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► **To cite this version:**

Corinne Florence Bigot. 'Locking the Door': Self-deception, Silence and Survival in Alice Munro's 'Vandals'. Trauma Narratives and Herstory, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2013, 978-1-137-26834-1. 10.1057/9781137268358 . hal-01682477

**HAL Id: hal-01682477**

**<https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-01682477>**

Submitted on 12 Jan 2018

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## **‘Locking the Door’: Self-deception, Silence and Survival in Alice Munro’s ‘Vandals’**

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published in *Trauma Narrative and Herstory*,  
 edited by Sonya Andermah & Silvia Pellicer,  
 Palgrave Macmillan 2013

This paper focuses on ‘Vandals’ by Canadian short story writer Alice Munro (*Open Secrets*, 1994). The story explores the complex relationship between abuse (here, the sexual abuse of children), silence and self-deception. This paper aims to read ‘Vandals’ as a trauma narrative which internalises the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience within its very structure (Vickroy, 2002). The paper will consider Munro’s narrative and stylistic choices to represent the unrepresentable and the impact of traumatic memory. I will also consider how Munro addresses the issue of survival, showing that as she denies closure, and provokes “emphatic unsettlement” (LaCapra), Munro exposes the silencing force of trauma and unhealed wounds in order to call on her readers to break the compact of silence.

### **Key words**

**Munro - traumatic memory - silence - emphatic unsettlement – survival - italics – topography**

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Most stories by Alice Munro are centrally concerned with the dialectic of remembering and forgetting and the contradiction between telling and not telling. They gradually bring the reader to the realisation that the protagonist is keeping silent about a traumatic event that haunts her memory. In ‘Vandals’, the last story from her 1994 collection, *Open Secrets*, these dialectics take on a more sombre tone since the event in the characters’ past, which is both silenced and remembered, is the sexual abuse that their neighbour inflicted upon them while the man’s partner seemingly chose not to see and act. In ‘Vandals’, Munro explores the complex relationships between abuse, silence and self-deception. As Juliet Herman pointed out in *Trauma and Survival*, violations of the social compact such as sexual abuse of children are ‘too terrible to utter aloud’, which encourages victims to succumb to the desire to deny the atrocities they have suffered and bystanders to the desire to look the other way (Herman, 1992, p.1, p.8). The narrator says very little about the abuse, so that narrative reticence echoes the silences covering the abuse. In ‘Vandals’, Munro explores the silencing force of trauma and unhealed wounds, to call on her readers to break the compact of silence. Her narrative choice to indirectly expose the abuse and the silence that covers it up through metaphors and a topography that simultaneously invites and resists deciphering proves to be a very adequate means to realistically evoke the traumatic experience of child abuse, as documented in

Herman's study (Herman, 1992, pp. 96-144) or Kalí Tal's reading of incest narratives (Tal, 1996, pp. 154-198). Munro addresses the question of the impact of traumatic memory on victims, as well as the question about the survival of abuse. Cathy Caruth's seminal essay, *Unclaimed Experience*, has provided the theoretical background on these points (Caruth, 1996), since the main concern of 'Vandals' is to point to unhealed wounds that linger on the body and on the intrusive memories that haunt the present lives of the protagonists. I propose to read 'Vandals' as a trauma narrative as defined by Vickroy since it 'internalize[s] the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience' within its structure (2002, p. 3). Moreover, Munro's refusal to provide closure and a final resolution at the end of the narrative has led me to consider Dominic LaCapra's notion of 'emphatic unsettlement' (LaCapra, 2001) to describe the effect of Munro's story upon her readers.

### **Witnessing the unspeakable, representing the unrepresentable**

"So did you read my signs?" is the question that Ladner, who owns a nature reserve, asks Liza and Kenny, the two young children he finds lurking on his property (Munro, 1994, p.285). The topography in 'Vandals', as Robert McGill puts it, 'is everywhere written over with texts' (McGill, 2002, p.106) — letters carved on a tree, signs with the animals' names and details about their habitats, notices forbidding people to trespass, and boards with quotations by Aristotle and Rousseau. The signs that the characters may fail to understand challenge the reader to decipher the signs of a narrative in which the abuse is never acknowledged by the victims, the perpetrator or the bystander. The short story opens with a letter written by a woman called Bea to her former neighbour, Liza, who is now in her twenties. Bea thanks Liza for having checked on her property while Bea cared for her partner in the hospital. The letter, which also mentions the man's death, is never sent. The rest of the first section is devoted to Bea's reminiscences about her past and her life with her partner, Ladner. The second part describes Liza and her husband's visit to Bea and Ladner's house, which Liza trashes for no apparent reason. The third part, ~~whose focalizer is Liza,~~ offers a

new version of the past, as it gradually emerges that Liza and her brother were abused by Ladner, a fact which Bea did not see, or chose not to see. In ‘Vandals’, Munro explores themes such as guilt and denial as she documents the complex relationships between abuse, silence and self-deception.

Ladner’s creation — the nature reserve— and his job – he is a taxidermist — will play a key role in the revelation of the abuse and, its effects, ~~and the silence that has covered it up.~~ Ladner has created what is called a ‘remarkable kind of nature preserve’ (Munro, p.266) with exhibits of ‘lifelike birds and animals’ which he constructs with wire armatures, papier-mâché, wood, clay and the animals’ skins. It is a simulacrum of the Ontario countryside, and this is made clear by the repeated emphasis on the fact that, on the reserve and with these animals, ‘nothing is real’ (286). There, Bea is said to mistake what is unreal for what is real. As Foy, Dawson and Ventura have pointed out, one of the central and unresolved questions in the story is whether Bea knew about the abuse (Foy, 1999; Dawson, 2005; Ventura, 2007). Early in the narrative, a sign on a trail that reads ‘*Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves—Rousseau*’ (271) alerts to the possibility that the characters in the story are prone to self-deception. Liza seems to believe that Bea did not do anything to protect the children because she did not see what was happening: ‘[w]hat Bea has been sent to do, she doesn’t see.’ (293). Bea’s inability to see is constantly underscored, for instance, on her first tour of Ladner’s property, she confuses mushrooms with rotten apples (272) and mistakes a ‘wire armature’ for a real body (273). However, after an unpleasant incident with Ladner, Liza wonders whether Bea has not ‘made a bargain not to remember’ (293), which suggests that Bea may have decided she had better ignore what was happening with the children. Bea seems to epitomize what Judith Herman calls ‘the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil’ (Herman, 1992, p.7), she seems to have succumbed to ‘the temptation to look the other way’ (Herman, 1992, p.8), which is a frequent reaction to child abuse in those who have

witnessed it. Carrie Dawson points out that Ladner's 'diorama functions as a symbol of the often complex relationships between ways of knowing and of not knowing, of preserving disbelief in the face of knowledge too horrible to contemplate.' (Dawson, 2005, pp.70-71) In the ~~short~~ story, much emphasis is put on the animals' eyes: the children are said to help Ladner by fitting eyes into the fake bodies (Munro, 1994, p.285) and to squish 'eyeballs into jelly' (286), and also Bea notices an animal's empty eyeholes during her first visit (273). The ever-present eyes point to Bea's inability or refusal to see that her partner is abusing Liza and her brother-; ~~however,yet~~ they may also serve to emphasise Liza's incomprehension about the fact that no one seems to see what is going on, as the narrator underlines that '[o]nly Liza sees.' (293) However, as Ladner's own eyes in the rape scene are said to shine 'out of ambush' (292) suggests that ~~the eyes~~ the motif may also evoke ~~may also convey~~ Liza's feelings of being unable to escape the predator's watchful eyes when she was a child, this would explain why, as she trashes Ladner's house many years later, she shouts "Bull's eyes" when a bottle hits the stove (280): her cry resonates as a cry of revenge. }-

Also, the skinned animals function as powerful metaphors throughout the story, conveying the children's silenced suffering. As Ladner's work with the animals is being described, there are repeated remarks about body parts such as the animals' innards, or 'guts' and their skins. Attention is drawn to the holes in these bodies — 'empty eyeholes', 'mouth holes'(273) — and, through the verbs describing Ladner's work, to the violent acts of skinning and scraping bodies (286). The children are repeatedly associated to animals, for instance, when Bea first meets Liza and Kenny, she asks them what kind of animal they would be if they could turn into animals (284), and Ladner only refers to them as 'the kids'. The word 'kid' in the English language can also refer to the leather made from the kid's skin, therefore, this phrase takes on a sinister connotation in the context of the taxidermist's world which may give some clue about his secret perverse activities- The diorama that exhibits the

animals' bodies should be read, as both Carrie Dawson and Héliane Ventura explain, as a story about the violation and manipulation of bodies (Dawson, 2005, pp.73-74; Ventura, 2007, p.313). It is through the metaphor of taxidermy that Munro effectively discloses the sexual and moral violence that Kenny and Liza have been enduring. The metaphor actually enables Munro to evoke the feelings that victims of child abuse usually experience and repress, as Tal's incest narratives and Herman's study of child abuse reveal (Herman, 1992, pp.96-114; Tal, 1996, pp.155-198). In its original meaning, trauma first referred to a wound to the body, so the image of the skinned animals proves to be a very effective means to convey the physical and spiritual wound inflicted upon the children. It also effectively suggests that Liza and Kenny can only 'inscribe the traumatic experience as metaphor', a device which, as Tal explains, is often used by the victims when they try to talk about the abuse (Tal, 1996, p.16). Thus, Liza thinks of a 'ripping open' (Munro, p.288) when she tries to describe the effect of Ladner's mocking of Bea; the verb denoting physical violence reveals she is aware that with Ladner, psychological and physical violence are linked. Furthermore, the image of the skinned animals is also a very effective means to convey the picture the children have of themselves as violated animals, evoking the self-devaluation, loss of self-esteem, and repression of emotions young victims of sexual abuse often feel (Tal, 1996, pp.155-198).

The children are said to be helping Ladner in his job, and if it is accepted that taxidermy is used in this short story as a means to reveal the abuse, then, the fact that Kenny and Liza help Ladner construct the fake bodies suggests that the fiction of their happy life together is a construct in which all of them are complicit. For 'Vandals' also addresses the disturbing issue of the victim's role in preserving the abusive relationship with the abuser and the abuser's partner. The abusive relationship, as Tal's narratives and Herman's study show, both depends on the man's position of power, which ensures silence and secrecy, and relies on the special bonds the abuser forges with his young victims (Herman, 1992, pp.96-114; Tal, 1996, pp.155-

198). Ladner's role as an instructor is emphasized, as he teaches the children about birds, trees, animals, the solar system (Munro, p.286). Ladner, the magician who can turn wood and clay into lifelike animals, is also a shape-shifter who can 'switch from one person to another person' (289). In other words, he changes his role from the children's teacher to their abuser, while assuming the mask of a father-like figure. Ladner, who has taught the children about the secrets of the nature reserve and has organized their activities there, is in charge of what Liza calls his 'territory' and the description of Ladner's nature reserve in section three, whose focalizer is Liza, shows that she has internalized his logic. Leaving her father's garden to enter Ladner's 'territory' means leaving the normal world behind to adopt and accept Ladner rule: 'when you cross the road, as Liza is doing now (...) when you cross into Ladner's territory, it's like coming into a world of different and distinct countries.' (291) The divisions Liza sees in the garden, as she distinguishes places where 'serious instruction' about trees and animals occurs from places where the children play, and places where sexual intercourse occurs (291), reveal her attempt to recreate some order out of the chaos she has endured in that territory. However, Ladner has created a world in which several realities coexist and ~~also~~ interlap. In this way, the children do not know how to differentiate between games and sexual games: 'what was terrible was always funny, badness was mixed up with silliness, you always had to join him with dopey face and voices and pretending he was a cartoon monster. You couldn't get out of it, or even want to' (290).

In 'Vandals', Munro rather convincingly explores the complicated bonds between an abused child and her parents which Herman describes in her chapter on child abuse: victims often develop attachments to their abuser, which they will strive to maintain, while attempting to preserve faith in their parents (Herman, p.98; p.107). Liza's inability to escape from her abuser is on a par with her attachment to him, which is revealed when she thinks of their relationship as 'the secret life she had with him' (Munro, pp.289-90). As the use of the

pronoun 'she' shows, Liza actually feels that she is a partner rather than a victim in this relationship, which is a means for her to minimize, if not deny, what is taking place with Ladner. Minimizing or excusing the abuse, as Herman's study underlines, frequently occurs in cases of child abuse as the child strives to preserve her attachment to her parents (Herman, 1992, pp.101-102) and although Ladner is not the children's father, he has become a substitute for the father-figure. Ladner has managed to preserve a very strong bond with the children, and more specifically with Liza. He makes sure that the children are on his side by making them laugh at Bea when she tries to join them in the pond, in fact, Liza is aware of Ladner's strategy when she imagines him saying: 'see how vain she is (...) pretending not to know we despise her' (288). Liza's love for Bea is emphasized but it is shown to be made of conflicting feelings, it is both a need to protect Bea and be protected by her:

And ~~it~~ it was this collection of flaws [...] that Liza especially loved. Also she loved the dampness that was often to be seen in Bea's eyes [...] her love was one of expectation, but she did not know what it was that she expected.<sup>2</sup> (287)

Although she claims not to know it, Liza expects Bea to rescue her from the abuse, however, Liza will conclude that Bea is too innocent to understand her relationship with Ladner, so she will never ask for Bea's help. As Dawson has convincingly argued, Liza's position amid the birds after she leaves the pond evokes the myth of Philomela who, after having been raped in a cabin in the woods, had her tongue cut out to prevent her from telling her story, and was eventually turned into a bird (Dawson, 2005, p.75). Philomela wove a tapestry to tell her sister her story, while in 'Vandals' Liza, who never talks about the abuse, draws Bea's attention to clues that indirectly point to it. She shows Bea their initials carved on a tree that stands in the middle of the path (289), yet it is her brother Kenny who shouts "Pull down pants!" (289) as he draws Bea's attention to the other series of letters on the tree, P.D.P.



which, as Ventura points out, ‘clandestinely level an accusation at Ladner, who is revealed as the PeDoPhile’ (Ventura, 2007, p.312).

~~In keeping with this, t~~The readers, as McGill notes, are constantly encouraged to read the landscape (McGill, 2002, p.110), since topography in ‘Vandals’ plays a key part in conveying the character’s silenced emotions and the resurfacing of their traumatic memories. ‘Vandals’, as a trauma narrative, attempts to engage its readers with ‘personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence’ of traumatic memory (Vickroy, 2002, p.3). In the section which describes Liza’s return to Ladner’s place many years later, much emphasis is put on the white landscape and its few black landmarks, a black swamp, and ‘black trunks against the snow’ (Munro, p.277). First, the black trees flashing against the white background as the characters drive past them are said to be ‘faintly sickening’ (277), which suggests, in the context of the black marks against a white background, that deciphering the signs may prove to be an unpleasant experience for readers and characters alike. When the characters stop the snowmobile, they find themselves ‘stuck in the solid middle of the winter day’ (277), and attention is drawn to trees which are ‘plastered with snow, clotted with it (277) and a black swamp which is ‘choked with snow’ (277). It is only after reading the next section where the abuse is disclosed that readers understand that this anthropomorphic landscape revealed the feelings Liza could not express. ~~for~~In the third section, the description of Ladner’s garden takes the form of a guided tour, with the pronoun ‘you’ apparently inviting readers in: ‘when you cross the road—as Liza is doing now, trotting on the gravel—when you cross into Ladner’s territory’ (291). The narrative, which is both marked by these shifts in pronouns verbal tenses (from the past to the present, and from the present to the past), aims to place readers in Liza’s ‘disoriented position through shifts in time, memory and affect’ (Vickroy, 2002, p.28). The change in the use of pronouns, which also appear when Liza evokes their games with Ladner, as quoted above, also brings to mind

the dissociative strategies victims of sexual abuse usually resort to. They are a common defense mechanism which enables the child to deny the reality of what is happening to her (Herman, 1992, pp.101-103; Tal, 1996, p.171). As she walks in the garden towards the house, Liza is trying to dissociate herself from her plight, projecting her pain and shame on the garden, as the tour ends on 'places where Liza thinks there's a bruise on the ground, a tickling and shame in the grass' (291). 'Vandals' demonstrates that trauma, as Caruth posits, 'is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth, 1996, p.4). Then, -the description of the garden is interrupted by three italicized segments which, with a final italicized sentence, frame a middle section, in normal typeface. The passage interrupts the course of the narrative and disrupts normal reading, as it is only by connecting the segments to the middle section that the readers can understand that a traumatic memory is resurfacing to the present moment of the narration, which emphasises the traumatic nature of the character's past experiences:

*P.D.P.  
Squeegey-boy.  
Rub-a-dub-dub.*

When Ladner grabbed Liza and squashed himself against her, she had a sense of danger deep inside him, a mechanical sputtering, as if he would exhaust himself in one jab of light, and nothing would be left of him but black smoke and burnt smells and frazzled wires. Instead, he collapsed heavily, like the pelt of an animal flung loose from its flesh and bones. He lay so heavy and useless that Liza and even Kenny felt for a moment that it was a transgression to look at him. He had to pull his voice out of his groaning innards, to tell them they were bad.

He clucked his tongue faintly and his eyes shone out of ambush, hard and round as the animals' glass eyes.

*Bad-bad-bad. (292)*

Again, 'Vandals' proves to be a trauma narrative, as, as it has internalized the rhythms and processes of traumatic experience' in the form of the text itself (Vickroy, 2002, p.3). Liza is assailed by traumatic memory, a 'disjointed sensory and affective memory', taking the form

of an image that possesses the character against her will (Caruth, 1991, p.3). Herman states that ‘the traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory which breaks spontaneously into consciousness’ (Herman, 1992, p.37). Traumatic memories, she explains, are ‘encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images’ (Herman, 1992, p.38). Vickroy also states that in trauma narratives such memories are ‘explored through affective and unconscious associations’ (Vickroy, 2002, p.3). In the passage above, these associations are conveyed through the floating of segments in italics, where the language of childhood mixes with and is perverted by words said by the abuser and which *Liza* remembers now. This fragment from the nursery rhyme together with the childish words remind readers that those who are abused *in the narrative weare* children. Furthermore, this fragment can be read as a symbol of the actual bodily contact between abuser and victims, as the last italicized segment whose repetitive pattern serves to mimic the assault depicts.

In the middle section, the sexual assault is told only indirectly, from the point of view of a child who tries to dissociate herself from the rape. The description rests on similes such as ‘the jab of light’ which both convey the violence of the act itself and bring to mind the strategies of indirect telling, through metaphors, that victims of sexual abuse use when they try to tell what happened to them (Tal, 1996, p.16). The passage evokes the dissociative strategies used by victims of child abuse, their powerlessness and their problematic perceptions (Herman, 1992, p.43age). Perception, Herman explains, ‘may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia, or the loss of particular sensations’ (Herman, 1992, p. 43). In ‘Vandals’, the narrative focuses on the man’s emotions, so that *Liza*’s feelings seem to be obliterated. *Liza*’s own torn body is absent from the narrative, instead, attention is drawn to *Ladner*’s. In the last paragraph of the middle section, the similes convey *Liza*’s confusion- *Ladner* is seen as a predator when his eyes are said to ‘shine out of ambush, and a victim since the similes turn him into the animals he skins: *Liza* sees a ‘pelt’, ‘wires’, animals’ glass eyes’

and ‘innards’. The similes also reveal Liza’s own lack of agency since she attributes her own powerlessness to her abuser. Herman [and Tal’s](#) highlight the victim’s usual sense of powerlessness and her belief that she is the one to be blamed (Herman, 1992, pp.96-114; Tal, 1996, pp.155-198). Indeed, the depiction of the assault in ‘Vandals’ shows that the abuser has successfully shifted the blame since the children feel they are the one who have broken the rules: ‘it was a transgression to look at him’. As the final italicized segment shows, Liza has indeed internalized the logic of the perpetrator; ‘*bad-bad-bad*’ testifies to a double violence: the echo mimics the physical violence endured by the children while the word itself testifies to the moral violence perpetrated on the child who believes she is guilty, and relives her shame as she hears the word again and again. Munro often uses italics to represent words that resurface in a character’s memory and haunt her, for instance, in ‘The Children Stay’, italics are used when the heroine who is about to lose her children suddenly remembers the words by which her baby daughter called her (Munro, 1998, 212). The shift in tenses and the confusing chronology also emphasize that the frontiers between past and present and between body and mind are blurred as traumatic memory resurfaces. -As they are [confronted](#) to the puzzle they have to decipher, readers are able to experience Liza’s struggle with her traumatic memory. ‘Vandals’ illustrates the tension between remembering and suppressing trauma as it conveys the violence of traumatic memory through its typography and offers a topography which exposes readers to the full impact of traumatic experience, from the suffering the children keep silent about to the revenant quality of their traumatic past.

### **Survival of trauma? Re-encountering the past**

In section two, the reader learns of Liza’s life as an adult, and her immersion in religious zeal, suggesting an attempt to repress what she herself calls her ‘wild’ past (Munro, 1994, p.281) through a very ordered world. Yet, this vision is questioned when her husband,

Warren, remembers Liza's wild dancing at a party: 'she tore her way through music, *supplicated* and curled around it, kicked loose' (281, italics mine). This description conjures up the vision of a wounded girl who is ultimately locked away from everyone, including her husband. Part two demonstrates that the question of survival after traumatic experience lies at the heart of the short story, since it depicts Liza's trashing of Ladner's house when she is in her twenties. Liza's acts of vandalism are directly linked to ~~to~~ the abuse as her Liza's acts of violence in Ladner's the house are conveyed in words that evoke sexual violence: books are 'torn apart' (280), Liza is said to 'yank out drawers' (280) and emphasis is put on the 'ripping of books and paper' (280). The 'funny noise' Liza makes when she violently pulls the drawers out, described as the 'admiring cluck of her tongue' (279), echoes Ladner's clucking his tongue in the rape scene (292). ~~T~~tearing the books and animals apart is her Liza's means to play out what was done to her. Liza herself points to this connection as she inflicts an injury to herself with her words: "Liza Minnelli, stick in your belly!" (283) These words draw attention to her wounded body and, by making the invisible wound visible, they ~~also~~ represent an attempt to speak out – either because she is repeating what Ladner said to her or because it is her means to voice her feelings about the psychological and physical damage she has endured. Thus, these words ultimately suggest an attempt to come to terms with the traumatic experience. As Liza is said to utter these words 'peacefully' (283), they point to the healing power of words survivors of child abuse feel when they are able to talk about the abuse instead of denying it (Tal, 1996, pp.168-174).

Liza's trashing of the house, therefore, can be seen as the therapeutic re-enactment of the abuse, giving her the empowerment that survivors experience when they remember and acknowledge the abuse. For Liza's dismembering the house and the animals can be read, as Ventura suggests, as 'a remembering of the self' (Ventura, 2007, p.317). When they enter the house, Liza's husband remarks it is 'like going back in time' (Munro, p.280) and when they

leave, he smashes a window ‘big enough so a kid could get in’ (294). Taking Liza to the house and helping her to trash it, Warren has enabled the kid to go back and re-enact the past, a therapeutic re-enactment which, as Liza’s remark indicates, has been vital to her survival: “you saved my life.” (Munro, p.294) However, remembering is a painful process too, and Liza’s own wounded body is strikingly evoked when she smashes a bottle of liqueur against a window: ‘a pool of beautiful liquid streamed out from it. Dark-green blood. The window glass had filled with thousands of radiating cracks and turned as white as a halo.’ (281) The blood, the cracks in the window and the ‘ripping’ of the books evoke a violated body and, as Liza’s gestures repeat the violence that has torn her apart, the traumatic memory reactivates the wounds. Yet, beauty results from this gesture and the past, as it is violently re-enacted, seems to engender its own creative force. As Ventura has demonstrated, the passage is endowed with a striking artistic dimension (Ventura, 2001, p.315) when Liza steps back ‘*admiring* what she’d managed so far’ (Munro, p.282, my italics). As Liza uses sticks of charred wood to make black marks on the rug (282), suggesting charcoal used in drawing and sketching, and she eventually uses a magic marker to write on the wall (282), she turns her work into a graphic tale of her abuse for Bea and Ladner to read. Pointing out the dissociation between affect and representation that victims of trauma suffer from, Dominic LaCapra suggests that ‘working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend but may, to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation (LaCapra, 2001, p.42). The wounding words Liza tells, the violent acts she inflicts upon the house and the animals are attempts to articulate her affects and work through trauma.

Liza, however, chooses reticence or cryptic answers when faced with her husband’s questions. When asked to justify her act of vandalism, Liza first deflects the question and then openly blames Bea for having phoned her many years after the events to offer her money

(275), which indicates that she has seen Bea's offer as another proof of her silence. Liza's accusation brings to mind a typical strategy used by victims of incest who often blame the mother (Tal, 1996, pp.154-248). Although Ladner and Bea are not the children's parents, Liza's reflection that they are 'like a family' (Munro, p.286) indicates that the abusive relationship can be likened to incest. The fact that Liza still proves incapable of naming and blaming Ladner suggests she has not yet managed to come to terms with the real facts. Although Liza phones Bea to report the act of vandalism, she says nothing about her role, which reinforces these two women's silence about the past. At the end of the story, readers are left with the disconcerting feeling that silence has prevailed. Thus, Liza's attempt to come to terms with her past becomes quite fragile and uncertain, suggesting that the resolution of the trauma is never final and that recovery is never complete (Herman, 1992, p.212).

Central to Munro's representation of traumatic experience and survival is the image of the wound that obliquely resurfaces in the final section of the story. As Liza and Warren are about to leave Ladner's place, Liza draws Warren's attention to the cedars in the garden – which were described as dark and secret rooms – and eventually, to the letters carved on the birch tree: “And that one with the bark like gray skin? That's a birch. See, it had letters carved on it, but they have spread out, they just look like any old blotches now.”(Munro, p.294) Echoing the earlier passage when Liza showed Bea these letters, the gesture conveys her wish to talk about her past and understand that this may prove impossible since the barely legible blotches suggest that traumatic wounds are invisible to others. As the bark is compared to 'skin', and the letters to 'blotches' (294), the letters turn into a scar that only Liza can see. The scar is a recurring image in Munro's fiction; it features prominently in 'Rich as Stink' whose teenage heroine is caught up in a complicated love relationship between her mother, her mother's lover and the man's wife (Munro, 1998). In this story, the girl is severely burnt when the veil she wears catches fire, and a few years later she reflects that, although no one

seems to notice how much she has changed, she knows she has, and she embodies the change that she only can see in her scar. In both 'Vandals' and 'Rich as Stink', the scar suggests that no child can find herself entangled in her elders' lives and emerge unscarred, yet it is also the scar that helps the character to make sense of, if not to articulate, what happened to them. In Munro's fiction, the scar is the locus of remembering and of suffering. In 'Vandals', it enables Liza to point to an unhealed wound that she imagines to linger on her body. Seeing the scar means remembering and re-enacting the traumatic wound. —The fact that the letters are hardly visible reveals how difficult it is for others to understand the traumatic experience the character has endured, all the more so as Warren's lack of interest is emphasized (Munro, 1994, p.294). Although Warren's lack of interest may allude to a patriarchal discourse neglecting women's (hi)stories – suggested by both his position on the sofa, with his back to Liza when she starts trashing the house, and his dismissing of her actions as a child's tantrum (280) – Warren's inability to notice what is around him (279) connects him with Bea, which evokes a larger desire to preserve silence on the issue of sexual abuse of children. This is 'a wrong', Tal points out, 'that the larger society refuses to acknowledge' (Tal, 1996, p.171). Although 'Vandals' can not be read as a *testimonio* due to its fictional nature (Felman and Laud, 1992), it aims at breaking the silence on sexual abuse by highlighting the silences around the children's ordeal: the indirect telling that prevails throughout the story is a means to force the reader to reflect on 'universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil' (Herman, 1992, p.7).

Preserving her characters' silence is for Munro a means to deny them closure and to highlight how difficult it is to communicate traumatic experience. Thus, the opening sentence of the final section provides readers with a disconcerting vision after Liza has trashed the house: 'Liza locked the door as you had to, from the outside.' (293) The phrase 'as you had to' warns that the gesture is crucial to one's surviving. Yet, it is unclear whether by locking



the door Liza is ‘liberating her past or sealing her own ‘shaded and secret rooms’’ (Levene, 1999, p.857). As Warren is the focalizer of the final section, the opening phrase can be read as Warren’s approbation of his wife’s desire to remain silent about her past. Speaking to Eleanor Wachtel in a 1993 interview, Munro used a similar image, as she explained that she had always been interested in the fact that in the course of their lives people could become a totally different person: ‘so you’ve got all these rooms in your head that you’ve shut off but that you can remember.’ (Munro, 1993, p.110) The locked door at the end of ‘Vandals’ may therefore suggest Liza’s attempt to refuse to dwell on her past. Munro’s explanation, however, reveals that shutting off the rooms does not free the character from her past, it can only betray an attempt to prevent others from knowing it. In ‘Vandals’, Munro underlines the difficulty to communicate traumatic experience. Commenting on the readers’ position at the end of the story, McGill remarks that ‘Munro finished by asking readers to question the degree of intimacy they really gain as readers.’ (McGill, 2002, p.114).

### Conclusion

Many gaps remain to be filled in this reticent narrative, where paragraphs often conclude with brief sentences that withhold explanation: Liza’s own choice of silence, ‘[s]he knew not to talk so much about what she knew (Munro, 1994, p.286), is revealed in a one-line paragraph followed by a textual blank space so that readers may be literally left with the space to ponder this chilling nugget of wisdom, which brutally summarises Liza’s own double bind.’ (286) Bea’s refusal to see what is happening at Ladner’s place and Liza’s hopelessness are made manifest in two brief sentences in section three: ‘What Bea has been sent to do, she doesn’t see./ Only Liza sees.’ (293). Interestingly, ‘there is no object after the verbs ‘sees’ and ‘knew’ so that it up to the readers to infer what it is that the characters should see or what they keep silent about. The position of the readers mirrors Bea’s since they are meant to decipher the signs of trauma. However, there are many impediments to comprehension, for instance,

the confusing chronology makes it impossible to know when the abuse started or ended. The shifting viewpoints in the story — Bea is the focaliser in section two, Warren for the second and fourth sections, and Liza for the third one — prevent the readers from gaining too much information about the past. They also preclude identification with any of the characters, including Liza whose emotions are only seen through Warren in section two — the image of the girl who is locked away from everyone as she dances-introduces a distance between Liza and the reader. So does the tour of Ladner's garden in section three with its constant emphasis on dissociation. This tour, as McGill argues, 'both completely identifies readers with Liza as the 'you' and utterly alienates them from her by eliding her' (McGill, 2002, p.112). There is, however, another effect of the confusing topography: the readers who, as McGill points out, are 'involved in drawing the map' (McGill, p.109), may also sympathize with Bea's confusion, since her difficulties to keep track of her direction during the first tour of Ladner's property is emphasized (Munro, p.171-3). Focusing on both Liza's incomprehension and Bea's confusion, Munro manages to arise readers' empathy and to prevent over-identification with the characters. Instead, Munro aims to provoke what LaCapra calls 'emphatic unsettlement', a process which enables the outsider to be responsive to others' traumatic experience without appropriating their experience (2001, p.42; 2009, pp.65-66). She also denies her readers easy consolation and reassurance; this is achieved at the end of the story with the dialectical images which testify to the complexity of a narrative whose aim is to suggest 'what is inaccessible, unbelievable, and elusive about traumatic experience.' (Vickroy, 2002, p.8). The first image, as we have seen, is that of the scar on the tree. To see the letters as a scar, as Liza does, is also a means to evoke what Caruth calls 'the enigma of survival' (Caruth, 1996, p.58): Liza has survived her childhood abuse, she has been offered the possibility to act out her traumatic memories, yet, pain does not completely disappear. 'Vandals' is a story that resists closure, for instance, Nathalie Foy concludes that with the

final image ‘you could feel darkness collecting’ Warren is made to feel a sense of immediate danger (Foy, 1998, p.160). However, this image also indicates that, in spite of his lack of interest or empathy, Warren has been touched by something: ‘you could feel the darkness collecting’ (Munro, 1994, p.294). This image resists explanation, although it echoes both Bea’s depiction of her relationship with Ladner, ‘*I come up against blocks of solid darkness.*’ (274), and Liza’s vision of ‘dark rooms’ in the garden, symbolizing her secret life with Ladner (291). The pronoun ‘you’ calls on the readers who are not expected to fully understand the traumatic experience but are instead, expected to be responsive to the characters’ attempts to tell their traumatic experience.

In conclusion, ‘Vandals’ illustrates the power of literature to offer what Caruth calls ‘an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent ways but to what, in trauma, resists comprehension’ (1996, p.6). Thus, Vandals’ attests to the endless impact of trauma on a life’ (Caruth, 1996, p.7). In ‘Vandals’, Munro has tried to encompass many aspects of traumatic experience, from the silence and denial that cover -it, to the victim’s troubled relationship with her past and her struggle with forgetting and remembering, to her ultimate attempt to survive trauma. As many trauma narratives do, ‘Vandals’ places readers into uncomfortable positions, a process which, as Dominic LaCapra puts it, ‘poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance’ (LaCapra, 2001, pp.41-42). The story draws its power from its dialectical images, preventing reassurance, easy consolation and complacency. It is a powerful trauma narrative in that it employs reticence and indirect telling as narrative strategies to expose the silences that have often covered up child abuse and call on readers to be responsive to those who attempt to break the silence.

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