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Broken Words and Stolen Land in Alice Munro's "White Dump". Synchronizing the Personal, the Political, and the Mythical

Abstract: Through the elucidation of the numerous intertextual and intermedial references which are more or less clandestinely strewn throughout the story "White Dump", this paper intends to show that Alice Munro proposes a politicized and indigenized version of an adultery in the middle-class in Canada in the 20th century as well as an anthropological and metaphysical reflection on the meaning of a dump which is ambiguously and subversively centred around the concepts of tinsel and treasure, treason and loyalty as well as salvaging, rehabilitating and transmitting.

Keywords: *opera, fictionalizing history, politicizing fiction, Aboriginal*

"White Dump" is the last story of Munro's sixth collection entitled *The Progress of Love* (1986).[1] Like the story entitled "Open Secrets" from the eponymous collection (*Open Secrets,* 1995), "White Dump" provides an initial oxymoron, that is to say "a figure of style which combines incongruous and apparently contradictory words and meanings for a special effect, as in Lamb's celebrated remark: 'I like a smuggler. He is the only honest thief'".[2] A dump is a place where rubbish is thrown into: it is generally associated with dirt and impurity. When paired with the colour white, it becomes extremely incongruous because it conjoins what is generally disjointed, white being the colour of cleanliness if not holiness. The conjunction of disjointed elements is one of the major tricks Munro resorts to in order to construct a fictional universe characterized by its ambivalent and paradoxical nature. This trick often conceals another one, which is also linked with misplacement or displacement: the trick of metonymy through which something is substituted for something else which, together with the more obvious oxymoron, draws our attention to the fact that the title of this story might be a densely polysemic and multivalent signifier demanding to be explored attentively. Through the elucidation of the numerous intertextual and intermedial references which are more or less clandestinely strewn throughout the story, this paper intends to show that Munro proposes an anthropological and metaphysical reflection on the meaning of a dump which is ambiguously and subversively centered around the concepts of tinsel and treasure, treason and loyalty as well as salvaging, transmitting and rehabilitating.

[1] Alice Munro, *The Progress of Love* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986). All further references to this edition, with page numbers, are to be found in the body of the text.

[2] John Anthony Cuddon, *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Penguin, 1979), 471.

The title of the story 'White Dump" is explicitly a reference to a heap of candy: vanilla icing, and nuts, and hardened marshmallow globs that the biscuit factory dumped into the backyard next to the playground where Isabel, one of the female protagonists, went to school. It constitutes an ambiguous memory from childhood which rehabilitates dump by turning it into a place of original delight. It is also a tantalizing notion which highlights the abjection of ambivalence. Isabel is a grown up woman who happens to be Sophie Vogelsang's first daughter in law and Denise's mother. She is the one who brought about the divorce between Laurence Vogelsang and herself because of her passionate love affair with a neighbouring pilot. Isabel is responsible for breaking the marriage vows and sullying the relationship both with her husband and her lover whom she eventually gave money to. Through the metaphor of the yummy heap of candy Isabel could not resist when she was a child, Munro strikingly renews the parable of Original Sin. Isabel did not bite into the forbidden apple, she licked vanilla icing dumped on the ground when she was a child and committed unrepentant adultery when she was a young adult.

Interesting as this revisitation of the Biblical story may appear, one cannot remain content with this literal understanding of the title. In her typically allusive scenarios Munro extends the personal into the political because white dump can also be understood as metaphorically referring to the strategies white colonizers used in order to dispossess the native population of their lands. They dumped goods of little value into the hands of Aboriginal people in exchange for land and 'white dump' might thus become metaphorically associated with temptation and deception as exerted by white settlers against the ancient denizens of the North American continent.

Such an interpretation is borne out by the otherwise unexplainable presence of Aboriginal people in the story. The references to original inhabitants are not explicit. Nowhere in "White Dump" does Munro speak of First Nations but this is the description she gives of young people around the lake at the time when the grandmother, Sophie, is having her early morning swim in the lake:

> Two boys and a girl. All three had long hair, waist-length or nearly so, though one of the boys wore his combed back into a ponytail. The ponytailed boy had a beard and wore dark glasses, and a suit jacket with no shirt underneath. The other boy wore only jeans. He had some chains or necklaces, perhaps feathers, dangling down on his thin brown chest. The girl was fat and gypsyish, with a long red skirt and a bandanna tied across her forehead. (290-291)

With this description of the young people trespassing on Sophie's property Munro is politicising and indigenizing her apparently "white" middle-class story. The allusion to the long-haired boys with feathers around their neck and

the gypsyish girl is a covert designation of the characters as Natives which throws light on the action they engage in. They have spotted Sophie having her swim in the nude and they take advantage of her being in the lake to get hold of her bathrobe and tear it into pieces. This act of robbery, which looks gratuitous, becomes motivated if we consider that these three characters are young First Nation offenders. They tear Sophie bathrobe and dispossess her of her vestments as a symbolic retaliation, because they themselves have been dispossessed of the land which was theirs in the first place.

Thus, the paradoxical white dump alluded to in the story, that is to say the heap of candy poured onto the ground for the children's delight, superficially refers to the sugary hill of the character's childhood memories but it is also an emblem of irresistible temptation which acquires overtones of moral equivocation and can be linked to the greed of colonizers and the ensuing theft of the land.

The story develops in a special place, a log-house built by Laurence's ancestor Augustus Vogelsang, a German immigrant to Canada. It is a family house which has been transmitted from the grandfather, Augustus, to the daughter, Sophie, to the son, Laurence, and will probably be passed on to the granddaughter Denise. Lawrence and his second wife, Magda, now live permanently in this revamped cottage and they provide hospitality to Denise during the summer time as Sophie used to provide hospitality to Laurence and Isabel when Denise was a child. The log house by the lake built by the ancestor is the original place of delight where Denise keeps coming back year after year, because this is where she led a privileged and carefree childhood. Yet the story begins with a description of the house which is far from positive: "There was no light in the house, so there was no color. There was no attempt. So dreary, I couldn't believe" (273). Through Magda's eyes, the log house, before she herself redecorated it, was a colourless dump. It was indeed a white dump, a settler's rough and rustic log house which replaced the long houses of native inhabitants and which Magda transforms into a stylish cottage decorated with the sham window panels imitating stain glass that her husband Laurence so successfully manufactures.

With this cottage by the lake ("ma cabane au Canada" as sung by Line Renaud), Munro builds an ambivalent configuration, which is simultaneously "white" and supposedly pristine but obviously inauthentic and spurious. It was set up on the land of a wronged and dispossessed people and it advertises its counterfeit nature through the trappings of its revamping. The significance of this family abode is densified and rendered even more complex through the insertion of apparently casual references which are to be heeded. Magda, Laurence's second wife, is depicted in the act of singing a song, a song which

acquires the dimension of a *mise en abyme*. "Magda is in the kitchen making the salad. She is humming a tune from an opera. 'Home to our Mountains'" (288).

Although the reference remains unacknowledged, or precisely because it is not made explicit, it requires from the reader to be pinpointed more precisely. The tune alluded to is taken from an opera by Verdi called "Il Trovatore" (1853). It occurs at the very end of the opera, just before the main protagonist, Manrico the bard, is executed; he is in a prison cell with the woman he believes to be his mother and attempts to console and reassure her. The woman, a gypsy called Azucena, sings a song about the return home and the joy and peace to be found in the primitive mountain life. She sings this song just before she herself is burnt on a pyre for having stolen the Conte di Luna's son and raised him as her own son, calling him Manrico.

This song constitutes a moment of wishful thinking, of escapism, it is an enclave of peace restored and happiness found again, a timeless moment, or a moment arrested before the final catastrophe. It is a song within an opera within a story which is being offered to the reader in a semi-clandestine manner, because only the opera-goer, the reader with knowledge of what the tune is about, can decipher the allusion and understand the type of relationship that may exist between the story and the opera. For there is necessarily a relationship with the main plot.

In the opera as in the story there is an attempt to find the original place of delight, to find the enchanted garden, to return to the safety of the place that matters, to return home or to return to what Yves Bonnefoy calls the "vrai lieu", the veritable place.[3] In "Il Trovatore", the mountains represent the shelter that Azucena wants to find back but instead of finding peace in the mountains, she will burn on the funeral pyre. In Munro's story the log house by the lake is at the same time the dump and the original paradise where the family tries to find back its unity, but Isabel has divorced Laurence and cannot return to a home which is no longer hers and Denise's brother, Peter, no longer sets foot in the house where he spent his childhood holidays.

By setting up an original paradise which is also a white dump, Munro provides an emblem of ambivalence which refuses the simplification of binaries and the rigidity of Manichean polarities. The story picks up the theme of homecoming only to stage-direct illusions of innocence and purity linked with a paradise that is out of reach or cannot be regained, possibly because it has been unlawfully appropriated.

Munro discreetly historicizes her fictional scenario and she even goes as far as turning personal and national history into myth through the recourse to allusions to Nordic Mythology. We know that Munro delights in tricks that she plays on the reader. She resorts to cryptograms or cyphers and she expects the

[3] See for instance the poem by Bonnefoy entitled "Vrai lieu". Yves Bonnefoy, "Vrai lieu", *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1953).

reader to decipher the allusion that has been casually or apparently innocently made.

The last allusion in the story which is also the last lines of the volume is partially cyphered because it is given in the original Norse language with a bracketed translation underneath:

> Seinat er at segia;
> Sva er nu radit.
> (it is too late to talk of this now: it has been decided.) (309)

In a very cunning or teasing fashion, Munro refrains from giving her sources. She does not reveal the origin of the quotation. She reveals and she conceals at the same time. She sends her reader on a quest for stories which is a quest for knowledge. This quotation is taken from the Lay of Atli, Norse Atlakvida, a heroic poem in the Norse Poetic Edda,[4] Second lay, stanza 29. It is spoken by Gudrun just before her brothers visit Atli at his court and are killed by him. It speaks of determinism: the only liberty that man can enjoy is that of accepting his fate.

[4] Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda Vol. 2 Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

Earlier in the story Munro provides a summary of the Lay of Atli, without indicating its relationship with the final sentence of the story. She thus dissimulates a connection that she simultaneously takes pain to establish and she finally leaves the reader responsible for establishing the connection between the different sequences in the story. This is the summary that Isabel provides: "In those old poems she reads, said Isabel, you know these old Icelandic poems, there is the most terrible gore and hacking people up - women particularly, one slitting her own kids' throats and mixing the blood in her husband's wine. I read that. And then Sophie is such a pacifist and Socialist, isn't it strange?" (281).

This summary encapsulates the scenario of the *Lay of Atli,* in which Gudrun is presented as a figure of revenge and a cruel manipulator who works stage by stage to obtain reparation for the killing of her first husband, the hero Sigurdt and the son she has had with him. She will be driven to stage-direct the killing of her brothers, Gunnar and Hogni and she will give her children to eat to her own husband, Atli, before setting fire to his castle and throwing herself into the fire with him.

We can now perceive the mirror structure between the allusions to the "Lay of Atli" and "Il Trovatore" by Verdi. In Verdi's opera, a gypsy, Azucena, wants to take her revenge on the man who has burnt her mother and she means to throw the man's son into the fire but, by mistake, she throws her own son onto the pyre. In the "Lay of Atli", Gudrun gives her children to eat to her husband.

Both stories hinge on female passion, on female dementia, on female revenge. Both stories present women as filicides: self-destructive murderesses of their own children.

Munro's story takes up the theme of female passion, female suffering, and female violence but she attempts to turn the table entirely. Instead of stage-directing the destructiveness of passion, she suggests the possibility of altering the course of destruction by proposing strategies of reparation and rehabilitation. Denise, Sophie's granddaughter, runs a women's center in Toronto where beaten women are provided with a shelter and she returns every summer to the log-house which is the home where she spent all the summers of her childhood. She comes back to this shelter to visit her father and to try and experience again the delight she experienced there as a child. This is where we begin to understand the relationship between "Il Trovatore" by Verdi first performed in 1853, the "Lay of Atli" sung by an anonymous skaldic poet in the 12th century and the story written by Munro in the 20th century. The attempt to find the original place of delight, to find the enchanted garden, is what all three stories tell us through a threefold variation. In "Il Trovatore," the mountains represent the shelter that Azucena want to find back. In Munro, the log house by the lake built by the ancestor is the original place of delight. To understand where the original place of delight is in the "Lay of Atli", we need to take into account still another story that Munro clandestinely and dizzyingly encapsulates in her own story.

The "Lay of Atli" is an older variant of the tale of slaughter and revenge that is the subject of the German epic *Nibelungenlied. It* has been famously reinterpreted in operatic from by Wagner in his tetralogy that comprises, *The Rhinegold*, *The Walkyrie*, *Siegfried* and *The Dusk of the Gods*. In this magnum opus, one finds a particular magic mountain encircled by a ring of fire where Brunhilde, the Walkyrie has been committed by her father, the god of gods, Wotan or Odin. Siegfried will find this magic mountain and will deliver the maiden with whom he will fall in love, exchange vows, and enjoy sexual gratification. The magic mountain encircled by fire becomes the shelter where Siegfried and Brunhilde consummate their love. The reason why Siegfried has been able to find the place where Brunhilde was concealed is that, when tasting the blood of the dragon he killed, he became capable of understanding the song of birds and it is under the birds' guidance that he arrives at the place where Brunhilde offers herself to him.

Munro playfully reminds the reader of the episode simply by calling the German ancestor who built the log-house by the lake: Vogelsang which means birdsong. Her allusive strategy is duplicitous. She drops clues, she teases the reader into picking up the clues to understand the rhyzomatic deployment of the story. From Azucena's mountains, to Denise's log-house by the lake, via

Brunhilde's fire encircled rock, she devises a place which acquires the status of *ur*-place, the foundational place of origins.

But at the same time as she represents this place as "the veritable space" of Bonnefoy's poetry or "the land of heart's desire" to pick up the title of Yeats' drama,[5] she undercuts and delegitimizes this construction by contemplating it as a dump. Munro engages in a discretly citational practice, a practice Antoine Compagnon equates to second hand double dealing,[6] through which the competence of the reader is being tested. She establishes a correspondence between the gypsy's condemnation to burn on a pyre in Verdi's "Il Trovatore" and the genocide of First Nations at the time of the colonisation of Canada and she also establishes a correspondence between the "Lay of Atli" and the history of Canada. She means for the reader to synchronize the historical theft of the land by the European colonizers in the 16th century with the mythical stories of the theft of gold from the Poetic Edda and the German epic of the Middle Ages.

"The Lay of Atli" which is an older variant of the *Nibelung* Tales is about King Atli wanting to learn the secret of the treasure of Gunnar and Hogni, the Niflungar Hoard. The *Nibelung* Tales are about the treasure of the Burgundian Kings, a story which has been taken up by Wagner in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848). The "Lay of Atli" like the *Nibelung* Tales denounces man's cupidity, the greed that justifies murder, plunder, torture, the very same greed that had led adventurers and conquerors to venture across the Atlantic and settle in the new found lands of the Americas. Through her synchronization of Augustus Vogelsang's colonisation of a part of Lake Huron and of the "Lay of Atli", Munro performs a very ambivalent political act. On the one hand she clearly points in the direction of canonical stories of greed to suggest an equation between mythical stories and historical journeys. She historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history but she also equates the journey of Augustus Vogelsang to the journey of Sigurdt or Siegfried towards the flame encircled rock where Brunnhilde has been held captive. By calling the German ancestor who built the log house on Lake Huron Augustus Vogelsang, Munro reminds her readers of the journey that Sigurdt undertook in order to be united to Brunhilde. This journey to the flame encircled rock under the guidance of birdsongs is a journey to the enchanted garden, the place of delight which Sigurdt longs for, it is also the place where vows will be exchanged. But the vows will not be kept and Sigurdt will not marry Brunnhilde. He will marry Gudrun. In similar fashion the colonizers will make promises and sign treaties with the native populations and they will not keep their word. They will ruthlessly dispossess Aboriginal people.

In both the opera and the short story, this original place of delight and peace becomes the contested site of perjury. In the other opera that Munro alludes to, "Il Trovatore" by Verdi, it is also perjury and forswearing that lead to

[5] William Butler Yeats, *The Land of Heart's Desire* (Rockville, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2005 [1894]).

[6] Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

Manrico's death. The young Conte di Luna had promised Leonora that the young bard would be safe and sound and it was on the condition that his life was preserved that Leonora accepted to marry the Conte di Luna. In spite of his oath, the Conte di Luna had Manrico arrested and executed in front of Azucena, who then revealed Manrico's true identity. Manrico is not Azucena's son. He is the Conte di Luna's brother and the Conte has turned into his brother's murderer. In *Genesis* 4.9, Cain says to the Lord "Am I my brother's keeper"? The theme of the fratricidal brother is a theme that Munro keeps harping on from story to story and it is taken up in "White Dump" with a political and indigenized inflection. The colonizers murdered the native population and turned the enchanted garden into a white dump because they forego the ethic responsibility they had towards their brothers and stole the land which was not theirs.

Through the process of apparently casual citations of "Il Trovatore" by Verdi and of the "Nibelung Ring" by Wagner via the the "Lay of Atli", the story makes room for other scenarios within its own scenario. It synchronizes an adultery in the middle class in the second half of the 20th century in Canada to Siegfried's betrayal of Brunhilde in the Germanic Middle Ages and it equates the breaking of the oath between a man and a woman to the breach of promise that the colonizers were guilty of when they settled in Canada. Munro moves from the personal to the mythical to the historical. She historicizes fiction and she fictionalizes history by collapsing the frontiers between the private and the public, the intimate and the political, everyday life and legends.

She constructs a relationship of co-presence between a heroic poem from the Middle-Ages revisited in an opera in the 19th century and a text from the 20th century. She also builds rhyzomatic relationships with another opera by a 19th century Italian composer who borrowed a play from a Spanish Romantic playwright, to extend her web of references both temporally and spatially. She stealthily appropriates a dizzying wealth of intertextual and intermedial relationship to generate a story about displacement, discontinuity and the illusion of home coming through the lives of three successive generations of women who have inhabited the same place. Sophie, a formidable professor of Scandinavian literature, is a single mother who raised her only son with an unbroken spirit despite the fact that the father was a married man who failed to take responsibility for his adultery, her daughter-in-law, Isabel, is a divorcee who broke the marriage vows to embark on a life of passionate and transient relationships and her own daughter, Denise, is an unmarried woman who runs a Woman's Center in Toronto dedicated to the care of broken and battered women. These three women exemplify three types of ambiguities which revolve around a breach of promise they themselves were victim of or responsible for,

in their respective domestic lives or the lives of those they took responsibility for. In an uncanny fashion, Munro juxtaposes the broken vows of domestic life to the breach of promise in national history and legendary epics better to demonstrate human frailty and the taint of spurious dealings but she does not condemn one to a wasteland or the abyss of an unclaimed dump. She creates an ambiguously "white" dump which is to be equated simultaneously with the delights and the pitfalls of "Dear Life".[7]

[7] Alice Munro, *Dear Life* (New York: Knopf, 2012).