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**The Departure of the Author:
A Post-Structuralist Reading of
Gerald Murnane's
*Landscape with Landscape***

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Landscape with Landscape

Gerald Murnane's *Landscape With Landscape* is an intriguing book, full of contradictions and inconsistencies, teasing in the way it seems to be deliberately constructed to escape interpretation. Its anonymous, subversive and conceited first-person narrator cum protagonist, recognizable from other books by Murnane, is also the alleged writer of the six stories in the volume. In this capacity he gradually distances himself from his readers and finally, as will be further discussed, divests himself of all credibility. Thematically, truth and reality are key concepts but the narrative slides precariously between events that are 'really' taking place and a set of events that exist only in the deceptive narrator's imagination.

All the stories start with a definition of place, a vantage point or a scene of departure. Significantly, as the title indicates, place and spatial perspectives are far more important than time. Seemingly matter-of-fact introductory descriptions like "I am in the backyard of my three-bedroom house in the City of Heidelberg..."(217) or "I stood on a hill northeast of Melbourne and looked across the folds of suburbs...(71) " turn out to be just as unreliable as the person

who defines them. What the narrator claims to be a Paraguayan setting turns out to be decidedly Australian, for example. Beneath and beyond what is usually defined as reality, depths and vistas of unreality are exposed. This indeterminacy related to landscapes and perspectives affects the reading experience making the interpretation of the text fraught with intriguing uncertainty.

The ambiguity applies to genre definition as well. There is no table of contents to tell the titles and page-numbers of the six stories, but all the same they are self-contained to the extent that it is possible to read them separately, thus regarding the book as a collection of short stories. Some of them have actually been published as separate stories. On the other hand, taken together they constitute an entity within which every story unfolds into the subsequent one thus making it possible to consider the book as a novel, or even an allegory. The six stories are all told by the nameless first-person narrator and principal character who towards the end of each also claims to be the writer of the next, writing his successor, i.e. himself, into existence as it were. The very last story harks back to the first, neatly completing the continuity of the circular arrangement. In this manner the reader is explicitly reminded of the genesis of the separate stories. However, the metafictional structure is disrupted in the last one, "Landscape with Artist," as the narrator, referring to his manuscript of the first story, "Landscape with Freckled Woman," surprisingly disclaims authorship of the book we have just finished reading. As will be further discussed, he has decided after all not to write about the various departures into

his inner landscapes and instead make do with the simple two-dimensional, painted representations he had so blatantly despised in the earlier stories.

Taking account of aspects of narrative techniques, this paper applies a postmodern and poststructuralist reading of the book. It sets out to show how *Landscape With Landscape* can, or perhaps even should, be read as a commentary on modern literary theory, a book of metacriticism, a piece of writing constituting at the same time a deconstructive instrument and the outcome of the deconstruction. It will be considered against the background of some of the most prominent and subversive characteristics of poststructuralism such as preoccupation with decreation, intertextuality, anti-narrative, anti-interpretation, and anti-form (see e.g. Hassan 123-4). Typically enough, *Landscape With Landscape* concerns the writerly rather than the readerly, process rather than completed work, and signifier rather than signified. It is a typical postmodern work also in the sense that it is not organized according to a consistent principle such as chronology or a rational chain of events but focuses on the fragmentary and associative.

According to the semiotic notion of intertextuality as introduced by Julia Kristeva and other poststructuralist theorists, the assignment of a text to a genre, in this case travel literature, normally provides the interpreter of the text with a key intertextual framework with its own sign systems and codes. Murnane uses the properties of the genre to deconstruct the intrinsic code system of the genre. Even though the central theme in all the stories is exile or departures, the text

presented is opposed to the very idea of actual travel. Just as Gerald Murnane himself has chosen never to leave Melbourne and Victoria, suburban Melbourne is the indisputable centre for his narrator whose 'departures' are largely deconstructions of famous literary and historical journeys.

Taken together Murnane's stories thematically refute the idea of the Great Australian Epic. This is in keeping with the view of postmodernist writing that the era of grand narratives and epics is over (see e.g. Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*). Above all the key Australian myth of pioneering exploration, signifier for national consciousness, is inverted and deconstructed by Murnane. The traditional Australian discourse is disrupted, as the solitary figure is not a brave explorer in the Outback but a conceited and unreliable writer in a Melbourne suburb. The key images of Australia, including the ideals of mateship and suffering, once grew out of the actual experience of journeys to and within the country, making 'the Australian story' one of travellers and explorers, notably a male enterprise characterized by suffering and idealism. It is true that Murnane in *Landscape With Landscape* uses notions of departure and exile to constitute both the central theme and also organizing categories but the journeys aim at partial, individual and subjective truths. All the stories deal with departures within or outside Australia, the journeys heading for the domains that Murnane in other contexts refers to as the 'inlands' or the 'plains', but they are not existentially or ideologically motivated. Murnane's narcissistic narrator is constantly in search of his own landscape behind those described by artists and

writers, “the furthest of all landscapes” and a “special territory” (259) that only he can identify with and depict. The narrator’s vain efforts in all the stories to approach that particular precinct by means of writing illustrate some of the philosophical ideas of deconstruction, arguing that all modes of writing stand at a distance both from reality and from that which it seeks to represent (see e.g. Jameson 205). As the narrator sets out on his journeys, constantly flaunting his australianness, he simultaneously divests the idea of national identity of all authenticity. The message becomes identical with that of Richard White:

There is no ‘real Australia waiting to be uncovered. A national identity is an invention. There is no point asking whether one version of this essential Australia is truer than another because they are all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible — and necessarily false. (White viii)

Through the designation of his text as part of a genre, a mode sometimes referred to as architextuality, Murnane deconstructs the traditional travel myth within the frame of travel literature. Characteristically, in the spatial metaphor of the journey undertaken by his narrator cum writer, there are numerous departures but no arrivals or returns. Thus there is no evidence of the traveller being changed in the process, and the departures do not lead to the traditional outcome of the quest, that is a transformation of the masculine subject on the lookout for a muse or some kind of illumination. Nor is there any reference to actual objects or events. The contrast between historical and literary travels

referred to in the text, such as William Lane's idealistic project, the New Australia expedition to Paraguay, and Jack Kerouac's adventures in *On the Road* on one hand, and the parochial and pathetic experiences of Murnane's protagonist on the other is striking.

The first story, "Landscape with Freckled Woman" introduces the narrator and his dreams of exploring "*inner space*" (16), of "unfolding" the landscape in order to reach "the real world" (6) from his vantage point in St Kilda Road in suburban Melbourne. This "unfolding" implies a merger of spatial and temporal notions and concerns the mental landscape that Murnane in other contexts refers to as 'the plains'. Discussing Murnane's earlier novel called *The Plains*, Imre Saluszinsky claims that the place suggested by the title is to be understood as wholly mental. It stands for a process rather than a product and has very little to do with a realistic Australian setting (Saluszinsky 44). This description applies to the stories in *Landscape With Landscape* as well. The writer/narrator takes the reader into a series of 'plains', mental enclaves surrounded by what is usually taken for 'reality,' defined only by their contrast to his chosen point of reference, i.e. suburban Melbourne. In his capacity of a 'plainsman' he sees himself as a representative of the essentially 'real' Australia, essence being a recurrent keyword. The narrator's search for an inner landscape of truth resembles the notion expressed in two mottoes for Patrick White's the *Solid Mandala*:

"There is another world, but it is in this one" (Paul Eluard)

“It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within” (Meister Eckhart)

The second story, “Sipping the Essence,” presenting the dream of exotic Queensland, contrasts two recurrent categories of people: “those aware of the essences of things against those preoccupied with appearances” (42), the latter including the much-despised painters who only care about surface and realistic representation. The narrator’s role-model is Jack Kerouac, and he sees himself as “a man of the roads of Queensland” (48), setting out to discover what he believes that Kerouac found too:

... the scope for endless journeys of exploration in what was supposed to be well-trodden territory. But the suburbs of Melbourne would be for me what the entire United States had been for Kerouac. Around me in the deserted streets the masses of trees and shrubs made a complex pattern of dark tunnels out of reach of the streetlights. There seemed space enough in Melbourne for a solitary to travel for years out of sight of those who huddled together. (49)

The “dark tunnels,” as will be further exemplified, are typical of the region to be explored. When the word ‘huddled’ is used to categorize the unimaginative non-explorers who prefer safety and comfort to truth, it carries the same connotations as in Patrick White’s *Voss* where the word is used about those who avoid the experience of the interior and choose to stay in the lush and fertile coastline. In his autobiography White stated that the “ideal Australia [he] visualised during any exile... was always a landscape without figures” (White

49). This is true about Murnane's representation of Australia also, consisting, as the title suggests, of a Chinese-box arrangement with a painting of a painting of a painting... "without figures". Voss's spiritual landscape was Inner Australia, and like many other heroes of the Interior he immerses himself and becomes lost in its mysteries, finally to be apotheosised. But Murnane's protagonist is neither Kerouac nor Voss. At the age of forty he is a married man who shows no interest in his family and who "had been no further north than Bendigo, where [he] had lived for four years as a child, and sipped while [his] brothers gulped" (66). He is still dreaming of discovering his "furthest north" together with Carolyn, the dream-girl of his youth, who has become his secret muse, explaining to her that he still

... had to add the last touches to the poetic reality of her. And even after [they] had settled at the base of the last peninsula of Australia, [he] would still not give up drinking or dreaming. [He] would remain a poet to the end. [He] would fill the last corner of Queensland with an immense Australia still waiting for a man and a woman who would travel always north. (65)

There is something of Don Quixote in Murnane's ever-travelling protagonist. He fails with women, and in his dreams he both covets and ridicules them. He is extremely self-centred, inflated, socially handicapped and obsessed by his idea of exploration that makes him interpret his perceptions of the 'real' world to fit his inner landscape. From this aspect the narrator, and, obviously

Murnane too, can be termed phenomenologists. Analyzing the function of individual consciousness, they are concerned with the distinction between the world as it is and as it is experienced. The essence of things is the residue that remains after phenomenological reduction, or as expressed by Salusinszky:

In my view [Murnane's version of consciousness is] uncannily similar to the versions we are given in recent European philosophy – by which I mean phenomenology and its twin offspring, existentialism and deconstruction. Phenomenology begins by off-loading the 'natural attitude' that tells us that our consciousness is set over against a world that exists independently of it. Instead of assuming a subject/object split, we need to execute a 'reduction' and reflect upon our experiencing of a world; on our perceptions and sense-data; on the active constitution of our own conscious world. (Salusinszky 44)

In the third story, "The Battle of Acosta Nu," the opposing categories are the Paraguayans and the Australians. The narrator identifies with the idealistic New Australians, "the men from Queensland who had set out for Paraguay to found a country of dreams" (69). The story can be read as an illustration of the postmodern attitude that grand projects are unable to save mankind through the development of science, rationality or ideologies, and that ultimately it is only possible to arrive at small-scale and personal truths. Everything that despicable Paraguay stands for of superficiality and lack of culture has mentally invaded the narrator's Australia and constitutes a threat to the intrinsic values of the continent. The protagonist, whose world picture is totally dominated by the

binary opposition of australianness vs. non-australianness, has problems convincing his doctor of the true state of affairs:

I told him at once that according to his science I was mentally ill but that in fact I was one of a handful of Australians still surviving years after our grandparents had arrived in Paraguay to found an ideal settlement ... [T]he settlement had failed because ... the Australians had foolishly abandoned the true source of their culture, the land of Australia itself. (80)

Murnane's idealized Australia is another version of 'the plains' as a mental landscape and his Paraguay bears no resemblance whatsoever with the 'real' country, rather it takes on all the standard properties of superficial attitudes of 'real' Australia. In his writing space is a multidimensional entity. By being named and referred to as 'the plains', America or Paraguay, for instance, space is turned into place with a specific symbolic meaning ascribed to it. Thus in the next story, "A Quieter Place than Clun," the mental domain termed Australia is set off against a landscape of literature, "the countryside of pessimism" (133), "the sad scenery of literary England" (136), evoking Emily Brontë, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, and above all A.E. Housman and his Shropshire. Just as an imaginary Paraguay provided a perspective on Australia, the country is now considered from the English horizon. The impact of Housman and other literary celebrities is typically vitiated, though, as the text by being exposed as fictional is constantly undermined:

[None of the students at the university in Melbourne] could have known why a melancholic haze had settled where their horizons had once been. They could never have guessed that a young man sitting alone in the third bedroom of a suburban house twelve miles south-east of the city of Melbourne saw all their lives from behind a hundred miles of greenery. All the places [he] had once looked at were on the other side of Shropshire as it appeared to a poet looking west from London in the late afternoons. (138)

It is obvious that England, just as America or Paraguay and other foreign countries are metaphorical landscapes denoting temperaments and attitudes rather than geographical location. Thus, as opposed to America, “England is the name of an imaginary place where cooler, more chaste satisfactions beckon” (Salusinszky 15-16)

In the story called “Charlie Alcock’s Cock”, told from a young Catholic’s perspective, there is a characteristic atmosphere of secrecy and teenage sexuality. His landscape is one of unmapped, mysterious tramlines, tunnels of foliage and dark backyards. His sinful dreams clash with his Catholic upbringing, and the journey in this story goes through dark passages of guilt:

Sometimes I saw myself again creeping beneath trees and through wardrobes and past the walls of lavatories. I followed a tunnel upwards towards a hint of strange sunlight. But the outlet of the tunnel was barred by the wire grille in a confessional booth in the church of the Immaculate Conception in Burwood Road, only half a mile from the backyard where I had first gone underground. (196-7)

Existential truths and notions of the Saussurean concept of the 'transcendental signified' are brought into conflict with the dark and petty secrets of family life. In this story as in many other contexts the speaker seems obsessed with motifs of pattern and order, with the creation of an intellectualised domain, that is signifiers rather than signifieds. Imagery of maps and photography usually suggests ways of imposing dominance and authority on the landscape. It is often associated with thresholds and marginal zones that are possibly dangerous. In this story it belongs together with the sordid secrets of lavatories and backyards rather than with power, creativity and imagination:

And I had to concede that all my so-called travels had occupied a space no wider than a backyard and had lasted no longer than the few hours of an afternoon in which the sun shone directly against the thin weatherboards of a lavatory wall. (207)

In the last story, "Landscape with Artist," the writer/narrator's role model is again Jack Kerouac. Cherishing the bible of the beat generation, *On the Road* and identifying with the beer-drinking Scraggs whom he takes to be "the nearest equivalent to the Beats of the USA", he sees himself as opposed to a rather vague category of people that he terms 'artists' and thoroughly despises. Unlike them he as a writer is concerned with "landscapes of the mind" (221). The written mental landscape does not lend itself as suitable background scenery for a writer to pose against as a painted landscape would. On the other hand, it is

argued, it can represent inner landscape more truthfully. “There is an uncomfortable space between /the writer/ and what others might see behind /him/” (223). It is this gap between what the writer faces and what lies behind that fascinates and troubles him and that his writing is meant to come to terms with. The “uncomfortable space” also suggests a recurrent dilemma of cognition described in Murnane’s writing. According to Salusinszky, “the most typical scene in all of Murnane’s fiction is “a character /who/ questions the reality of what he is seeing. Instead he finds himself inside something – but what?” (Salusinszky 33)

Even though all the stories deal with journeys inside or outside a mental state referred to as Australia, it should be noted that the book is about itself, the lonely, painful process of writing and the notion of mental exile. Murnane’s traveller takes fictionality as a theme to be explored. Like other metafictional texts his stories are constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of fictional illusion and the subsequent destruction of that illusion. Through that opposition the book thematizes the separation of three terms: reality, realism and truth. Aiming at some ultimate ‘truth’ represented by the ‘furthest landscape’, the narrator despises the kind of ‘reality’ cherished by the artists in their realistic paintings. The reason is that they mistake reality for truth whereas he is obsessed by the various gaps, crevices, intersecting planes, and tunnels that indicate the existence of some complex and fundamental truth behind appearances. His aim is to “describe some landscape

that separates /him/ from what /he sees/”(224). The distance or gap between the truth he wishes to depict and the written words that are his only tools can be expressed in Saussurean term as the unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified, or between form and content, or between fiction and reality.

Murnane and his narrator are both intrigued by “the horizon between the end of that landscape” that allows a posing artist to define himself against it, for instance on a dustjacket photograph, and “the beginning of the landscape which is the equivalent of the contents of the book” (223). Above all, he is obsessed by “the subtlest of all horizons”, that is “[t]his quite imperceptible boundary that would mark, if anyone saw it, the beginning of the furthest of all landscapes, the place that the writer once looked at in the days before he composed his book.” He is not interested in a photographic landscape that is “hardly different from the scenery in the books themselves” but rather the landscape depicted in *On the Road* with Kerouac’s “long sentences leading like roads *away* from the country that presses against the back of his neck” (224, emphasis added). Discussing the stylistic features and the experimental qualities in Murnane’s writing, Imre Salusinszky has noted his “interest in the mystery of the sentence, and in sentences as units of thought and experience, rather than merely of grammar” (Salusinszky 10). The individual sentences and pages take on an almost physical capacity of stepping-stones towards that far-away place, the furthest of all landscapes. The despicable artists, caricatures drawn with a great sense of humour, all have their landscapes neatly arranged behind them. The writer,

though, has other goals in mind and the ideal woman cum reader that he is seeking in all the stories will be familiar with Kerouac and understand that he, like his role-model is “heading toward a place much further than Nebraska” (228). His goal in all the stories, however, is infinitely deferred and forever elusive, and his consistent approach is like an asymptote in relation to a coordinate axis. As it says in “The Battle of Acosta Nu”:

I was not planning to set out at once for the place if I happened to learn where it lay. On the contrary, I saw the routes of my journeys towards it during my lifetime as a pattern like those graphs of equations that tend towards but never reach a certain axis. I saw myself putting off year after year my entry into the landscape that should have drawn me to it but somehow kept me at bay. (97)

In 1980, after twenty years of solitary journeys between Melbourne and the outer suburb of Harp Gully, the narrator is still contemplating the structure of the book that he is going to write. Now he thinks of using the idea that he is a character in a story that he tried to put on paper in 1960. Again the reader feels convinced that this must be the very story that he or she will soon have finished reading. Staying with the artists at Harp Gully the narrator feels sure he is in his “rightful place” and things seem to make sense: “the artists have their place, but I have mine; and mine encloses theirs” (247). But there is another twist to come. He meets a woman at a party who quite unexpectedly takes an interest in his

plans and he suddenly enjoys the prestige of being invited to “the home of one of Australia's leading artists” (259) and knowing a woman who has been portrayed by the Famous Artist. He presents a typescript of a piece of fiction called *Landscape With Freckled Woman*, constituting the initial story of the book. As each story has a link to the subsequent one, it seems quite logical that the last one links up with the first. Another significant and surprising twist still remains though: the story we have finished reading will never be written, and consequently not the previous ones either. The writer who has written himself into existence through the separate stories now deletes not only his writing but also himself. The traditional story of exploration, using the journey as a metaphoric device, involves the transformation of the masculine quester who becomes either apotheosised or humanised whereas Murnane’s traveller is merely annihilated. The reader is given to understand that the stories only existed in a non-existent writer’s imagination. The landscape turns into a dreamscape and the narrator’s final reflection can be read as a comment on modern literary criticism:

But as soon as I imagine that figure walking away from the Artist, I want to have the man he represents imagine something that will be always out of sight of the Artist. And so I imagine him planning to write a piece of fiction in which this view of him is described and something added to it.

Yet I have read enough to know that such fiction would seem nowadays merely modish, that my self-conscious narrator would seem

only a figure of artifice and not a means of telling the truth. And so I decide never to write such a story. And I keep to my decision. (267)

These concluding lines in themselves call for the kind of approach that the preeminent American deconstructor, J. Hillis Miller, defines as follows:

“Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air” (Miller 341). Murnane’s anonymous and defamiliarized writer, “walking away” from the Artist and everything that is usually taken for reality, serves as an illustration to Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” stating that:

... writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes 114)

Murnane’s writer also exemplifies Barthes’ view that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 118). Having repeatedly emphasized his *intention* to write, and his anguish not being able to put on paper what he has in mind, Murnane’s narrator in the imaginary painting described above parallels Barthes’ description of the writer’s situation. He is absent and mutant like Proust, allegedly one of Murnane’s favourite authors (see Salusinszky 93):

Proust was concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters: by making the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but *he who is going to write* — wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible ... the Author *diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage* ... the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent (emphasis added, Barthes 115-116)

What Murnane offers through his vanishing writer is not merely an ironic comment on the role of literature and the plights of any writer of fiction. Trying to describe the exilic condition he experiences and his futile longing for an inner space of truth, words are his only tools. But neither the author nor his words can be trusted. The world picture presented is so utterly ungraspable that it also becomes unthinkable in the language in which we usually think. The inherent message might be that no text or other signifier can satisfactorily define the 'transcendental signified' but also that, paradoxically, ultimate 'truth' can only be approached to the 'lie' of fiction.

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