

Gerald Murnane's "The Plains": A Convenient Source of Metaphors

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GERALD MURNANE'S *The Plains* presents the failed mission of an outsider. A young film-maker travels from Outer Australia to the plains of Inner Australia, his purpose being to study the beliefs, manners, dreams, art work, and culture of the people who live there. The most specific place names we are given in the book are Inner and Outer Australia: the place on the plains in which the narrator stays is not named, nor is the place from which he came. We never learn the narrator's name nor the names of his patron, the other landowners and their families, the other historians and artists of the plains.

The Plains can be read as a parody of the conventional narrative of exploration. The explorer's task is to journey into new, strange, unexplored places and, through the journey and the recording of observations, to take possession of these places, to make them familiar. *The Plains* inverts this process: the explorer enters the already inhabited, the familiar world of country Australia, and makes that world seem unfamiliar.

The epigraph to the book comes from the journal of the explorer Thomas Livingstone Mitchell and reads:

We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilized man . . .

This is a reversal of the myth of the "savage bush in need of taming." *The Plains* takes us into this "welcoming" country, practises the imposition onto the land of "civilized" customs, tests the hypothesis that the land will receive, will absorb, the possessive aims of "civilization." The ultimate result is a deconstruction of Mitchell's claim. Earlier Australian writers such as Henry Lawson wrote of the land's resistance to the plough: the plainsmen are

more advanced pioneers—they are cultured, leisured men, interested in reaping the land's spiritual and intellectual harvests, seeking in their cultural researches the essence of its meaning. The land both invites and repels their efforts at interpretative colonization.

The book re-opens the already-explored paths and re-addresses some of the findings that have been significant in forming a sense of national identity. The main belief about Australia that the narrator's journey contests is that the coastal, exterior regions are the most valuable. This explorer turns his back on the concepts of Australia as a land of sun and golden beaches and of Australians as bronze-skinned surfers, "sun-bakers," and extroverts, embracing instead the various interiors of country, home, library, and thought. In a sense, too, the book is taking up the nineteenth-century search for the inland sea, a paradisaical Australian heartland postulated by the actual early explorers, but it does this in the context of the twentieth century, which knows that no such satisfying conclusion waits at the end of the journey. *The Plains* does not represent fictionally a historical, failed quest as, for example, in Patrick White's *Voss*; rather, it speculates about the forces motivating such questing. Instead of presenting a direct account of an exploration, it is an account of the exploration of exploration itself. In an almost allegorical way, *The Plains* exploits both this potent myth, which fired the imaginations and energy of nineteenth-century Australians, and the exploration of the myth, with the discovery that the inland lacks a sea. The plainmen dream about a plain beyond their own:

"I can't believe that even our plains could equal the land we all dream of exploring. And yet I believe that land is only another plain. Or at least it must be approached by way of the plains around us." (52)

"We're all plainmen, always claiming that everything in sight is a landmark of something beyond it." (50)

The goal of their vision, by definition, is impossible because it is beyond the known. As the third landowner says,

"I happen to believe myself that we're all explorers in our way. But exploration is much more than naming and describing. An explorer's task is to postulate the existence of a land beyond the known land. Whether or not he finds that land and brings back news of it is

unimportant. He may choose to lose himself in it forever and add one more to the sum of unexplored lands." (54)

As an unconventional exploration novel, *The Plains* reclaims Australia and Australians from the rigidity of interpretations and characterizations based especially on descriptions of landscape and climate. Whilst recognizably an Australian novel, this is no account of a national character forged from the pioneering struggles against drought, bushfire, and flood.¹ There is a mythic quality about *The Plains*, established largely through its lack of specificity, the brooding silences of its spaces, and the hinted parallels with an actual historical past. But this mythologizing works against some of the more entrenched myths about Australia. Russell Ward writes:

According to the myth the "typical Australian" is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser ever willing "to have a go" at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is "near enough." (1-2)

The plainsmen, however, are suave perfectionists. Ward continues:

He is a "hard case," sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. (2)

Yet the plainsmen are obsessed by culture, art, and metaphysics. They are the patrons of men—artists, poets, historians, designers—qualified and suitable to undertake a variety of projects that will seek to reflect and enshrine their heritage. On the other hand, some of the mythical qualities are exaggerated: the "typical" Australian's taciturnity becomes an intensely guarded privacy and a perverse delight in not being understood. Given to long sessions of talking in bars, the plainsmen do not yarn; they philosophize on abstruse subjects. But although *The Plains* examines myths about Australian men, it does nothing towards gendering the myths, towards challenging the basing of national identity in male characters. In fact, much of the humour of the book relies upon a recognition of contestations over the contents of specifically masculine identity. The deconstruction of "Australian" identity is performed via a redefinition of the Australian

man; men of imagination rather than men of brawn are the real pioneers. With their mental powers of projection and speculation they are the ones most able to pursue and create new horizons. In an early appreciation of the novel Imre Salusinszky makes a similar point:

Murnane inverts the key Australian myth of the pioneering exploration, transforming it from one which marginalizes intellectuals in favour of practical men to one in which the intellect is central. (60)

This formulation, however, masks the abiding assumption of masculinity as the keeper of identity. The revalued intellectuals are not women. The "inversion" takes place within the parameters of male concerns with the possibility of their subjecthood. The myth-makers are men: their history, their discoveries, their debates, and not women's, are given textual existence. In the debates that engage the plainsmen, women are discussed by men as if they are outside of the historical process: timeless, teasing, intangible essences.

Whilst conjuring some of the key terms of this masculinist nationalist debate, *The Plains*, none the less, is concerned more broadly with issues of representation, definition, and interpretation. One of the effects of the lack of naming and boundary marking is to deny the fixed imposition of signs and meanings onto the landscape and to reveal these activities as conventions. True, Australia is named. But we should not take this location of place for granted: *The Plains* also makes us aware that Australia is a name that has been foisted onto the place; the attachment of place and name is not inevitable and natural but arbitrary. Argument over the name is recalled:

A minority . . . argued that the plains would never receive their due until the continent then known as Australia was renamed Inner Australia. (36)

One man had dissociated himself from the minority Inner Australia and had taken up the most extreme of all positions. He denied the existence of any nation with the name Australia. (37)

Thus, while Australia is named on the first page, this is not a stable, solid landmark by which we can navigate. Uncertainty of place is aroused immediately. In the second paragraph we read: ". . . I cannot even say that at a certain hour I knew I had left

Australia" (9). This is an ambiguous sentence; it suggests that the narrator both has and has not left Australia. Memory hasn't failed: either language ("I cannot say") or knowledge ("I cannot say I knew") or both are responsible. The sentence also suggests the indefinability of borders, in this case of the border between Australia and the plains. Then again, on the level where *The Plains* is equivalent to this particular written text, the narrator, a fictional character, hasn't really left Australia at all, which is why he cannot say or know that he has. Yet the writer of those words has left, in the sense that the writing of a piece of fiction, the process of imagining *The Plains*, the absorption in the construction of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, does involve the creation of a new world, a textual world that itself cannot be the world we live in. In a realist novel we know where we are. If Melbourne is named we are invited to compare the textual Melbourne with the actual, the unwritten. Scrupulous attention to geographical and historical detail in the first volume of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, for instance, locates us very firmly in the Ballarat gold fields, to the extent that a number of discussions of the novel focus on this issue of verisimilitude.² Murnane, however, removes this anchor with the taken-for-granted reality and, although we encounter sign posts and landmarks, we have no stable point of reference to place us.

The Plains is an anti-climactic book, since the goal of the project—to capture, to realize the total meaningfulness of the plains—is not a concrete one. The novel thus creates a desire that is at the same time frustrated. It could be argued that the film-maker's project is concrete and that the failure to make the film acts as a climax, in the sense of an ending. The film that the narrator/film-maker sets out to make is to be "in one sense the record of a journey of exploration" (60). This is how he describes his projected film to the plainsmen:

The hero of my own film saw, at the furthest limit of his awareness, unexplored plains. And when he looked for what he was surest of in himself, there was little more definite than the plains. The film was the story of this man's search for the one land that might have lain beyond or within all that he had ever seen. I might call it—without pretentiousness, I hoped—the Eternal Plain. (60)

The search seems to be for a unifying essence, a single, all-encompassing plain to connect human vision simultaneously with an essential self and with the world out there. The search fails. The film is never made. Yet, for a number of reasons, the failure does not come as a surprise to either the reader or the narrator. First, the discursive and densely crowded structure of the book does not generate suspense and tension of the kind "And then what happened?" or "Who did it?" or even "Why did it happen?" This is not to say, however, that *The Plains* is not compelling. Indeed, the opening paragraphs immediately establish a sense of mystery; the landscape teases:

Twenty years ago, when I first arrived on the plains, I kept my eyes open. I looked for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances.

My journey to the plains was much less arduous than I afterwards described it. And I cannot even say that at a certain hour I knew I had left Australia. But I recall clearly a succession of days when the flat land around me seemed more and more a place that only I could interpret.

The plains that I crossed in those days were not endlessly alike. Sometimes I looked out over a great shallow valley with scattered trees and idle cattle and perhaps a meagre stream at its centre. Sometimes, at the end of a tract of utterly uncompromising country, the road rose towards what was unquestionably a hill before I saw ahead only another plain, level and bare and daunting. (9)

The physical landscape contains conventional features that locate the place in the "real," the "objective," the outside world. This is no dream landscape. There are trees, a valley, cattle, a stream, a road, a hill, and so on—nothing exceptional. But our focus is drawn away from these surfaces towards something hidden. The narrator undermines the solidity of his description by drawing our attention to the fact that he is looking for a perspective and that a true description depends upon a perceptiveness to hints in the landscape.

The first words are "[t]wenty years ago." We infer that some change has occurred between then and now. Perhaps the narrator, in fact, has discovered through his observation "some elaborate meaning behind appearances"; perhaps he has interpreted the plains. Or perhaps his experience has proved that his expectations were wrong. The word "seemed" is repeated and draws us

into the world of mystery: we wonder what is hidden behind that seeming, whether the narrator now knows, is now certain, not only about how things seem but about how they really are. Our curiosity to discover what the narrator has discovered, to experience a revelation, is excited immediately. But it is not long before we realize that no revelation is forthcoming. The narrative does not press forward and onwards, gathering its details together as it moves towards a distant point of clarity, but spreads its focus in many directions, to the extent that we quickly dispel any belief we may have had that all these paths will at some stage converge. The wealth of information that the film-maker wishes to incorporate into his film, the historical and philosophical complexity, the variety of beliefs and debates, the speculations, the intuitions—all of these factors alert us to the inappropriateness of film to the narrator's project. When the narrator recalls a note he had made during his research into the plains—"I, a film-maker, am admirably equipped to explore this landscape and reveal it to others" (38)—we read these words ironically. The film is something of a red herring. That it is not made does not really disappoint, since the failure of photographic representation serves to highlight the medium that does "explore this landscape and reveal it to others," namely, writing. The book itself has been completed. This leads to the second reason for our lack of surprise; the narrative, on the whole, is reflective and unfilmable.

Here is a passage chosen at random:

The painter's early works were well praised but, so he thought, misunderstood. Viewers and critics saw his layers of gold and white as a reduction of the plains to their essential elements and his swirl of grey and pale-green as hints of what the plains might yet become. For him, of course, they were unmistakable landmarks of his private country. And to emphasize that the subject of his art was in fact an accessible landscape, he put into his later work a few obvious symbols—the nearest approximation to forms common to both the plains and his own land. (66)

I suppose one could film this in the form of a dialogue between art critics and the artist, but even so, such a film would rely on verbal signs rather than visual symbols. *The Plains* works so extensively through this type of interpretative commentary that dialogue—which occurs only in one section of the book—would be

indispensable. The function of the narrative itself is to undermine the possibility of an authoritative, comprehensible, accessible visual medium of representation. The film we might be able to imagine being made of Murnane's *The Plains* would be quite different from the film entitled *The Interior*, which the narrator wanted to make. He wished to reveal a view of the plains that no one had ever seen before, but which everyone would recognize as true. The film, it seems, would reveal some transcendental plain that was nevertheless bound to the earthly one. The irony, however, is that the commentary surrounding the attempt, the reflections about the approach, the analysis of the aim, are more engaging than the anticipated result: the narrator's research and his notes are the life of the book.

The other reason for our continuing awareness that the film will not be made derives from the ambiguity of the word "plains" and the shifting perspectives on the plains offered by the book. The plains do not exist on one plane only, nor can precise points of intersection between the planes of the plains be located; no fixed borders delineate and contain them; the drawing of boundaries is arbitrary and disputable. Both macroscopically and microscopically the plains are infinite. Each horizon, both near and distant, yields to another beyond or within. These are some of the ways in which the plains exist:

The plains are the heartland of Australia, the golden earth, dense, firm, the deepest region, inwardly looking, dark, invisible. . . . The plains are the vast expanses of Australia, stretching outwards from the centre to the blue-green horizon, beyond the horizon and beyond the next, extending into the haze, the glare, invisible. . . . The plains are the mind, dreams, desires, speculating about the world of potentiality, still distant, tantalizingly out of reach, moving away with each step forwards. . . . The plains are reality, the phenomenal, experiential world, the world known through the senses, the world that each individual apprehends, that the artist can mediate through photographs, paintings, films, words, or, should I say, try to mediate, or better still, wants to mediate. . . . The plains are a composition of speculative words that continually open onto further speculations and create an infinite network of paths that intersect, overlap, somersault, fork, stop, turn backwards, outwards, inwards. . . .

The plains are not fixed: they do not accommodate a single, unified reading, but rather a diversity of interpretations.

The plainsmen themselves have a terrible time trying to define the plains: generation after generation of divided plainsmen dispute the nature of the true plains. Old-golds pitch themselves against Blue-greens, Haremen against Horizonites, Plains First Leaguers against Progressive Mercantile Party members, League of Heartlanders against The Brotherhood of the Endless Plains. Moreover, the dispute is not confined to philosophy: it invades the spheres of art, poetry, sport, and politics. In the midst of this tug of war it is very difficult for the poor reader to locate the "real" plains. Because the plains that the narrator/film-maker wishes to capture obviously are not, as one of the plainsmen points out, merely "surfaces reflecting sunlight" (61), a visible equivalent is impossible. How can the visible portray the invisible? They are indefinable, they cannot be captured on canvas or film or paper. The narrator suspects that this is the case. On a sheet of paper inside a folder labelled "LAST THOUGHTS BEFORE BEGINNING THE SCRIPT PROPER," he writes:

Yet an old doubt returns. Is there anywhere a plain that might be represented by a simple image? What words, or what camera could reveal the plains within plains that I had heard of so often these last weeks? (63)

Metaphor or substitution is the closest he can get to this accomplishment:

I can only say that I sense about each of them [the plainsmen] a quiet dedication to proving that the plains are not what many people take them for. They are not, that is, a vast theatre that adds significance to the events enacted within it. Nor are they an immense field for explorers of every kind. They are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings. (104)

This brings us to the main reason for the inevitability of the film-maker's failure: the non-existence of a communally shared metaphysic. "Truth" and "Meaning" and "Significance" are shown to be not Transcendental Presences but personal invention in disguise. The novel explores a search for Ultimates and, continually along the way, finds provisionals instead.

The major preoccupation of the book is the impossibility of mirroring either the objective or subjective worlds. I have discussed the role of film in this context: the narrator, at the end of the book, leaves us with an image of the camera turned in upon himself, exposing the inner darkness that, he claims, is all that is visible or knowable; the quest turns in upon itself and away from the world; finally, no image that contains outlines and solid features is possible. Writing, however, is also implicated in this crisis of representation. Writing is revealed to be not a transparent carrier of meaning but a human construction.

The dogmatic uses to which language can be put are emphasized, in a satiric way, through the endless struggles amongst groups of plainsmen over theories of place, mind, time, and so forth and in the attempts of the historians to find the perfect motif to represent and give cohesion and expression to their sense of identity. *The Plains* at once acknowledges the will to meaning, to certainty, motivating these conflicts, debates, and searches and suggests the futility of believing in any one theory as the right, final, and all-embracing one. The book does not, in the controversies it relates, flounder and fail to arbitrate; rather, it undermines the very possibility of arbitration. This is not to say that the novel unconsciously unleashes the forces of anarchism; its aim, rather, is against the opposition and prejudices justified by men's appeal, through the twin authorities of reason and vision, to a metaphysics of essences. The horizon, says one group of artists, is where the true, the real plains are found. No, says another group, we must look to the ground; there is the heart, the soul, the spirit of the plains. Neither group acknowledges the rhetorical basis of its claims. Each believes it is being objective. The book reveals the non-objective foundations of such statements. Those plainsmen who know that "men invent their own meanings" live their lives quietly and unexceptionally, devoting their time to the study of private patterns, perversely pleased when they are misunderstood, rather than insistent that others should share their beliefs. The symbolic use of the plains in the book exposes reason's reliance on such metaphors as space, structure, ground, terrain, boundary, and vision to arrive at conceptual knowledge. Words cannot create solid shapes, but

only the illusion of such creation. Hence the plains dissolve before our reading eyes.³

Both in explicit statement and through its thematic unfolding, *The Plains* concerns itself with the inadequacies, the limitations, of language in the face of certain tasks. It sees language as unable to reproduce a commonly viable, empirically accurate, essentially true and complete picture of reality:

There are no fit words to describe what I hope to do. Descry her landscapes? Explore them? I could hardly tell in words how I have come to know these plains where I first came upon her. Hopeless to speak yet of those stranger places beyond them. (70)

Language is felt by the narrator to be separate, not from the social self but from the inner self.⁴

It is interesting to notice, in this context, the significant role played by silence at crucial stages of the story. There is the silence that concludes the narrator/film-maker's annual revelations, in which he talks about the film he is supposedly making. In his own words:

My failing was that I could never arrange my subject matter—the arguments and narratives and expositions that kept me talking for never less than half a day—so that it culminated in a revelation that somehow emphasized or contrasted with or prefigured or even seemed to deny all likelihood of the lesser revelation of the land outside appearing suddenly in an unexpected light. (120)

The world seen immediately and silently by the audience, with its own eyes, the narrator realizes, is the real revelation. The silence of the vast plains cannot be made to speak. *The Plains* shows the writing of fiction, concerned as it is with creating patterns, finding motifs, and developing themes, to be a response to the fictionalizing activity in life, rather than as an opening onto or mediation of the truth "out there" or "in here":

And while all these tasks went forward in the great houses, the many unemployed students and scholars of the subject added their knowledge or perfected their skills in public libraries and museums and rented studios and among the outlying swamps and plantations of estates whose vastness and complexity they dreamed of reducing to a stylized image on a simple field. (41)

In one sense this is the novel's attempt: to reduce the vastness and complexity of experience to a stylized image by carefully

arranging a finite number of words within the covers of a book. In another sense, however, the novel's accomplishment is to challenge and undercut that reductive project, to expose the impossibility of a union between Truth and infinitely flexible, humanly constructed meaning.

There is also the silence/blankness of the paper face that the narrator uses as a dummy figure of himself. This ends Section One, the section that, ironically, records the narrator's most intense exploratory and preparatory note-taking and information-gathering period on the plains. There is the silence of the library, a silence imposed by two forces: the books ("the hugeness of the speakers and the scores of years in which the silence had still not been broken" [97]), and the impossibility of reaching or possessing the woman who haunts the library. Language here confronts the paradoxical nature of desire:

When I entertain even the vaguest thoughts of the two of us as a man and wife I had to allow that even such people could not have existed without a possible world to counterbalance what was for them the actual. And in that possible world were a couple who sat silently in separate bays of a library. (100)

If the possible, the desired, were to become actual, then the possible that is desired would be lost. There can be no way out of this trap; desire is unfulfillable since it is itself desired. The narrator despairs at one stage: "If only the plains didn't seem to go on forever" (51). But they do. And they must. This figuring of desire, however, is not unproblematic. There is here a rather glib elision of "desire" and the enigma of woman. Desire is propelled by the unattainable heterosexual relation. Desire, sex, and woman are collapsed into each other. Woman represents something beyond language, an obstacle to language and its project of completion; she is the continual and endless deferral in the signifying chain. The search for meaning is simultaneously a search for the woman, and the failure of the quest is also the failure of union with the woman. She confronts man and his word with their impotence. The narrator's nostalgia for perfect meaning and his recourse to the defences of the secluded inner world are closely linked to this equation between woman and ineffable reality.

Silence defeats the clamour and proliferation of language. Silence also keeps language in a state of yearning. This endlessly unfolding gap that both generates the representational, definitional aim and thwarts its accomplishment is none other than the classic feminine abyss, the site of reference for collapse of reference in a world of male significations. Although *The Plains* deconstructs the possibility of a mimetic correspondence between word and world, breaks apart the unity of the image and identity, although it concludes with a non-image of darkness—"that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself"—and although the word will not connect with the visible, nevertheless the word is with the man and silence is with the woman. Despite their solipsism and self-alienation, the plainsmen (and the narrator) speak and write and study: the plains "are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that *men* invent their own meanings" (104, emphasis added); men, not women; women are one of the metaphors, one of the fields upon which the explorers can cast their projections.⁵

In an interview with Candida Baker, Murnane uses a birth metaphor to describe the existence of *The Plains*:

An almost caesarean book removed from the dead body of another book . . . the book that surrounded *The Plains* had not much merit to it and it was my third, last and worst attempt to write what I regard as a conventional novel. (195-96)

The vital, surviving, published book is ripped by force from the useless, engulfing, maternal body in which it was lost, its "unconventional" or special identity obscured. In this account of artistic conception, textual origin is dependent on the death of the mother: the perfectly formed book of ideas is rescued from the sprawling world of feminine chaos. Interestingly, the title of the "mother" book, "The Only Adam," comes from a sentence of Thomas Mitchell's, a sentence into which the epigraph to *The Plains* leads, but, typically, before which it stops just short. In this sentence, Adam refers to the explorer himself, a solitary male in possession of paradise: "Of this Eden it seemed that I was the only Adam and it was indeed a part of paradise to me" (qtd. in Schaffer, 61). As the title of the discarded book, however, "The Only Adam" suffers a change of gender, becomes associated with

the maternal body. Despite the fact that "The Only Adam" came from the same pen as did *The Plains*, the unworthy and unwieldy larger book is banished, metaphorically, to the feminine realm. Here, as in the text of *The Plains*, boundaries do exist: meaning and originality are placed on the masculine side; meaninglessness, or the threat to meaningful existence, on the side of the feminine. In *The Plains*, that part of identity that is experienced as real—that silent, elusive, invisible, unrepresentable space—is imaged as female, as woman, the dark mystery. The role and treatment of women here remain little different from those in that "opposite" type of realist fiction that uses language as a tool for possessing and capturing. As Teresa de Lauretis writes,

[t]he discourse of the sciences of man constructs the object as female and the female as object. That, I suggest, is its violence, even when the discourse presents itself as humanistic, benevolent, or well intentioned. (45)

In the shimmering unreality of her mute reality/objectivity, the plainswoman is the boundary that the explorer seeks.

In Marcus Clarke's classic nineteenth-century novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, the angelic figure of Sylvia acts as the boundary between the basic oppositions of good and evil, natural innocence and socially instituted guilt, which divides the male characters. Sylvia, as the object of desire and exchange amongst men, functions to define masculine identity, and social organizations of power, along the lines of rivalry. In the course of the novel she passes from father to gaoler/husband to preacher, before finally uniting with and freeing the convict/hero in death. Her place is that of the signifier of the relationships between these males. The function of the female in *The Plains* is little different. She is the interstice, unreachable herself, but providing access to all other territories, to male zones:

I must one day satisfy my curiosity . . . about their theory of the Interstitial Plain: the subject of an eccentric branch of geography; a plain that by definition can never be visited but adjoins and offers access to every possible plain. (86)

To the traveller, the plainsman, her elusiveness may seem to give her the aura of mystery, to place her in the realms of the magical Beyond. But to her this place makes her propertyless, makes her

one of "those shadowy areas that no-one properly occupies" (86). True, she is not fixed in her place: but then, she has no place; she is only the mirage of a receding horizon.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for instance, Hirst.
- ² See, for instance, Leonie Kramer's introduction to the Penguin, 1971, edition of the novel.
- ³ This play among geography, landscape, and language is also the main activity in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The explorer/narrator in Calvino's novel is Marco Polo. His task is to conjure the exotic distant lands he has traversed for Kubla Khan. In the context of the roles of the two men, the "ungrounded" status of these evoked cities denies the fulfilment and legitimacy of the Khan's possessive drive, his colonial enterprise.
- ⁴ I depart here from Ian Adam's proposition that *The Plains* conforms to Herbert Read's dictum, espoused elsewhere by Murnane himself, that "[g]ood writing exactly reproduces what we should call the contour of our thought." Indeed, as Adam claims, Murnane's style is obsessed with the mimetic impulse. But this impulse remains foregrounded; it continues to push the horizon of its ambition ahead of, or away from, itself. *The Plains* does collapse the boundaries between external and internal geographies: but the "contour of our own thought" is as elusive before the grasp of closure as is the contour of the land.
- ⁵ See Gelder, who writes that "[t]he plains-as-text becomes the woman-as-plains-as-text. Textual interpretation becomes a metaphor for sexual desire, sexual colonization" (126).

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