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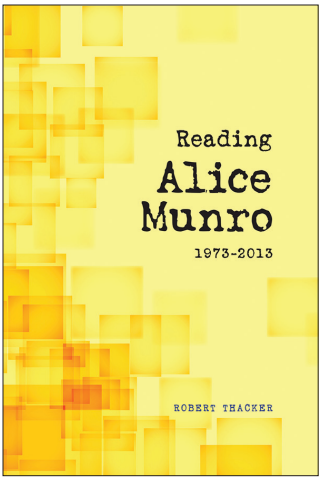

READING ALICE MUNRO, 1973–2013
by Robert Thacker

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ROBERT THACKER

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Once Again for Debbie

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Introduction:

Alice Munro's "Approach and Recognition"

This book is an exercise in literary, professional, and personal history. Sometime in the fall or winter of 1973/74, when I was 22 years old and a recent university graduate planning to marry and trying to figure out just what I would try to do in this life, having pretty much decided on graduate school in Canada, I received my first issue of a subscription to the *Tamarack Review*: number 61 (November 1973). It opened with a new story, "Material," by someone unknown to me, a writer named Alice Munro. Seeing that magazine as my first independent foray into Canadian writing, I read the story, was struck hard by it, and found myself hooked: if this was Canadian literature, I thought, then sign me up.

And so I signed up. I moved north from my native Ohio during the summer of 1974 to begin graduate work at the University of Waterloo—my new wife and I entered Canada on that August day when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency, and we listened to his speech as we drove along the 401: we were embarking on a new direction in a new country. By then, "Material" had appeared again, this time as the second story in Munro's third book, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), published that May by McGraw-Hill Ryerson. The brief biography on its dust jacket noted Munro's beginnings in Wingham, Ontario, her time in university, and her marriage, saying that afterwards she moved to Victoria,

British Columbia, "where she has lived until recently." She was then living in London, Ontario, and during that academic year was the writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario, where she had been a student herself. After over 20 years on the West Coast, Munro had come home.

Meanwhile, I began my studies at Waterloo, and although mostly I was doing what newly embarked graduate students did—reading, trying to keep up with my courses, figuring out what directions to go in—I had begun watching Munro and her career closely. I read and studied her first two books, and in my second term I served as teaching assistant in a course on Ontario writing; there I taught my first formal class, a lecture on *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), Munro's first book. At the same time, I was thinking about doing my MA thesis on the Ontario small town in fiction, with a consideration of Munro among other writers. As it turned out, I narrowed the focus of my writing, first to just Munro and then, shaping my material in terms of narrative technique, to just the uncollected stories from the 1950s and those in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. I took as my title an apt descriptive phrase from "Material": "A fine and lucky benevolence" (*Something* 43). While this was happening, Munro had finished her residency at Western and had reconnected with Gerald Fremlin, an old attraction from her undergraduate days. By August 1975 she had moved to Clinton, Ontario—back to Huron County, just south of Wingham—to live there with Fremlin. There Munro continued to write another 11 books, and in 2013 the unalloyed excellence of that writing won her the Nobel Prize in Literature—the first Canadian to be so honoured.

These contexts present a first rationale for *Reading Alice Munro, 1973–2013*. I discovered Munro and her writing at a propitious moment in my own career and, as it turned out, at such a moment in hers as well. Because of *Dance of the Happy Shades*—which won the Governor General's Award—and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)—which became a feminist *cri de coeur* and also won a major award—Munro's writing was, during the early 1970s, beginning to receive real academic attention. The first published articles date from those years, a time of both deep English-Canadian nationalism and a concurrent demand—both in the universities and in the culture more broadly—for greater attention to Canadian writers and their works. Read Canadian! was an imperative frequently

heard, read, and repeated. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and especially her *Survival*—both published in 1972, urtexts each—were indicative of the times. Along with many others, Munro's growing reputation was both noticed and celebrated, seen as further evidence of the emergence of Canadian literature as an academic specialty.

Concurrently, Munro's move back to Ontario in 1973 at the end of her marriage and her eventual return to Huron County in 1975—to her home place, putting her "in the midst of, so to speak, my material," as Munro once wrote (proof *Who* 229)—set the stage for her emergence as a powerful writer. That is, just as her work was beginning to receive significant attention as a part of Canadian literature, Munro, an established writer in her mid-40s, returned home and saw her material anew, with different eyes and a different understanding. In late 1973, too, she wrote a memoir story called "Home" (which she published in a collection of new writing the following year but withheld from including in a book of her own until 2006). Her material became more immediate, no longer recalled through time and memory from far away, off in British Columbia. Once settled in Clinton, Munro turned to the aesthetic struggles that defined, in part, her breakthrough collections *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), the latter something of a legacy volume from the former. Here the structures of her stories became more complex. It was during this time, too, that Munro hired as her agent Virginia Barber, who successfully brought her stories to the attention of American commercial magazines; by far the most prominent of these—and longstanding in its relationship with Munro—was the *New Yorker*. When the Nobel Prize was announced, that magazine's editors republished her "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (1999–2000) as a tribute to her accomplishment and for its own special recognition. It was Munro's 63rd appearance in the *New Yorker*.

Once I had submitted my thesis on Munro to the University of Waterloo in 1976, I headed west to begin doctoral studies at the University of Manitoba. Although my focus there was largely on other things, I kept working on Munro, and in 1979 offered "Alice Munro and the Critics: A Paradigm" as my third academic conference paper to the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS). It began with a stern exposé and denunciation of thematic criticism as applied to Munro. That

approach was then holding sway in analyses of Canadian writing generally, most especially through the influence of Atwood's *Survival*; thematic articles on Munro's work had linked her to larger "Canadian" themes such as Northrop Frye's idea of the garrison mentality. Some of the early essays on Munro had approached her work through this idea. Asserting the inappropriateness of such analysis for Munro, I suggested rather that the strength of her stories lay in their narrative, in the techniques she used in writing them, and in their mimetic recreation of 1930s and 1940s Ontario, as they were remembered. The polemic portion of the essay—which my editor then called "your kamikaze attack"—was later dropped, and the balance of the essay became "Clear Jelly: Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics" (1983), the first essay in the first critical book on Munro. It is also the first essay included here.

I followed "Clear Jelly" at regular intervals with other essays and reviews on Munro's fiction, an annotated bibliography in 1984, and a succession of pieces focused on Munro criticism, the most recent appearing in 2013. In 2000 my focus shifted to biography when Munro agreed to cooperate on a book about her literary life; *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* was published in 2005 and was revised as an updated paperback in 2011. Once that book was completed I returned to critical writing on Munro, taking up new subjects I had noticed along the way as I researched my book—such as Munro's Irish heritage and her story "White Dump" (1985), which concludes what I consider to be one of Munro's best collections, *The Progress of Love* (1986). Those two essays are included here. I plan to keep doing this, for as long as I can, while keeping an eye on the factual details of Munro's ongoing career.

The intention of *Reading Alice Munro, 1973–2013* is to use a selection of my essays—most of them, actually—to track a perpetually deepening fascination with Munro's writing and, because of that writing and its effects, with her life and the trajectory of her writing career. Although it is not intended as a monograph critical study of Munro's work—her work has long seemed beyond such treatment—my hope is that, when it is read sequentially within a single volume, along with the contextualizations I offer along the way, readers will be able to see and understand the gradual making of an entire, most remarkable career. To this end, the essays are arranged chronologically and, because of separate emphases, divided into

three sections. Each of these sections, as well, derives from a single decade. The first deals with techniques, forms, and publishing contexts during the 1980s; the second, made up of pieces that were published during the 1990s, reflects my frequent use during that period of the Alice Munro fonds at the University of Calgary and takes up issues revealed by the archival materials found there, along with gauging the deepened complexities of her fiction. The third section, "Understanding the *Oeuvre*," is made up of essays published after *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. These both derive from and straddle that biographical work: the first, "Alice Munro's Ontario," which extends analyses begun in the 1980s, was written before the biography but revised after it. The others were directly derived from that work: "A 'Booming Tender Sadness': Alice Munro's Irish" owes itself to my study in the Calgary archives of the contexts of Munro's television script, "1847: The Irish" (1978), and of its story version, "A Better Place Than Home" (1979). Similarly, the essay on "White Dump" owes itself to the better understanding I came to of that story's importance through reading its archival contexts.

Also included in that section is my short review of *Too Much Happiness*, one of six reviews I have included here. It, like the other short review, "Munro's Progress," a review of *The Progress of Love*, serves to define a particular moment in Munro's career. With that book, as I think the review makes clear, Munro reached a higher level of accomplishment than readers had seen previously, and with that review I tried to articulate what I then saw, and still see, as her increasing acuity during the 1980s—the results of her return to Huron County, where she lived "in the midst, so to speak, of [her] material." Similarly, the publication of *Too Much Happiness* in 2009 allowed for the same sort of analysis, with—ever innovative, this writer—some consideration of the unique qualities of that volume's title story; in some ways, it is unlike any other Munro story. That review also allowed me to take up, and to attempt to refute, some reviewers of *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) who had made almost no attempt to understand, let alone appreciate, the core significance of that book. This seemed an especially necessary action because, and this is clear, *The View from Castle Rock* will ultimately be seen as utterly crucial to any thorough understanding of Munro's *oeuvre*. Looking back now, Munro appears to

have been heading toward *The View from Castle Rock* for much of her writing career.

In the same way, I have interleaved four review essays within the three sections—I have called them "critical interludes," and in various ways they establish the larger contexts the essays explore. Published at intervals—respectively in 1987, 1991, 1998, and 2013—these pieces offer a comprehensive overview of Munro's critical reception from the 1980s on. Read today they are certainly a bit cheeky, and also stern and insistent, but they seem also to still capture some of the energy of their times. Although I had initially thought to place these review essays in a section of their own, I ultimately decided that reading each review essay within the trajectories of the times, the one seen in relation to the other and to the other essays, made more sense. This contextualization also recreates moments in literary history, a feeling for the times—something that I am after. Finally, *Reading Alice Munro* concludes, as a postlude, with an afterword that considers *Dear Life* (2012), its "Finale," and the Nobel Prize as likely conclusions to Munro's career.

* * *

In a recent essay focused on the importance of A. E. Housman to Willa Cather, I drew on Munro and invoked her story "Wenlock Edge" (2005), most especially its differing endings—the ending in the *New Yorker* version versus the final one found in *Too Much Happiness* (Thacker "One"). When she first submitted the story to the *New Yorker* in July 2005, it ended with this statement from the narrator: "I discovered that Uricon was Wroxeter, a Roman camp on the Severn River" (Submitted 29). The reference is to Housman's "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble" (poem 31) from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), seen by scholars as among the best in that collection. Munro revised this sentence for the final version published in the *New Yorker*, and it came just after the narrator observes other students who were "on a course, as [she] was, of getting to know the ways of their own wickedness" (91). By the time "Wenlock Edge" appeared in *Too Much Happiness*, having been held out of *The View from Castle Rock*, Munro had dropped this particular reference to Uricon, although obviously the reference to the poem remains in the story's title, along with

the larger presence of Housman through quotations of his poems. In my essay on Housman and Cather, too, I invoke W. H. Auden's elegiac poem, "A. E. Housman" (1939), which, after a caustic portrait of the other poet ("He timidly attacked the life he led"), concludes that "only geographical divisions / Parted the coarse hanged soldier from the don" (182). "I kept on learning things," Munro's narrator says in the *New Yorker* version, just before she tells us "that Uricon, the Roman camp, is now Wroxeter, a town on the Severn River" (91).

I mention these cruxes here for various reasons. The first is autobiographical. As a Munro scholar, I began focusing in the 1980s on her narratives and evocations of Ontario's Huron County as a fully imagined place. I also attended, more than most others, to the progress of both Munro's own publication and that of critics and reviewers on her work. Although the internet and searchable databases have made published bibliographies largely obsolete, during the 1980s and into the 1990s my annotated Munro bibliography was the place for students to start discovering her critical contexts. Early in the 1980s, too, Munro began donating her papers to the University of Calgary, an archive I first visited in January 1988. Quite literally, its contents transformed the ways I went about my Munro scholarship: they often reveal the exact extent of her activity as a writer, they provide biographical nuance wherever one looks, and they define a trajectory for her career.

My first visit to the Alice Munro fonds in Calgary coincided with the period when I was concluding revisions to my doctoral thesis and transforming it into a book, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (New Mexico, 1989). While doing that work, I discovered my other writer, Willa Cather. Simply put, Cather was the first writer to really contend with the imaginative effects of the prairie-plains space on the Euro-American imagination, especially in her early prairie novels *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and, most pointedly, *My Ántonia* (1918).

My initial discoveries in Calgary drew me into the archives, and not just Munro's. At the time the only way scholars could see Cather's autograph letters was to visit numerous archives all around the United States. Having conceived of a second book project, "Connection: A Woman's Place in the Writing of Emily Carr, Willa Cather, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro," one I envisioned as based in the archival materials of

each author, I set about visiting archives and gathering materials. It was to be an analysis of each writer's relationship to her own particular "home place"—Wright Morris's phrase—an analysis grounded in feminist and place theory. Although I may yet complete the book (a sizable portion of a draft exists), I ultimately set it aside in order to research and write *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. The effects of my growing familiarity with the Munro archive are evident in my published criticism. It is evident first in "'So Shocking a Verdict in Real Life': Autobiography in Alice Munro's Stories" (1988), but it is probably most evident in "Alice Munro's Willa Cather," which first appeared in *Canadian Literature* in 1992, and in the balance of the essays that followed. As both *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* and this book show, once I discovered archival research generally and the Alice Munro fonds at the University of Calgary in particular (I may be the only person who has read the entire Munro archive there), my scholarship was transformed—both in how I have read Munro and how I continue to read her work. And that reading has been continual, for as the years have passed and I have gone from Munro critic and bibliographer to biographer and critic, Munro and her works have loomed ever larger in my personal ken. Although I still do critical and historical work on the North American West, derived from the contexts I examined in *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, Munro and Cather have become the primary subjects of my career.

After the autobiographical crux, there are two others in need of addressing here: first, my decision to republish these essays without revision beyond formatting, mechanical correction, and some new copy-editing—that is, without updating or substantive revision. Second, there is the matter of my repetitions of quoted passages from her published stories and essays, and from some of her statements.

My thoughts regarding Auden on Housman have most to do with this, certainly, but Auden is relevant in another way: in 1945, Random House brought out its edition of *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden.* When preparing it, Auden's editor Edward Mendelson has written, "Auden gave many of his earlier poems ironic, distancing titles whose tone was (depending on your point of view) either tellingly or irritatingly at odds with the poems they headed." In subsequent editions Auden "replaced a few of the more flippant titles with neutral ones." (xxvi). Like Munro and

Cather, Auden is an artist of especial interest to me—a wonderful year-long seminar with Chester Duncan at the University of Manitoba during 1977 to 1978 ensured as much. I am certainly no Auden, but his retitling of his poems in the ways Mendelson describes has always struck me as an ill-advised, regrettable act. That is my point of view and, as such, I have no desire to now revise my younger self.

More especially, Munro's own poetics are rooted in her Huron County home place—as I often argued, a place she at first remembered across distance and time from British Columbia (1952–73) and then, once she returned in 1973, has both confronted and lived with (and within) since. Situations, incidents, names, and references echo within her stories. A favourite of mine is Munro's repetition of the name "Mr. Willens" from her "Story for Sunday" (1950), the second story she published in *Folio* while at the University of Western Ontario, in "The Love of a Good Woman" (1996). That university and its location, London, also echo throughout Munro's work, in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), *The Beggar Maid* (1979), "Family Furnishings" (2001), "Wenlock Edge," and elsewhere. Most recently, with "Train" (2012), which begins with the character Jackson, who is returning home from the Second World War, jumping off his train before it reaches his station, Munro returns to the material in unpublished stories that she worked on called, variously, "The War Hero" or "The Boy Murderer"; many fragments in the Calgary archives begin with, for example, "Franklin got off the train at Goldenrod, where he didn't need to" (37.16.28). And of course there is the presence of Munro's mother in her stories from the late 1950s on, including in the "Finale" of *Dear Life* (2012).

My point here is twofold: by publishing the essays in much the same form they appeared originally, I am both leaving myself as I was as a critic when the essays were originally published and encouraging readers toward the critical specifics of that time—the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. My critical interludes—the review essays devoted to Munro criticism—do this most explicitly, certainly, but my own essays are meant to do much the same thing. There is continuity, growth, and influence in this. Two examples: "Clear Jelly: Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics" (1983), my first published essay on Munro, defined Munro's retrospective narrative; it has been frequently cited, was recently republished in a

volume focused on *Dance of the Happy Shades* edited by a French scholar (Guignery), and is arguably the basis for Isla Duncan's narratological study of Munro, *Alice Munro's Narrative Art* (2011). A second example, which illustrates both the extension of my thinking and the effect that my discovery of the Munro archives had on my work, can be found in the two essays "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario" (1984) and "Alice Munro's Ontario" (2007), both of which conclude with an analysis of the final scene in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection" (1978). In the earlier essay, I focused on Munro's evocation of the Ontario small town, using "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960) as my central text and offering an argument largely drawn from my University of Waterloo thesis. In "Alice Munro's Ontario"—written, as I have said, before *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* but revised after its publication—I examine the original unrevised versions of "Home" (1974) and "Working for a Living" (1981), seeing them as key texts that reveal Munro's palpable, deep connection to her Huron County home place, to her parents, and to her own personal and cultural history. What Munro achieves in the conclusion of "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection" is not just the well-made fictional artifice of her early work but a deep and resonate verisimilitude rooted in her return to Huron County. Life *is* but a dream—a dream that is just as it often seems, and often feels—and throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s Munro was compulsively articulating such feelings about her home place.

And then there is the relationship between Munro and Cather. I had not read Munro's "Dulse" (1980) when I first met her in New York City at one of the publicity events arranged by Alfred A. Knopf for the launch of the US edition of *The Moons of Jupiter* in March 1983 (at that stage of my life I was often aware of her newly published stories, but I allowed them to myself only sparingly). I had arranged to meet her in order to ask some questions connected to my annotated bibliography, which was then in the making, and was seated next to her at a luncheon. Ever polite, but even then not especially drawn to literary critics, she asked about my interests beyond her writing. Not knowing about "Dulse," I told her about my interest in and work on Cather and the prairie west, and we had a lively discussion about Cather. That same day at a friend's place I read "Dulse" and was stunned by its very existence—Munro, of course, had made no mention of it. That evening, at a reading, I told Munro of my discovery.

She said she thought I knew it when we met and talked earlier in the day. No, not at all.

This episode led, a few years later, to a conference paper called "Alice Munro's Willa Cather" (and occasioned my first real interview—on the telephone—with Munro). After several drafts and with increasing use of the archival holdings on "Dulse" at the University of Calgary, it was eventually published in 1992. Without question, part of my motivation for comparing the two writers has been my own interest in and knowledge of each writer, but there is more to it than that. As Munro shows throughout "Dulse," she has been a careful reader of Cather's fiction and of her as a person, too, certainly. But when she visited Grand Manan (around 1978 to 1979) she in effect researched the time Cather spent on the island. That is, she met the prototype for Mr. Stanley—the Cather fanatic in her story—someone whom Cather scholars had met there and been aware of. When I first visited Grand Manan in 1995 to prepare to lead an excursion of a Cather group to the island, I met someone who Munro had also met, and had plucked from those she met there to use in her story. That person had, as Munro writes in "Material," "passed into Art" (*Something* 43), and as it happened was not very happy about it: people read Munro's story and recognized the likeness.

Both Cather and Munro are what I would call organic writers—artists who work with images and memories that both resonate with authenticity and are mimetic in the fullest sense of the term. On reading them, readers stand back, rapt with the way the writing has made them feel, and think that this is how it feels to live, to be alive. Indeed, but in reading them we also feel Munro's drive toward wisdom and the power of affecting "Art"—a word Munro capitalizes in "Material" to emphasize its significance. As I compare the two of them, I am reminded that in our 1987 telephone interview, Munro mentioned that her favourite Cather story is "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), which Cather wrote as an homage to her dying mother. For her part, Cather has Godfrey St. Peter, her historian protagonist in *The Professor's House* (1925) remark to a class, "'Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had'" (69). Wisdom. Art. Munro belongs in my essay on the influence of Housman on Cather because, just as she sees the same qualities in Cather and enumerates them in "Dulse," so too she senses similar

qualities in Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and invokes them in "Wenlock Edge." (Munro once told me that she could recite whole sections of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad* from memory. More than that, it is a delight to me that Mr. Stanley's favourite Cather novel in "Dulse" is her most perfect one: *A Lost Lady* [1923] [Interview, May 12, 2014; *Moons* 39].) In a review of a small, sharp book on Cather, Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (2000), A. S. Byatt—who has written some of the finest reviews of some of Munro's books—wrote that Munro is the only other writer she knows besides Cather who "has learned to depict whole lives from a distance in the same strangely unworked-up and unaccented way, while also making it entirely new, as her landscape and *moeurs* are new" (53). When Cather reviewed a new edition of *A Shropshire Lad* in 1897, she quoted from "On your midnight pallet lying" (poem 11) and asserted: "That is what it means to write poetry; be able to say the oldest thing in the world as though it had never been said before, to make the old wounds of all bleed fresh, to give a new voice to the *Weltschmerz,* that, perhaps, is the most exalted lyric in the whole collection" (Cather, Review 708). So, too, with Munro. Ruth Scurr's powerful 2011 review of Munro's *New Selected Stories* (published only in Britain) is titled "The Darkness of Alice Munro." Indeed.

A final point about my method here. The reader who reads this book from cover to cover—as opposed to the one who dips in here and there—will doubtless notice that I quote certain passages of Munro's more than once. Munro's 1973 statement in an interview that art involves "approach and recognition" is a favourite of mine, as are lines from "Material," such as "a fine and lucky benevolence" and the one I just used here, "passed into Art." Her 1974 essay in *Weekend Magazine*, "Everything Here Is Touchable and Mysterious," which has never been reprinted, offers such passages along with its title and provenance (Munro's father provided her with factual material about the Maitland River—a significant presence in Munro's imagination, and in this essay—which runs by their farm in Lower Wingham). The ending of "The Ottawa Valley" is key to understanding Munro's depiction of her mother, and, as also just mentioned, the ending of "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection." There is also the ending of "Meneseteung" (1988). I also include Byatt's quotation in which she compares Munro's art to Cather's at the outset of my "Alice Munro's

Ontario." One approach to dealing with these repetitions might be to cut the repeats, but I have elected not to do that. It seems appropriate, in a book on a writer who so emphatically and deeply draws from her own place and culture, and who returns to repeat herself, to allow these assertions and passages to repeat—central as they are to Munro's art. "The final four works in this book are not quite stories," Munro writes, introducing her "Finale" in *Dear Life* (255). Here her mother and her father appear yet again, and for a final time: "dear life," indeed. Given this, and given the consistent probing found in her art itself, the repetitions here seem apt, justified by the repetitions and revisitations found throughout Munro's work. As Munro writes: "Connection. That was what was it all about" (*Moons* 6). That one is another favourite.

* * *

As I have gone back and reread these essays, remembering and (at least in some sense) rediscovering their arguments and contexts, I have noticed the recurring ideas, quotations, and references to specific stories that have informed the arguments these essays offer. Reconsidered now, in 2015, when as Munro critics we have a good sense of just what "the rest of the story" is ultimately likely to be, as regards both Munro and the whole corpus of her work, these recurrences seem eerie in their constancy. They serve to map the work of a writer whose intention for her art has never waivered, even if her own estimation of its accomplishment may have. That is, such recurrences are striking in the numerous ways Munro has vivified them throughout her career. Never a writer much inclined to analytical or academic debates about her own work, Munro has nevertheless made comments on that work that consistently display both imaginative precision and truth. Such comments are sharp, pointed, and, what is more, borne out by Munro's own practice. By way of concluding this introduction, I wish to address some of them, and to draw further connections between them and the trajectory of Munro's own life and career.

In my 1987 review of *The Progress of Love*, for example, I began by quoting a comment that Munro made to Jill Gardiner in an interview for Gardiner's 1973 M.A. thesis: "as we grow older: 'life becomes even *more* mysterious and difficult,' so that 'writing is the art of approach

and recognition. I believe that we don't solve these things—in fact our explanations take us further away" (*Reading Alice Munro* 73). Gardiner interviewed Munro on June 1, 1973—at a time when Munro had left her marriage for good, would soon return to Ontario, and would soon write and publish three critical "approach and recognition" stories as consequence of that return: "Home" (1974), "The Ottawa Valley" (1974), and "Winter Wind" (1974). These stories, each one confronting memories and situations drawn from her family, offered "recognitions" that were far more raw and far less made and mannered than any Munro had published previously in such family-derived stories, such as "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960), "Boys and Girls" (1964), and "Red Dress—1946" (1965). In those 1973 stories, Munro may be seen, again, approaching and recognizing the mystery of each of her parents—and her grandmother and a great aunt, too—as she would approach them again and again after returning to Huron County in 1975, living there, and continuing to write. Visiting with Munro there myself on September 6, 2013, I asked her about the four pieces that make up the "Finale" section of *Dear Life*: "The Eye," "Night," "Voices," and "Dear Life." Introducing them as "not quite stories," Munro writes that she believes "they are the first and last—and the closest things I have to say about my own life" (255). Her mother and father are each there, and are again approached, wondered over, and recognized. When I asked her if each of these incidents actually happened, she said they had. They were, as she had written, "the closest things about my own life." Munro, writing her lives, still.

Three salient points emerge from such facts that need emphasis here. First, Munro's return to Ontario in 1973, and her return after that to Huron County in 1975, brought about an aesthetic confrontation with the physical surfaces, the cultural mores, and, most especially, her memories of the region that ultimately strengthened both the effect of and their affect on Munro's stories. Once back in Ontario, she continued to write as she had from British Columbia—descriptively, experimenting with form and point of view, writing densely detailed short stories—but as a first project, "Places at Home" (an unpublished piece of writing for a photography book), and then *Who Do You Think You Are?*, demonstrates, she did this with greater immediacy and urgency. Ever an organic writer, Munro revises perpetually—constantly rethinking her ideas for stories,

beginning drafts, rejecting beginnings, rejecting characters and scenes, beginning again (the archive reveals boxes of rejected beginnings and, sometimes, whole drafts)—seeking to put on paper the story that exists in her mind. We readers have long thought she succeeds wonderfully—certainly at least since *Dance of the Happy Shades* won her first Governor General's award in 1969—but Munro herself has never been completely sure, nor does she ever seem satisfied. Her uncertainties were most acute during the mid-1970s and into the early 1980s—her famous removal of *Who Do You Think You Are?* from the press in 1978 for restructuring and rewriting being the clearest indication of this.

However, and this is my second point, this was also the time during which Munro was working on a group of stories that proved to be critical to her development as a writer of both unique power and profundity, both immediately and over the course of her career. Among these are the three first-person "Janet" stories that she held back from *Who Do You Think You Are?*, working on them subsequently through magazine publication and into her next book, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982): "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection," "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 2. The Stone in the Field" (1979), and "The Moons of Jupiter." So, too, is "Working for a Living" (1981), which began as fiction, was rejected by the *New Yorker* in that form, then became a memoir—which was rejected by its editors in *that* form as well. These pieces became, in fundamental ways, the basis for what Munro called in 1980 the "family book," which she had in mind then and kept thinking about and working on but did not complete until 2006 as *The View From Castle Rock*. During this time, too, she wrote and published "Dulse" and "Bardon Bus" (1982), two other explorations that showed Munro combining autobiographical materials with non-personal considerations—literary influence and posture, her own position as a writer, and relationships, viewed analytically—and exploring female sexual mores and desires. These latter explorations would prove, from the 1980s on, to be among her most central and enduring, drawing her especially then and as she has aged. Such stories as "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (2001), "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," "Chance" (2004), "Too Much Happiness" (2009), and "Dolly" (2012) confirm as much.

Such constructions of similarity between and among stories as these have to do with Munro's interests, and with the shape of her writing, rather than with the growing critical reputation of that writing. Turning to such matters, my third point is derived from how Munro shaped her career during the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Once she hired Virginia Barber as her agent in New York, Munro effectively began working quite consciously within two literary marketplaces, Canada and the United States, with Barber pursuing connections on her behalf in a third, Great Britain. Munro's decision to pull *Who Do You Think You Are?* from the press was occasioned, in part, by the responses she was getting to the manuscript from her editor at W. W. Norton in New York, who was trying to reshape it into a conventional novel at the same time that it was going into production in Canada. When that editor left Norton, Barber took Munro's book to Alfred A. Knopf and to Ann Close, an editor there. When it was published by Knopf in 1979 as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*, the book was slightly different from its Canadian predecessor—Munro had had time for more revision and adopted some of her Norton editor's suggestions, and Close had made some suggestions of her own (see Thacker, *Writing* 336–57). Thus *The Beggar Maid* has a slightly different text and so, technically, is a different book than its Canadian version.

Such details of difference are of less import than the acknowledgement that, with Barber, the *New Yorker* (and its right-of-first-refusal contract from 1977 on), and the reshapings found in *Who Do You Think You Are?/ The Beggar Maid*, Munro's career in the late 1970s was becoming deeply enmeshed in two literary cultures, that of Canada and the US, the first overarching the second. Just as Munro herself was rediscovering her home place, shaping it in different and more complex ways, so, too, were the markets for that work changing and expanding. By 1980 she had her literary foundation in place: Barber in New York, her agent; Charles McGrath (and his successors), her editor at the *New Yorker*; Douglas Gibson, her Canadian editor in Toronto, and Close, her US editor, also in New York. By early 1983, when Knopf published the US edition of *The Moons of Jupiter* and the British version appeared from Allen Lane, Munro's critical reputation was well-established, and it was also growing. It was clear that she was already a writer to be reckoned with, and it was equally clear that

with the *New Yorker*, Barber's broad efforts, and her two book publishers, Munro's new stories—still increasing in effect—were finding a greater audience. Her reading base was still strongest in Canada, but she was finding ever more readers abroad throughout the 1980s.

Also in 1983, the first critical book on Munro's work was published: *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis K. MacKendrick and published by ECW Press. It contained an interview with Munro and nine critical essays, and was followed the next year by the first critical monograph and by my annotated bibliography of Munro in the fifth volume of *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors*, also from ECW Press. In 1984 came *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, a collection of papers edited by Judith Miller from the first conference on Munro, held in 1982 at the University of Waterloo, and published by its press. As all this suggests, just as Munro's own career was taking off with *The Moons of Jupiter*, an equivalent critical interest in her works was emerging. The appearance of *Probable Fictions* in 1983 began a decade that saw the publication of 10 books on Munro, another two in which she is considered along with other authors, an annotated bibliography, a short monograph as part of a reference work, a brief series biography, and about a hundred critical articles and dissertations. Most of the book publication came from Canada, but not all of it—E. D. Blodgett's *Alice Munro* (1988) was the 800th volume in Twayne's World Authors Series and Ildikó de Papp Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable* (1989) was published by Northern Illinois University Press. Since 1993, this pace of critical book publication has abated, with just five more single-authored books. At the same time, there have been two collections of critical essays, special issues of journals, an extended literary biography, a memoir by one of Munro's daughters, an appreciation, and around another two hundred articles and dissertations. A massive (457 pages) reference book, *Alice Munro: An Annotated Bibliography of Works and Criticism* by Carol Mazur and Cathy Moulder, was published by Scarecrow in 2007.

Given all of this, and given that this is an author who is, as the Nobel Prize Committee asserted in its press release, a "master of the contemporary short story" (October 10, 2013), *Reading Alice Munro, 1973–2013* should be seen as a historical introduction to both Munro and to Munro criticism. The body of critical analysis focused on Munro and her works

is now a large and daunting thing, certainly, but the gradual critical understandings revealed here—from 1983 until 2013, along with their coinciding contextual issues—define her emergence and, when seen together, contextualize that emergence within Canadian literature during the last decades of the previous century and first years of the current one.

* * *

I wish to express my gratitude to the editors of the publications in which these essays first appeared for permission to republish them here. The specifics of this publication are to be found in the acknowledgements and also in the works cited. In preparing the essays for *Reading Alice Munro, 1973–2013*, with the exception of the routine copy-editing mentioned above, I have not altered the original text except in a few places to silently correct a factual matter and, in one instance, when two passages were repeated. As well, because these essays appeared using a variety of house citation styles (and for a few using no citations at all), I have elected to follow current MLA citation style. Thus textual citations have been deleted from some endnotes and been incorporated into a Works Cited. Also, when citing materials from the Alice Munro fonds at the University of Calgary, I have given the identification numbers used in one of the two published accession catalogs (*The Alice Munro Papers* 1986, 1987); I refer readers to those two indispensable books. When using material from subsequent accessions—for which there are in-house finding aids only—I have indicated the dates of composition for letters or relevant box and file numbers.

The work involved in a book such as this encourages its author to look back. So I have done here. Revisiting who I was when I was about to become a graduate student, discovering Munro in 1973 to 1976, and then as a more-advanced graduate student discovering Auden and Cather, reminds me of all the support I have enjoyed through the years. First and foremost there is Debbie and the other members of my family. Then, during those graduate student years, there were Stanley E. McMullin at Waterloo and Evelyn J. Hinz and John J. Teunissen at Manitoba. Since 1983 it has been my privilege to teach at St. Lawrence University. Its travel funds, generously and supportively dispensed by a

succession of presidents and deans, got me to Calgary and into the Alice Munro fonds, and into many other archives as well. A timely gift to the university by Eric and Jane Molson jump-started *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* in 2003. At St. Lawrence I have also enjoyed the enthusiastic and always-generous support of David L. Torrey. I am so very grateful for all of this support. As well, beyond my family, my mentors, and my St. Lawrence connections, there has been a group of like-minded academic friends who have made my own "dear life" a joy: Anne, Evelyn, Florence, John, Laurie, Mark, Matt, Melody, Michael, Richard, Sue, Tracy, and many more. "A fine and lucky benevolence," in fact.

R. T.
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