

UnCannyda

Let us begin with the fantastic-uncanny. In this sub-genre events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at its end. . . . [T]here also exists the uncanny in the pure state. In works that belong to this genre, events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected

—Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (44-46)

The uncanny event, which is an obvious singularity or convolution of the continuum, has a massive psychic gravity and affects personal models of reality immediately adjacent to it in much the same manner as a star bends light.

—Christopher Dewdney, *The Secular Grail: Paradigms of Perception* (185)

In his well-known essay on the uncanny, "Das Unheimlich," Freud attempts to uncover the psychological sources of the complex and, he claims, contradictory sensation associated with the German word that translates literally as "unhomely."¹ Concentrating on E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" and various dictionary definitions of *unheimlich*, Freud argues tortuously and suggestively that a deep affinity exists between the "heimlich" and the "unheimlich": by a process of repression, something that was once homely—familiar and comforting—becomes the opposite—strange and disconcerting. As several post-Saussurean commentators have demonstrated, Freud's concept of the (*un*)heimlich can be applied to portions of numerous literary works, particularly those which inscribe the *angst* of alienation or deploy the techniques of defamiliarization.² Almost inevitably, therefore, most applications of the Freudian uncanny, including Freud's own, treat of works written during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period of increasing comfort and anxiety for the urban middle classes of Western Europe and North America. "As the visible world is measured, mapped, tested, weighed," wrote Andrew Lang in 1905, readers increasingly turn to literature to feel "the stirring of ancient dread in their veins" (qtd. in Lears 172). Like the ghost stories and horror movies in which it often occurs, the uncanny reveals "a longing for intense feeling," a craving for relief from "the spiritual blandness diffused by liberal Protestant culture" (Lears 173). Much the same longings and cravings seem to have been satisfied by traveller and explorer writings about Canada. Even today, a book about the Canadian hinterland offers most readers an opportunity to experience the unhomely within the home, to enjoy vicariously and in comfort discomfiting encounters with the strange and unfamiliar.

As a means of illuminating certain passages of early writing about Canada which emphasize the country's strangeness and unfamiliarity, Freud's notion of the uncanny is less anachronistic than it might first seem, for one of the precursors of the sensation analysed in "Das Unheimlich" is the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the "*new or uncommon*." As defined by Joseph Addison in the June 23, 1712 number of *The Spectator* (412), the "*new or uncommon*" is that which "raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possest" (280). Conceding that the pleasure derived from "*Novelty*" may be mixed with "Horror or Loathsomeness," Addison emphasizes the "Delight" rather than the "Disgust" generated by the "*new or uncommon*" (279). An unusual or abnormal "Object," he argues, "contributes a little to vary human Life, and to divert our

Minds, for a while, with the Strangeness of its Appearance: It serves us for a kind of Refreshment, and takes off from that Satiety which we are apt to complain of in our usual and Ordinary Entertainments. It is this that bestows Charms on a Monster, and makes even the Imperfections of Nature please us. It is this that recommends variety, where the Mind is every Instant called off to something new . . . " (280). Thus Addison expands the Longinian conception of the "extraordinary" (Tuveson 100) into an aesthetic that is obviously germane to the writing and reading of travel accounts of the New World. Both the writers and the readers of such accounts of Canada after the conquest were in search of the "*new or uncommon*" and were prepared to find a measure of the "terrible or offensive" mixed in with their "Delight" in "Strangeness" (279-80).

When Addison proceeds to catalogue the sources of the "*new or uncommon*" his examples can easily be referred to the changeable climate and water scenery of Canada. "Groves, Fields, and Meadows, are at any Season of the Year pleasant to look upon, but never so much as in the opening of Spring, when they are all new and fresh, with their first Gloss upon them, and not yet too much accustomed and familiar to the Eye. For this Reason there is nothing that more enlivens a Prospect than Rivers, Jetteaus, or Falls of Water, where the Scene is perpetually shifting, and entertaining the Sight every Moment with something that is new. We . . . find our Thoughts a little agitated and relieved at the Sight of such Objects as are in Motion, and sliding away from beneath the Eye of the Beholder" (280). As well as emphasizing "fresh[ness]" and "Motion" as salient characteristics of phenomena that generate an aesthetic pleasure in the "*new or uncommon*," this passage links that pleasure with entertainment, excitement, relief, and, in Ernest Lee Tuveson's phrase "a need for novelties to cure ennui" (110). This portion of Addison's analysis has a decidedly "modern ring" (Tuveson 110), not merely because it smacks of self-centredness and self-cultivation, but also because it aligns the "*new or uncommon*" with the aims and activities of the therapeutic culture which has dominated the industrialized West since the late nineteenth century. By advancing "Novelty" as an antidote to monotony, Addison sounds a note with many later reverberations: the sensuous aestheticism of Walter Pater certainly comes to mind (Tuveson 95) as does the gothic sensationalism of a host of authors and *auteurs* from Edgar Allan Poe to Steven Spielberg.

Addison's world is not Pater's or Poe's or Spielberg's, however, but Pope's, and Steele's, and Swift's. In his second essay on aesthetics in *The Spectator* for June 24, 1712 (413), he firmly attaches the "Pleasures of the Imagination" to the Christian-humanist tradition by providing them with a teleological explanation grounded in the design argument. To "give us greater Occasion of admiring [His] Goodness and Wisdom . . . the first Contriver" "annexed a secret Pleasure to the Idea of any thing that is *new or uncommon*, that he might encourage us in the Pursuit after Knowledge, and engage us to search into the Wonders of his Creation; for every new Idea brings such a Pleasure along with it, as rewards any Pains we have taken in its Acquisition, and consequently serves as a Motive to put us upon fresh Discoveries" (282-83). This is the argument from design that provides the Providential underpinning for much traveller and explorer writing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canada: the pleasure to be derived from encountering the "*new or uncommon*" is intended by God to encourage the search for "new sensations and unfamiliar scenes" (Tuveson 109), not for their own sake, but as instances of Divine benevolence and order. As he encounters and ponders strange phenomena in unfamiliar places, the traveller or explorer is a scientific pilgrim, a seeker after knowledge of new worlds and "*Final Causes*" (Addison 282). To understand "*new or uncommon*" objects correctly—to pass beyond surprise to explanation—is to move closer to God, who has contrived the "pleasing Shows . . . Apparitions," and "Delusion[s]" of the natural world to ensure our engagement with His Creation and, hence, our admiration of His "Goodness and Wisdom" (282-83). Little wonder that instances of the "*new or uncommon*" in early writing about Canada tend to occur in works by such authors as David Thompson and J. Mackay who combine strong scientific interests with equally strong religious convictions.

Although Thompson seems to have studied primarily "the literature of science and natural history," he was also widely read in "the Bible [and] seventeenth and eighteenth-

century prose" (Hopwood 21). Moreover, he was well acquainted with eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics to draw upon the vocabulary of the "*Great*" to describe the "stupendous Works of Nature" that he encountered during his explorations of the Canadian North and West between 1784 and 1812 (Addison 279, and see MacLaren, "David Thompson"). In his account of his journey from Hudson Bay to Lake Athabasca in 1795-97, for example, he describes Manito Falls on Black River as "grand and awful" (115) and in describing his approach to the Rocky Mountains in 1800 he characterizes "the view as grand in a high degree" (Hopwood ed. 223).³ As I. S. MacLaren observes, "[t]he parlance of the British landscape tradition . . . is not central" to Thompson's travel narratives but, rather, occurs at moments of heightened scientific and spiritual awareness as part of an attempt to contextualize the radically unfamiliar ("David Thompson" 92).

Thompson's account of his journey to Lake Athabasca furnishes one of the most striking examples of the uncannily uncommon in early writing about Canada. Arriving at Lake Manito—now Wollaston Lake—in the summer of 1796, Thompson encountered a very strange object indeed: a large body of water "sending out two Rivers, each in a different direction" (111), the reason, of course, being that it straddles the continental divide. At first the "great lake" impressed the explorer as sublime: "as far as the eye could see, were bold shores, the land rising several hundred feet in bold swells, all crowned with Forests of Pines; in the Lake were several fine Isles of a rude, conical form, equally well clothed with Woods. I was highly pleased with this grand scenery . . ." (111-12). Before long, however, Thompson's first impression of Lake Manito yielded to a sense of the uncanny: "I . . . soon found the apparent pine forests to be an illusion; they were only dwarf Pines growing on the rocks, and held together by their roots being twisted with each other" (112). As predicted by Addison's analysis of the uncommon, the "illusion" created by the "dwarf Pines" prompts Thompson to further enquiry: "seeing a fine Isle, which appeared a perfect cone of about sixty feet in height, apparently remarkably well wooded at the top of the cone, I went to it, my companions saying it was lost time. On landing, we walked through the apparent fine forest, with our heads clear above all the trees; the tallest only came to our chins. While we were thus amusing ourselves, the Wind arose and detained us until near sunset. To while away the time, we amused ourselves with undoing the roots of these shrub Pines for about twenty feet on each side, when the whole slid down the steep rock into the Lake, making a floating Isle of an area of four hundred [square] feet; and so well the fibres of the roots were bound together, that when it came to where the waves were running high, it held together . . . and thus drifted out of our sight. . . . On the Isle, the roots of these small pines were covered with a compact moss of a yellow colour, about two inches thick" (112). With its emphasis on a strange and illusory phenomenon that diverts the mind and engenders curiosity, this is a classic example of the Addisonian uncommon in Canada. As "amuse[d]" as he is by what he has found, Thompson scarcely loses sight of the scientific aspects of the "dwarf Pines," but records the extraordinary strength of their roots and the density, colour, and dimensions of the moss that covers them. In the midst of a mysterious lake, a strange *trompe l'oeil* yields "Surprise," "Entertainment," and new "Knowledge."

In the paragraph that follows, Thompson moves beyond pleasurable diversion and scientific description to ponder the full implications of the "dwarf Pines" of Lake Manito. "The mould . . . under the . . . pines" on the conical island is "very black . . . rich, [and] . . . perhaps the produce of centuries," but it is so "scant, that had the area of four hundred [square] feet been clean swept, it would not have filled a bushel measure" (112). The rock laid bare by the removal of the "dwarf Pines" is "as smooth as a file, and no where rougher than a rasp; and had it been bare it would have been difficult of ascent" (112). The island itself is "about two miles from other land." "[T]hen how came these pines to grow upon it," Thompson wonders; "they bare no cones nor seeds, and no birds feed upon them. These wild northern countries produce questions, difficult to answer" (112). After surprise, amusement, and curiosity comes the larger puzzlement which, in Addison's words, "encourage[s] . . . the Pursuit after Knowledge, and . . . serves as a Motive . . . [for] fresh Discoveries." Thompson does not attribute the presence of perplexing phenomena in the Canadian wilderness to "the Great Creator" (147)

because this is implicit in the very name of the lake and, later, falls that he is describing. Wollaston Lake is aptly named "Manito (supernatural) from its sending out two Rivers" and Manito Fall is "well named" because of its awe-inspiring scenery (115). In explaining the beliefs of the Nahathaway Indians regarding "Keeche Keeche Manito (The Great, Great Spirit)" earlier in his narrative, Thompson also places on view his own conception of God: "they appear to derive their belief from tradition, and [believe] that the visible world, with all its inhabitants, must have been made by some powerful being, but have not the same idea of his constant omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence that we have . . ." (75). After describing another perplexing phenomenon—a "Mirage" on Landing Lake in present-day Manitoba⁴—he records that the Nahathaways regard it as "the work of a Manito; and [that] with this argument they account for every thing that is uncommon" (401). Thompson's beliefs did not entirely accord with those of the Indians but there can be no doubt that, like them, he attributed the uncanny phenomena that he encountered in the Northwest to "the Great Creator."

J. Mackay's *Quebec Hill* was published in London in February, 1797, about two months after Thompson, disgusted with the failure of the Hudson's Bay Company to explore the "extensive countries" under its control (114), transferred his allegiance to the North West Company. Largely "written in Canada, where the writer . . . spent a considerable portion of . . . time" (5), probably in about 1793, *Quebec Hill* presents Lower Canada as a province "abound[ing] with prospects in a high degree delightful to such as have a relish for romantic scenery" (7 n.) but deficient in agricultural and commercial opportunities for British emigrants. "Delight" repeatedly gives way to "Disgust" as Mackay shows one aspect after another of Canada's physical and social landscape to be dismayingly deceptive. "Tho gay the scene . . . / When, view' d from far, in richer verdure glows: / More near, is seen the harvest-choaking tare . . . And greedy locusts blast the springing corn" (17). Drawing on Peter Kalm, and, perhaps, Thomas James, Mackay depicts the Canadian winter as a horrifyingly unhomely phenomenon:

Nor in the fields alone the cold prevails,
Nor only there pervade the frigid gales;
The shelter' d domes confess their searching breath.
The shiv' ring stranger sees with new surprize,
As in the morn his chamber he surveys,
That fields of ice the solid mass pervade,
And on the wall like pendant charts are spread.

(24)

Earlier in the poem Mackay offers scientific explanations for the way in which the northern winds freeze deep water and kill unwary travellers (23-24), but here he subordinates rational explanation to a "stranger's" unpleasant "surprise" at the uncanny ability of the "frigid gales" to transform bedroom walls into "fields of ice." As manifestations of God's "wisdom and goodness," such phenomena suggest that Canada is barely fit for human habitation and encourage the "wise man [to] soar . . . on Hope's celestial wing / Towards the regions of eternal spring" (26). In the meantime, having exhausted "The novelty of lonely wilds and woods," Mackay will return to "Britain . . . where temp' rate years their empire hold, / Free from the extremes of ardent heat or cold . . ." (26-27).

Less productive of "Horror or Loathsomeness" than most of the things that Mackay describes, the novel effect of light on the mountains north of the St. Lawrence nevertheless reveals Canada once again to be a place of "Shows and Apparitions" where appearance has a deceptive relation to reality:

The lofty hills that, onward, rise in crowds,
Oft hide their summits in the bending clouds.

But now, nor dusky shades obscure the sky,
Nor pregnant clouds portending tempests nigh;
Unveil' d, the mountains show their lofty heads,
Which form a contrast to the humbler meads:
Save, that, from far, the intervening space,
Th' unequal swellings of their sides deface;
That, richly cloth' d, in colours of the air,
Increas' d in size, and more remote appear.

(18)

In *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, Barry Lopez discusses some of the tricks and changes in perception that occur in northern regions as a result of reflection and other light effects. Some of the most uncanny of these are in the area addressed by Mackay' s description (and, indeed, Thompson' s accounts of mirages): a spectator' s means of assessing distances under certain atmospheric conditions. Writing from direct or indirect knowledge of Newton' s *Opticks*, Mackay knew that distance causes a perceived degradation in distinctness ("from far, the intervening space, / Th' unequal swellings of their sides deface"). He also knew that on a clear day the break up of sunlight into prismatic colours ("colours of the air") by the surface of the mountains would make them seem greater in magnitude ("Increas' d in size") than they actually were. Add to this the fact that in northern latitudes refraction had been observed by James and others to make distant objects seem closer on an overcast day or during fog and farther away ("more remote")⁵ on days that were sunny and clear, and it is not difficult to understand the strange phenomenon that Mackay describes: under certain conditions in Canada, mountains can defy the rules of perspective by appearing to be *both* bigger and farther away than they actually are. Perhaps Mackay expected as much in a country in which "frigid gales" could put ice fields on bedroom walls.

Another early example of the treatment of Canada as uncanny—as UnCannyda—can be discussed here without fear of redundancy. The centrepiece of Thomas Moore' s "To the Lady Charlotte Rawdon from the Banks of the St. Lawrence" (1806) purports to be the song of an "Indian Spirit," a Puckish figure who conducts the reader on an aerial tour of the natural and supernatural world of Canada' s native peoples. A footnote to the song quotes extensively from Jonathan Carver' s description of the uncannily clear waters of Lake Superior: "' When it was calm," [Carver] says, and the sun shone bright, I could sit in my canoe, where the depth was upward of six fathoms, and plainly see huge piles of stone at the bottom, of different shapes, some of which appeared as if they had been hewn; the water at this time was as pure and transparent as air, and my canoe seemed as if it hung suspended in that element. It was impos sible to look attentively through this limpid medium, at the rocks below, without finding, before many minutes were elapsed, your head swim and your eyes no longer able to behold the dazzling scene' " (Moore 126 n.) This passage provides the basis for the Indian Spirit' s description of his flight

Over Huron' s lucid lake,
Where the wave, as clear as dew,
Sleeps beneath the light canoe,
Which, reflected, floating there,
Looks as if it hung in air.

(126)

Whereas to Carver the effect of "look[ing] attentively" into the "limpid medium" of Lake Superior is likened metaphorically to drowning ("your head swim[s]") and blindness ("your eyes [are] no longer able to behold the dazzling scene"), Moore' s Indian Spirit experiences no such unpleasant sensations, but merely observes the "lucid lake" and "floating" canoe in passing. This difference is worth remarking because, whether consciously intended by Moore or not, it highlights the European nature of the surprise, curiosity, and mode of ratiocination provoked by phenomena which were apparently less

uncanny, or, at least, uncanny in a different way, to Canada's native peoples. It is difficult to imagine a Huron Indian reacting in the same way as Mackay to the presence of ice on the inner wall of a long-house. And Thompson's Indian companions, it will be recalled, told him that his excursion to the island on Lake Manito was "lost time." Since familiarity transforms strangeness to commonplace, a strange land can only be less strange to natives than to strangers.

The confusion of air and water that commands the attention of both Carver and Moore also recalls the perceptual illusions described by Thompson and Mackay. What makes Canada uncanny at certain times and places is the transgression or dissolution of (European) spatial categories: small seems large, far appears near, outside comes inside, above resembles below. Moore seems to have been especially struck by this last sensation, for in the induction to the song of the Indian Spirit he goes beyond Thomas Anburey's comparison of the "luminous appearance" of "porpoises" in the St. Lawrence to "beautiful fire works in the water" (1:29)⁶ to liken a "gleaming porpoise" to "a watery star" (126). That Moore also prepares the way for his flight of "Fancy" by claiming to have seen "the dim moonlight through [the] scaly," "brittle and transparent" body of a "glass-snake" (126) is as consistent as the twilight setting of the poem with his attempt to undermine the distinctions between the real world of the St. Lawrence and the spirit world of the Native peoples. In "To the Lady Charlotte Rawdon" the observations of Carver, Anburey, and others become a source for the "visionary" fancies (126) of the most accomplished Romantic poet to visit Canada.

As the boat upon which Moore sailed down the St. Lawrence passed by the "leafy shore" of Lower Canada, it became in his mind a "mystic bark" piloted by an "angel" along the "dim shores of another world" (128)—the world of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Thus suspended in Moore's geographical cosmology between the Hell of the United States from which he had come and the Heaven of Great Britain to which he was returning, Canada was both more and less the "home . . . inshrined" in the poet's heart (131). At once "strange" and "new" (128) and friendly and familiar, it was a place conducive to the blurring of distinctions, the mediation of extremes, the apprehension of the *(un)heimlich*. During a "thirteen day" voyage from Quebec to Halifax, Moore apparently composed only one poem, "Written on Passing Deadman's Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Late in the Evening, September, 1804." "This is one of the Magdalen Islands, and, singularly enough, is the property of Sir Isaac Coffin," he explains in a note, adding that the poem was "suggested by [the] superstition [of] . . . 'the flying Dutchman'" (129n.). Of the remainder of the journey, he writes that "[t]he weather . . . was pleasant; and the scenery along the river delightful. Our passage through the Gut of Canso, with a bright sky and a fair wind, was particularly striking and romantic" (129n.). As a site of the *(un)heimlich*, Canada was already far behind Moore when he sailed for England in October, 1804, but, for his British readers, induction into the Canadian uncanny had to await the publication of "Poems Relating to America" in *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems* in 1806. "Other," indeed.

The idea of Canada as a site of uncommon and uncanny experiences for the traveller persisted well into the nineteenth century and, thanks in part to stimuli from surrealism and magic realism, remains active in twentieth-century Canadian writing. One nineteenth-century writer who was especially attuned by temperament and training to recognize and rationalize the strangenesses of Canada was John MacTaggart, the Clerk of Works to the Rideau Canal between 1826 and 1828. Before coming to Canada in 1826, MacTaggart had worked on the Plymouth Sound breakwater, a project designed by the innovative Scottish civil engineer John Rennie, and, equally to the present point, had published the *Gallivian Encyclopedia* (1824), a compendium of antiquarian and folkloric materials pertaining to southern Scotland (see Emerson 481). In the opening pages of his *Three Years in Canada: an Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826-7-8* (1829), MacTaggart characterizes himself as a practitioner of "[r]ummaging"—that is, "the art of exploring whatever lies in a state of nature" (1:44), with special attention to phenomena that excite curiosity and invite explanation. "Where any matter is known, curiosity

ends," he asserts; "but while doubt and mystery cloud the lovely face of Nature, there is employment for the rummager" (1:58).

A good example of MacTaggart's "rummaging" at work in *Three Years in Canada* appears in his account of the bizarre optical effects that are "seen to much perfection on the St. Lawrence and the great lakes" during hazy weather:

Ships between the observer and the . . . [horizon] become double, but singularly so; one is above the other, the upper one bottom up, and their top-masts touching. . . . If the ships are beyond the real horizon . . . they are raised to the ridge of [a] clear white stripe, which looks like a belt of snow; and here they are sometimes in their natural position, never double or bottom up, as in the former case. Thus are islands and coasts [beyond the horizon] . . . brought up to view . . . and frequently magnified in dimension; little crags, on the sides of mountains, always seen duly perpendicular. When th[e] haze becomes agitated, the scene runs into beautiful disorder; islands break into rocks and fragments, ships seem dismasted, and the masts appear standing severed from the hulls; the bowsprit leaves, and stands out a huge arrow; they then after a time unite." (2:108-09)

MacTaggart attributes these and similar phenomena to refraction or what he calls the "grand speculum" and suggests that this may also provide the physical basis for the legend of the Flying Dutchman. He also concedes, however, that the "grand speculum" produces "more variations than [he] can altogether account for" and defers to "more able observers" for explanations that might "dispel superstition" (2:109-10). Some of the mysteries of UnCannyda have been solved but others remain to provoke curiosity and explanation.⁷ What, it may be wondered, would MacTaggart have made of the French Canadian legend of the flying canoe?

Of the many twentieth-century Canadian writers who in one way or another have made the "doubt and mystery" of the uncommon and the uncanny an effective part of their repertoire, none comes more readily to mind than Margaret Atwood. In "Journey to the Interior" (1968), "the hills / which the eyes make flat as a wall, welded / together, open . . . / to let [the traveller] through" (30); in "A Bus Along St. Clair: December" (1970), the ghost of Susanna Moodie enjoins the reader to "look down: / there is no city; / this is the centre of a forest . . ." (91); in "Daybooks I" (1978) the "rocks" hauled by a long-dead pioneer "will stay / where they are put, for the time / being" (208); and in "A Blazed Trail" (1984) the speaker comes to a "rocky point" at close of day to discover "water [that] still holds light / and gives it out, like fumes / or like fire" and a place "where a sound should be / and is not . . . which is darker / and more solitary, / which approaches" (318). But perhaps Atwood's most eerie treatment of the Canadian environment as uncanny is in "Death by Landscape," a short story published first in *Saturday Night* in July, 1989 and then in *Wilderness Tips* (1991).

When the story opens, the protagonist, Lois, has recently moved into an apartment near the (Toronto?) waterfront where she has surrounded herself with a collection of paintings by the Group of Seven and David Milne that she has bought for "something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not the peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least. Looking at them fills her with a wordless unease. Despite the fact that there are no people in them or even animals, it's as if there is something, or someone, looking back out" (102). As the story unfolds, the uncanny appeal of the paintings turns out to be the product of a mysterious event that occurred when Lois was thirteen years old and on a canoe trip from summer camp. Lois recalls that "[t]he canoe route [was] clearly marked, that they had gone over it on a map, and there [were] prepared campsites with names which [were] used year after year," but that she nevertheless felt apprehensive about the trip: she could "feel the water stretching out, with the shores twisting away on either side, immense and a little

frightening" (110). These apprehensions are fully borne out by what happens on the second day of the trip. Precisely at noon,⁸ Lois and her friend Lucy leave the other campers and climb to a lookout that affords them a "long view of the water" from the top of a "sheer cliff" (114-15). While waiting discretely out of sight while Lucy "has a pee," Lois hears a shout—"Not a scream. More like a cry of surprise, cut off too soon. Short, like a dog's bark" (116)—and rushes back to look for her friend. Lucy is nowhere to be found, however, and, after further searches by the campers and the police, the conclusion is drawn that she has "simply vanished" without trace or explanation (119). "Was there anything important, anything that would provide some sort of reason or clue to what happened," Lois continues to wonder years later, but the answer is always no: "[she] can remember everything, every detail; but it does her no good" (112).

In the absence of new insight, all that remains to Lois are fanciful speculations about Lucy's whereabouts that canvass both the material and the animistic possibilities:

How could you ever find anything there, once it was lost? Maybe if they cut it all down, drained it all away, they might find Lucy's bones, some time, wherever they are hidden. A few bones, some buttons, the buckle from her shorts.

But a dead person is a body; a body occupies space, it exists some where. You can see it. . . . But Lucy . . . is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere.

* * *

Who knows how many trees there were on the cliff just before Lucy disappeared? Who counted? Maybe there was one more, afterwards.
(121)

Thus the paintings in Lois's apartment have acquired a special significance for her as mementos of the past, portraits of her lost friend, representations of UnCannyda:

She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. . . . [S]he's behind the tree that cannot be seen because of the other trees . . . but if you walked into the picture and found the tree, it would be the wrong one, because the right one would be farther on.

Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She's in Lois's apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive. (121-22)

Like Lois's paintings, literary texts in which Canada figures as a site of the uncommon and uncanny are both "doors" and "holes"—artifacts that simultaneously subject the disconcerting aspects of the environment to rational control and open the reader to unnerving puzzles and mysteries. A need to control the environment has been fundamental to European civilization in Canada, but so, too, has been a desire to encounter and celebrate the country's northern strangenesses. Not without reason does Homi K. Bhabha relate the "narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'" to both "the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth [and] the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other" (2). Where these two contradictory but complementary urges meet in works from Thompson to Atwood, doors open inwards to admit intimations of a reality—UnCannyda—which helps us to recognize the rational order that we call home as an absolutely essential but frequently pervious boundary between the known and the unknown, the comfortable and the discomfiting.

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1. See "' The Uncanny,' " *Art and Literature*, 335-76. [\[back\]](#)
2. See, for example, Weber and Hertz. [\[back\]](#)
3. All other quotations are from Glover' s edition. In some places Thompson' s punctuation has been silently emended. [\[back\]](#)
4. "What is called a Mirage is common on all these Lakes. . . . On one occasion, going to an Isle . . . about one mile distant, the ice between me and the Isle appeared of a concave form, which, if I entered, I should slide into its hollow. Sensitive of the illusion, it had the power to perplex me. . . . "[T]he sort of Mirage is not frequent. That most common elevates and depresses objects, and sometimes makes them appear to change places. In the latter end of February at the Reed Lake . . . a Mirage took place in one of its boldest forms. . . . The Mirage began slowly to elevate all objects, then gently to lower them, until the Isles, and the Point appeared like black points on the ice, and no higher than its surface . . . ; in the time of three minutes, they all rose to their former height, and became elevated to twice their height. . . ." Thompson reckons the cause of mirages to be "waves of the atmosphere loaded with vapours . . . with the Sun in a certain position" but adds that "[t]here may be a better theory to account" for the phenomenon. "While the Mirage is in full action," he concludes, "the scenery is so clear and vivid, the illusion so strong, as to perplex the Hunter and the Traveller; it appears more like the power of magic, than the play of nature" (100-01). See also Macoun 45. [\[back\]](#)
5. See James 89-90: "I . . . often observed that misty weather caused a greater refraction than did clear weather. For example, from a low hill near our house we could never see a small island situated about four leagues off to the southwest, if the weather was clear and sunny. But if the weather was misty, we could often see it, even from sea-level. . . . This shows how great the refraction is in that area. Incidentally, I have seen the land elevated because of refraction, and at the same time have seen the sun rise perfectly round." [\[back\]](#)
6. See also Anburey 1:304 for a locale in which "the water seems to separate the trees from the land, and to pass in a manner through them." [\[back\]](#)
7. A couple of other examples may be noted. In the Rocky Mountains in 1824, Samuel Black was surprised to discover that a "fine distant prospect" was not what it had appeared, "for in place of Arcadian plains and [D]iana' s Groves and fountains, we walk in Neptune' s Regions always wet and often sinking in the ooze Bottom amongst aquatic Vegetables and Flours, little grassy hillocks, mud and Slime" (126-27). As MacLaren observes, Black' s "aesthetic disorientation" and subsequent search for a scientific explanation for "these horrid desolations of God' s creation" (131) recall "Thompson' s experience on Manito . . . Lake in 1796" ("Influence" 2:477). On the Li 鑽res River in 1886, Archibald Lampman was canoeing past "a stretch of reeds" when "On a sudden seven ducks / With a splashy rustle r[o]se" and, in a curiously geometrical formation ("One before, and two behind, / . . . the others all in a row"), flew as if "led" "Through the purple shadow . . . / Till we only hear[d] their whir / In behind a rock spur, / Just ahead" (*Poems* 20-21). Unlike Thompson and Black, Lampman offers no answers to the teleological questions provoked by this surprising and mysterious occurrence. Does a principle of design operate behind the ducks' behavior? Is their passage "through the . . . shadow" and "behind [the]

rock" significant of the soul's movement at death?[\[back\]](#)

8. Of course, noon is a time rich in portentous associations (in *Paradise Lost*, Eve falls at noon and in Mallarmé's "Hérodiade" John the Baptist is beheaded at noon), and is frequently regarded as a moment out of linear time (see, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Silent Noon" and, closer to home, Lampman's "Heat" and "Among the Timothy"). Lucy's name recalls Wordsworth's Lucy poems, where the dead girl takes her place among the repetitive cycles and far from inanimate objects of the natural world.

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