Gerald Murnane′s Changing Geographies

by

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> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> T.S. Eliot

Last November it was announced that Gerald Murnane is the winner of the Patrick White Award for 1999. The citation mentions that his writing "is focussed on the minutiae of country and suburban life," but also that "he uses these to push forward an obsessive philosophical quest – for the ideal landscape, for a true home, for a resolution of dualities." Concentrating on the latter part of the statement, this paper will discuss the function of Murnane's geographical imagery. It will be argued that this kind of symbolism is used to hint at a possible "resolution of dualities" and indicate "the existence of a land beyond the known land" (P 45). Exiled from his "true home," a phrase that occurs both in *Tamarisk Row* and in *Landscape With Landscape*, he explores notions of "behind," "underneath," and "beyond," which are always present in his writing. The first-person narrator cum traveller in *The Plains* takes a significant stance in the introductory paragraph of the novel that is typical of Murnane's speakers when stating that he is looking for "anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearance."

Murnane's shifting and wide-ranging geographies take us from Hungary to the USA, from Sweden to Paraguay, and from the suburbs of Melbourne to the prairie. All the same they are recognisable from one book to another, characterised by a set of features that make it possible to define a Murnanean landscape by its properties and functions. He deals with a unique and personal precinct that is totally mental, often referred to as an inland, and the geographical specifications carry similar symbolic connotations in the totality of his oeuvre. There are even subtle and passing references to one piece of his writing in the context of another, which makes it possible to consider all his fiction from this aspect. The changing geographies reflect

not only the textual and linguistic processes in a metafictional or philosophical mode. They also seem designed to comment on Murnane's own development as a person and writer.

Lecturing on his novel *The Plains* at La Trobe University, Gerald Murnane argued that it "was the story of a man who tried to see properly" (unpublished manuscript quoted in Salusinszky 43). Actually, all his narrators, most of whom are very much alike and also in many respects have an obvious resemblance with the author himself, share this aim: "to see properly". Trying to come to grips with his own relationship with the surrounding world, Murnane, like the speaker in the central story of his latest book, *Emerald Blue*, has "come to recognize that the only subject he was able to write about was his own mind" (EB 175). Like Husserl and other phenomenologists he considers the study of the potentialities and functions of consciousness, mind and memory as a primary task in his writing. His attention is directed towards cognitive processes rather than demonstrating the veracity of external conditions. In other words, his main interest is not the world as it exists but as it is given in our minds. Regarding the interplay between the external and the internal Salusinszky finds numerous parallels between Murnane's plains and Derrida's *différance* (see e.g. Salusinszky 5, 78). Consistently pursuing the theme of mental exile, seeking to find the "true home" that was mentioned in the citation quoted above, Murnane practises what according to Salusinszky can be referred to as "'fictionalised' philosophy-writing." This obsession, he argues, has parallels not only in Derrida but also in, for example, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Wittgenstein (Salusinszky 3). In the process of quest and exploration, his narrators, like Murnane himself, experience that pictures, paintings, photographs and visual memories induce series of associations that initially seem unconnected but when seen from a distance at least suggest the possibility of a meaningful pattern.

All his books are concerned with mental exile and quest, and the very titles of some of them suggest the significance of the geographical settings, such as *Inland*, *Landscape With Landscape*, *The Plains*, and "Stream System". Murnane is an avid reader of maps and atlases, and there is a constant interconnection between text and cartographic representation. His texts can be considered as maps, and various maps are turned into texts, implying that the human mind can be compared with the printed network that we call a map. What we call mind, identity or personality consists of a boundless network of images, and similarly what we refer to as reality is an intricate tissue of images and representations (see e.g. EB 85). Factual references that are repeatedly made to atlases, encyclopaedias or other such works deceptively

confer a sense of reality and have a distinct *Verfremdungseffect* in the literary context, which makes any attempt at genre definition all but impossible. Murnane's geographical knowledge is put to use when he introduces and combines maps, grid patterns, projections, and pictures from a variety of times and places thereby creating a fictional landscape that is no longer realistic but filled with secret energy and mystery. The literary text takes on the properties of a provisional map on which continually new territories are incorporated into surprising constellations, the route forever aiming at the hazy horizon at the far end of the plain where some ultimate truth might be found.

His maps are not totally reliable, though, because it is doubtful whether there anywhere is "a plain that might be represented by a simple image" (P 53). There is even "the theory of the Interstitial Plain: the subject of an eccentric branch of geography; a plain that by definition can never be visited but adjoins and offers access to every possible plain" (P 76). This idea is further developed in *Velvet Waters* and its theme of deceptive and intriguing 'folds' in maps (Salusinszky 96). In this manner Murnane's grassy *plains* also become interstitial *planes* on the map representing his mind.

The quoted passages indicate the foregrounding of the *plain* as the region to be investigated and mapped. In Murnane's books the traditional Australian theme of exploration is set in an inland that must not be confused with the interior of the continent but is wholly mental and individual. His questing narrators are forever travelling towards the inaccessible "heart of some remote private plain" (P 53), and in the process new vistas keep opening up. It is argued that "we are all explorers in our way. But exploration is much more than naming and describing. An explorer's task is to postulate the existence of a land beyond the known land" (P 45). To an extent it is justified to argue that this is the central idea behind Murnane's writing as a whole. Notions of travels, horizons and borders become loaded with significance, or, as expressed by the filmmaker-narrator in *The Plains*, such a journey of exploration is "a venture into obscure regions by a route that few knew of" (P 54). The tone and style in the following passage recalls Marlow's reflections in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, another story of a journey to "the interior". The landowner speculates on the location of "The Great Darkness" where possibly "all our plains lie," wondering whether the others realize

> … that all the while the great tide of daylight was ebbing away from all they looked at and pouring through the holes in their faces into a profound darkness? If the visible

world was anywhere, it was somewhere in that darkness – an island lapped by the boundless ocean of the invisible. (P 100)

It can be argued that all Murnane's texts convey an almost Romantic thought in the sense that they suggest meanings that cannot be translated into purely logical propositions of reason and science. They visualise an area with a strong connection between place and mind that only the creative artist could hint at, an island or enclave within which every plainsman could see himself as "a solitary inhabitant of a region than only he could explain" (P 6). The religious dimension is clearly relevant too:

> … his mind was a place, a vast arrangement of places. Everything he had ever seen in his mind was in a particular place … some of the furthest places in his mind might have adjoined to the furthest places in some other mind. He had no wish to deny that the furthest places in his mind or in the furthest mind from his mind might have adjoined the furthest places in a Place of Places, which term denoted for him what is denoted for some other persons by the word *God*. (EB 87)

As in this passage, the idea of *place* is strongly foregrounded. The recurrent notion of the furthest horizon, "the Place of Places," resembles not only Marlow's "furthest point of navigation" but also Derrida's idea of the *transcendental signified* as the non-existent extra-textual point by reference to which the meaning of a text can be plotted and fixed. No map or other element of a system of meaning has significance in and for itself but only as part of the system. The connection that seems to exist between a text and the real world is merely an illusion. Consequently, there is nothing firm upon which subsequent meanings can be constructed. The horizon can only be approached asymptotically, as in "The Battle of Acosta Nu": "I saw the routes of my journeys towards [my lost land] during my lifetime as a pattern like those graphs of equations that tend towards but never reach a certain axis" (LWL 97). By stepping back, though, looking from a distance at the assembled kaleidoscope of perspectives and recollections of places a kind of pattern might possibly be discerned. Refuting Imre Salusinszky's statement in the introduction to his bibliography that "there is no reason to believe that [Murnane] has read a page of Husserl or Derrida" (3), Murnane mentions that, after reading an article by Derrida in TLS in the 1970s, in spite of finding the text "incomprehensible," he has "always remembered one sentence: *To write is to go in search*" (EB 17). Thus this idea expressed in the Author's Note prefacing Murnane's first novel, *Tamarisk Row* becomes central also in all his later writing:

> If you could fill each square on a calendar with a picture instead of a number, and if each picture could show clearly some event or landscape or recollection or dream that made each day memorable, then after a long time and from a great distance the hundreds of pictures might rearrange themselves to form a surprising pattern. *Tamarisk Row* is one such pattern.

Practising what might be termed the geography of the page, Murnane tries to establish an explanatory code in retrospect. A square on a calendar, a separate page, paragraph or sentence are units that taken together constitute the "surprising pattern" of mind-mapping. The page of a book is seen as a window or a mirror (I 121) in which each sentence and paragraph are painstakingly chiselled to sound exactly right and to convey "the shape of meaning" and "the contour of our thought" (Murnane, *Meanjin* 515-516).

In the context of the folded map, a combination of colours becomes significant, especially that of blue and green as in the stained glass window in the Catholic church (EB 177), the haze on the horizon beyond the grasslands in *The Plains*, the feathers of the kingfisher, or indicated in the very title of the central story in *Emerald Blue*:

> Each of these maps was itself an enlargement of one or another detail on an earlier map in the series, and the first map, from which all the other maps and all the text arose, was a simple representation looking more like a coat of arms than a map of any place on earth. The first map was an area of land roughly square in shape and divided *per bend sinister* into two triangles. The upper triangle was coloured a light green and the lower triangle was coloured a dark blue … Beside the area of light green were the words GRASSY COUNTRYSIDE, and beside the area of dark blue were the words VIRGIN FOREST. (EB 176)

From *Tamarisk Row* onwards contrasting colours, as on the jockeys' silk, Clement's marbles, the opposition between the Blue-greens and the Old Golds in *The Plains*, or the contrast between dark green and cream in "Finger Web" (VW) become related to the notion of place, as opposed to space. Place is something familiar and personal that has to do with identity, memory, and a sense of belonging, and unlike space it has individual meaning ascribed to it. Through mapping and naming, however, space can be appropriated and turned into place. Thus when they set out on their quest, the starting-point for Murnane's mental travellers is a place they know well, usually a Melbourne suburb. It is mostly clearly defined in a matter-of-

fact fashion, as in *Velvet Waters* with close and detailed, often repetitive documentation: "I am sitting at a battered garden-table on the back veranda of a ten-room stone house on a hilltop thirty-four kilometres north-east of the centre of Melbourne" (VW 71). Whenever Melbourne is concerned we are given exact bearings on streets and creeks, and the descriptions indicate Murnane's almost obsession with motifs of pattern, order, maps and photographs. Positions and vantage-points are defined by the traveller with considerable accuracy:

> Behind me was the *place* that I came from this morning when I set out for the *place* where I am now. Behind me was the *place* where I have lived for the past twenty years – where I have lived since the year when I wrote my first book of fiction" (VW 45, emphasis added)

As the traveller approaches the inland or the plains, the landscape becomes defamiliarized, and dreamlike, more and more assuming the properties of unknown *space*, and it is evident that already existing maps are of no avail as "the true extent of the plains has never been agreed on (P 8). The traveller in *The Plains*, for instance, finds himself in an enclave, "encircled by Australia" (P 6), that is space surrounded by place, "a zone of mystery enclosed by the known and the all-too-accessible" (P 77).

Then as the exploration proceeds, a number of seemingly unrelated geographical key concepts are introduced and the setting becomes increasingly imprecise, "the world itself…one more in an endless series of plains" (P 9). Motifs of space, territory and landscape are related to notions of identity and the very act of writing:

> [The plains] are not … a vast theatre that adds significance to the events enacted within it. Nor are they an immense field for explorers of every kind. They are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings. (P 92)

In this manner Murnane deconstructs and inverts the traditional myth of the Australian interior. His Inner Australia is not the empty arid desert but a lush grassland where the plainsmen have assumed the cultural task of "shaping from uneventful days in a fat landscape the substance of myth" (P 12). There are striking similarities, not only thematically, between Gerald Murnane and David Malouf. For instance, a passage like the following one from Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* has the same treble, time-space related perspective in

combination with the symbolic grassy landscape of the mind. The speaker is Ovid, one of Malouf's mental travellers, in search of his "true home":

> I see us from a great height, two tiny figures parting the grassland with a shadowy crease as we move thought it like swimmers … From a point far ahead I see us approaching. From a point a whole day's distance behind us, I see us moving away. (*An Imaginary Life* 96)

Murnane and Malouf are both concerned with solitary individuals trying to find patterns that are hidden beyond and underneath physical appearance, and eventually they find that, paradoxically, it is only through the lie of fiction that ultimate truth can be approached. Thus in Malouf's *Johnno* the mystery of the central character becomes explicable, at last, only as some "crooked version of art":

> For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man's life as we know it intended to violate? (Malouf 164-165)

When writing about growing up in Australia, Murnane and Malouf are both concerned with geography, maps and connections. As Dante, the narrator in *Johnno,* argues: "The pattern might have been there already if we had eyes to see it" (Malouf 151).

The notion of an unknown territory behind or beneath the mosaic fragmentation of ordinary perception is central even in Murnane's first novel, *Tamarisk Row*. It is related to the recurrent idea of *essence* and the basic polarity between two categories of people: "those aware of the essences of things against those preoccupied with appearances" (LWL 42). For those who can perceive the essence, the surrounding world presents a dichotomy between merely sensory visual images and their inner vision where ordinary perceptions are distilled and transformed by the mind. Murnane asserts the existence of "an alternative, separate, and superior reality capable of meeting in an infinite number of ways the needs of those who are privy to it" (Tittensor 101). The plains represent such a deeper and superior unrealistic reality, "real, that is spiritual geography" (P 29), the only area from which the furthest horizon can be perceived in the distance. In this respect Gerald Murnane qualifies as one of the authors that

Helen Daniel defines as "liars". As she argues, everything that he has written is based on one central proposition: "that the Lie of fiction is the truth" (Daniel 310):

> Whether he is alone out there on the vast plains defending his country … or whether he is the founder of his own city of words, defending it against all the invading reality, stopping up its gaps and buttressing its ramparts – he is always the fierce and indomitable guard of his own landscape, which is his own Lie. His work is among the most solitary and the most beleaguered in Australian fiction – besieged by the reality outside, by the impossibility of his own enterprise and by his own self-parody.
> (Daniel 310)

In Murnane's literary universe place has dominance over time to the extent that time becomes almost non-existent: "time has been abolished from my world" (VW 161). History and time, which have been privileged in the modern era, appear as futile human constructions, related to individual and subjective experience. If realistic fiction represented the Newtonian cosmos in all its causal continuity, Murnane's writing rather reminds us of the teachings of contemporary physics according to which the whole idea of a causal universe is undermined by the uncertainty principle. From this aspect his outlook is in keeping with Foucault's and other literary theorists' emphasis on the centrality of space in modern systems of thought:

> … the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault 22)

The heterogeneous spaces of sites and relations, which Foucault terms "heterotopia," his scepticism about so-called truth, and his distrust of the correspondence between fact and concept have obvious parallels in Murnane's writing:

> The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible … they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory /..../ Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous,

as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation, and I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner. (Foucault 25, 27)

Murnane's intricate juxtaposition and interplay of past, present and future, like Einstein considering such temporal distinctions as illusory, has a geographical location that may cause optical problems to the reader. Writing about his own experience, the central character in many of Murnane's texts presents, as mentioned, a double or treble perspective. He is seeing himself from his position in the present evoking memories of a place in the past when he as a young man was looking towards the future, imagining the place where he would find himself then. Typically enough words like "remember" and "foresee" are frequently used. As in the following passage, we as readers are repeatedly reminded that we are made privy to the painstaking actual process of writing:

> Whenever he remembered his games during the years when he remembered the hut in the forest often after having seldom remembered it for many years, which years – the years of his remembering – followed an event that will be reported in the paragraph following the next paragraph, he supposed that he imagined himself during all of his games as living with one or another wife-in-his-mind on one of the toy farms that he had cleared near the toy forests that he had left uncleared. At some time during one of the years mentioned in the previous sentence, the chief character remembered having seen for a moment of the one day mentioned in the fifth sentence of the previous paragraph some of the blue or green feathers on the breast of a bird that flew through a shaft of sunlight in a place of dense timber and undergrowth beyond the clearing that his father had made in the forest. (EB 171-172)

By his selective zooming-in technique Murnane offers a multidimensional orientation. Time can be seen "as one more sort of plain" (P 75, 90) because "[w]hen a man considers his youth, his language seems to refer more often to a place than to its absence, and to a place unobscured by any notion of Time as a veil or barrier" (P 75). Within this network of relational interdependence the boundaries between time and place, between life and art become blurred. Events do not follow in a serial order that expresses underlying causal laws: "My world has no *forward* and no *back*, only a place here and a million million other places near or further away" (VW 152):

In all the world there has never been, there is not, and there will never be any such thing as *time*. There is only *place*. Eternity is here already, and it has no mystery about it; eternity is just another name for this endless scenery where we wander from one place to another. (VW 152)

Being *solitary* in the vast landscape of the mind is a predicament that Murnane shares with Emily Brontë, who obviously holds a certain fascination for him. In *Inland* he mentions *Wuthering Heights* as a book he repeatedly returns to (I 118), and in admiration he refers to its author as a "true solitary" (EB 192). The last paragraph of *Inland* is a direct quotation from the end of Brontë's novel, an evocation of a well-known grassy place in English literature even though the source is not mentioned in the context. Another, more subtle link with the Brontës can be perceived in the concluding story in Murnane's latest book *Emerald Blue*, called "The Interior of Gaaldine." It is allegedly a "true account of certain events recalled on the evening when [he] decided to write no more fiction." Gaaldine is not mentioned in the text so the reader is expected to know that this was the name of the imaginary island made up by Anne Brontë as a parallel to Emily's better-known Gondal, their respective equivalents of Murnane's mental landscapes. As a young man Murnane dreamt of falling in love with a woman resembling Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. Unfortunately, to be able to meet somebody like her he would "have to live the opposite of a solitary life" (EB 192). Also he realized that "such a young woman could be met only in the place called Gondal," that is Emily's imaginary island, a "place in [her] mind" exclusively (EB 193), not intended to be entered by strangers. Today it has been partly explored, though. From the *Gondal Chonicles* we can learn something of the place whereas the mystery of Anne's Gaaldine still gives free reins to our imagination as it has to remain forever unknown like the fictitious island of New Arcadia in Murnane's story.

The mind stores "a number of images of meaning" (EB 161), disparate and seemingly irrelevant but by the previously mentioned zooming-in technique an image that has been in the background for a long time can be bought to the foreground (EB159). In the process a relationship between the multifarious images is established, frequently linked by the unifying image of *grass* and *grasslands*, both literary and factual. Gerald Murnane's fascination with *Wuthering Heights* might partly be explained by its descriptions of grassy landscapes. The following passage referring to Brontë's novel indicates the visual character of imagery and

memories. It also contains an interesting statement about his preference for this and other novels because their setting or imagery in his mind and memory relate to "grassy places":

> I got up from my table today and took down the book from its shelf and turned to the last paragraph and read it aloud…. [W]hile I read it aloud I dreamed of myself seeing headstones of graves with grass-stems swaying near by and clusters of tiny flower-heads among the grass and in the background a view of indistinct moorland…
>
> Like most people, I dream of myself seeing places while I look at pages in books. The places are always grassy places; I do not go on looking at the pages of a book if the first pages have not made me dream of myself seeing grassy places. (I 119)

The idea of "grassy places" has an impact both because of the fact that this kind of literary geography has continued to serve as a source of creative inspiration and because it provides an interpretative and unifying link between all Murnane's books. This makes it natural to consider them as a coherent body of literary and philosophical vision. The grasslands at the edge of Murnane's own Melbourne suburb are mystically connected with the Great Plains in America, the Prairie, the Puszta, or the Great Hungarian Alfold, all together constituting a specific spiritual geography, related to the idea of the "true home." This kind of landscape forms the background of moments of dream and vision, with crucial significance in the mind of the narrator. In "Emerald Blue," for instance, grass is the common denominator that helps bringing together images as disparate as: ruts filled with water in an Australian painting, a stamp marked 'Helvetia', a bachelor uncle, the colour of emerald, Proust, a line of trees against the horizon, and, again, *Wuthering Heights*.

Recurrently the narrator pictures himself as surrounded by grass or remembering grassy landscapes. There are a number of foregrounded events associated with isolated and enigmatic big buildings, libraries or mansions, growing up from the grassy plains, childhood walks through the paddocks with a favourite bachelor uncle, imagined horse-races, and various escapist masturbation fantasies connected with grassy settings. In these contexts both the existence and the lack of "female presences" (EB 95) have attracted the attention of critics and reviewers. It is noteworthy that both the narrator's dreams of shamelessly following his adolescent sexual impulses and his idealistic dreams of the innocent wife-in-his-mind are accompanied by the vision of a world without women. Some of the critics, taking a feminist approach, see the journeys of exploration as colonizing the female, emphasizing the narrow-minded religious attitudes regarding sex or reacting against Murnane's obsession with

sexuality and alleged prurience in these matters. Commenting on *The Plains*, which he reads as parody, Ken Gelder sees the film-maker cum narrator's interest in the landscape as "a metaphor for his interest in the various women who come into his field of vision." Instead of exploring the plains, which Gelder takes to represent "the site of erotic desire," the narrator, he argues, considers the women as the primary objects of his lust: "interpretation becomes phallocentric ('the camera in my hand'), a way of impressing the opposite sex, a way of making oneself significant to women." Murnane's earlier novels, too, according to Gelder, primarily deal with "male adolescent desire and male sexual exploration (the woman-as-plains, to be explored and colonized)." Also *The Inland*, he finds, is "scattered with disturbing references to the violence done to women by men in the name of desire"(Gelder and Salzman 125-127).

Certainly a feminist interpretation of Murnane's geographies could be rewarding but a reading focussing merely on his preoccupation with sexual desire seems far-fetched, simplistic and also reductive, considering the complexity of Murnane's unity of vision and consistent imagery. Nor is it compatible with the statement that the plains are "simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings"(P 92). This outlook can be interpreted from a broader feminist perspective, though. Among feminist geographers in today's discourse, making a distinction between time-geography as opposed to human geography, concepts of *place* and *space* are implicitly gendered. *Place* is understood "in terms of maternal Woman – nurturing, natural, but forever lost" (Rose 62). Woman as landscape/place becomes part of Murnane's exilic motifs, his search for the "true home," and his "image of an image of a woman" (VW 154) in grassy landscapes. What the narrator in *The Plains* imagines is "not solid land but a wavering haze that conceals a certain mansion in whose dim library a young woman stares at a picture of another young woman who sits over a book that sets her wondering about some plain now lost from sight (P 53).

Whether the imaginary women occur in the shape of naked girls in magazines or madonna-like figures they belong together with the female notion of *place* whose true nature can not be explored and revealed by objective geographical study. It is true that the young man is pictured "relieving himself" and also kneeling "on the grass in his mind in front of the young woman in his mind" (VW 185), but the symbolic impact of the scenes should not be ignored. *Space*, on the other hand, pertains to a different sphere, that of "Western hegemonic masculinities." However, "both the opaque unknowability of *place* and the transparent

knowability of *space* depend in their different ways on a feminized Other to establish their own quest for knowledge" (Rose 62, emphasis added). In the dualistic structure that is also part of Murnane's geographies, *place* is private, emotional, and filled with mystery and nostalgia, whereas *space* is public, rational, and transparent. In the process of the quest, which implies turning space into place, the women figures, representing otherness, serve as symbolic catalysts.

Another circumstance indicating that Murnane is not aiming at a realistic representation of life or giving vent to misogynist tendencies but rather at an antirealistic exploration of his mind and the creative process is his method of indirect vision. In spite of all its inconsistencies and incredibilities the lie of fiction comes closer to truth than allegedly realistic representations. Similarly, Murnane prefers the oblique observation to mere direct visual registration: "I have found a way of watching a thing that shows me what I never see when I look at the thing. If I watch a thing from the sides of my eyes, I see in the thing the shape of another thing"(I 116). He has also learned the trick of "bringing to the foreground of his mind an image that had been for long in the background of his mind" (EB 159). From his position in the open landscape, the film-maker in *The Plains*, one of all Murnane's seekers who want to "see properly," reflects on the possibility of widening human perspectives in the "encroaching darkness." He is watching the darkening plains, believing that we are "disappearing through the dark hole of an eye that we're not even aware of" (P 101). This might seem pessimistic and deterministic but at the same time he emphasizes the importance of the personal quest for one's "true home", that is "not to cease from exploration" to borrow Eliot's phrase. Some of those who are considered as visionaries "have never asked precisely where their plains are":

> 'The Great Darkness. Isn't that where all our plains lie? But they're safe, quite safe.
> And on their far side – too far away for you and me to visit – over there the weather is
> changing. The skies above us all are growing lighter. Another plain altogether is
> drifting towards our own. We're travelling somewhere in a world the shape of an eye.
> And we still haven't seen what other countries that eye looks out on.' (P 102)

In this manner Murnane's shifting geographies, radiating from his own Melbourne suburb, ranging from the single straw of grass to escatological and existential issues, emphasizes the need of consistent exploration. Though his unique geographical imagery of continuous multiplication of plains/planes, he conveys the idea that we are all exiles from "a stranger

place still – the country that allowed us all to think ourselves exiles from a stranger place still" (VW 124).

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ABSTRACT

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Lecturing on his novel *The Plains* at La Trobe University Gerald Murnane argued that the book "was the story of a man who tried to see properly." In the introductory paragraph we are told that the first-person narrator is looking for "anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearance." This search for "the furthest of all landscapes" is a recurrent theme in Murnane's writing. My paper will discuss the characteristics and the function of his idiosyncratic geographies in such contexts. As he writes in *Velvet Waters* his mysterious hidden vistas of loneliness and otherworldliness belong to a world in which "there will never be any such thing as *time*. There is only *place*." These two novels like *Inland* and *Landscape With Landscape* take us on cerebral journeys across maps and strange territories of continually changing perspectives. It will be argued that the settings referred to as Paraguay, Hungary, America or Australia, 'the plains' or 'the inland' are to be understood as mental precincts, as states of mind.

CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES

Key words:

Map, grid, pattern, geography, exploration:

VW 40, Ahlström , "Kartbladets speglingar"
"a network of concealed trails" (VW 63), map+America (VW 82-85)

"… he was made up mostly of images…The connected images made up a vast network. He was never able to imagine this network as having a boundary in any direction. He called the network, for convenience, his mind" (EB 85)

pattern: see *Tamarisk Row*, Author's Note
motifs of pattern and order, maps and photography

"his mind was a **place** or, rather, a vast arrangement of places. Everything he had ever seen in his mind was in a particular place… some of the furthest places in his mind might have adjoined to the furthest places in some other mind. He had no wish to deny that the furthest places in hs mind or in the furthest mind from his mind might have adjoined the furthest places in a Place of Places, which term denoted for him what is denoted for some other persons by the word *God*." (EB 88)

God, cf **Derrida** (Hawthorne 175): there is no fixed, extra-textual point by reference to which the meaning of a text can be plotted and fixed.   No element of a system of meaning has significance in and for itself but only as part of the system…there is nothing firm upon which subsequent meanings can be constructed…the desired point of stability = **a transcendental signified**, an element that has meaning in and for itself.

VW 120, making a **map** in his mind , 146

I had begun to study what I called geography from my collection of second-hand National Geographics." (VW 120)

Freckles, as a constellation, Cf LWL, P 40

"we are all explorers in our way. But exploration is much more than naming and describing. An explorer's task is to postulate the existence of a land beyond the known land" (P 45)

"piece together a **plain** where nothing exists but what artists claim to have seen…the places that the artists knew they were only able to hint at" (Romantic thought?, P 47)

"I've spent my life trying to see my own place as the end of a journey I never made" (P 48)

"to occupy a territory with boundaries and landmarks invisible to all but my own scattered kind. And I believed that every man was called to be an explorer" (P 50)

"I thought of my journey as a venture into obscure regions by a route that few knew of" P 54

Suburbs, La Trobe:

VW 39 (La Trobe)

Closed rooms, drawn blinds, silent room with books, monastery, cell:

VW 15, 16,17, 96, "Stone quarry", *Inland*

Books behind glass (*Inland*)

Collecting books ("In Far Fields")

Water, pond, well, spring:

Boy watching fish

Girl drowned in well (*Inland*)

Couples visiting springs ("Velvet Waters")

Stating exact position, exact time:

VW 71: " I am sitting at a battered garden-table on the back veranda of a ten-room stone house on a hilltop thirtyfour kilometres north-est of the centre of Melbourne"

Double time perspective VW 176-7

Mansions:

VW 17

"a certain mansion in whose dim library a young woman stares at a picture of another young woman who sits over a book that sets her wondering about some plain now lost from sight", P 53

Australia:
VW 34 (border, fence)

Far-away countries:
VW 17, 25

America:
VW 33, 35, 193ff

Leaps, changed perspectives in time/place:
VW 32, 106
Foreseeing himself, VW 186
VW 107, 216
Flashbacks and flashforwards
Interplay of past, present and future effected by the use of a first-person narrator who remembers himself in the past imagining the future and an omniscient intrusive author who foresees later events ("the girl that he one day would…")
"Time can have no agreed meaning for any two people…" (P 78)
shelves labelled **TIME** (P 86ff)
"**Time** … is made to appear as one more sort of **plain**" (P 90)
history and time are constructions

Space vs. place:
VW 45 (place foregrounded)
Space turned into place

Plains, grasslands, enclave:

VW 33, 43, 85, 162, 189, 232

Grasslands outside the Melbourne suburb are related to other grasslands such as the Great Plains, the Prarie, the Great Alfold

Hinterland (*Inland*)

Enclave: "they still felt themselves encircled by Australia" , P 6

"each **plainsman** chose to appear as a solitary inhabitant of a region that only he could explain", P 6

"the true extent of the plains has never been agreed on", P 8

"they saw the world itself as one more in an endless **series of plains**", P 9

extreme position: deny the existence of any nation with the name Australia…the boundaries of true nations were fixed in the souls of men. "and according to the projections of real, that is spiritual geography, the **plains** clearly did not coincide with any pretended land of Australia" (P, 29)

"I was disappearing into some invisible private world whose entrance was at the loneliest point on the plains…the end of my quest" (P 59)

"people here conceive of a lifetime as one more sort of plain. They have no use for banal talk of journeys through the years or the like…they allude constantly to a Time that converges on them or recedes from them like some familiar but formidable plain. When a man considers his youth, his language seems to refer more often to a place unobscured by any notion of Time as a veil or barrier" (P, 75; **Time as Place)**

"I must one day satisfy my curiosity, though, about their theory of the Interstitial Plain: the subject of an eccentric branch of geography; a plain that by definition can never be visited but adjoins and offers access to every possible plain." (P 76)

"a zone of mystery enclosed by the known and the all-too-accessible" (P 77; cf **enclave**)

/The plains/ are not…a vast theatre that adds significance to the events enacted within it. Nor are they an immense field for explorers of every kind. They are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings (quote!!, P 92)

"the world is something other than a landscape… the invisible is only what is too brightly lit" (P 92)

"We're travelling somewhere in a world the shape of an eye. And we still haven't seen what other countries that eye looks out on" (P 102)

Sexuality and church, Foucault

Brontë and sexuality

Foucault 21, 23, 153

Foucault: the concept of 'discourse', radical scepticism about 'truth' and the correspondence of fact and concept (Lentriccia 55)

History is a human production

Foucault's critique of the human sciences, unconscious structures governing

Archeology – finding fragments

North/south

Colour:

Dark green+cream, See VW "Finger Web"

Colour and silk, blue green; VW 162-4)

"I have decide on my colours at last… My colours are lilac and brown with two small patches of what I call sky-blue" (VW 166); Cf glassmarbles *Tamarisk Row* and VW 169

blue-green and yellow, P 10-11

Horizon, furthest landscape, border:

VW 46, 82-83

Perspectives, directions, **vantage-point:**

VW 34, 44

Surrealist representation of a 'real' world which we think we know but do not know at all; reminds us of the irrationalities of the dream world

Often starting with a precise definition of a vantage-point: "I am writing in the library of a manor-house, in a village I prefer not to name, near the town of Kunmadaras, in Szolnok County" (Inland), or "I am sitting at a battered garden-table on the back veranda of a ten-room stone house on a hilltop thirty-four kilometres north east of the centre of Melbourne." (VW 71)

Movement:
VW (flat, mansion, film, foreign countries), 115

Recurrent scenes and imagined pictures:
Walking with unmarried uncle (VW 105ff, 199, 227-8; Cotter referring back to p. 105)
Sitting on the **grass** with a woman ("kneeling on the grass in his mind in front of the young woman in his mind"; VW 185)
Surrounded by **plains of grass**, watching from the **sides of his eyes**, VW 191, 192
Boy who no longer goes to Mass (VW 195), afraid of priest, VW
Vomit, VW 207, 218, 219, 225, 233
Panting noises, water bubbling, VW 225, 233
Outside-the-body experiences
A book is a window, a mirror (I 121)

Art:
Chririco, Magritte, Escher

Literature:
cf Alice in Wonderland (going down into another world)
Wuthering Heights (Inland, EB 92
"The Interior of Gaaldine" EB 185ff (Gaaldine and Gondal =imaginary islands (Anne and Emily, EB 193
Emily Brontë = a true solitary EB 193
Similarities between Murnane and Brontë: time-shifts and "the chine box ingenuity of construction
Harebells (see Jeans's letter, *Inland* last paragraph + heath) kolla i *Inland* och *Wuthering Heights*
Cemetery (I, 168)

Horizonites vs. Haremen, cf Gulliver (P 11)

"what moved them more than wide grasslands and huge skies was the scant layer of haze where land and sky merged in the farthest distance… the blue-green haze as though it was itself a land – a plain of the future, perhaps…" "men of action" (Horizonites, P 19, 23) "Rather than flee, the animal seemed to trust to the last in its colouring – the same dull gold that predominated in the grass of the plains" "realistic plans for closer settlement", (Haremen, P 21, 24);

"basic polarity in the temperament of the plainsmen. Anyone surrounded from childhood by an abundance of level land must dream alternately of exploring two landscapes – one continually visible but never accessible and theother always invisible even though one crossed and recrossed it daily." (P 30)

Dreams, film, photos:
Swedish film (Smultronstället, Hon dansade en sommar, Jungfrukällan), see "Velvet Waters" 187-8, 204-5, 215, 225
Photos: VW 151

Metafiction

Quotes:
"When **the man in this story** first decided to visit Sydney, he did not **think of himself** as about to visit a large city four or five hundred miles north-east of his own city. Even when he said one Friday night in April 1964 to the men he drank beer with every Friday night,'I'm thinking of going to Sydney for a couple of days,' he was not thinking of himself as approaching a large city beside a semi-circular bridge with yachts sailing under it. If he had told the men in the hotel where he drank beer every Friday night what he was thinking of himself as doing, he would have said, 'I'm thinking of walking up and down for a couple of days in a corner of a garden where a few **dark-green** ferns hang down in front of a wall of **cream-coloured** rocks.'" (VW 125, anonymous characters, recurrent colours, perspectives foreseeing and recalling; see also 128,136-8, 146)
"house painted cream with dark-green trimmings" (VW 134)

"While he read those pages he looked often at the **map** of all he country districts as far away as two hundred miles from that city. While he looked at the map he moved his index finger along the black lines denoting main roads. While he moved his finger he **saw in his mind** himself travelling in January 1965 from the suburbs where he had always lived to the country district **where he would sit in a Catholic church** each Sunday morning and **would choose** in his mind the young woman who **would** not be too **knowing** to want to become his girl friend" (VW 133, *knowing* (142, 144, 148) *aloof* (230-1) to denote the attitude of presumptive girld friends, double time perspectives: past and future)

women-as-plains-as-text, Gelder-Salzman, *The New Diversity*, 125

"His inner life, if it could be so called, is a continual wandering through a **maze** in which the walls are **images of the places he has never travelled to**". (VW 149)

"In all the world there has never been, there is not, and there will never be any such thing as *time*. There is only *place*. Eternity is here already, and it has no mystery about it; eternity is just another name for the endless scenery where we wander from one **place** to another." (VW 152; "the secret dominance of **place**")
"I am on my travels in this world of place after place" (VW157)
"**time** has been abolished from my world" (VW 161)
According to Einstein the difference between past, present and future is merely an illusion

"an image of an image of a woman" (VW 154)

"The silk jacket is worn my a man with a faintly Chinese face. His name is Clarrie Long, and I wish I had used that name instead of Harold Moy for the **jockey** in the first work of fiction I ever wrote, and the name **Bendigo** instead of **Bassett** for the city in north-central Victoria where that work of fiction is set." (VW 160; 166 cf *Tamarisk Row*; racecourse, silk, metafiction. "This is the district that I called Harp Gully in a work of fiction. The narrator in that work of fiction looked forward to spending the last part of his life at Harp Gully"; VW 162)

"… I go on with my task of building a **dream-racecourse** and naming dream-horses to race on it and devising for the owners of dream-horses jackets and sleeves and caps of dream-silk patterned with dream-colours." (VW 168)

"The passenger in the Volksvagen sedan had often looked at pages in his **atlas** of the world showing **maps** of the regions of the United States of **America**. The page that he had looked at most often was headed **Great Plains**. Whenever he had looked at this page he had seen in his mind **plains of grass** reaching to the **horizons of his mind**", VW 193

Thoughts:

Close and detailed, often repetitive, documentation of seemingly minor events which later turn out to be significant when considered in a new context.

Double or treble time perspectives when a character in the present sees himself in the past, looking towards the future, resulting in a number of "would have", "foreseeing", "the girl that one day…" The constant change of planes of orientation change cause 'optical' problems to the reader. Visual and literary readings necessarily have to choose a single plane of orientation. By his selective zooming-in technique Murnane offers a multi-dimensional orientation. Sometimes the selective focus is on objects seen from inside a room, next the room is seen from a temporal and/or spatial distance, and next the concentration rests on the area between the horizon and the watcher. (cf zooming in, choose to regard or disregard) It is If fiction, as it is usually stated, aims either at the realistic representation of life or at the antirealistic exploration of artistic processes, Gerald Murnane's writing definitely belongs to the latter category.

Dichotomy between mere visual registration of images and an **inner vision**, arrived at by the mind's writing on those images
Fish-**eye**
Inability of the human **eye** to receive and bear a moment of illumination

Reality experienced as an endless network of representation, cf opening pages of *Emerald Blue*: "The connected images made up a vast **network**. He was never able to imagine this

network as having a boundary in any direction. He called the network, for convenience, his **mind**" (EB 85)

A dimension that resists the grasp of everyday rational understanding

Foucault (*Cultural Studies Reader*, 142f):

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible … they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory … Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation, and I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner."

Foucault emphasizes the centrality of space to the critical eye (143). "Geography must indeed lie at the heart of my concerns" (145)

… the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of **space**. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through **time** than that of a **network** that **connects** points and intersects with its own skein… (Quote!!)

Feminism & Geography

Place is understood by humanistic geographers in terms of maternal Woman – nurturing, natural, but forever lost. In stark contrast space, which refers only to the public space of Western hegemonic masculinities … both the opaque unknowability of place and the transparent knowability of space depend in their different ways on a feminized Other to establish their own quest for knowledge. (62)

time-geography as opposed to human geography (*Feminism & Geography* 75)

although contemporary science has lost some of its faith in the successful completion of the search for **truth**, most geographers continue to believe that the true nature of the world can, in principle, be explored and revealed by objective study (63)