dullness even in the act of preaching the Gospel, or while praying in his study. He pleads for grace. He bares his breast to Heaven – at least symbolically – in his desperation. He would surely lacerate himself with thorned whips if such behavior would not be Popish, would not constitute in fact a further sin. [...] He strives, he falls. Darkness again. (*Castle Rock*, 14)

⁹⁸ 'A Wilderness Station' is set in the town of Walley, Ontario, in the late nineteenth century, amongst the first pioneers to settle in the wilderness. The fictional reverend McBain quotes from Thomas Boston's sermon *The Crook in the Lot*: 'Whatever crook there is in one's lot/This world is a wilderness, in which/we may indeed yet our station changed,/but the move will be out of one wilderness/station unto another.'" (Gittings, 82)

William Laidlaw's liberal life does not seem reconcilable with the religious fear which Boston's preaching aims to provoke in the members of his Presbyterian congregation. Furthermore the fictionalized ancestor is described as being assaulted by pagan fairies on the night of All Hallow's Eve. The author wonders: 'when Will was pursued on All Hallow's Eve did he not call for protection on the same God whom Boston called upon when he begged to have the weight – of indifference, doubt, sorrow – lifted off his soul?' (*Castle Rock*, 17) Margaret Atwood argues that in Munro's fictional universe, which is essentially secular, the characters are confronted with the impossibility of determining the significance of an event or a behaviour for which more than one interpretation is possible. Although Munro is admittedly agnostic religiosity is not a peripheral element in her fictional universe. It is a theme addressed in *Castle Rock*, described as the closest 'to what a memoir does – exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way' (*Castle Rock*, Foreword). Sheila Munro observes that her mother substitutes the search for faith with a system of aesthetic values at an early age: 'She lost her faith when she was about twelve; every time she asked for a "sign" from God and no sign was forthcoming her faith "went down a notch." It didn't matter much because at this time "art took over". Art became her religion.' (Sheila Munro, 87) A religious perspective, however, implies that there is one mode of interpreting the immanent world, according to the truth revealed in the metaphysical world. Such interpretation is to be found in the Bible, which, according to the Protestant creed, is accessible to the intellectual faculties of each and every believer. Religious precepts, whether genuinely welcomed or simply absorbed as a consequence of the surrounding community, are apt to provoke a certain response in the individual:

Christianity is "what people had" – and in Canada, church and state were never separated along the lines laid down in the United States. Prayers and Bible readings were daily fare in publicly funded schools. This cultural Christianity has provided ample material for Munro, but it is also connected with one of the most distinctive patterns in her image-making and storytelling.

Atwood refers to the central Christian tenet according to which two disparate and mutually exclusive elements, divinity and humanity, coexist in Christ, neither annihilating the other. This contradicts the very basis of logic, which states that A cannot be both itself and non-A at the same time; the formulation “A but also non-A” is, according to Munro’s illustrious colleague, indispensable to Christianity. Atwood argues that Munro’s view of reality is tinged with such paradox of religious origin, one which generally informs traditional Canadian culture, notwithstanding Munro’s private agnosticism. The influence of social mores and upbringing, although later refused or critically assessed by the adult, continues to permeate the mind of the storyteller. ‘Many of Munro’s stories resolve themselves – or fail to resolve themselves – in precisely this way,’ continues Atwood, ‘for Munro, a thing can be true, but not true, but true nonetheless. [...] The world is profane *and* sacred. It must be swallowed whole. There is always more to be known about it that you can even know’ (*Carried Away*, XX).

Despite the sober piety described as illuminating the lives of both the mother and grandmother, the only examples of uninterested and pure love in the *Search*, Proust’s narrator seems to recoil from expressing an opinion on religion. His emotional and intellectual faculties are concentrated on the mechanisms of memory and creativity, to such an extent that he seems to utterly ignore the presence of the divinity, neither acknowledging nor denying it. The audience, however, senses that the protagonist inclines towards the latter hypothesis. As the novel progresses, in fact, Proust lays the foundations of what can be considered as an aesthetic religion. The *Search* is firmly anchored on the one hand to the immanent world, where the young man makes the necessary experience, both joyful and painful, of the transience of the social world, of the fickleness of emotions, of his own frailty, that will push him to a spiritual crisis and consequently to the discovery of the literary vocation. On the other hand the story of this man’s life, and that of his society, is illuminated by glimpses of a transcendent world, whose nature is aesthetic. The rare moments of inarticulate joy experienced by the narrator as a child are connected with the recognition of a certain sudden harmonic equilibrium of natural elements, which he longs to express in words. As an adult he

becomes aware of another kind of harmony, of anthropic origin, in the great works of art. Examples of the first are the sight of the Martinville steeples immersed in the countryside of Combray or of the apple trees in Hudimesnil; of the second the roman porch of Balbec church or the painter Elstir's sea views. During these epiphanies, a gift alternatively from nature or man's talent, the protagonist feels a sort of elation which, in the Christian perspective, reveals to humankind the connection of the soul to the divinity. In such rare instances the narrator feels himself as lifted from his earthly existence into a realm whose language he longs to understand, that of art. In the universe of the novel, where the divinity is absent, there is no certainty regarding the existence of a transcendent world. A silence or a blank space swallowing the prospect of an afterlife fails to give any guiding principle about the immanent world.⁹⁹ The artist's discipline and commitment to a system of aesthetic values, which is as questionable as the existence of the realm of God, would seem unreasonable. Proust argues that there is a set of 'obligations' that the writer strives to fulfil until the exhaustion of his forces. These obligations seem to derive from another world, founded on sacrifice and self-will, whose hypothetical existence remains obscure to the most:

[...] everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying the burden of obligations contracted in a former life; there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be fastidious, to be polite even, nor make the talented artist consider himself obliged to begin over a score of times a piece of work for the admiration aroused by which will matter so little to his body devoured by worms, like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much knowledge and skill by an artist who must for ever remain unknown and is barely identified under the name Vermeer. All these obligations which have not their sanction in our present life seem to belong to a different world, founded upon kindness, scrupulosity, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this, which we leave in order to be born into

⁹⁹ Significant religious figures of the *Search* are the mother and grandmother, who mildly influence the child's early beliefs.

this world, before perhaps returning to the other to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we have obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts, knowing not whose hand had traced them there – those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only – and still! – to fools. (*Captive*, 600-601.)

Both *Castle Rock* and the *Search* follow their protagonists' meditations regarding man's condition, and the different ways to face the idea of mortality. Such issues, normally addressed by religion, are explored through the perspective of an artist and through the means of the medium of literature. Both Munro and Proust's fictional universe are essentially lay but none the less oriented toward a transcendent horizon. Art is the human response to the metaphysical interrogatives, one which stimulates and justifies the task of writing.

The narrator.

Both Munro and Proust create first person narrators who present evident analogies with their authors. In regard to the *Search* it has been argued that the narrator's relationship to Proust's biography is of a questionable nature. The affinities between Marcel and the elliptical protagonist are detectable in their original *milieu*, the Parisian bourgeoisie at the turn of the twentieth century, in their spiritual connection with the countryside of Chartres and the Normandy coast, in their discreet exploration of homosexuality, in their esteem for and expertise in the arts. Finally, a connecting point between the real and the fictional young man can be traced in the dramatic loss of the beloved companion in a misfortunate accident.¹⁰⁰ Despite the occasional adherence to events and personalities

¹⁰⁰ In 1913 Marcel Proust lost his long time friend and lover, the chauffeur Albert Agostinelli, in a flying accident off the coast of Monaco. The relationship between the narrator of the *Search* and the character of Albertine, who dies after falling from her horse at her aunt's house in Touraine, is argued to have been inspired by Agostinelli and Proust's stormy liason. Agostinelli was married to Anna Square and was thus repeatedly unfaithful to his employer, on whom he nonetheless both economically and emotionally depended.

belonging to Proust's life it appears, however, that these correspondences are of little help in defining the identity of the protagonist of the *Search*. The narrator, except for the trajectory of his reasoning and the nature of his observations, that are exhaustively explored in the novel, is enigmatic. He is not physically described, his surname is never mentioned and it is reasonable to imagine that his name should have similarly remained unknown. Deleuze argues that the narrator is a 'body without organs,' 'involuntary sensibility, involuntary memory, involuntary thought that are, each time, like the intense totalizing reactions of the organ less body to signs of one nature or another' (Deleuze, 182). Furthermore the absence of conspicuous physical or moral traits beyond an extreme sensitivity, perceptiveness and intellectual curiosity, justifies the preponderant critical position that, rather than a vivid and evocative hero, the narrator is an instrument whose purpose is to illuminate the philosophical trajectory of the novel. The *Search* follows a young man's apprenticeship towards the understanding of life through artistic vocation. The 'I' of the novel voices both intellectual conquests, the comprehension of the laws of time governing existence and the fulfilment of the literary vocation. Tadié observes that the narrator is 'both form and content' of the novel: 'le narrateur est un moyen privilégié d'analyse d'une vocation; il permet aussi d'embrasser – tout en respectant la vraisemblance – le spectacle le plus vaste possible. Mais il ne le peut qu'en se dédoublant: à la fois matière et forme, il devient aussi forme et matière de l'œuvre, et, pour le lecteur, l'accès imposé' (Tadié, 33). In the course of the elaboration of the *Search*, from the nucleus detectable in *Jean Santeuil* to the non-fictional approach adopted in *Contre-Sainte Beuve*, a process of distancing the main character is observable. From the early novel to the *roman fleuve* Proust gradually distances the protagonist from his own persona, despite the choice of the narrating voice seems to contradict such resolution.¹⁰¹ On the contrary in the *Search* Nalbantian observes that Proust seems to have 'manipulated his materials regarding place and person, creating artistic composites of locale and character. His fictionalisation involved a conglomeration of real life components into the richness of aesthetic ambiguity'

¹⁰¹ *Jean Santeuil* is narrated in the third person while the *Search* is in the first.

(Nalbantian, 99). According to Nalbantian Proust adopts the techniques of substitution, abstraction and analogy to alter real events and personalities, transforming them in founding elements of the architecture of the novel: 'artistic perception, therefore, becomes a kind of re-reading of the universe of perception in the transformation of "represented things" (Nalbantian, 98). In conclusion it can be argued that an autobiographical reading of the *Search* is convenient to the extent to which every work of fiction is generally retraceable to the author's personal experience. The resemblance between Proust and his protagonist is, in this case more than elsewhere, misleading. Henry remarks that 'le but de l'écrivain n'était pas de mieux comprendre sa propre vie mais de connaître *la vie*. Dès lors tout lecteur peut s'identifier à son Narrateur non par sympathie pour sa personnalité mais pour la vérité générale contenue dans l'observation. De la biographie n'est demeuré que ce qui aurait pu être vécu par n'importe qui' (Henry, 161).

It seems likely that the debate around the genre to which *Castle Rock* belongs is destined to protract in the future. Munro's creative enterprise is revolutionary. In the Foreword the author admits that her material is autobiographical, furthermore she offers accurate reference of it in the course of the book. Especially in the section dedicated to her ancestors, where extracts of journals, correspondence and personal memoirs are quoted, the narrative content of *Castle Rock* is grounded to historical facts. Munro specifies, however, that such material has been subject to a creative re-elaboration. The two statements seem contradictory only if a philosophical position is adopted on the nature of objective reality and on the possibilities of literature to depict it. It seems that in the case of Munro's work finding a conciliatory position on the definition of 'reality' or 'truth' is problematic. Particularly in the case of *Castle Rock* a distinction between factual and fictional elements of the narrative is not only a questionable operation but an improperly articulated one. Munro's book considers two strands of autobiographical material. The first is related to events doubly separated from the author, as she attempts to reconstruct the lives of her ancestors who inhabited the Ettrick Valley in the Scottish Borders at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thus a considerable chronological and geographical distance divides the artist from her material. The second part

approaches the author's autobiographical experience and the time of composition of the book. For this section Munro finds inspiration in the oral contributions provided by her immediate relations, in order to reconstruct the lives of the generations nearest to her time of life and the social context of her early youth. Tessa Hadley observes, however, that 'capturing the far past, if one can only do it, turns out to involve very much the same act of imagining as capturing the present. (Hadley). The imaginative process involved in recreating the lives of her distant ancestors, that Munro can research exclusively through historical documents at her disposal, is not dissimilar from the creative re-elaboration of events and characters of her direct acquaintance. Although the lives of her parents and immediate relatives are chronologically closer than those of her Scottish ancestors they are nonetheless beyond Munro's direct capacity of scrutiny. Hadley argues that in both cases it requires a similar exercise of the imagination on the part of the author, oriented towards capturing the distance between what appears, what can be objectively assessed through the evidence of documents or oral accounts, and the intellectual and emotional dynamics that happen within the individual. The tension in Munro's work is between the outer world and the inner consciousness. Such polarity gives rise to discrepancies in the interpretation of reality on the part of the characters. Atwood observes: 'What is fakery, what is authenticity? Which emotions and modes of behaviour and speech are honest and true, which pretended or pretentious? Or can they be separated? Munro's characters think frequently about such matters' (*Carried Away*, XV). The attitude of questioning the nature of 'authenticity' is mirrored by the scepticism of Munro's narrators. The frequent comments on the ethics of storytelling suggest the position of the writer in regard to her craft. Atwood argues: 'How much of art is genuine, how much just a bag of cheap tricks – imitating people, manipulating their emotions, making faces? How can one affirm anything about another person – even a made-up person – without presumption?' (*Carried Away*, XX)

Castle Rock appears to boldly confront 'ethical' questions of writing. Munro, however, has previously overcome moments of artistic crisis in regard to it. Following the composition of the story 'Home,' written after a return to the 'Laidlaw farm in Lower Town along the Maitland, a place still embodying Anne Chamney Laidlaw [Munro's

mother, who died of Parkinson's disease in 1959],' the author considers the possibility of abandoning the literary work. Thacker argues that the cause for such apparent impasse is the writer's dissatisfaction with recent material, which draws upon the impressions produced by reviewing the house of her childhood, where the memories of her mother's illness and the economic difficulties of the family surface with particular vividness. The literary achievement of the stories composed at this juncture, however, is widely recognized. Especially 'The Ottawa Valley' is considered as one of Munro's accomplishments. Thacker argues that the stories "Winter Wind," "Home," and "The Ottawa Valley" 'detail the artistic crisis her return to Ontario brought her: read along with these other stories, the endings of "Home" and "The Ottawa Valley" sound like farewells to fiction because that might well have been what they were intended to be.' (*Writing Her Lives*, 265). Munro's biographer observes that the desire to 'accomplish her writing "with honor" continued to be Munro's ambition'. Between the years 1973, when 'Home' was composed, and 2006, when *Castle Rock* appears, Munro has continued to explore the fictional possibilities of events and people in circumstances in which the 'ethical question' of writing is apt to surface. The author has not disregarded the richness of her autobiographical trajectory. Howells argues that Munro 'has continued to investigate parallels between the instability of language and the incompleteness of any fictional structure on the one hand, and the indeterminacy of human relations and the excesses of the fiction-making imagination on the other' (*Munro*, 153). Such fertile tension is to the reader's advantage. The artist's subjective recreation of events is able to project individual experience unto the sphere of universality, where connections with the audience are possible. Whereas the question of ethicality regards the author, the concern of the audience is elsewhere, in the aesthetic experience. Tessa Hadley, considering specific passages of the first section of *Castle Rock*, concludes:

She has the help of Laidlaw letters and diaries, but she has to make up what she puts in between these outlines, those incomplete or clumsy statements. What she makes up isn't what happened, it is what she hopes

might have happened, could have happened. What is this guessing that writers do? Is it irresponsible, in the light of the scruples of history? And how do readers judge whether it works, when they can't test it against the 'truth'? (Hadley)

The affinity between Proust and Munro's work emerges at the root of the creative process. Stronger than the similarities regarding memory and man's relationship with the past, is their vision of the aesthetic process. Both Proust and Munro transmit their sensitivity, their way of experiencing the world as individuals to the protagonist of their literary creation. This is not true of all writers, of fiction or otherwise. It is observable how creativity is often an effort to escape from the constrictions of one's own personality, of social or personal nature.¹⁰² Even when such escape is but illusory, as the joys and pains of the author's life tend to be nonetheless reflected on the page, the imaginative act at once veils the author's identity and liberates a much yearned sense of freedom. Writers at the other end of such metaphorical spectrum, such as Proust and Munro, do not feel the urge to elude their subjectivity. They aim instead to let the audience see through the eyes of fictional characters that very closely resemble their own selves. Creativity for them is an exercise in seeking the universal in their individual experience of the world, and to render it through the medium of language, rather than inventing distant or fantastic worlds. By exercising their creativity with autobiographical material the narrators of *Castle Rock* and the *Search* confront the larger issue of the purpose of writing altogether and the ethics of storytelling. When the fictional elements on the page closely resemble people and accidents occurred in the extra-textual life not only the identity of the author but that of the beloved ones is investigated by a mechanism, that of literary creation, which refuses to submit to constraints. Proust claims the independence of his literary creations from the author's life by opposing his theory of the separation of the 'moi de l'œuvre' from the 'moi social'. His preoccupation

¹⁰² For instance in the case of authors of fantastic or fairy tales; the relevant examples are indeed too numerous and varied, from *A Thousand and One Nights* to *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf.

is not to find a justification for the acts of betrayal or potential deception inherent in writing but on the contrary to demonstrate how art is necessary to understand life. The ethical dimension of the creative act is instead a constant preoccupation for Munro. It is also one which nourishes and stimulates it, as is evident in the case of *Castle Rock*. In the author's most recent work the qualms and prudent metaphysical statements become a part of the narrative and a constituent element of her aesthetic. The tone adopted by the protagonist of *Castle Rock* is different from Proust's narrator, the very authority of the author in performing her task is questioned and yet it seems impossible to either silence the pen or resolve the essential ethical issue. Munro continues to weave her stories, approaching and frequently intersecting the trajectory of her autobiography, thus breaking ground and leading the audience in a territory as yet uncharted. If Proust seeks to lay the foundations of an aesthetic philosophy Munro is rather an explorer of genres, one who would typically unsettle the very concept of boundaries between them.

Time lost and regained.

Both *Castle Rock* and the *Search* confront the possibility of writing of the past, encouraging the protagonist to explore the limits of the only instrument available for such task, memory. The exploration of memory leads to the discovery that identity is not fixed but modifies with time. The law which rules over the universe of both *Castle Rock* and the *Search* is therefore change. Yet the root of the urge felt by the narrators to initiate their creative enterprise is a sentiment opposite to change, the fear of loss. The latter seems to be inherent to human consciousness and to remain constant despite the fluctuation of identity perceived by both narrators. The act of writing is dictated by that fear of loss, one that prefigures the ultimate destiny of man, the dissolving of consciousness in death. The narrators of *Castle Rock* and the *Search* dread to discover that time slips away from their grasp, that only fragments can be preserved, albeit altered, in memory, or else everything quietly disappears in the undisturbed flow of the centuries. The act of writing is to an extent an exorcism of that fear. The present chapter

seeks to investigate how the narrators of Munro and Proust's works confront the paradox of time lost and how they trust art to regain it.

In an interview published in 1997 Munro discusses the origin of her interest in ancestry, which emerged as she reached middle age and was sharpened by the death of her father Robert Laidlaw.¹⁰³ The artistic implications of such interest are detectable in the collection *Friend of My Youth*, published in 1990. It is not, however, until 2006 and the publication of *Castle Rock* that the fictionalized history of her lineage appears. In 1997 Munro observes: 'as I became middle aged [...] and around the time my father died I started getting these feelings, and I think that many people do, that the time for ancestors seems to be middle age...'¹⁰⁴ The author links two circumstances in her life, the reaching of mature age, whose perception is accentuated by the disappearance of another generation, and the experience of death in her immediate context to explain her resolve to research family roots.¹⁰⁵ Munro's fiction focuses on family relations and on the dynamics present within close-knit communities, as seen through the perspective of a range of female protagonists bearing similarities with the author. *Lives* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are especially inspired by Munro's family history and social background. The collection published shortly after the loss of Munro's father, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1983), includes two interrelated stories, 'Connections' and 'The Stone in the Field,' which signal the appearance of a new theme. In them Munro explores the lives of the pioneers in Southern Ontario at the turn of the nineteenth century and their resonance in the behavioural patterns of contemporary rural Ontarians. The theme is more widely addressed in *Friend of My Youth* (1990), particularly in the homonymous story and in 'Meneseteung,' set in the fictional town of Carstairs during the Victorian age. It can be observed how, around the decade of nineteen-nineties, Munro progresses from a specific interest in her immediate past to the exploration of the lives of the

¹⁰³ The event occurred in the year 1979.

¹⁰⁴ Christopher E. Gittings, 'Constructing Scots-Canadian ground: family history and cultural translation in Alice Munro,' *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol.34, no. 2 (Winter 1997), 74-85.

¹⁰⁵ The death of Munro's mother, occurred when she was twenty-eight and is ascribable to a different emotional context. Ann Laidlaw, who had been affected by Parkinson's disease since her daughter's adolescence, was expected to pass away after more than a decade of worsening health.

generations that preceded hers. In the story ‘Hold me Fast Don’t Let me Pass,’ included in *The Moons of Jupiter*, another narrative thread is detectable. The narrator imagines the lives of men and women who, although connected to her by blood, are separated by their belonging to another continent, Europe. The protagonist, Hazel, travels to the Scottish Borders in the hope of reconstructing her late husband’s lineage, finding herself involved, through acquaintance with a local charismatic woman, both in tales of ancient folklore and in local contemporary life. Christopher Gittings observes: ‘Hazel hopes to disinter a lost fragment of her self through an inquiry into the time her husband spent in a Scottish community before they met and married. Jack’s stories of his Aunt Margaret Dobie and Scotland become a part of Hazel’s imaginary landscape tying her to him, just as the Grieves and Cameronianism compose the connective tissue through which the narrator of “Friend of My Youth” remembers her relationship to her mother’ (Gittings, 81). An interview dating from 1997 suggests that Munro’s interest in the transatlantic connections of her family, both on her maternal and her paternal side, deepen when a particular link is retraced. The author remarks: ‘I found to my surprise that the [Scottish] poet [James] Hogg was a connection.’ For Thacker ‘each side of [Munro’s] family – one Scots Presbyterian, the Laidlaws, the other Irish Anglican, the Chamneys – arrived in upper Canada at the beginning of the great emigration from Britain that followed the end of the Napoleonic wars’ (cited in Gittings, 81). Both Thacker and Barber observe that Munro not only repeatedly visited but, in 1990, spent three months in Melrose, in the Scottish Borders, in order to research her ancestry. She was aware that a significant part of it originated in the nearby Ettrick Valley. Thacker comments: ‘[...] she planned to spend the first three months of 1990 living in Melrose, Scotland, just south of Edinburgh. She had visited there before, but this time she wanted a longer stay at a time “when it wouldn’t be too touristy”, settle down in it a bit.’ (*Writing Her Lives*, 436) Virginia Barber recalls: ‘She had made trips to Scotland, and greatly enjoyed researching people and places that were part of her Laidlaw family’s past.’¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ ‘An Appreciation of Alice Munro,’ p. 92-94.

Alice Laidlaw is a descendant of William Laidlaw, a shepherd who lived in the Vale of Ettrick in the latter half of the eighteenth century. William was the father of Margaret Laidlaw, a countrywoman reputed to have contributed to Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (1802) by relating a number of ballads hitherto only performed orally. In *Castle Rock* Munro thus reconstructs the figure of Margaret Laidlaw and her role in the composition of the *Minstrelsy*:

Margaret Laidlaw Hogg was famous locally for the number of verses she carried in her head. And Hogg – with his eye on posterity as well as present advantage – made sure he took Scott to see his mother. [...] Margaret Hogg made a great fuss when she saw the book Scott produced in 1802 with her contributions in it.

“They were made for singin and not for prentin,” she is supposed to have said. “And noo they’ll never be sung mair.”

She complained further that they were “neither right settin down nor right spelt,” though this may seem an odd judgement to be made by someone who has been presented – by herself or by Hogg – as a simple old countrywoman with only a minimum of education.

She was probably both simple and sharp. She had known what she was doing but could not help regretting what she had done. (*Castle Rock*, 22)

In the same household Scott would have met James Hogg, a young local shepherd, first cousin of James Laidlaw, William Laidlaw's grandson. Hogg was to become the author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and a literary companion to the same Walter Scott. Investigating the lives of these ‘men of Ettrick,’ as well as of the known female lineage, Munro discovers herself to be directly related to a significant voice in the contemporary horizon of European literature. The stature of Hogg as a writer, however, does not seem to be the only cause of interest and artistic inspiration for Munro. The author is surprised by the knowledge that a man of letters

could have sprung from a rural, modest background such as the Scottish Borders in the early eighteenth century, and that such a man should be born within her lineage: ‘when I found the Hogg connection it was especially important for me, because you would not have guessed in my family as I was growing up that there would be a poet, [...] all of this was so much buried beneath the importance of being a practical person and working hard in daily life’ (Gittings, 89). Munro’s attention is prompted by the unexpected ambition of youths, such as Hogg and a number of natives forming the nucleus of a local intellectual society, whose labour was physical, whose financial means were scarce, whose expectations of changing status in life must have been limited. Munro observes:

Hogg and a few of his male cousins – he does not give their names – are to meet in that same high house at Phaupp. By this time the house is used as a lodging by whatever bachelor shepherd is in charge of the high-feeding sheep, and the others are present that evening not to get drunk and tell stories but to *read essays*. These essays Hogg describes as flaming and bombastical, and from those words, and from what was said afterwards, it would seem that these young men deep in the Ettrick had heard about the Age of Reason, though they probably didn’t call it that, and about the ideas of Voltaire and Locke and of David Hume, their fellow Scot and Lowlander. (*Castle Rock*, 22-23)

The disadvantage of rural origins is counterbalanced by Hogg’s rise to literary success in the capital city of Edinburgh, although such reputation remains mythically connected with his humble background. The ‘Ettrick Shepherd’ is Hogg’s successful character in the satirical sketches published under the title of ‘Noctes Ambrosianæ’ in the monthly review *Blackwood’s Magazine*, thanks to which the figure of the genius of humble origin gains notoriety in the Scottish intellectual *milieu*. The condition of the artist born at the periphery, whose talent is nurtured by a native landscape and local folklore, who pursues the literary vocation despite the unsympathetic social and economic circumstances, particularly resonates with Munro. Born in the Ontarian province,

growing up in the years between the Depression and the aftermath of the Second World War, within a community of farmers and labourers, the author feels an empathy with Hogg that transcends purely artistic grounds. Tessa Hadley thus comments on the parallels between Hogg and Munro, despite the divergent historical time and geographical location in which these artists operate:

James Hogg's privileged moment between the old ways of the valley and the modernity of Edinburgh's literary culture mirrors the way Munro has always positioned herself, mediating the old-fashioned rural Canada she grew up in for a sophisticated cosmopolitan readership. Even when her writing is preoccupied with particularly modern dilemmas – sexual freedoms or the breaking-up of the framework of marriage – her almost anthropological long view is so penetrating because of her vantage point between systems. Hogg, moving beyond the closed world of the valley, is able to have a “historical awareness of the recent past” and a vision like Scott's of the “importance of something that was vanishing”: the same vision gives urgency to Munro's writing. The vantage point of the insider-outsider isn't very comfortable, though: it is open to discounting from both directions. Hogg is Edinburgh's “bumpkin genius”; to his cousin James Laidlaw, he has “spent most of his life in conning lies”. Munro's nearer relatives might describe it as “calling attention” to himself.¹⁰⁷

On her repeated travels to Scotland Munro explores the connection with James Hogg. She, however, enquires beyond the documented life of the writer and makes contact with the geographical location of Ettrick more than a century after her ancestors departed from it.¹⁰⁸ Barber mainly attributes to that period the finding of documents related to the Laidlaw family, in regard to the years between their residence in the Ettrick community and their settling in the New World: “[Munro] had discovered an astonishing amount of

¹⁰⁷ Tessa Hadley, ‘Dream Leaps,’ *The London Review of Books*, London, (January 25th, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ In the story ‘Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass,’ inspired by the Scottish sojourn and included in the collection *Friend of My Youth*, the interest in the contemporary life of a small town in the Scottish Borders is juxtaposed with the protagonist's fascination with local folklore.

written material: journals, letters, and published articles by and about the Laidlaw family members' (Barber, 94). The volume of written material left by her ancestors is interpreted as confirming the family tradition of keeping memoirs, regular correspondence and generally of observing reality and registering personal impressions on the page.¹⁰⁹ This predisposition is mentioned in the Foreword to *Castle Rock*, whose relationship between autobiography and fiction has been discussed in the previous chapter: '[...] I was lucky, in that every generation of our family seemed to produce somebody who went in for writing long, outspoken, sometimes outrageous letters, and detailed recollections' (*Castle Rock*, Foreword). In an interview published in 2006 Munro adds: 'Writing about experience, about what was happening to them, writing stories that were in the family history, writing evaluations of whatever society they happened to be living in – sometimes very intolerantly – and so I had all this mass of material.'¹¹⁰ The result of more than a decade of pondering over the origin of the Laidlaw lineage, *Castle Rock* is initiated by a meditation on the lives that preceded the author's and the urgency to inquire about them. The significance of art in the prospect of mortality lies therefore at the heart of Munro's most recent accomplishment.

The attempt to capture the lives of the past, by creating an hybrid structure of fiction and history to support them, is dictated by a combination of a deep-rooted spirit of inquiry and an ancestral predisposition. The author sees herself as continuing the line of Laidlaws who described the world through the medium of language in their diaries, journals and letters, despite the unsympathetic circumstances to any intellectual endeavour in which their rural origin placed them. Such is the case of the famous Hogg and of Munro's direct ancestor, William Laidlaw. There is, however, a specific element connected with Munro's native origin, Canada, which stimulates the interest towards the distant past. *Castle Rock* is in fact both a journey in time and in space, across the Atlantic. As a North American of European descent Munro is aware that part of her ancestral past is not accessible through the direct connection with the land that she

¹⁰⁹ A relevant example in Munro's immediate family is *The McGregors: A Novel of an Ontario Pioneer Family*, written by Robert Laidlaw, Munro's father. It was published posthumously in 1979.

¹¹⁰ Lisa Dickler Awano, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Symposium, (Summer 2006 issue), p. 92-94.

inhabits, and defines in her fiction as 'home'. There is an interruption, in the family line, in the natural bond with the land which is still at the root of Munro's sensitivity and of her poetics. Such interruption is represented by William Laidlaw's transatlantic journey, after which the Scottish past, with its natural and cultural heritage, is forever left behind.¹¹¹ From that perspective Munro's ancestral past is lost both in chronological and geographical distance; the author's creativity is stimulated by the urge of bridging that double loss. The imagination in *Castle Rock* must perform a double leap. The book is an attempt to write a connection not only with the lives of the past but also with a part of the world, Europe, specifically the Scottish landscape and ancient folklore, that was only partially accessible to Munro through the correspondence, diaries and journals composed by her relatives.

Such element of spiritual relation to a faraway land is absent in Proust's novel. The connection with the land descending from past generations is however no less felt by the narrator, who responds to the landscape of Combray as well as to the roman and gothic architecture of the forefathers in ways that stimulate and enrich his meditations on the past. In the *Search*, however, each profound, inarticulate stirring of the soul, such as the mysterious emotion provoked by certain natural and architectonic landscape, constitute an element of the central philosophical argument. The vast architecture of the *Search* aims at exposing Proust's aesthetic views with a rigour that is absent from the preoccupations of *Castle Rock*. The underlying sentiment of anxiety provoked by man's condition and the paradox of time is the real common thread between the two works. The concern of the narrator of the *Search*, at times his obsession and a cause of detriment to his health, is the fear of loss. In *Swann's Way* an early sign of fragility is the boy's distress at being deprived of the maternal kiss before falling asleep. During a night, which ends in a premature nervous crisis, the mother is prevented from respecting the intimate ritual because of the presence of Charles Swann, a guest, at dinner. The boy therefore remains awake until the guest's departure, being eventually discovered in an

¹¹¹ Munro's European descent involves two strands, the Irish and Scottish, both of which constitute material of inspiration for her fiction.

abnormal state of agitation and thus obtaining permission to be consoled by the mother. The narrator, however, registers his melancholic state following the apparent victory:

I ought then to have been happy; I was not. It struck me that my mother had just made a first concession which must have been painful to her, that it was a first step down from the ideal she had formed for me, and that for the first time she, with all her courage, had to confess herself beaten. [...] I felt that I had with an impious and secret finger traced a first wrinkle upon her soul and made the first white hair show upon her head. (*Swann* , 49-50)

Despite the consolation of the mother's presence the sight of the first wrinkle on her otherwise youthful face and the appearance of a white hair on her head provoke in the boy a feeling of unhappiness. Although inarticulately, these signs suggest to him the unknown reality of aging, prefiguring the unimaginable time of death of the beloved parent. More than the cause of her grief, which is the realization of his own weakness of nerves, the narrator laments that he should be the cause of the acceleration of the effects of time on her body. Kristeva argues: 'There is no event that can explain the genesis of a work, not even the death of a woman like Mme Proust. The book had been maturing for ages, yet it was mourning his mother that marked the start of a new time-scale and a new way of life' (Kristeva, 12). Many critics observe that the sudden loss of Proust's mother in 1905, struck by a crisis of uraemia whilst travelling with her son, prostrates the future author of the *Search*. The intensity of his grief forces him to reflect on mortality and on the sense of dedicating one's life to literature, knowing that the loved one's and ultimately one's own self are destined to perish. A subsequent passage depicts the boy's anguish when he is confronted with the necessity of detaching from what is known. It occurs during his first visit to the watering place of Balbec, on the Normandy coast, which he reaches by train from Paris, accompanied by his grandmother. As he enters the

room, which he is to occupy in the hotel, he is seized by a violent crisis, apparently caused by the sight of the unknown furniture:

Perhaps this fear that I had – and shared with so many of my fellow-men – of sleeping in a strange room, perhaps this fear is only the most humble, obscure, organic, almost unconscious form of that great and desperate resistance set up by the things that constitute the better part of our present life towards our mentally assuming, by accepting it as true, the formula of a future in which those things are to have no part; a resistance which was at the root of the horror that I had so often been made to feel by the thought that my parents must, one day, die, that the stern necessity of life might oblige me to live remote from Gilberte, or simply to settle permanently in a place where I should never see any of my old friends; a resistance which was also at the root of the difficulty that I found in imagining my own death, or a survival such as Bergotte used to promise to mankind in his books, a survival in which I should not be allowed to take with me my memories, my frailties, my character, which did not easily resign themselves to the idea of ceasing to be, and desired for me neither annihilation nor an eternity in which they would have no part.¹¹²

The strength of habit, similar to a gravitational force holding physical objects, the furniture of the room, in their fixed position around the protagonist, is suddenly removed by the act of travelling to an unknown place. The boy's mind is jolted by the perception of change, causing a sudden and violent nervous breakdown. The loss of habit forces the narrator to perceive the death of the self who inhabited the former room, located in Paris. In the *Search* a similar trajectory is frequently observable. Since the sense of identity is not fixed, but implies the alternation of different selves in the course of time, the narrator registers such invisible transformation on his own body, through the eruption of sudden illnesses. After each temporary crisis the only trace left of his former self is in memory.

¹¹² *Within a Budding Grove*, translated by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, p. 442. Hereafter *Budding Grove*.

Thus a new love means the death of the self who loved someone else. The old self begins to grieve the loss as soon as it perceives the danger. Swann, although suffering acutely because of his relationship with the unfaithful Odette, and occasionally wishing death to end his 'malady,' shrinks from the thought that his love might be dissolving while he is still capable of perceiving the rupture.

In former times, having often thought with terror that a day must come when he would cease to be in love with Odette, he had determined to keep a sharp look-out, and as soon as he felt that love was beginning to escape him, to cling tightly to it and to hold it back. But now, to the faintness of his love there corresponded a simultaneous faintness in his desire to remain her lover. For a man cannot change, that is to say become another person, while he continues to obey the dictates of the self which he has ceased to be. (*Swann*, 94)

Deleuze observes that 'love unceasingly prepares its own disappearance': even at its climax, the sentiment that is alive and vibrant senses the danger of its own inevitable dissolution, and manifests it with a scene of jealousy. In it the self imagines a moment that never occurs, in which it will enjoy inflicting pain and stimulating the regrets of the person it will have stopped loving. Thus love seems to be a neverending, unavailing chase of another being that can never be possessed, in the constant fear of its own dissolution. Such relentless alternation of love and loss, argues Deleuze, is found in Swann's love of Odette, in the hero's love of Gilberte, of Albertine. Of Saint-Loup, Proust says: 'He suffered in advance, without forgetting a single one, all the pains of a dissolution that at other moments he thought he could avoid' (Deleuze, 19). In the hotel bedroom, in Balbec, the boy is struck with fever at the unconscious realization that things, as well as people, are impermanent. He is prostrated by the even worse discernment that his own identity is shifting. He is overwhelmed not by the fear of the unknown but by the sense of mourning for what he might, and will, eventually lose. The cause of the narrator's rupture with the first unrequited love, Gilberte Swann, is a false

excuse born of the fear of loss of his own enamoured self. The narrator thus reflects on the form of 'suicide of his own self,' which he feels that he is committing:

It was a slow and painful suicide of that part of me which was Gilberte's lover that I was goading myself with untiring energy, with a clear sense not only of what I was presently doing but of what must result from it in the future; I knew not only that after a certain time I should cease to love Gilberte, but also that she herself would regret it and that the attempts which she would then make to see me would be as vain as those that she was making now, no longer because I loved her too well but because I should certainly be in love with some other woman whom I should continue to desire, to wait for, through hours of which I should not dare to divert any particle of a second to Gilberte who would be nothing to me then. (*Budding Grove*, 560)

The extreme consequence of the universal law of transformation is the end of consciousness. As a young man the narrator struggles to comprehend the concept of the death of the beloved, 'la pensée que mes parents mourraient un jour' (*Swann*, 432). Gradually the prospect of his own caducity strikes him. He reacts with an immediate refusal, 'le refus qui était encore au fond de la difficulté que j'avais à penser à ma propre mort' (*Swann*, 432). In the course of meditating on the human condition the mind perceives the possibility of another 'life,' described as 'une survie comme celle que Bergotte promettait aux hommes dans ces livres' (*Budding Grove*, 612). The concept of the possibility, given to the artist, of perpetuating his existence through his work of art and of vanquishing the laws of time, heralds the inspiration for the 'Book.' Deleuze argues that the narrator eventually finds 'the absolute time of the work of art,' in which 'all the other dimensions are united to find the truth that corresponds to them' (Deleuze, 25).

At the end of *Swann's Way* is described a concept of loss which seems irretrievable. It relates to the mores, fashion and sense of morality of a society located in a certain time

and space. The *Search* opens at the flourishing of the *belle époque* in Paris and ends when the consequences of the First World War provoke the social transformation of the country.¹¹³ The acute eye of the protagonist observes, from childhood to maturity, several occasions when the ‘social kaleidoscope’ revolves with previously unimaginable effects. In *The Guermantes Way* the particular circumstance, which draws the narrator’s attention, is the Dreyfus affair, in regard to which the social world seems to change attitude with a discomfiting facility. In the context of a fluctuating political climate the Parisian bourgeoisie appears first to favour the members of the Jewish community and then as easily and briskly, following the simultaneous rise of anti-Semitic sentiments in other European countries, to estrange it.¹¹⁴ At the end of *Swann’s Way* the narrator recalls the pleasure he had in watching Mme Swann’s parade along the ‘Avenue des Acacias’ in the Bois de Boulogne, in the years when the fashion of the *belle époque* thrived in the capital city and he was a young admirer of the elegance of the aristocracy. The narrator registers the striking contrast with the present, identified with hatless pedestrians and the novelty of automobiles. This awakens in him a sense of ‘horror.’ The meditations ends with a sense of irretrievable loss:

The reality that I had known no longer existed. It sufficed that Mme Swann did not appear, in the same attire and at the same moment, for the whole avenue to be altered. The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between

¹¹³ The principal locations in the novel are Paris, Combray, situated in the countryside of Chartres, Balbec, a watering place on the Normandy coast and Venice, where the protagonist travels with his mother after the rupture with Albertine.

¹¹⁴ Albert Dreyfus was a captain of the French artillery of Jewish background who, in 1894, was unjustly convicted for treason and sentenced to life imprisonment in the colony of French Guiana. Although two years later the accusations against him were found to be unjust and the real culprit identified, the French military justice dismissed the evidence while the military counter-intelligence fabricated false evidence of Dreyfus’s involvement as a spy for Germany. In 1899 public opinion was affected by the intervention of Émile Zola in favour of the Jewish officer. French society was divided between ‘Dreyfusards’ and ‘anti-Dreyfusards.’ In 1906 Dreyfus was reinstated as a major in the army and served during the First World War. *The Guermantes Way*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff. Hereafter *Guermantes*.

the contiguous impressions that composed our life at the time ;
remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment ;
and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years. (*Swann*, 287)

Deleuze argues that the sense of defeat against the laws of time, which seems lost as it runs from man's hands into the mysterious mechanisms of memory, is a necessary step in the protagonist's apprenticeship. He must begin by acknowledging that the mundane 'signs' are void. They only lead to the discovery that things are impermanent. The social world, with its coded language and transitory sense of morality, is destined to dissolve and leave nothing behind it. Therefore the melancholic sentiment caused by the alteration of buildings, streets, means of transport, of men and women's fashion is, however inconsolable, functional to the narrator's learning to yearn for something that is not perishable, for the very essence of time. The loss of a certain social world is not comparable, in terms of intensity, to the blow provoked by the death of a beloved, which is equally irretrievable. The two feelings, however, both prefigure the sense of an ending:

For wordliness, at each moment, is alteration, change. 'Fashions change, being themselves borne from the need for change'. At the end of the Search, Proust shows how the Dreyfus Affair, then the War, but above all Time personified, have profoundly modified society. Far from taking this as the suggestion of the end of a 'world,' he understands that every world he had known and loved was already alteration, change, sign, and effect of a lost Time (even the Guermantes have no other permanence than that of their name). Proust does not in the least conceive change as a Bergsonian duration, but as a defection, a race to the grave. (Deleuze, 18)

The first experience of death in the narrator's immediate vicinity, excepting the news received of Tante Léonie's demise in Combray, is sudden and archetypal. It represents the disappearance of pure love, which in the novel is identified with the figure of the

grandmother.¹¹⁵ Two episodes convey the significance of such a loss for the narrator. The first episode occurs when the protagonist is visiting his friend Saint-Loup at his barracks in Doncières, the military town where the young aristocrat is quartered. Receiving the announcement of a telephone call from Paris, from his grandmother, the narrator reflects on the nature of that modern technology. When the familiar voice is disembodied, presenting itself to the narrator's consciousness without the accompaniment of the 'traits de la figure,' 'la partition ouverte de son visage,' the body language with which he is familiar, the numbing armour of habit is broken. The narrator has a perception of the voice's frailty and a vision of the final dissolving of she to whom it belongs:

A real presence indeed that voice so near – in actual separation. But a premonition also of eternal separation ! Over and again, as I listened in this way, without seeing her who spoke to me from so far away, it has seemed to me that the voice was crying to me from depths out of which one does not rise again, and I have known the anxiety that was one day to wring my heart when a voice should thus return (alone, and attached no longer to a body which I was never more to see), to murmur, in my ear, words I would fain have kissed as they issued from lips for ever turned to dust. (*Guermantes*, 966)

Similarly, after Albertine's mortal accident the narrator is reached by her disembodied voice in the form of a letter received whilst he is travelling to Venice.¹¹⁶ Although this event is shocking, since Albertine's signature seems to reach him from the realm of the

¹¹⁵ The narrator's mother, who after the old lady's demise assumes her speech, attitudes and habits, especially the reading of Madame de Sévigné, accompanies the son in his adulthood. The love she bears for him is equally pure, uninterested and incessant. It is considered by Proust critics to be an extension of the grandmotherly devotion.

¹¹⁶ The trip to Venice, dreamed by the protagonist since his early youth but always prevented by his poor health, occurs after the rupture with Albertine. The beloved flies to her aunt's house in Touraine and dies accidentally after falling from her horse. The letter received by the narrator is in fact from Gilberte Swann, whose irregular handwriting induces him to mistake her signature for Albertine's.

dead, it does not provoke in him a strong response. The protagonist seems to be almost indifferent to the miraculous reappearance of the girl through her handwriting. His loving self is already detached from the beloved, regardless of her permanent absence. His jealous self, on the contrary, has kept him attached to her long after her demise, until it has subsided and has been vanquished by the laws of time. Deleuze argues that the opposite occurs in the case of the grandmother. On that occasion the narrator suffers not in consequence of the news of her death but because of an episode of involuntary memory happening months later, in the hotel at Balbec. When Albertine dies the narrator is immediately prostrated by the news. The memory of his love for her, however, dissolves in the course of time. When he eventually receives the enigmatic letter in Venice he is incapable of renewing his anguish over having lost her. Both the grandmother's telephone call and Albertine's letter, although they connect individuals who cannot be physically present to each other, fail to rescue the narrator from the sense of defeat provoked by the idea of death. The narrator's apprenticeship, as Deleuze defines it, is laborious. He must suffer before he can find in his vocation the instrument to transform these apparent forms of loss into the solid, permanent architecture of the work of art. Of greater intensity, although untimely, is the narrator's realization of the grandmother's death. The young man comprehends that he has irretrievably lost her several months after her demise, at his second arrival in Balbec. It is a simple object, a boot, and a simple gesture, that of bending in order to unlace it, that triggers an episode of involuntary memory:

But no sooner had I touched the topmost button that my bosom swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I shook with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. [...] I had just perceived, in my memory, bending over my weariness, the tender, preoccupied, dejected face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother whom I was astonished – and reproached myself – to find that I regretted so little and who was no more of her than just her name, but of my own true grandmother, of whom for the first time since that afternoon in the Champs-Élysées on which she had had her stroke, I

now recaptured, by and instinctive and complete act of recollection, the living reality.¹¹⁷

Deleuze argues that in the circumstance time is irretrievably lost, although it appears to be rescued by memory: '[it] makes us feel a painful disappearance and constitutes the sign of a Time lost forever instead of giving us the plenitude of the Time we regain' (Deleuze, 19). The narrator is initially struck by a 'divine presence,' almost prefiguring a joy, which accompanies every similar episode. Subsequently, however, he is swept by tears and overwhelmed by the sense of grief. The episode of involuntary memory is not a promising, fortunate event as in the case of the madeleine dipped in tea, giving rise to Combray in the mind. Deleuze observes: 'Why does the involuntary recollection, instead of an image of eternity, afford the acute sentiment of death?' (Deleuze, 20) Memory is a precious aid in comprehending the mechanisms of time and yet it is unable to transform lost time in time regained, which prerogative is accorded to art. In the realm of art the episodes of involuntary memory, such as the unlacing of the boot in the hotel at Balbec and the madeleine dipped in tea, find their real signification. The problem of non-being, raised by the sudden disruption of death in the protagonist's life, is solved in the composition of a text, which transcends the constraints of time. Deleuze observes:

The boot, like the madeleine, causes involuntary memory to intervene: an old sensation tries to superimpose itself, to unite with the present sensation, and extends it over several epochs at once. But it suffices that the present sensation set its 'materiality' in opposition to the earlier one for the joy of this superimposition to give way to a sentiment of collapse, of irreparable loss, in which the old sensation is pushed back into the depths of lost time. [The Narrator] begins by experiencing the same felicity as in the case of the madeleine, but happiness immediately gives way to the certainty of death and nothingness. (Deleuze, 20)

¹¹⁷ *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. by Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, p.141.

The paradox which lies at the heart of both *Castle Rock* and the *Search* is the dissolution of consciousness in death. What can be the solace of writing in the prospect of the fading intellectual and emotional light? The effort of rescuing the lives of the past from oblivion, of bringing back to life the voices of her ancestors through the letters, diaries and journals, is the apparent aspiration of Munro's novel. Seeking to rebuild Combray, Balbec and the lost world of youth in the narrator's mind is the initial ambition of Proust's narrator. Can the act of writing, by employing the imperfect instruments of memory and the imagination, fulfil the task given to the protagonists? The question whether time, lost because of the laws that govern human existence, can be regained thanks to a work of art is addressed by both *Castle Rock* and the *Search*. In the following chapter this study will consider the different ways in which that question is posed and answered in Munro and Proust's works.

The conclusion.

Interesting points of contact are observable in the ending of *Castle Rock* and the *Search*. The protagonists recapitulate the threads of a metafictional meditation concerning the task of writing a book. Drawing a curtain on the many lost worlds recreated on the page, on the Combray of the mind as well as on the Etrick Valley and pioneer Ontario, both authors address the essential question of what writing can deliver, to whom and for what purpose. As the *Search* draws to a conclusion the very motive of its composition becomes intelligible, namely the role of art in the prospect of man's limited existence. The extent of the novel serves the purpose of leading the protagonist to the discovery that in the universe of art lies his only possibility to establish a connection with other human beings, and that his creativity is the key to understand the paradox of time. The

interrogative pervading *Castle Rock* is the reason why man is drawn to discover what preceded him, and to record it before the time that is allotted to him expires. Story-telling, in the original sense of man telling his own story, and that of his predecessors, is an instinct that is more potent than the fear of time lost. Art is a challenge to man's condition, allowing his voice to remain audible long after his consciousness ceases to be. The theme on which the book opens returns towards the ending, in the section of *Castle Rock* entitled 'Home,' suggesting the circular movement of the authorial meditation. The time of narration in 'What Do You Want to Know For?' approaches the time of composition of *Castle Rock*, offering a sense of ending which is open to interpretation. The title of the story is suggestive of the author's, as well as of the audience's, questioning on the purpose of researching ancestry, which is the main concern of *Castle Rock*. Howells argues: 'the story [...] is full of promises of revelation, but is anything revealed or there is only another layer of mystery?' Howells concludes that 'once again the answer is referred indefinitely. Some secrets remain secret beyond the limits of sight, science of metaphysical speculation' (*Munro*, 132). In the opening of 'What Do You Want to Know For?' the narrator, a mature woman, meditates on the intellectual curiosity she shares with her second husband, the geographer Gerald Fremlin, about the geological history of their native country. Thacker thus comments on the relevance of such interest for Munro's work: '[They] drove about the countryside exploring and rediscovering – it is not by chance that both "Working for a Living" and "What Do You Want to Know For?" begin with images of Munro and Fremlin on the road, driving about, noticing something' (*Writing Her Lives*, 331). "What Do You Want to Know For?" first appears in the year 1993 under the rubric of "essay" in an anthology published in support of the Canadian Centre of International PEN. It can be supposed that a predominance of autobiographical content, the story's adherence to the reality of specific locations in South-Western Ontario, Munro's native territory, the exactitude of the psychological content persuade the author to distinguish 'What Do You Want to Know For' from the rest of her work as early as 1993. She accordingly decides to present it as a piece of non-fictional prose. In the story three narrative threads are interwoven. The first is the discovery of a fascination for the glacial history of Southern

Ontario, drawn on the map accompanying *The Physiography of Southern Ontario*, by Lyman Chapman and Donald Putnam. The affinity of the other two narrative threads is arguable on the basis of their being connected to the human body. While driving through the countryside with her husband the narrator notices a strange mound of earth on the side of the ‘narrow, bumpy road,’ which they are travelling (*Castle Rock*, 316). On exploration the alien protuberance is revealed to be the mysterious burial site of early German settlers. Meanwhile the protagonist is waiting to be submitted to a medical procedure, a biopsy test, in consequence of a diagnosed lump in her breast. The first narrative thread is accompanied by specific imagery previously observable in Munro’s fiction, related to maps and to the imaginative thinking these are apt to stimulate in the mind of the characters. Howells observes:

The point about maps is that they chart locations of things in relationship to one another, providing a visual and spatial understanding of places, events, processes. [...] In Munro’s projects of textual mapping, alternative worlds are positioned alongside in the same geographical and fictional space so that realistic street maps of small towns are overlaid or undermined by maps of characters’ inner lives and by memory maps of nearly forgotten family or local history – as if the everyday might be transformed to reveal ‘the other side of dailiness’ if we just paid attention and looked closely enough. (*Munro*, 197)

In order to convey the sense of time, not only personal but also historical and prehistoric, whose scale is not comparable with the life span of the characters, Munro frequently alludes to historical reference in her fiction. Relevant examples are Uncle Craig’s magazines in *Lives*, the private memoirs and correspondence of the Reverend Boston in ‘A Wilderness Station,’ the encyclopaedia, Del’s favourite reading etc. Furthermore the characters are frequently confronted with the evidence of a geological past through the direct observation of the landscape. The conformation of the earth can be considered as a form of written document which nature laboriously engraves in the elements, in the

shape of the rocks, in the disposition of lakes, in the distribution of valleys etc. An early example of the meditations which the geological past of the land stimulates is a passage in ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’, included in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). In it the protagonist, a young girl, performs the identical action with her father and brother that the narrator of ‘What Do You Want to Know For?’ performs with her second husband. In both occasions a drive through the Ontario region reveals the transformations undergone by the land in the course of geological eras, detectable in the signs left by the glaciers descending from and then retreating to the North of the Continent. In both cases such information is only accessible to expert eyes. In ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ the secrets buried in the land are revealed to the girl by the father, who seems to possess an ancestral knowledge, despite his scarce formal education. In ‘What Do You Want to Know For?’ the geological history of the country is explained by the map accompanying *The Physiography of Southern Ontario*. The country drive thus stimulates the imagination of the young protagonist in ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’:

He 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. Like *that* – and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-had ground where we are sitting. His fingers make hardly any impression at all and he says, “Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power behind it than this hand has.” And when the ice went back, shrank back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left his fingers of ice in the deep places it had gouged, and ice turned to lakes and where they were today. They were *new*, as time went.¹¹⁸

As the story unfolds the girl perceives another dimension of time, relating to the father’s youth, which is equally alien to her comprehension as the geological past of Ontario.

¹¹⁸ Alice Munro, ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy,’ *Selected Stories*, London: Vintage, 1996, p.4. Hereafter ‘Walker’.

The drive continues to an unknown house inhabited by the companion of his father's bachelorhood years, where his daughter is confronted with 'a new and unfamiliar vision of him.' Howells argues that 'the child may have no language to describe the adult emotions she has witnessed, yet she perceives they are as alien to her own experience as the ancient history of the Great Lakes' (*Munro*, 18). According to Howells, Munro 'traces the topography of home and then radiates outwards tracing the child's efforts to comprehend layers of life beyond the orderly structures of her town's familiar street plan and family relationships' (*Munro*, 18). Such interpretation illuminates one possible signification of the story. Thacker observes that in 'Walker Brothers Cowboy' the narrative hints at the sense of finitude and frailty apt to overwhelm the individual when he or she is confronted with the evidence of prehuman time, as suggested by the following sentence: 'The tiny share we have of time appals me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquillity' ('Walker', 4). Since the protagonist of 'Walker Brothers Cowboy' is a child such peculiarly human sentiment is intermingled with a refusal of disturbing thoughts prefiguring the idea of death, which seems bewildering at such an early age:

Even my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it had lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in. He has not known a time, any more than I, when automobiles and electric lights did not at least exist. 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.
(‘Walker’, 4)

In 'What Do You Want to Know For,' composed thirty years after 'Walker Brothers Cowboy,' the narrative voice approaches the age of seventy, inferring that 'I am over sixty. My death would not be a disaster. Not in comparison with the death of a young mother, a family wage-earner, a child' (*Castle Rock*, 333). The father's simplistic explanations and the child's inarticulate emotions are displaced by a meditation

stimulated by the geological study by Chapman and Putnam. The volume considers the area immediately north of the American border, which embraces the great Lakes. A sincere feeling of attachment to the land prompts the erudite digression. The narrator remarks that ‘there is always more than just the keen pleasure of identification’:

There’s the fact of these separate domains, each with its own history and reason, its favourite crops and trees and weeds – oaks and pines, for instance, growing on sand, and cedars and strayed lilacs on limestone – each with its special expression, its pull on the imagination. The fact of these little countries lying snug and unsuspected, like and unlike as siblings can be, in a landscape that’s usually disregarded, or dismissed as drab agricultural counterpane. It’s the fact you cherish. (*Castle Rock*, 322)

A meditation unfolds on the colours with which the different kinds of geological terrains are indicated in the map accompanying *The Physiography of Southern Ontario*. In it is detectable a sense of tranquillity, a dispassionate questioning and serene absorption exemplified by such observations as: ‘I get a naïve and particular pleasure from matching what I see on the map with what I can see through the car window’ or ‘it is exciting to me to spot the boundaries, when it’s a question of the different till plains, or where the kame moraines takes over from the end moraine’ (*Castle Rock*, 321-322). The story ends with a timeless perception of the seasonal alternation of weather and crops, implying that the human component of the landscape might disappear to be substituted by the eternal equilibrium of nature: ‘But for now, the corn in the tassel, the height of the summer passing, time opening out with room again for tiffs and trivialities. [...] Back to where no great change seems to be promised beyond the change of season. Some raggedness, carelessness, even a casual boredom again in the reaches of earth and sky.’¹¹⁹ Such an undisturbed scenario is counterpoised, however, by the parallel

¹¹⁹ Munro thus comments on the possible influence of religious upbringing in the study of geology and natural history: ‘I didn’t learn any of this at school. I think there was some nervousness then, about being at loggerheads with the Bible in the matter of the creation of the Earth.’ (*Castle Rock*, 340)

storyline involving the discovery of a lump in the narrator's breast and the subsequent preparation for the biopsy test. Howells argues that 'parallels are suggested between landscape and the female body': 'the idea of 'something strange,' an 'unnatural lump' in the landscape which is associated with death, hovers over the narrative to chime uneasily with another 'unnatural lump' in the narrator's left breast which she reveals has shown up on a recent mammogram. [...] What anyone sees is not all there is, for there are hidden secret places and buried stories within the most familiar bodily and geographical territories' (Munro, 147). 'What Do You Want to Know For?' has been described as 'a story of buried secrets' (Munro, 147). The suggestion of the author's frailty, through a suspected illness which might be buried underneath her skin and in the depth of her flesh, is juxtaposed to the discovery, made with her husband during a drive through the country, of a crypt buried by a 'mound blanketed with grass.' Such imagery reminds us of prehistoric eras, being 'like a big, woolly animal – like some giant wombat, lolling around in a prehistoric landscape' (*Castle Rock*, 316). Howells remarks that the story at this point 'traces the double quest to find out the history of the mysterious crypt on the one hand and the nature of the lump in her breast on the other' (Munro, 147). Thus the leitmotif of *Castle Rock* reappears, man's limited existence and yet his need to be connected with the past, both near and distant, familiar as well as of geological eras of which there can be no written memory.

Both works return to the transience of the world, manifest in the scene of the matinée at the Guermentes' and in Munro's visit to the cemetery in Blyth, in the vicinity of her abode in South-Western Ontario, where she discovers the graves of the ancestors who crossed the Atlantic. Beyond a sense of the frailty of life accompanying such scenes the significance of the artistic project lies in its challenging the laws of time. The work of art is projected into a future where the author shall be no more. The Epilogue of *Castle Rock*, entitled 'Messenger,' begins with a description of the transformations undergone by the human landscape of the author's youth, the countryside of South-Western Ontario. Not dissimilar to the closing of *Swann's Way*, where the protagonist laments the disappearance of the mores and fashion of the Faubourg Saint-Germain of his adolescence, Munro observes that the organization of the land typical of the early

twentieth century rural society is dissolving. It is reasonable to predict that, with the disappearance of the current generation, the memory of it will be lost. In the case of *Castle Rock*, however, it is entirely to the benefit of nature that these transformations occur, since nature gradually erases the human traces left on its soil and re-appropriates what was once hers. As in 'What Do You Want to Know For?' nature, which precedes and survive man, is regarded by Munro as a constant against which human life can be measured. Beyond the historical dynamics in which the characters are involved is the vaster horizon of geological history and, on a more domestic scale, the regularity of the crops and the change of seasons. In *Swann's Way* the sudden notice of the nature of the Champs-Élysées, in the vicinity of the Avenue des Acacias, where the protagonist once observed Mme Swann and the Ladies parade in their dresses, accompanies the reflection on the 'revolving of the social kaleidoscope' and the apparent irremediable loss of the social world of the narrator's adolescence:

Nature began again to reign over the Bois, from which had vanished all trace of the idea that it was the Elysian Garden of Woman; above the gimtrack windmill the real sky was grey; the wind wrinkled the surface of the Grand Lac in little wavelets, like a real lake; large birds passed swiftly over the Bois, as over a real wood, and with shrill cries perched, one after another, on the great oaks which, beneath their Druidical crown, and with Dodonaic majesty, seemed to proclaim the unpeopled vacancy of this estranged forest, and helped me to understand how paradoxical it is to seek in reality for the pictures that are stoned in one's memory, which must inevitably lose the charm that comes to them from memory itself and not from their not being apprehended by the senses. The reality that I had known no longer existed. (*Swann*, 287)

The disconsolate conclusion hints at the dissolving of the narrator's own consciousness, long after even the imprecise memories of the Bois will have subsided. The grief conveyed by the lyric passage is a necessary component, however, of the philosophic trajectory of the novel. The protagonist must become aware of the transience of the

world and of his own self in order to search for an escape from such impasse, and an anchor in that transcendent universe, indicated by Proust in the arts. The narrator of *Castle Rock* describes a similar scenario. With the passage of time the human traces left on the soil of the earth such as houses, fences and objects of domesticity are subject to a process of substitution or of oblivion, ending in their disappearance from sight and almost in their sinking into the land. The vegetation eventually conceals or entirely swallows them. The following episode from ‘What Do You Want to Know For?’ seems particularly relevant:

One of my earliest memories is of the summer my father sold off the gravel on our river flats [...] when the trucks were gone, the gravel removed, there was the novelty of pits and hollows that held, almost into the summer, the remains of the spring flood. Such hollows will eventually grow clumps or tough flowering weeds, then grass and bushes.

In the big gravel pits you see hills turned into hollows, as if part of the landscape has managed, in a haphazard way, to turn itself inside out. And little lakes ripple where before there were only terraces or river flats. The steep sides of the hollows grow lush, in time, bumpy with greenery. But the tracks of the glacier are gone for good. (*Castle Rock*, 319)

Similarly human burials are subject to the progressive negligence and abandon which Munro observes in the cases of the Blyth cemetery and of the German crypt. Conversely, as Munro is trying to detect an old graveyard which does not appear on maps, she turns her attention to patches of wild grass in the middle of exploited land: ‘Human burials is one of the very few reasons that any land is undisturbed, nowadays, when all the land around is put to use’ (*Castle Rock*, 347). All that is left for the eye to see are lumps on the surface of the land, irregularities, spots ‘with a look of chance and secrets,’ the sort of unpredictable, hilly landscape which is peculiar to South-Western Ontario and to Munro’s poetic. The following passage describes Munro’s favourite soil indicated on the map of the *Physiography of Southern Ontario*:

My favorite of all the kinds is the one I've left till last. This is kame, or kame moraine, which is a chocolate burgundy color on the map and is generally in blobs, not ribbons. A big blob here, a little one there. Kame moraines show where a heap of dead ice sat, cut off from the rest of the moving glacier, earth-stuff pouring through all its holes and crevices. Or sometimes it shows where two lobes of ice pulled apart, and the crevice filled in. End moraines are hilly in what seems a reasonable way, not as smooth as drumlins, but still harmonious, rhythmical, while kame moraines are all wild and bumpy, unpredictable, with a look of chance and secrets. (*Castle Rock*, 321)

By examining them closely, without the filter of habit or the framework of constricting intellectual conceptions, such as can derive from a religious upbringing, the artist is able to explore the origin of those fragments of the past. In the *Search* the artist's intellectual detachment from the sensible world is described as fostering a different approach to death. It is necessary, in this case, to distinguish between physical death and the permanence of ideas. Four characters belong to the category of artists in Proust's novel: the composer Vinteuil, the actress La Berma, the writer Bergotte and the painter Elstir. In *La Prisonnière* an episode exemplifies the paradox inherent in the writer's life. Bergotte has dedicated his existence to the composition of literary works that survive his death but do not exempt him from his mortal destiny. The writer is caught by a fatal crisis of uraemia whilst he is visiting an exhibition, in the hope of seeing the painting entitled *La Vue de Delft* by Vermeer. The last image he perceives before losing consciousness is a detail of the beloved painting, a little patch of yellow wall representing for him an absolute artistic achievement, the ideal style that he set as a model for his craft and failed to accomplish:

At last he came to the Vermeer which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else that he knew, but in which, thanks to the

critic's article, he remarked for the first time some small figure in blue, that the ground was pink, and finally the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His giddiness increased; he fixed his eyes, like a child upon a yellow butterfly which it is trying to catch, upon the precious little patch of yellow wall. 'That is how I ought to have written,' he said. 'My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several coats of paint, made my language exquisite in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.' (*Captive*, 600)

Bergotte's realization that he has spent his life in the pursuit of something inanimate, outside of his own self, cohabits with the acceptance of the failure. The crude reflection, however, does not seem to rise the phantom of regret for what he has missed of the sensible world. Bergotte grieves for what he has not achieved artistically:

In a celestial balance there appeared to him, upon one of its scales, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of yellow wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly surrendered the former for the latter. [...] He repeated to himself: 'Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.' While doing so he sank down upon a circular divan; and then at once he ceased to think that his life was in jeopardy and, reverting to his natural optimism, told himself: 'It is just an ordinary indigestion from those potatoes; they weren't properly cooked; it is nothing.' A fresh attack beat him down; he rolled from the divan to the floor, as visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead. (*Captive*, 600)

In describing Bergotte's last meditations Proust approaches the core of the *Search* itself, seen as the apprenticeship directed towards the discovery that life is only intelligible through art. Bergotte has a vision of life as a 'game' he has unjustly wasted and yet on the same balance he weighs the little patch of yellow wall, which literally swallows his consciousness. The artist thus faces the paradox of mortality. In the instant in which the

'I,' who is responsible for the composition of the work of art, discovers the laws of time governing human existence, suddenly dissolves. On receiving the news of Bergotte's death the narrator ponders over the essential question: 'In what fashion are we going to fall asleep? And, once we are asleep, by what strange paths, up to what peaks, into what unfathomed gulfs is he going to lead us? [...] Will it bring us in the end to illness? To blissful happiness? To death?' (*Captive*, 599) If consciousness is a self-enclosed, isolated world and social relationships, friendship and love but transient mental states, the architecture of the *Search* seems to leave no hope for communication between individuals. And yet there is a world of ideas, permanent and universal, which is accessible not only to the artist but to humanity at large. Several passages in the novel suggest that the appreciation of the arts, although it might give rise to intellectual controversies (for example the disputes over the music of Chopin, Wagner or the exhibitions of La Berma), nonetheless they foster a form of communion between artist and audience and amongst the members of the audience itself. In relation to the leibnizian universe of the *Search* Deleuze argues: 'Our only windows, our only doors are entirely spiritual; there is no intersubjectivity except an artistic one. Only art gives us what we vainly sought from a friend, what we would have vainly expected from the beloved' (Deleuze, 42). In Vinteuil's sonata the idea of Swann's love survives long after its dissolving, which happens, paradoxically, when he marries Odette. It seems that the notes expressing his love can migrate to distances, temporal and geographic, where he himself and his love are unknown. Swann, who does not recognise in the old Combray music-teacher the author of the Septet, is however under the impression of communicating with the composer's soul through the music:

And Swann's thoughts were borne for the first time on a wave of pity and tenderness towards that Vinteuil, towards that unknown, exalted brother who also must have suffered so greatly; what could his life have been?

From the depths of what well of sorrow could he have drawn that god-like strength, that unlimited power of creation? (*Swann*, 181)¹²⁰

Vinteuil's sonata discloses the intuition that something immaterial can nonetheless hold a sense of reality previously unknown. The demonstration is the force with which Swann, as well as others, are moved by it.¹²¹ Music reveals the composer's soul and simultaneously allows the connection with the other, the audience. Henry observes: "L'accent unique" de Vinteuil garantit que "l'individuel existe". Le musicien seul a été capable d'atteindre "sa propre essence", de "fixer les éléments" composant de son âme. Outre sa superbe vocation, le *Septuor* de Vinteuil sert donc de révélation non pas à un ordre supérieur d'existence mais à la seule existence possible' (Henry, 236). In music there is a prefiguration of another world, which survives the composer himself. For Swann the idea of morality threatens to suffocate every speculation on the non-being, while the sonata only resists in suggesting that something of this existence might transcend death:

In that way Vinteuil's phrase, like some theme, say, in Tristan, which represents to us also a certain acquisition of sentiment, has espoused our mortal state, had endured a vesture of humanity that was affecting enough. Its destiny was linked, for the future, with that of the human soul, of which

¹²⁰ On hearing the sonata for the second time at the Verdurin's salon Swann, who does not realize that he is already acquainted with the composer, thus speculates on his identity:

"I know some one, quite well, called Vinteuil," said Swann, thinking of the old music-master at Combray who had taught my grandmother's sisters.

"Perhaps that's the man!" cried Mme. Verdurin.

"Oh, no!" Swann burst out laughing. "If you had ever seen him for a moment you wouldn't put the question." [...]

"But it may well be some relative," Swann went on. "That would be bad enough; but, after all, there is no reason why a genius shouldn't have a cousin who is a silly old fool. And if that should be so, I swear there's no known or unknown form of torture I wouldn't undergo to get the old fool to introduce me to the man who composed the sonata; starting with the torture of the old fool's company, which would be ghastly." (*Swann*, 262)

¹²¹ Deleuze argues that the superiority of artistic signs is precisely a consequence of their being immaterial: '*Only the signs of art are immaterial.* [...] The superiority of art over life consists in this: all the signs we meet in life are still material signs, and their meaning, because it is always in something else, is not altogether spiritual.' (Deleuze, 39-40)

it was one of the special, the most distinctive ornaments. Perhaps it is not-being that is the true state, and all our dream of life is without existence; but, if so, we feel that it must be that these phrases of music, these conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, are nothing either. We shall perish, but we have for our hostages these divine captives who shall follow and share our fate. And death in their company is something less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less certain. (*Swann*, 398)

The concept of death as ‘less bitter, ‘inglorious’ and even ‘perhaps less probable’ in the realm of art is organically confirmed in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. In it the narrator confronts the idea of mortality, through the act of gazing at the ‘powdered heads’ and aged profiles of men and women reunited in the Guermantes’ ballroom:

At the first moment I did not understand why I failed to recognise the master of the house and his guests, why they all appeared to have ‘made a head,’ generally powdered, which completely changed them. The Prince, receiving his guests, still preserved that air of a jolly king of the fairies he suggested to my mind the first time I saw him, but now, having apparently submitted to the disguise he had imposed upon his guests, he had tricked himself out in a white beard and dragged his feet heavily along as though they were soled with lead. He seemed to be representing one of the ages of man. (*Time Regained*, 1188)

Kristeva argues: ‘Ainsi donc, au temps de l’enfance, des amours, des jalousies, des mondanités, des salons, des discussions esthétiques, des sonates, quatuors, sextuors ou des tableaux, succède le temps de la mort’ (Kristeva, 327).’ In the last volume of the *Search* the leitmotif of death, which the present study has attempted to follow, is resumed and amplified. Malcolm Bowie argues that Proust’s novel begins ‘with a fragile human consciousness holding out against the surrounding darkness’ and ends with the

preoccupation of death, 'in a mighty ceremony of leave-taking.'¹²² The sight of the Guermantes ballroom communicates a sense of urgency to the narrator, which is a direct consequence of the discovery that the physical body occupies a place in time, and is therefore destined to decay and dissolve. If the protagonist is willing to act on all that he has learnt during his long apprenticeship he must hurry before the wheel of time crushes his frail existence. Thus he ceases to fear and instead comes to value the idea of death. It signifies the end of his indulging in social pleasures and of the hesitations in regard to his literary talent:

This idea of death installed itself in me definitely as love does. Not that I loved death, I hated it. But I dare say I had thought of it from time to time as one does a woman one does not yet love and now the thought of it adhered to the deepest layer of my brain so thoroughly that I could not think of anything without its first traversing the death zone, and even if I thought of nothing and remained quite still, the idea of death kept me company as incessantly as the idea of myself. (*Time Regained*, 1280)

The passage describing Bergotte's demise conveys a similar sense of hope. During his funeral wake, as his physical presence is about to disappear from the consciousnesses of those who knew him, his books displayed in the windows of the shops are described as 'angels' heralding the artist's resurrection. The narrator concludes: 'So that the idea that Bergotte was not wholly and permanently dead is by no means improbable (*Time Regained*, 601).'

¹²² Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, London: Hammersmith, 1998, p.98.

Towards a conclusion.

In accordance with the proustian view that in the universe of art connections can be found even between the most distant elements, an affinity is discernible between two artist, such Munro and Proust, whose cultural background and writing style are otherwise far apart. Such connection is to be found in their vision: both authors similarly regard the possibilities of art within the constraints of man's limited existence. The discovery of the law of change compels the protagonists of *Castle Rock* and the *Search* to look backward, in search for the lost fragments of the past and of their own selves. Something of it seems to be trapped in memory, which Proust defines as the essence of time. Time itself is lost. The categories of past, present and future are definable in reason of the only experience accessible to man, the present. The perception of the world, the narrow window through which the individual looks at physical reality, is conveyed through language according to the laws of narrative. Story telling is the way the narrators of both Munro and Proust's works acknowledge the world. Human interaction thus appears to be an intersection and negotiation of personal and collective narratives. The sharing of narratives immensely widens the horizon of human interaction, as it liberates human discourse from the constraints of time and space. It is not necessary for the interlocutors to be physically present to each other in order to share the arbitrary signs and meanings of language, on the contrary communication can happen through chronological as well as geographical distance. Creativity, maintains Proust, dismantles the bars of individual consciousness and allows man to see reality from another perspective, that of other men and women who lived even at a considerable distance of years and kilometres. Munro's book, with its intersection of individual narratives, those penned by the author's relatives and by her own self, delivers as much historical accuracy as can be conveyed through story-telling, the only possible way of writing of the past. The writer's act of honesty is to both to unveil the narrative laws governing every written text and to explore its interaction with the imagination under the very eyes of the reader.

In *Castle Rock* memory and writing are connected in the reconstruction of both the author's lineage and of her own self. The custom of writing, a trait of the Laidlaw generations, is described as a precious element in the composition of the book which includes extracts from memoirs, personal correspondence and journals. Munro suggests that writing is the exercise of giving form to the artist's unique perspective on the world, thus eschewing the controversial question of separating the strands of fiction from those of non-fiction. The reconstruction of the historical context in which the Laidlaw lived is nonetheless based on accurate research, including the war-years and the aftermath of the Depression in Northern America when Munro grew up. The verisimilitude of these portraits is akin to Proust's vivid depiction of the French *belle époque* at the onset of the First World War and of the bourgeoisie, greatly altered in its spirit and mores, that survived it. As Barber argues, however, wherever 'there [is] a hole in the story,' Munro exercises her fictional talent in imagining the lives of the past, thus creating a narrative whose artistic achievement exceeds the preoccupations with autobiographical accuracy (Barber, 94). The philosophical reach of *Castle Rock* transcends the history of the Laidlaws. The book is not the mere chronicle of a genealogy of British emigrants who settled in Northern America. Munro seems to interrogate the sense of urgency of the individual who, at a mature stage in life, questions her origin. In Munro's fiction the interest in personal and family history is juxtaposed to the characters' wondering about the past of the land they inhabit, even in terms of the geological eras that preceded their existence. Adopting a secular perspective on life the author of *Castle Rock*, having reached a frame of mind and an age not dissimilar to the narrator of *Le Temps Perdu*, casts a backwards glance to the past, pointing, as Proust before her has done, a telescope in the direction of events and individuals that are distant from her. The book allows different interpretations to be conjectured around its ending, whose suggestive meditations are not comparable, in terms of intellectual rigour, to the philosophical argument drawn by Proust at the closure of the *Search*. The medium through which both books attempt to describe a secular view of memory and the experience of time, however, is similar. In both cases the word is the instrument of the quest, the

metaphorical lamp with which both authors attempt to throw a light on the past, is the written word.

Munro suggests that the value of traces left by a past civilisation on the land rests in their speaking of the lives of the past, whose existence would otherwise be forgotten. The analogy which she draws between a house and a literary creation can serve to illuminate the importance of local history in her fiction. Arguing that ‘a story is not like a road to follow, it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the rooms and corridors relate to each other,’ the domestic environment is considered as a model suitable to convey the creative process.¹²³ A house can be a metaphor for an enclosed space in which familiarity veils the unpredictable factor of subjective choice. In *Lives* the narrator argues: ‘people's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable – deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.’ A house, similar to a story, mirrors the time when it was built and the life style of those who inhabit it. Both a house and a story can be considered as a time capsule, which the observer belonging to future generations can examine in order to understand what would otherwise be out of his reach. The particular vision, which is to be gained from the inside of a story, depends on the artist who is in part geographically, chronologically and culturally determined. Munro argues that without the specificity and diversity of literature the individual lacks the comprehension of the complexity of life over the course of time. The risk of ignorance or oblivion affects present and future generations:

The removal of so many fences, and of the orchards and houses and barns, seems to me to have had the effect of making the countryside look smaller, instead of larger – the way the space once occupied by a house looks astonishingly small, once you see only the foundations. All those posts and wires and hedges and windbreaks, those rows of shade trees, those varied uses of plots of land, those particular colonies of occupied houses

¹²³ William H. Pritchard, ‘Road Map Not Included’, *The New Yorker*, November 25th, 2001.

and barns and useful outbuildings every quarter of a mile or so – all that arrangement and shelter for lives that were known and secret. [...]

As is you could see more then, though now you can see farther. (*Castle Rock*, 345)

Castle Rock ends with the description of a domestic object, which the narrator remembers collecting in one of the houses that she has inhabited. In this scene an echo can be detected of the metaphor of the story as a house. The object is a ‘magic doorstep,’ a ‘big mother-of-pearl seashell’ which serves the purpose of keeping the doors open and communicating, between the different worlds described by Munro in her narrative. The narrator depicts it as a ‘messenger from near and far,’ listening to which, by holding it to her ear, she discovers ‘the tremendous pounding of my own blood and of the sea’ (*Castle Rock*, 349). It is possible to imagine that ‘the pounding of my own blood’ alludes to the affinity that Munro feels for the lives of her ancestors, and the rumour of the distant sea to the transatlantic voyage which transported them to Northern America.

The present study argues that by composing *Castle Rock* the author intends to transcend the limit of autobiographical writing. It equally holds that criticism seems unable to explore beyond the adherence of a work of art to the author’s autobiographical experience. The book exceeds the category of autobiography as it does not exclusively depict a life but it attempts to throw light on the urgency of researching its origins. Furthermore it illuminates the connection between remembering and writing, between researching the past and exercising the creative imagination. In seeming accord with Proust’s aesthetic philosophy Munro suggests that in an immanent world all is destined to perish and dissolve, including the mind preserving the memories of the past. Only the artistic act survives, in this case the written text. The literary work is nurtured by memory and yet does not coincide with it. It implies the cognitive re-elaboration of events by that imprecise, creative mechanism. The present study has attempted to demonstrate that memory can be described as an altering lens through which the individuals see their past. It is therefore definable as a subjective, not objective category

of experience. Through the appreciation of a work of art generations of geographically, historically and culturally determined individuals can be connected to what has preceded them, from which they are otherwise excluded because of their limited life span. Munro argues that the impulse for an the interest in ancestry and consequently the composition of *Castle Rock* is the prospective of impending death: 'It happens mostly in our old age, when our personal futures close down and we cannot imagine – sometimes cannot believe in – the future of our children's children. We can't resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life' (*Castle Rock* , 347). *Castle Rock* is thus comparable to the mother-of-pearl messenger, projecting not only Munro's personal history but also a succession of different worlds, from the Vale of Ettrick of the early nineteenth century to the contemporary provincial South-Western Ontario, in the future where audiences unknown to her will receive it. They will thus hear, rising from the pages, 'the tremendous pounding of the blood and of the sea.'

Proust's extensive meditation on the fugacity of existence, which informs the *Search* from its beginning, concludes on a note not dissimilar to that suggested by *Castle Rock*. The narrator initiates his tale with the description of sleep as a form of temporary death disorientating the mind and threatening to dissolve the idea of identity. As the narration unfolds the protagonist experiences the social world, friendship and love and discovers that these are transient and illusory forms of communication. Social intercourse is submitted to an aesthetic code and regulated by a sense of morality, which produces the illusion of permanence. Society is instead a revolving kaleidoscope of opinions, mores and fashion. Love and friendship seem to be rescued from the superficial flow of quotidian relations and recognized by the self as outer realities, whereas they are projections of it. It seems therefore that death approaches without it being possible for the individual to escape his own subjectivity and comprehend the sense of existence. While the mind is occupied in acknowledging its continuous transformations everything and everyone is altered by the silent force of time. In *Le Temps Retrouvé* the narrator observes the dramatic alteration of men and women who, like himself, belong to the pre-

war Parisian society. At the matinée of the Prince of Guermantes, referred to as 'le Bal des têtes,' the Duc of Guermantes seems to wear a powdered wig and white whiskers. He seems to be imitated by his guests, because of the temporary incapacity on the part of the narrator to recognize the phenomenon of aging: 'At the first moment I did not understand why I failed to recognise the master of the house and his guests, why they all appeared to have 'made a head,' generally powdered, which completely changed them' (*Time Regained*, 1188). The narrator discovers that the only escape from the constrictions of the self and from the caducity of existence is in the realm of art, which is universal and timeless. Through the appreciation of a work of art the mind can exceed the narrow confines of individuality to comprehend the perspectives of other individuals and thus initiate the only possible form of communication with them. Through the exploration of artistic treasures the individual is connected to different forms of humanity, located in different times and places:

Our life; and also the life of others; for the writer's style just like the painter's colour is a question not of technique but of vision. It is the revelation, which by direct and conscious means would be impossible, of the qualitative difference within the way in which the world appears to us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain the eternal secret of every individual. [...] Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world, our own, we see it multiplied and as many original artists as there are, so many worlds are at our disposal, differing more widely from each other than those which roll round the infinite and which, whether their name be Rembrandt or Ver Meer, send us their unique rays many centuries after the hearth from which they emanate is extinguished. (*Time Regained*, 281)

The artist is the metaphorical bridge between individual sensitivity and the universal system of linguistic signifiers.¹²⁴ The limits of memory, which have been explored in the *Search*, are surpassed in the creative enterprise. Proust's novel suggests, more radically than but harmoniously with Munro's intuitions in *Castle Rock*, that life becomes intelligible only in works of literature. The artist selects from the mass of apparently meaningless and transitory events of a life the universal experience of being immersed and apparently lost in them.

¹²⁴ As previously mentioned Proust does not seem to consider the problem of translation, which inevitably alters the concept of universality of literature.

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