



## READING ALICE MUNRO, 1973-2013 by Robert Thacker

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## Part Two

### What the Archives Reveal: Reading a Deepening Aesthetic

During the latter half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, Alice Munro's stories appeared in the *New Yorker* with increased frequency and regularity—only occasionally would one be published in another magazine, meaning that the editors at her primary venue had passed on it. With her still-growing reputation, placing stories elsewhere was not difficult. During the 1990s Munro published another three collections—*Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), and *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998)—and a first volume of her *Selected Stories* (1996). The new collections showed both continuity in her art and also some radical experimentation. In the first collection, for example, the title story connected to and extended other family-based concerns readers had seen before, while another, “Meneseung” (1988), was unlike anything Munro had done previously. Much the same could be said of the stories found in the other two collections from the 1990s, notably with such stories as “The Albanian Virgin” and “Carried Away,” from *Open Secrets*, and the title story of the 1998 collection and others there equally so.

As far as criticism, the first half of the 1990s saw another five single-authored books on Munro (one of which examined Mavis Gallant's work in tandem) and a brief series biography. Three of these asserted a new critical sophistication while attempting to extend, in various ways, what

critics during the previous decade had established; the other two, from a series published by ECW Press, made the more significant contribution. The latter half of the decade saw only one critical monograph, by Coral Ann Howells, and published in Britain as part of a series there; it stands out as the best such critical book published during the 1990s. Critical essays appeared in greater numbers with uneven results, some showing both insight and imagination while others, often from abroad, merely “discovered” Munro and asserted the attractive qualities they found in her stories. In 1998 I edited a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, republished the next year as *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro*. It, along with my second review essay from 1998, republished here, is probably the best venue from which to ascertain the issues informing Munro criticism during the 1990s.

In January 1988 I visited the University of Calgary to look for the first time at the Alice Munro fonds there; since then I have returned many times. I spent the fall 2003 semester in Calgary reading the entire archive for my work on *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. Because Munro is an organic writer—that is, she writes with images and ideas of what she is after but without outlines or planning notes—Munro’s work is especially amenable to archival investigation. Containing as they do notebook drafts and (often) multiple typescript versions of stories, in both fragmentary and complete forms (there is, for example, a full version of “Bardon Bus,” which Munro revised after the version published in *The Moons of Jupiter*), her archives reveal a great deal about her intentions and direction. Perhaps more than any other part of her work, they reveal Munro as a writer ever revising, working repeatedly toward particular phrasings, and most especially working intently on those phrasings that end stories. They also reveal her as a writer who sometimes worked extensively on stories that she later abandoned. As the last essay included in the section here asserts, Munro’s archives are filled with a myriad of clues regarding her direction and intentions. That essay, published in 1999, was consciously polemical: I was encouraging other scholars to go read and use the Calgary archives regularly and consistently.

Given these investigations, the essays and review essay in this section are infused with what was then a new awareness of Munro’s directions, specific attempts, and textual outcomes, seen in relation to what her

archives revealed. This is most evident in “Alice Munro’s Willa Cather” (1992) and “Writing ‘Home’” (1998)—the latter the introduction to the special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* and to *The Rest of the Story* and still bearing the marks of that position here—in the readings they offer of, in the first, “Dulse” (1980) and, in the latter, “Home” (1974), “The Progress of Love” (1985), and “Friend of My Youth” (1990). Details from the archives inform the essay on American literary influence and also the second review essay on criticism—which reviews most of the critical work noted above—and especially the final essay focused on the Munro archive itself.

“Alice Munro and the Anxiety of American Influence” is another essay with a polemic agenda. It proceeds from the twin facts that Munro has always been clear about her American literary influences but that, overall, most Canadian critics have avoided that fact. I delivered it as a paper in 1991 at the University of Ottawa’s symposium on Canadian–U. S. Literary Relations, and there were whoops and much consternation when I asked, “Whose anxiety is it, anyway—that of Canadian writers or Canadian critics?” With regard to Munro, it was quite clear that the critics were those who were anxious. During that time I was writing about anti-Americanism as a widely held but largely unspoken prejudice among English-speaking Canadians, especially among those in universities, and this essay reflects these discussions (see Thacker “Gazing”). I was also doing my work on Cather as an influence on Munro and she, along with Eudora Welty, looms large. Later, when I revised *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* for the paperback edition, I added a tenth chapter covering 2004 to 2010 and, because of encouragements from Munro herself, explored the influence of William Maxwell. So my question still stands.

The second omnibus review essay to be published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, “What’s ‘Material?’” (1998), also rails a bit about Munro’s relationship with the Canadian academy. Unlike its predecessor, “Go Ask Alice,” which considered books offering larger discussions of Canadian literature, this review essay looks exclusively at volumes of Munro criticism and at Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s short ECW biography. More than a bit polemical, too, it examines the relationship between the life, the fiction, and the criticism, asking uncomfortable questions about the appropriateness of the critical monograph for a writer like Munro

and, more uncomfortably still, wondering over the unseemly rush of new PhDs to turn their theses into books so as to secure academic careers. At the same time, it argues that the best books reviewed are those from ECW's series.

## Alice Munro's Willa Cather (1992)

The fall and winter of 1927 to 1928 proved a difficult time for Willa Cather. She had been forced to move from her Bank Street apartment in New York City, and just after returning east from a long Christmas visit with family and friends in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she received news of her father's death. Cather's longtime companion, Edith Lewis, later recalled this period of their life together, writing that during the following summer, "Grand Manan seemed the only foothold left on earth." They had been visiting Grand Manan Island, off the coast of New Brunswick in the Bay of Fundy, since 1922, staying at the Whale Cove Inn until 1928, when their newly built cottage was ready (Skaggs 128–30; Brown and Crone 41–46). Lewis continues, saying that "with all her things in storage," owing to the move, Cather "looked forward fervently to her attic at Grand Manan. No palace could have seemed so attractive to her just then as that rough little cottage, with the soft fogs blowing across the flowery fields, and the crystalline quiet of the place" (153).<sup>1</sup>

These summer trips presaged the events of "Before Breakfast," one of Cather's last stories, written in 1944—about three years before her death—and included in the posthumous *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948; Arnold 165). It is set on an island—though off the coast of Nova Scotia—and its protagonist, Henry Grenfell, a well-to-do American businessman, is seeking refuge from his overwhelming sense of ennui. He is fleeing what Alice Munro has described in "Chaddeleys and Flemings:

2. The Stone in the Field” as the “pain of human contact”—her narrator admits to being “hypnotized by it. The fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity” (*Moons* 27). Such sentiments, too, inform Munro’s “Dulse” (1980), a story first published in the *New Yorker* and, after revision, collected in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). And like Cather’s story, Munro’s derives from its author’s knowledge of Grand Manan Island: Munro has explained that while working on a story involving the character who became Lydia, the protagonist of “Dulse,” she visited the island and there met a person steeped in Cather’s history on Grand Manan. That person’s veneration of the American writer served Munro as a basis for Mr. Stanley in “Dulse”—the two parts of the story, she said, seemed to fit well together (Telephone interview).

Although critics have examined Munro’s Cather connection, more consideration of the matter is warranted. Klaus P. Stich has discussed Munro’s use of Cather as both presence and authorial icon in “Dulse,” pointing out a wide variety of apt thematic and imagistic parallels throughout Cather’s works. However, though his article includes much that is relevant to an initial understanding of the Cather–Munro connection, Stich’s analysis presents a partial picture only. Even so, his discussion of it is far superior to those offered by the critics who have published extended critical analyses of Munro’s fiction: Martin, Blodgett, and Carrington. Although they present detailed readings of “Dulse,” none pursues the Cather connection much beyond the superficial—she is merely present, as Blodgett argues, to represent a view of art that is “hermetically sealed,” one “that Munro finds wanting” (113).

In “Dulse,” Munro offers a story that grew out of her own visit to Grand Manan and that recapitulates the setting, midlife-crisis mood, and cathartic *dénouement* of “Before Breakfast.” What is more, Cather appears in effect as a character, one with a compelling presence whose status as a no-nonsense-author-of-consequence needs to be probed and (as far as possible) understood—by Munro, by her protagonist Lydia, and by the readers of “Dulse.” Cather’s importance to Munro’s story, moreover, is further borne out in draft versions of “Dulse,” as found in the University of Calgary archives. The connection between them extends beyond this pair of stories, and it is a broader parallel that persists yet: Munro’s recently published story, “Carried Away” (1991), features a protagonist who

considers Cather to be one of her favourite authors, and takes place in February 1917 when Cather was still rising in fame (34).<sup>2</sup> This notwithstanding, Cather's presence in "Dulse" remains the central connection in the story, inviting further analysis.

That Munro would be drawn to Cather's work is not surprising. As women who have sought to depict the "home place" (in Wright Morris's phrase)—writing out of their inheritance and lineage to create fictions derived from their protracted and intimate knowledge of their respective rural small towns—the two have much in common. Munro would have been aware of Cather's prominence among American writers from the 1920s on, but more than that she may also have been attracted by the appeal of Cather's work outside of the academy; *My Ántonia* (1918), for example, has not been out of print since its publication. This quality persists, and it would likely not be lost on an aspiring writer of Munro's intelligence and ability. Nor would Cather's penchant for seemingly revisiting the same material, as Merrill Maguire Skaggs has recently argued, for Munro has shown the same tendency.<sup>3</sup> Finally, although Munro has been seen as a writer of perception and sensibility, rather than of erudition or allusion, much recent scholarship has confirmed a detailed awareness in her fiction of a wide range of literary forebears, both paternal and maternal (Blodgett; Carrington *Controlling*; York "Rival").

Taken together, these lines of parallel treatment and influence suggest a compatibility and relationship between Cather and Munro that, if not of the same crucial importance as, say, Sarah Orne Jewett on Cather, is far deeper than has been acknowledged thus far.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Cather's well-known phrase describing Jewett's relationship to her subject, the "gift of sympathy," may be apt to describe Munro's view of her American precursor, Cather (Preface). Thus the appearance of Cather as a major presence in "Dulse," along with a telling invocation of the messages of Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) in the story, is not just a singular occurrence within Munro's work: it is a direct acknowledgement of Cather's influence and of their shared values.

\* \* \*



At the beginning of “Before Breakfast,” Henry Grenfell glimpses the morning star, the planet Venus, but it brings no solace: he has arisen from a difficult night’s sleep brought on by his personal dissatisfactions and aggravated by a chance meeting he had with a geologist the evening before. Going about his morning toilet upon rising, “Grenfell rejected his eye-drops. Why patch up? What was the use . . . of anything?” (148, Cather’s ellipsis). This final question is what Grenfell—through the mediations and actions of the story, all of which occurs before breakfast—must get beyond. He does, ultimately, finding solace in the passage of time from youth to old age, in reconciling himself to the geological history of “his” island—a perspective that troubled him the night before—and, finally, in the transformative powers of Venus/Aphrodite.

Like Grenfell, Munro’s Lydia has come to Grand Manan seeking a refuge, and like him, too, she spends just a single night there during the story. At the story’s end, she is left at least hopeful if not, like Grenfell, seemingly transformed. Her feelings at the outset, however, are not as intense as his, though they appear to be more chronic. Even so, Munro is defining the beginnings of a despondency similar to Grenfell’s. Lydia is 45, divorced with two grown children living on their own, and working as an editor for a publisher in Toronto; significantly, she is a poet, too—but is not forthcoming about it. She is a person who is particularly unconnected to those around her. Having just broken up with Duncan, with whom she had been living in Kingston, Lydia is travelling, in the words of a rejected draft’s phrasing, “hoping to manage some kind of recuperation, or even happiness, before she had to start working again” (38.8.20.1.f1).<sup>5</sup>

Parenthetically, draft versions of the story are being used here both for the greater articulation of authorial intention they reveal and to demonstrate the process of Munro’s composition. Passages from rejected drafts—such as this one—are not to be seen as preferable to the final versions, although the papers reveal that Munro is an author who works very hard on crucial passages in a story, consequently rejecting descriptions and phrasings that both add to an understanding of her intentions and might well have been retained.

As well, although this essay is looking at the most direct connections between “Before Breakfast” and “Dulse,” there are more subtle parallels as well. Cather uses the planet Venus, replete with its mythological

associations and sense of timelessness, for its essentially mysterious quality: it suggests meaning apprehended but not fully understood. Thus Grenfell's dissatisfaction arises in part through the geologist's well-intentioned factualities; these have the effect of dispelling the mysterious attraction he feels to his island, which in turn has been of such solace to him, even when he is away from it—the island is his mainstay, even in just knowing it is there.

Similarly, in the *New Yorker* version of "Dulse," Lydia's ex-lover is Alex, a geologist, one "absorbed ... in the crust and content of the earth and in his own distinct energies" (38). A more interesting parallel is found in Munro's title story for the volume in which "Dulse" was collected: "The Moons of Jupiter." The story, which has the same narrator as the "Chaddeleys and Flemings" stories, Janet, focuses on the apprehended death of Janet's father. Janet, who has just visited a nearby planetarium, jokes with her father—in the hospital awaiting heart surgery—about the names of Jupiter's moons. Throughout, her concern is finding truths that can be believed with absolute certainty. Here, however, even the facts of science fail, and she is drawn inexorably to the mystery of the solar system: its enormity, its mythic proportions (reflected in the names of the moons), and its ultimate inscrutability.

At the outset of "Dulse," Munro describes Lydia's disorientation and her futile attempts to connect to the people and the things around her, then encapsulates her efforts and ultimate detachment with the sentence: "She set little blocks on top of one another and she had a day" (36). Stopping at a guest house for the night, Lydia muses over the movements and motives of the people she meets, seeking to infer and then to understand the source of what made them, apparently, whole.<sup>6</sup> She realizes, Munro writes early in the story, "that people were no longer so interested in getting to know her" (36), and she seeks to understand herself in view of such changes. What Lydia is most bothered by, and wishes most to understand, is "what gave him [Duncan] his power? She knows who did. But she asks what, and when—when did the transfer take place, when was the abdication of all pride and sense?" (50). In a rejected draft version of the same passage, Munro is more precise: "Then what had given him his subsequent power? Easy to say it was the foolishness of Lydia, the abdication of all pride and sense, a most persistent streak of cravenness[.]

But it was no help to her, this explanation, it explained nothing, she was left to sit regarding her own life with sad disbelief.” The whole of this passage, part of a typed draft, is struck out and replaced with a holograph insertion, reading: “Then what had given him his subsequent power?” Munro appears to have considered putting the entire section from “Easy” to “disbelief” in parenthesis before rejecting it entirely (38.8.20.1.f10–11).

That evening Lydia meets her fellow guests, including Mr. Stanley, to whom she is introduced, and with whom she eats dinner and discusses Willa Cather. At the same meal she acknowledges at another table three men who work for the telephone company. Throughout the story, Lydia’s thoughts focus primarily on her own concerns, especially on Duncan and their relationship (at one point we read about her discussion of it with a psychiatrist), and on their recent breakup. She thinks as well about the members of the telephone crew, with whom she plays cards later in the evening, imagining each as lovers (one of them, Eugene, tries to beckon her to his bed). She evaluates each relative to Duncan, whom she recalls in considerable detail as to habits, preferences, and peculiarities. She knows she is now, for him, merely the latest in a long line of former girlfriends—“morose, messy, unsatisfactory Lydia. The unsatisfactory poet” (52).

Even though such thoughts make up most of the story, Lydia meets Mr. Stanley first, and through him she meets the personage of Cather. They talk of Cather generally at dinner, and the next day at breakfast they have a second—and far more pertinent—exchange about her, one that defines her presence in “Dulse.” As such, Stanley and Cather frame the story. By using Cather in this way, Munro provides Lydia with another person’s (relevant) life to wonder over at this crucial moment in the protagonist’s own life. Munro offers Cather—the author of *A Lost Lady*, whose Marian Forrester is, like Lydia, a woman whose entire identity is dependent on men—as a frame for Lydia’s “recuperation.” And Lydia, for her part, might well be seen as Munro’s “lost lady.”

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Just as Munro is offering us her version of Cather, so too is Mr. Stanley offering Lydia his version of Cather, itself a persona to be probed. Mr. Stanley, opening their first conversation with “Are you familiar with the

writer Willa Cather?" (38), uses his enthusiasm for Cather as mealtime chit-chat. He tells Lydia of Cather's summers on Grand Manan Island, mentioning her view of the sea and how she composed most of *A Lost Lady* (his "favorite") on the island, and telling Lydia of his plans to talk that evening with an 88-year-old woman "who knew Willa." "I read and reread her," Stanley says, "and my admiration grows. It simply grows" (39). Evaluating Stanley's conversational manner, Lydia thinks of "a time when a few people, just a few people, had never concerned themselves with being democratic, or ingratiating, in their speech; they spoke in formal, well-thought-out, slightly self-congratulating sentences, though they lived in a country where their formality, their pedantry, could bring them nothing but mockery. No, that was not the whole truth. It brought mockery, and an uncomfortable admiration.... And his adoration of the chosen writer was of a piece with this," Lydia decides, "it was just as out-of-date as his speech" (39–40).

Lydia suggests creating some sort of memorial on the island, but Stanley rejects the idea, saying that on the island many "thought her [Cather] unfriendly and did not like her." Lydia, however, realizes that for him this is a "private pilgrimage," so he wants nothing to do with a memorial, which would see, Lydia thinks, their guest house "renamed Shadows on the Rock[.] He would let the house fall down and the grass grow over it, sooner than see that" (41).<sup>7</sup>

The draft versions of "Dulse" suggest that Munro worked hard at getting Stanley's character—and so the Cather connection—right. Initially, Stanley was named Middleton, "from Boston, a brisk and courtly and menacing old fellow," and Lydia accompanies him to Cather's cottage; Grand Manan is mentioned, as is *My Ántonia*. Munro sets the date of Cather's death over 20 years early, 1925 rather than 1947, and refers to Edith Lewis as "Edith Head" (38.8.19). Munro subsequently replaces *My Ántonia* with *A Lost Lady*—parts of which were written on the island—and refers to Lewis by her real name (38.8.21). In earlier drafts as well, Lydia was a university teacher of American literature, then worked in a bookstore but "had majored in American literature at university" (38.8.20; these are alternate versions, the first typed, crossed out, with the latter as a holograph correction). What these changes suggest—beyond getting a series of plausible connections to hang together—is that Munro

was trying various ways to make the Cather connections resonate and, equally, to make Lydia a person of suitable background for understanding them.

Stanley, based on a person Munro actually met, is developed so as to create a particular version of Cather that Munro seeks to first establish and then probe. Within the story's structure, he is foregrounded: after introducing Lydia and her situation at the outset (presenting only a bit of her fundamental malaise, wondering if she can find a way to support herself and so live on the island), Munro moves at once to Mr. Stanley and the discussion of Cather, which takes up the story's first portion. Lydia anticipates the telephone crew mocking Stanley, which they eventually do—during dinner as the men overhear his conversation with Lydia, and later when he returns for the night after his visit with the woman who knew Cather (48). At the same time, Stanley's formal manner recalls aspects of Grenfell's character; the latter, for example, signs cheques for his family's expenses without looking at what they are for, because to do so would be unseemly (*Old Beauty* 154–55), and Stanley's devotion to Cather is akin to Grenfell's devotion to his island retreat.

Finally and most tellingly, Stanley's version of Cather, his “durable shelter” (59), shows him to be hopelessly “out of date,” and almost insignificant. Given Cather's critical reputation throughout her later years (from the 1930s on, she was often seen as a kind of aged literary dinosaur, charmingly still concerned with the romance of the past while American fiction had moved on to social relevance), Munro's characterization of Stanley has particular resonance, both for Lydia and for Munro herself (see O'Brien “Becoming”). In view of Lydia's awareness that “people were no longer so interested in getting to know her” (36), she fears becoming passé and, like Stanley, a nonentity. Equally, Cather's parallel fate within literary renown—being a benign throwback to a simpler time—may be a fear felt by both Lydia, the poet, and her creator, Munro.

Yet Munro counters this view of Mr. Stanley with another, more positive, one. When the two meet, Lydia is vague as to Mr. Stanley's age. Later, during a brief chat with Lydia, the woman who runs the guest house says, almost triumphantly (because Lydia has been unable to guess Mr. Stanley's age accurately), that he “is eighty-one. Isn't that amazing? I really admire people like that. I really do. I admire people that keep

going” (43). It is an assessment that applies equally well to Cather’s Grenfell. Cather and Munro are writing about such people: both Grenfell and Lydia reach moments on their respective islands in which they must decide how to “keep going”; throughout their work, both writers have focused on such moments, Cather most clearly in *The Professor’s House* (1925) and Munro throughout her fiction, though most precisely in her last two books.

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Munro’s characterization of Cather lies at the heart of “Dulse.” What the draft versions suggest is that Munro endeavoured to make Cather’s characterization more inscrutable by probing the author’s known public persona in tandem with Cather’s largely unknown, private persona. Thus Lydia, whose poetic vocation seems equivocal, because she seldom mentions her work to others and has decided “that probably she would not write any more poems” (37), has reason to wonder about the persona presented by a famous woman writer, in view of her own uncertainties, generally, but more specifically because of the vocation she shares with Cather. More precisely, Cather is directly relevant to Lydia’s situation because of the unwavering persona she presented to the world throughout her life. For Cather, the preeminence of art, and of her own vocation as an artist was always *the* uncompromised value. Mr. Stanley, for his part, understands this. Speaking of Cather’s reputation on Grand Manan during dinner, he says: “The people here, you know, while they were very impressed with Willa, and some of them recognized her genius—I mean the genius of her personality, for they would not be able to recognize the genius of her work—others of them thought her unfriendly and did not like her. They took offense because she was unsociable, as she had to be, to do her writing” (40–41).<sup>8</sup>

In the *New Yorker* version of this passage, Munro uses the word “person” rather than “personality” (31), and the tension between the two words—between the externality of the first and the interiority of the second—suggests Munro’s direction. For Lydia’s sake as well as her own, she is probing the distance between person and personality, between what a person is seen to be and what she shows herself to be—that adumbration

of actions, speech, appearance, and presence that make a person who she is. For Munro as for Cather, this is no easy matter, nor are answers in any way unequivocal. This issue, finally, is crucial to Munro's Cather: in "Dulse," Munro offers up Cather as a difficult case in being human, in being an artist, and in being a woman writer—difficult for Lydia, for the reader, and for Munro herself.

During their initial discussion, Lydia passes over Mr. Stanley's assertion that Cather had to be "unsociable ... to do her writing," but they return to the idea the next morning during breakfast, after Lydia has meditated on her own situation and problems. A paragraph about Lydia's lover and their relationship—included in the *New Yorker* but omitted from the book—is directive; its omission, no doubt, was due to changes in the lover's character between versions (his name, his profession, and his encounter with bears), but it speaks directly to why Munro felt it necessary to include Cather:

All this points to a grand self-absorption. A natural question follows: What did I think would be left over? But self-absorption honest as that [Alex's] can be pure relief, once you've seen a few disguises. He was a great man for not lying, and blithe about it; none of your wordy justifications. He had real hopes for us. He thought we could be true companions: me, a poet, a grownup, hardworking woman absorbed in that, as he was in the crust and content of the earth and in his own distinct energies. He hadn't known poets. (38)

Although the final sentence here is equivocal, it points back at Lydia herself (as well as at her poet colleagues, Cather and Munro)<sup>9</sup> and, accordingly, toward Munro's point: her version of Cather in "Dulse" is essentially a meditation on the artist's need for both self-absorption and disguises.

Thus in the *New Yorker* version, Munro may be seen to be pursuing this issue by sidestepping Lydia as a first-person narrator and addressing her reader directly:

But there is more to it than that; take a look at Lydia. Her self-absorption equals Alex's, but it is more artfully concealed. She is in competition with him, and with all other women, even when it is ludicrous for her to be so. She cannot stand to hear them praised or know they are well remembered. Like many women of her generation, she has an idea of love which is ruinous but not serious in some way, not respectful.

Lydia catalogues the sacrifices she made for her relationship, then concludes, saying of them: "They were indecent. She made him a present of such power, then complained relentlessly to herself, and much later to him, that he had got it. She was out to defeat him" (38). This paragraph is retained in the revised book version of the story, but Munro moves it, in effect, away from herself as the author; it is placed far more clearly in relation to Lydia's psychiatric analysis. The key to these meanderings—both perceptual and textual—is found, in the *New Yorker* version, in the question that abruptly follows the words "defeat him": "Is that the truth?" (38). In *The Moons of Jupiter*, the question becomes: "That is what she said to the doctor. But is it the truth?" (55).

The difference between these two versions—along, one thinks, with the need to shift from first to third person—is crucial. In the *New Yorker*, owing to the narrative fissure between narrator and author demanded by the story, the question encompasses more than Lydia's situation: it expands, given Munro's detached commentary on it, to include herself as the author. In the book version, Munro has revised and backed away from these implications, and the passage becomes more circumscribed and focused on Lydia herself. In both cases, however, the issue is what self-absorption actually looks like, and all the characters in the story—including Cather—are decidedly self-absorbed.

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The overall effect of the shift from the first-person perspective of the *New Yorker* version to the third person in *The Moons of Jupiter* is one of distancing; Lydia seems more disconnected and detached in the revised version. At the same time, these two articulations of Lydia's self-analysis confirm



Judith Kegan Gardiner's argument concerning narrative techniques employed by women writers in relation to their personal identity and, more specifically, offer a parallel to Cather's *A Lost Lady*. Cather uses a third-person point of view in her novel (although an early use of "us" [10] reveals the authorial presence behind the narrative), but she creates Niel Herbert's vision of Marian Forrester so vividly that readers often recall the narrative as his first-person account.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Munro comments directly on Lydia in the *New Yorker* version and her subsequent shift to third person suggest a similar situation, a problem she solved through the creative distance afforded by the more detached narrative approach.

The shift in point of view between the published versions of "Dulse" was not a last-minute change, however; there are drafts using each point of view: the holograph drafts (38.11.7 and 38.8.19) are, respectively, in third and first, and the typescript drafts (38.8.20, 21, 22) are third, first, and third. Munro frequently tries both points of view to see which is the more appropriate, although the shifting back and forth throughout this story's composition and publication indicates more than the usual difficulty in settling on a narrative perspective. As well, the change from Alex to Duncan, from a geologist bothered by polar bears to a historian nudged by black bears, may be part of this self-absorption: the ordinariness of Duncan's life being preferable to the more exotic nature of Alex's. Or it may have to do with the demands of the *New Yorker* and its audience—there is something of an American cliché about Canada in Alex's polar bears—although Alex's background is present in the draft materials (38.8.20).

When Lydia joins Mr. Stanley for breakfast, "the telephone crew had eaten and gone off to work before daylight." She inquires after "his visit with the woman who had known Willa Cather," whereupon Stanley launches into a full report, and the ensuing discussion goes directly to the heart of "the case of Willa Cather." The woman had run a restaurant when Cather was staying on the island, and she and Lewis would often have their meals sent up. Sometimes, however, Cather would not like the meal and would send it back, asking "'for another dinner to be sent.' He smiled, and said in a confidential way, 'Willa could be imperious. Oh, yes. She was not perfect. All people of great abilities are apt to be a bit impatient in daily matters'" (56–57). Here the narrator comments on Lydia's mood

at this moment: “Sometimes waking up was all right, and sometimes it was very bad. This morning she had wakened with the cold conviction of a mistake—something avoidable and irreparable.” This is by way of accounting for Lydia’s response to Stanley’s last comment: “Rubbish, Lydia wanted to say, she sounds a proper bitch” (57).

Mr. Stanley continues, reporting that sometimes, “If they felt they wanted some company,” Cather and Lewis would eat in the restaurant. On one such occasion, Cather discussed a proposal of marriage the woman was considering: “Of course,” Stanley says, Cather “did not advise her directly to do one thing or the other, she talked to her in general terms very sensibly and kindly and the woman still remembers it vividly. I was happy to hear that but I was not surprised.” Lydia’s reaction to this, and the ensuing discussion, bears quoting at length:

“What would she know about it, anyway?” Lydia said.

Mr. Stanley lifted his eyes from his plate and looked at her in grieved amazement.

“Willa Cather lived with a woman,” Lydia said.

When Mr. Stanley answered he sounded flustered, and mildly upbraiding.

“They were devoted,” he said.

“She never lived with a man.”

“She knew things as an artist knows them. Not necessarily by experience.”

“But what if they don’t know them?” Lydia persisted. “What if they don’t?”

He went back to eating his egg as if he had not heard that. Finally he said, “The woman considered Willa’s conversation very helpful to her.”

Lydia made a sound of doubtful assent. She knew she had been rude, even cruel. She knew she would have to apologize. (57–58)

Retreating to the sideboard and feeling bad for the hurt she has just inflicted, Lydia talks briefly to the owner of the guest house, who talks

about longing to get away, then, remembering something, gives Lydia a bag full of dulse—an edible seaweed that she professes to have a taste for—left for her by Vincent, the man on the telephone crew she found the most attractive as a potential lover. She takes it back to the table as “a conciliatory joke,” asking “I wonder if Willa Cather ever ate dulse?” Stanley ponders the question seriously, looking at the leaves, and “Lydia knew he was seeing what Willa Cather might have seen.”

The three paragraphs that conclude the story encapsulate the essential question posed by “Dulse,” and so speak most directly to Munro’s Willa Cather; they need to be quoted together because of their mutuality, amounting to a symbiosis:

But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live? That was what Lydia wanted to say. Would Mr. Stanley have known what she was talking about? If she had asked how did Willa Cather live, would he not have replied that she did not have to find a way to live, as other people did, that she was Willa Cather?

What a lovely, durable shelter he had made for himself. He could carry it everywhere and nobody could interfere with it. The day may come when Lydia will count herself lucky to do the same. In the meantime, she’ll be up and down. “Up and down,” they used to say in her childhood, talking of the health of people who weren’t going to recover. “Ah. She’s up and down.”

Yet look how this present slyly warmed her, from a distance.  
(58–59)

Some readers have made much of the exchange over Cather’s relationship with Lewis, assuming the lesbian cast that has been a central concern of some Cather critics. Thus Munro is seen as either taking a swipe at lesbians on behalf of heterosexual women or, more charitably, adopting the point of view of some of the marginalized.<sup>11</sup> Without engaging either view, the partiality of such arguments needs to be recognized, as does the partiality of any analysis. The story, and Munro’s creation of a particularly

resonate version of Cather, is far more complicated than that. Munro's work is open to alternative ways of seeing any single event in a character's life; this is true throughout "Dulse," but especially so in its concluding paragraphs, where Munro can be seen—through successive drafts—honoring her version of Cather by making that writer's presence more, not less, ambiguous.

Overall, the book version is more articulate and, equally, more open-ended. In the *New Yorker*, Lydia thinks that Mr. Stanley "wouldn't have known what I was talking about" in the face of her question, "How did she live?" (39); in the book, that assertion has been expanded to include: "Would Mr. Stanley have known...?" Likewise, the flat statement in the *New Yorker*: "She was Willa Cather" (italicized in an earlier draft: 38.8.21.f 19) becomes "If she had asked ... would he not have replied ... that she was Willa Cather." Finally, "The day might come when I'd find myself doing the same," becomes: "when Lydia will count herself lucky" to be doing the same. Indeed, given the open-endedness of Munro's conclusion, it is not far-fetched to see the rejected paragraph from the *New Yorker* version, which describes Cather and Lewis as "true companions," as describing Lydia and Alex as well.

Eudora Welty—one of Munro's acknowledged influences (Metcalf Interview)—has asserted that "the story is a vision; while it's being written, all choices must be its choices, and as these choices multiply upon one another, their field is growing too" ("How" 245). Cather's presence in "Dulse" is central to the story and essential to the choices Munro has made in writing it: through the echoes of "Before Breakfast," through her presence on Grand Manan Island as a shade and a local character, and most fundamentally by "the mystery of her life"—to paraphrase Munro's own words in "The Stone in the Field" (*Moons* 33). Taken together, the choices Munro made created a version of Cather that resonates throughout "Dulse," amplifying the mysteries and uncertainties that characterize Lydia's confusions. The case study that Cather represents for both the self-absorption of the artist and the disguises of the artist, most particularly the woman artist, continues to whet the imagination for Munro, for Mr. Stanley, for Lydia, and for the reader, even after the story has been laid aside.

According to Munro, she was working on a story involving Lydia when she visited Grand Manan with a friend and there met a Cather “fanatic”; the two parts of the story just seemed to fit well together (Telephone interview). The inaccuracies of the references to Cather in the initial draft bear out this gestation of the story, as, indeed, does the flavour of Mr. Stanley’s character generally. More significant than a holiday incident providing a new element for a story in process, however, is how Munro used her experience of meeting a Cather “fanatic.” It became the basis for a complex invocation of and meditation upon Cather that is, at once, something of an homage, an acknowledgement of their shared vision and purpose, and a caustic analysis of “fanatical” self-absorption—Cather’s, Mr. Stanley’s, Lydia’s, and, finally, her own. This invocation, moreover, serves as a precise object lesson for Lydia, though the matters it raises are not resolved, only intimated and essayed.

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The complexity of the issues Munro confronts in “Dulse” become evident by moving backward through the story’s final three paragraphs. Lydia is “slyly warmed” because—Marian Forrester-like—she sees that she still has her ability to attract a man, as confirmed with Vincent’s present of dulse. Yet the obverse of her pleasure here is the implication that her identity is still defined by men—giving them the same “power” over her that she allowed of Duncan, a situation that so obsesses her, and that Cather and Munro both confronted as artists in a male-dominated world. The notion of being “up and down” to describe “the health of people who weren’t going to recover,” recalls, with its connection to Mr. Stanley’s “durable shelter,” Grenfell’s predicament in “Before Breakfast”; throughout each writer’s work, moreover, is the acknowledgement that none of us, ultimately, is “going to recover.” Thus the central questions posed by “Dulse,” by way of both point and counterpoint, are those that directly engage the “mystery” that was—and is—Cather: “But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live?”

Writing of both biography and autobiography, James Olney quotes an observation by Clarissa M. Lorenz: “What ordinary mortals can’t swallow about artists is the ravaging of others. But the daemon will continue

to destroy with impunity. Art, after all, is born of a colossal ego re-creating the world in its image. "A creative person has little power over his own life," said Jung. "Those pay dearly who have the creative fire." So do those who are closest to them" (436).<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay, Olney asserts that "it is autobiography, or the presence of the biographer's life, the presence of the authorial 'I,' that draws biography across the vague, wavering, and indistinct line that separates history from literature..." (429).

Munro has often shown herself to be uncomfortable with the "authority" the role of writer seems to demand of her, and is here writing what amounts to a meditation on the artist's self-absorption. Perhaps, too, "Dulse" should be seen as a meditation on the self-absorption of us all. Similarly, the implications of Cather's work beyond *A Lost Lady* and "Before Breakfast"—all of which, including these two works, is now seen as nowhere near as simple as it was once regarded—are also an unstated but clearly implied presence in the story. In "Dulse," too, Munro is writing autobiography, biography, and fiction: the commingling is indeed, following Olney, literature, but it is also an acknowledgement on Munro's part of her fundamental kinship with Cather. Its sense of an ending that is not really conclusive echoes both *A Lost Lady* and "Before Breakfast," and is an acknowledgement of their shared values. Yet in keeping with each woman's distrust of absolutes, Lydia's unanswered questions about Cather acknowledge, finally, the very mystery of being that drives any artist: "But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live?" Mr. Stanley does not know, Lydia does not know, Munro does not know. Nor, really, do we. But by asking these unanswerable questions, Munro both acknowledges and celebrates Cather's ability to take the mystery of her life with her. Rather than being an emissary from a simpler time, an anachronism, Munro's Cather is a kindred spirit, an influence, a foremother.



## Alice Munro and the Anxiety of American Influence (1994)

In one of the interviews she gave when *The Progress of Love* (1986) had just been published, Alice Munro was asked—in the usual way of such occasions—about “the effects of other writers on” her. She replied, with typical directness:

“Oh, writing makes my life possible, it always has. I started serious reading and writing at about the same time, during adolescence when my life was difficult, as everybody’s is, and it still makes life possible. I read something like that Chekhov story, I can’t see how people get through the day without reading something like that.”

Taken by itself, such a comment is unremarkable: it is hardly surprising that such a fine writer as Munro would also be a frequent, sharp, and detailed reader. The implied symbiosis seems only natural. And such comments are common in literary interviews generally, and in hers in particular. Yet Munro’s assertion here of reading-as-being is notable in another way: it raises the question of influence. She comes back to it herself later in the same interview when she cites William Trevor’s work, saying that



it has been “a great encouragement” to her: “I brought this up because sometimes you need—I need—reassurance. And I go to a lot of writers, I think, for reassurance, in different ways” (Freake Interview 8, 10).

Munro’s comments here and others like them elsewhere confirm that she is quite open to and very much interested in the work of other writers. In the course of this particular interview, in fact, she mentions many others—classical as well as contemporary—whose work she is evidently very familiar with. What is no less evident is that Munro is not shy about naming names. And yet, Chekhov and Trevor notwithstanding, these names are—and have been throughout her celebrity—mainly American. In an early and oft-cited interview with John Metcalf, Munro says that “in terms of vision, the writers who have influenced me are probably the writers of the American South ... Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers ... Reynolds Price. Another writer who’s influenced me a lot is Wright Morris.” She then adds a tag line that, for my purposes at least, is crucial: “I’m sorry these are all Americans but that’s the way it is” (Metcalf Interview 56, ellipses in original).<sup>1</sup>

Questions of influence have been receiving progressively more attention in Munro criticism these days. Some critics have pursued the Joycean connection first noted by J. R. (Tim) Struthers (“Reality”); others, most notably Ildikó de Papp Carrington, have discovered and discussed a Yeats connection; Lorraine York has examined both Tennyson and Browning (“Rival”); and W. R. Martin, like Carrington and E. D. Blodgett, has noted a wide variety of connections with British and European traditions. Others have detailed Munro’s connections to the Gothic. As Janet, the narrator of “Chaddeleys and Flemings,” asserts in a much different context, “Connection. That was what it was all about” (*Moons* 6). So it is with Munro herself.<sup>2</sup> Although critics have not exactly ignored Munro’s American connections, they have looked for them not very often or very closely. True enough, one of the first critical articles on Munro was Struthers’ “Alice Munro and the American South” (1975), but apart from this piece—which really just elaborates on the comment Munro made in the Metcalf interview—only Klaus P. Stich has sought to probe what is perhaps the deepest of Munro’s American connections—that with Willa Cather, which, though unmentioned in any interview, is rather evident in her story “Dulse.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond these articles and the superficial comments

offered in the critical books, no one to my knowledge has attempted to connect Munro's work with that of McCullers, O'Connor, Price, Morris, or several other American writers whom she has acknowledged as influences.<sup>4</sup> My first question, then, is, why is this? The omission seems odd, given Munro's acknowledgements, both about her own reading and about specific influences; it seems especially so in view of the considerable work done on her British and continental connections.<sup>5</sup>

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Without question, the whole business of literary influence is a slippery slope, and taking up questions of influence in Munro's writing poses some particularly knotty problems. Although she has shown herself to be attentive to the work of others, Munro has produced fictions that on the surface appear to be marvelously self-contained. There are some fairly obvious literary allusions in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) (notably in the title story), and she even more successfully (as critics have demonstrated) uses allusions to certain Victorian poets and to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Since then, however, and with the very notable exception of "Dulse," Munro's display of the influence of others has been, like her fiction itself, quite subtle indeed.

The work of several critics on theories of influence is useful here. Harold Bloom, to whom I obviously owe a portion of my title, has written the best-known discussion of the subject. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, he asserts that "the profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images. Poetic influence, or as I shall more frequently term it, poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet as poet" (7). His account of literary influence envisions a "psychodrama" (O'Brien *Willa Cather* 260) impelled by the artist's "fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 46). Postulating an alternative reading of their own, and rejecting the phallogcentrist assumptions of authorship assumed by Bloom and his likes, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that the woman writer's

problem has been less an “anxiety of influence” than an “anxiety of authorship.” In both *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and the first two volumes of their projected three-volume study, *No Man’s Land* (1988–), Gilbert and Gubar probe “the terrible odds against which a creative female subculture was established” from the eighteenth century to the present; they deal specifically in their first book with “the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their ‘anxiety of authorship’” (51, 59).

All of this is germane to Munro’s fiction, for, influence aside, she has certainly displayed her own anxiety of authorship, and continues to do so, as her “for reassurance, in different ways” comment suggests. Her early story “The Office” (in *Dance of the Happy Shades*) demonstrates this, as does the title of her *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). What is more, the context adopted by Gilbert and Gubar—as opposed to Bloom’s Freudian, “life-cycle of the poet as poet” approach—makes much more sense as regards Munro: her art, which she has described as “the art of approach and recognition,” is rooted in the present, seen always in the context of its relationship to the people, places, and perceptions of the past, and conjoined with utter delight over language and its myriad inabilities to fully articulate the moment described. Munro expands on this notion of “approach and recognition” in another early interview, explaining as best she can: she believes “that we don’t solve” the mysteries surrounding the incidents she uses in her stories; “in fact, our explanations take us further away.” As we grow older, according to Munro, “life becomes even more mysterious and difficult” (Gardiner Interview 178). Thus, by approaching the mystery she finds inherent in her own life, she has forged an art that offers not understanding but momentary glimpses and fleeting insight.

Thus, to study Munro’s relationship to her forebears—both literal and literary—is to acknowledge, in the words of Terry Eagleton, that “all literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of ‘influence’ but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work” (138). As becomes evident to anyone who follows the process of composition traced in the University of Calgary’s Munro papers—in which she can be seen groping for a story’s vision, making changes right down to the final instant (and sometimes

even almost after the final page proofs have been sent in, as with the first version of *Who Do You Think You Are?* [Hoy “Rose and Janet”])—Munro is a writer whose work confirms Eagleton’s point, and in its most radical sense.<sup>6</sup>

Eagleton offers a second, related observation that is perhaps even more apt for a reading of Munro, given the repeated questioning by critics of the relationship between her life and her fiction. Because “there is no such thing as literary ‘originality,’ no such thing as the ‘first’ literary work,” writes Eagleton, “the biography of the author is, after all, merely another text, which need not be ascribed any special privilege: this text too can be deconstructed” (138). I would argue that this is the way in which Munro uses her own life in her fiction: as a text to be shaped in accordance with a story’s particular vision. Indeed, although her techniques in this regard have become much more subtle, the uncollected story “Home” (1974) is something of a watershed in this regard, as are “The Ottawa Valley” (*Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*) and “Chaddeleys and Flemings” (*The Moons of Jupiter*). In “Home,” punctuated as it is by italicized passages that comment on what she has just written, Munro engages in metafiction to challenge genre, convention, and any knowable version of truth, ending, “*I don’t want any more effects, I tell you, lying. I don’t know what I want. I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can*” (153).<sup>7</sup> Following this same line, Munro has expressed some desire to write straight biography, pointing to Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights*, with its combined autobiographical and fictive elements: “I’d love to do something like that. It’s one of the books I can’t read, because I start imitating it. It has very seductive prose you want to imitate, though nobody else could do it, I think” (Freak Interview 9).<sup>8</sup> Detail, strength of voice, the narrator’s (and often the author’s) doubts about understanding the significance of things, “jerky” shifts of focus (Irvine, “Changing” 99)—all of these elements that make up a Munro story bear the marks of other texts, whether literal, literary, or autobiographical. The extent of this has been, thus far, only remotely understood.

That Munro’s critics have largely ignored her own acknowledged American influences, preferring instead to focus on her British antecedents, is surely a curious thing. This reader is tempted to wonder aloud if this gap is not in some way a reflection of anti-American attitudes on the

part of many Canadian critics, some of whom seem to prefer to concern themselves with her European influences—more distant, more familiar, and more “literary”—rather than the not-so-attractive American “sources.” As Munro felt compelled to say to Metcalf, “I’m sorry these are all Americans but that’s the way it is.” My second question, then, is, whose anxiety is it, anyway—that of Canadian writers or Canadian critics?

W. R. Martin sees reflections of Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* (1947) throughout Munro’s first two books. Though his argument is insufficient due to his brevity—three paragraphs in all—Martin is on the right track, especially when he concludes by noting that both writers are “historians of the working of the human imagination, and both are celebrants of strangeness and mystery, and ‘all the opposites on earth’” (*Paradox* 204).<sup>9</sup> They certainly are. But I would go much further than this and look at the commonalities of vision and technique, which Martin discusses, as part of a larger similarity, one born of place. Cather enters into this, too, not as some sort of daunting version of “the imperiously important author” whom Munro is rejecting (as Blodgett seems to suggest), but as an acknowledged precursor in the fictional depiction of place and as a “prickly” personality who could indeed be imperious.<sup>10</sup> In short, both of these figures may be seen as Munro’s foremothers. Although one may point up the many differences between, as well as the similarities among, Cather’s and Welty’s works on the one hand and Cather’s and Munro’s on the other, each writer reflects in her fiction what might be called a sympathy of place. As noted earlier, Munro herself preferred the term “vision” when describing Welty’s influence. Whether this preference is conscious or not, it recalls one of the critical statements Welty published in the mid-1950s, “How I Write,” in which she makes two assertions that are relevant here. The first assertion is:

The story is a vision; while it’s being written, all choices must be its choices, and as these choices multiply upon one another, their field is growing too. The choices remain inevitable, in fact, through moving in a growing maze of possibilities that the writer, far from being dismayed at his presence on unknown ground (which might frighten him as a critic) has learned to be grateful for, and excited by. The fiction writer has learned (and

here is my generalization) that it is the very existence, the very multitude and clamor and threat and lure of possibility—all possibilities his work calls up for itself as it goes—that guide his story most delicately. (245)

Earlier, I recalled having followed Munro's process of composition as documented in some of her papers in Calgary. My sense is that Welty's description here might well have been offered by Munro herself (and, indeed, her published discussions suggest the same process).<sup>11</sup>

The second assertion from Welty's "How I Write" that I'd like to highlight is: "Relationship is a pervading and changing mystery; it is not words that make it so in life, but words have to make it so in a story. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to" (250). This is moving closer to what I mean by "sympathy of place," for what each of these writers does in her fiction is offer texts that—each in its various ways—are ensembles of relationships. These are seen over time, empathetically re-created, replete with the textures of their physical space. Welty writes, in "The House of Willa Cather" (1973):

She saw the landscape had mystery as well as reality. She was undaunted by both. And when she writes of the vast spaces of the world lying out in the extending night [Welty's reference is to *A Lost Lady*], mystery comes to her page, and has a presence....

Willa Cather saw her broad land in a sweep, but she saw selectively too—the detail that made all the difference. She never lost sight of the particular in the panorama. Her eye was on the human being. In her continuous, acutely conscious and responsible act of bringing human value into focus, it was her accomplishment to bring her gaze from that wide horizon, across the stretches of both space and time, to the intimacy and immediacy of the lives of a handful of human beings.

People she saw slowly, with care, in their differences: her chosen characters. They stood up out of their soil and against their sky, making, each of them and one by one, a figure to reckon with. (*Eye* 43–44)

“The gift of sympathy” is a common phrase in Cather criticism; it is Cather’s own, taken from her preface to Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), which she edited. The context here bears remarking on, for it applies as readily to Welty or Munro or Cather as it does to Jewett:

It is a common fallacy that a writer, if he is talented enough, can achieve this poignant quality by improving upon his subject-matter, by using his “imagination” upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose.... If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again. The artist spends a lifetime in loving the things that haunt him, in having his mind “teased” by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that.... And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius. (7–8)<sup>12</sup>

In effect, Cather is expanding on Welty here (though, of course, the chronology is reversed) by broadening the point from “place” to, if you will, “the home place.” This phrase, which is usually identified with the 1948 Wright Morris novel that bears the phrase as its title, is closer to what Cather appreciates in Jewett’s work and to what, in the final analysis, unites these writers. Without question, too, those who know Cather know that she could be prickly, that she was something of a snob, and that she was the aloof and imperious authorial presence Munro alludes to in “Dulse.” But she also produced—for such was her devotion to her art—the sympathetic fictions that Jewett foresaw for her and that Welty would celebrate.

What Cather was doing anticipated both Welty and Munro. Thus Sharon O'Brien writes of Cather in a manner that might be applied equally to the other two, and much more than superficially: "When Cather became a writer of fiction she likewise practiced an art of connection: she retold and reworked some of these community stories, passing them on to her readers, weaving together oral and written narratives, farm women and artists, past and future in her fiction" (*Emerging* 29). There's that word again: connection. Indeed, it is each woman's particular connection with her place that, in effect, sets her fictional world apart from the writing of others. In each case, a characteristic style and, what is more, an emphasis on voice and the peculiar details of locale serve to define character as the writers probe the "pervading mystery" that is "relationship." As Munro writes: "Connection. That is what it was all about" (*Moons* 6). This is why Munro's use of Cather is so very important in "Dulse" and why, for me at least, Stich's discussion of shared names, themes, and other details of the story is fine, but not enough. Given the contexts I have alluded to here—especially, I would maintain, in light of Gilbert and Gubar's argument in *No Man's Land*—the correspondences go much deeper than Stich suggests.

Although I cannot offer a fully developed argument, I would like to point up some other matters that derive, in effect, from Munro's Cather.<sup>13</sup> Then, to conclude, I want to suggest other avenues for studies of Munro's influences. First of all, there is the matter of autobiography. As I have noted elsewhere, Munro's use of Cather derives in part from her own visit to Grand Manan Island, off the coast of New Brunswick, where Cather owned a cottage (at Whale Cove) and spent portions of her summers between the early twenties and the war years (Thacker, "So Shocking" *Reading Alice Munro* 274 n3; Woodress 415–16). There she met a person whom she described as "a Cather fanatic," a person (I have confirmed) well known to Cather critics. Munro was working on the story involving Lydia at the time, and subsequently brought the two matters together (Telephone interview). Second, there is the evidence of the University of Calgary's Munro papers, which suggest that Munro worked to get the Cather dimension of the story right, shifting the allusion from *My Ántonia* (1918)—as it was in an earlier draft—to the much more suitable choice, given Lydia's character, of *A Lost Lady* (1923).<sup>14</sup>



Neither of these matters affects Stich's treatment fundamentally, really, but another seems of much more urgency: Munro's greatest debt to Cather in "Dulse" may well stem from somewhere other than the various novels Stich notes, although his argument concerning *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), based on various parallels and the shared use of the name "Lydia," seems quite convincing. Rather, Munro's best source for her story may be "Before Breakfast," one of Cather's last stories. Written in 1944, about three years before Cather's death (Arnold 165), it was included in the posthumous *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948). It anticipates the situation, mood, character, and dénouement of "Dulse." More to the point, Cather's story is set on an island (though off the coast of Nova Scotia) and its protagonist, Henry Grenfell, has come out to the island suffering from the same sort of ennui that plagues Lydia, though his stems from sources different than hers. What the two stories share, most fundamentally, is their protagonists' need to seek an island refuge from what Munro elsewhere characterizes, through her character Janet, as the "pain of human contact." Janet continues: "I was hypnotized by it. The fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity" (*Moons* 27). So, too, was Cather.

Thus, though "Dulse" is derived from different sources, the stamp of Cather's story upon it is unmistakable. So, too, is the stamp of Cather's personality, which Munro portrays accurately enough to make us wonder about her sources—if indeed she consulted any—and how she used them.<sup>15</sup> Stich also notes echoes between other stories in *The Moons of Jupiter* and some of Cather's works, but there are more than he suggests.<sup>16</sup>

These matters are raised not to dispute a critic who has already done good work on a subject of some interest to me, but to point up the need for further, and deeper, analyses of these matters. Munro's relationship to a whole raft of American precursors demands such attention, most particularly that to Welty and Cather, but to her forefathers, too. Her relationship to Morris, whom she singled out in that early Metcalf interview, needs a much closer examination, especially in light of their shared interest in photography.<sup>17</sup> Indeed—though this is speculation on my part—Munro may have been consciously imitating Morris during her attempt in the seventies to write a text for a book of Ontario photographs (the unpublished "Places at Home"): Morris produced several phototexts, including *The Home Place* (1948) and *God's Country and My People* (1968). Walker

Evans and James Agee probably figure here, too. Or, moving back to fiction, Katherine Anne Porter, or John Cheever, or Sherwood Anderson, or Tillie Olsen, or Walker Percy... The list is long indeed, however it is made and whoever makes it. With Munro it is not surprising that this is so: she is an artist utterly beyond any chauvinism, aware to her very core that "relationship is a pervading and changing mystery," whatever form that relationship takes.



## Alice Munro, Writing “Home”: “Seeing This Trickle in Time” (1998)

A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out. It flares up, it smolders for a time, it is fanned or smothered by circumstance, but its being is intact, forever fluttering within it, the result of some original ignition. Sometimes it gives out glory, sometimes its little light must be sought out to be seen, small and tender as a candle flame, but as certain.

—Eudora Welty, “Some Notes on River Country” (1944; *Eye* 286)

This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious.

—Alice Munro, “Everything Here Is Touchable and Mysterious”  
(1974)

“Look at the road map of Huron County,” begins Magdelene Redekop in her essay in this volume, and this advice seems ever more pertinent to readers who approach, take up, savour, and—as much as possible—understand the art of Alice Munro. With her ninth volume, *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), just awarded the Giller Prize (having been passed over, ridiculously, in the Governor General’s Literary Award competition), with its title story inspiring the cover of the *New Yorker*’s 1996 holiday fiction

issue (itself reprised for the 1997 issue containing Munro's "The Children Stay") and featured in the O. Henry Awards "Best of 1997," and with the bulk of her *Selected Stories* (1996) confirmed, Munro's accomplishment is now both unquestioned and unquestionable. And in ways not altogether clear to reader and critic alike, "The Love of a Good Woman" became, almost at the instant of its publication in the *New Yorker* in 1996, a central Munro text. Such are its style and its extent, so clear are its echoes of previous Munro stories, so comprehensive and mysterious are its inter-leavings that critics—most emphatically Dennis Duffy—saw in it a key, virtuoso instance of its author circling back, re-taking up, and probing once more the "open secrets" of being, and of having grown up, lived in, left, remembered, returned to, and above all made texts out of Huron County, Ontario.

Indicative passages, chosen almost at random, resonate within and between Munro's works. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," for instance, the narrator recalls her younger self and especially her amazement over her father's attitude toward time: "The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquillity" (*Dance* 3). Equally indicative and even more resonant is: "Of course it's my mother I'm thinking of," which Munro writes as she concludes "Friend of My Youth," just before she offers as the literal conclusion (relevant to some of the story's characters) a historical summary of the sect called the Cameronians—or Reformed Presbyterians—one of whose "ministers, in a mood of firm rejoicing at his own hanging, excommunicated all the other preachers in the world" (*Friend* 26). Beyond this panache, the explicit meaning of this paragraph in relation to the story just told stands contextual but mysterious.

In another story in *Friend of My Youth*, "Meneseteung," Munro imagines the discovery of a nineteenth-century Huron County poet, Almeda Joynt Roth, whose book of poems, *Offerings*, said to have been published in 1873, contains a poem entitled "Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung" (52). Writing of the relationship between the character Roth and the first-person narrator (also, of course, a character), who discovers Roth through the local paper, the *Vidette*, Pam Houston asks a question and offers an answer that together are a fit departure for meditating on Munro's intricate time- and place-based art: "Does the

landscape, then, exist separately from the way these women see it?’ And neither woman can answer. The two women have momentarily become one voice, bound together by the metonymic qualities of language, and by the inability of a metaphor to speak its name” (89).

Also bound up with these two women’s voices is Munro’s own voice through her pen, moving across pages, making and remaking texts. Munro, the creator, made a change between the first publication of “Meneseteung” in the *New Yorker* and its inclusion in *Friend of My Youth*—as she often has done (in *The Love of a Good Woman*, notably, she even points out the extent of the changes between the *New Yorker* publication of the stories and their appearance in the book). In “Meneseteung,” the narrator describes her search for Roth’s gravestone and her discovery of it; the *New Yorker* version ends thus:

I made sure I had got to the edge of the stone. That was all the name there was—Meda. So it was true that she was called by that name in the family. Not just in the poem. Or perhaps she chose her name from the poem, to be written on her stone.

I thought that there wasn’t anybody alive in the world but me who would know this, who would make the connection. And I would be the last person to do so. But perhaps this isn’t so. People are curious. A few people are. They will be driven to find things out, even trivial things. They will put things together, knowing all along that they may be mistaken. You see them going around with notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading microfilm, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish. (38)

Munro left her *New Yorker* readers with a hopeful sign—making sense of what in “Carried Away” she has referred to as a “devouring muddle” (*Open* 50). Yet when “Meneseteung” appeared in *Friend of My Youth*, Munro had dropped the phrase “knowing ... mistaken,” and an additional paragraph had been added (or reattached, once the editors at the *New Yorker* had been satisfied) to offer a different ending: “And they may get it wrong,

after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" (73). With this addition, the previous hopeful sign has been dashed and, more troubling to some (though certainly not to Munro herself, given her various comments, especially surrounding *Open Secrets*), the narrator's authority, despite the foregoing 20 pages, is utterly compromised if not altogether dashed. Welcome, again, to Munro, in whose fiction everything is both "touchable and mysterious," and each character, especially those who narrate or serve as vehicles for Munro's wonderings, is keenly aware of the myriad difficulties in the way of "seeing this trickle in time" or "making a connection." It is a world rooted in the times and the touchable surfaces and characters of Huron County, a place inhabited since the early 1850s by Munro's ancestors (as she writes in "A Wilderness Station" in *Open Secrets*), a place she has explored fully and deeply.

Take, for example, a key instance in Munro's art: the story "Home," published in 1974. It offers a basis for further meditation on the ways by which Munro makes her connections. It is one of her few published stories not collected in a book (those first appearing in the *New Yorker*, Carol Beran points out here, are "Wood" [1980] and "Hired Girl" [1994]). In "Home," Munro writes of the circumstances of her father's declining health—a subject that she returned to in "The Moons of Jupiter" (1978). Like "The Ottawa Valley," also published in 1974, "Home" is patently autobiographical and metafictional; it reflects the circumstances of Munro's return to Ontario after living in British Columbia for over 20 years. That it has not been republished in a book, I would guess, has as much to do with its metafictional uncertainties—the narrator shows herself to be tentative and uncertain—as with anything else (though Munro has commented in interviews in a tone of resigned rejection over these attempts at metafictional techniques; see, for example, Freake). Yet "Home" is an apt text for both this essay and this volume: set in the centre of Munro's *oeuvre*, "Home" reveals her techniques, her focus, and her concerns. As such, it introduces, connects with, and illustrates her own hopeful "seeing" of "this trickle in time."

In "Home," accompanying her ill father to the hospital, the narrator/Munro—I conflate the two knowingly, be assured—writes:

So I sit beside him ... and we follow that old usual route. Victoria Street. Minnie Street. John Street. Catherine Street. The town, unlike the house, stays very much the same, nobody is renovating or changing it. Nevertheless it has faded, for me. I have written about it and used it up. The same banks and barber shops and town hall tower, but all their secret, plentiful messages drained away. Not for my father, perhaps. He has lived here, nowhere else; he has not escaped things by this use. (143)

This passage proclaims a conclusion—"used it up"—that has since been proven false by Munro's further writings: Munro returned to southwestern Ontario after her marriage ended, but she had not at all "used it up," whatever she may have thought then. Rather, she began to use it differently—another story title—the difference born of her time away, and her changed perspective born of distance and experience, the deepened complexities of her art, and her myriad imaginative connections within and between her stories.

Thus Munro wrote, also in 1974, of the Maitland River (which the Indigenous people called the Menesetung), contradicting some of what she had written in "Home":

We believed there were deep holes in the river. We went looking for them, scared and hopeful, and never found them, but did not stop believing for that. Even now I believe that there were deep holes, ominous beckoning places, but that they have probably silted up. But maybe not all. Because I am still partly convinced that this river—not even the whole river but this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious. ("Everything")



This short essay, published when Munro was described as “a writer living in London, Ontario,” shortly after the appearance of *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, was prescient: her art since then has largely been one of visiting and revisiting the same places and the same people, shifting emphases, altering structures, moving in time, “rescuing one thing from the rubbish.” The narrator in “Home” heads out from a London-like city on a succession of buses to visit her father and stepmother, Irlma, who live outside a Wingham-like town. The “Meneseteung”—the spelling altered from Munro’s first use of it—becomes the title of a story in which the character Almeda Joynt Roth uses the Indigenous name for the Maitland River in her poem. That same river, renamed the Peregrine, manages with its holes to obscure Mr. Willens’s fate in “The Love of a Good Woman.” This river proves to be, in Munro’s imagination, an “ominous beckoning place” indeed, its flow is a metaphor for the passage of time, to the ongoing processes of her art.

Meandering thus through the lowlands of Huron County, near the lake, following the river’s flow from Wingham to Goderich—“this little stretch of it”—is what Munro’s fiction has done from the first stories of the early 1950s up to *The Love of a Good Woman*. In its own flow, her art defines and details the way in which Munro explores the mystery of being, setting out a complex web of connections, reconnections, summations, and seeming conclusions that hold for a time but ultimately are insufficient. Like Robert Frost’s notion that every poem clarifies something, Munro’s stories offer readers moments of insight, perhaps even epiphanies: “Breathing spaces, is that all?” one of her narrators wonders (*Progress* 273). These moments both clarify and mystify—and Munro has returned to them, as *The Love of a Good Woman* shows, in progressively more complex ways.

Critics have tried to keep up to Munro yet largely have not—although 11 single-author critical books on Munro have been published, the ability of critics to encompass her and her work within an overarching rationale has been paltry (see Thacker, “Conferring Munro,” “Go Ask Alice,” and “What’s ‘Material?’”). Indeed, due to the shape and the scope of Munro’s art—story following upon story, reconnecting, redefining—the critical monograph is not really up to Munro at all. Rather, individual articles on individual stories or connected groups of them now seem, to me at least,

to offer the better critical course. Thus, the rationale for this volume is that it better follows its subject's inclinations, its subject's art. Following up on Louis K. MacKendrick's *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* (1983), this volume offers essays that explore little-examined aspects of Munro's art—JoAnn McCaig and Carol Beran, for instance, make significant use of the Alice Munro Papers at the University of Calgary to define and understand Munro's long relationships with, respectively, Virginia Barber, her agent, and the *New Yorker*, the showcase magazine in which many of Munro's stories have first been published through Barber's agency. As I have said elsewhere and am about to demonstrate again through my discussion of "The Progress of Love," based on the Calgary archive, the Alice Munro Papers represent an exceptional resource still largely ignored by her critics. Several authors here take up the stories contained in *Open Secrets*, a volume that has not yet received much attention, save from Ildikó de Papp Carrington, who here has continued her analyses into the stories in *The Love of a Good Woman* with her source study of "The Children Stay." Broadening the textual relationships within *Open Secrets*, Nathalie Foy, W. R. Martin and Warren U. Ober, and Robert Lecker examine stories that resonate both within and beyond that volume; the latter two essays also extend historian John Weaver's important characterization of Munro as a historian of her time and place. Likewise, Marianne Micros and Magdalene Redekop define influences on Munro that have not yet been examined, and Deborah Heller deals broadly with *Friend of My Youth*.

### Following "Home" to "The Progress of Love"

Returning to "Home," I want to continue this introduction with an extended quotation that will be useful for the remainder of this essay, and with my consideration of the ways by which Munro's stories lend themselves to what Helen M. Buss has called "mapping." That is, "Home" offers a textual grounding that, when understood in relation to what is available in the Calgary archive, forecasts a subsequent relationship to "The Progress of Love" and to "Friend of My Youth." At the same time, "Home" looks both backward and forward in its detailing of Munro's

characteristic concern, even obsession, fictional renderings of her relationship with each of her parents. “My Mother’s Dream” in *The Love of a Good Woman* offers yet another version—fantastic and delightful as it is—of the mother–daughter relationship. So, when seen at the centre of Munro’s work, “Home” both resonates with and illustrates the ongoing connections in her art, wherever one looks.

Toward the beginning of “Home,” the narrator/Munro meditates on changes made to the house in which she grew up:

The front rooms have been re-papered. The paper has red and silver vertical stripes. Wall-to-wall carpeting—moss green—has been put down....

Even the outside of the house, the red brick whose crumbling mortar let in the east wind, is disappearing under clean white metal siding. My father is putting this on himself. So it seems now that the whole house is being covered up, lost, changed into something ordinary and comfortable, and I do not lament this loss as I would have done at one time. I do say that the red brick was really lovely, and that people in the city pay a good price for old bricks, but I do this mostly because I think my father expects it. He can explain again about the east wind and the cost in fuel and the difficulties of repair. It cannot be claimed that the house now being lost was a fine or handsome house in any way. A poor man’s house, always, with the stairs going up between the walls. A house where people have lived close to the bone for a hundred years; and if my father and Irlma, combining their modest prosperities, wish it to be comfortable, and—this word is used by them without quotation marks, quite simply and positively—*modern*, I am really not going to wail about the loss of a few charming bricks, a crumbling wall. But I am shy of letting my father see that [the] house does not mean to me what it once did, and that it really does not matter much to me how he changes it. ‘I know you love this place,’ he says to me, apologetically yet with satisfaction. I don’t tell him that I am not sure now if I

love any place, any house, and that it seems to me it was myself I loved here, some self I have finished with, and none too soon. I used to go into the front rooms and rummage around looking for old photographs, and sheet music. I would sit at the piano where mice were nesting—banished now by Irlma—and try to play the opening bit of the Moonlight Sonata. I would go through the bookcase looking for my old Latin Poetry, and find the best sellers of some year in the nineteen-forties when my mother belonged to the Book-of-the-Month-Club (a fine year for novels about the wives of Henry the Eighth, and for three-name women writers, and for understanding books about Soviet Russia). Also limp-covered classics bought by mother before she was married, her maiden name written in lovely, level, school-teacher's writing on the watered end-paper. *Everyman I will go with thee, in thy most need be by thy side*, it says above my mother's name. Reminders of my mother in this house are not easy to find, though she dominated it for so long, filled it with her astonishing, embarrassing hopes, and her dark and helpless, justified complaint. She was dying for many years of Parkinson's disease, which was an illness so little known to us, and so bizarre in its effects, that it did seem just the sort of thing she might have made up, out of perversity, and her true need for attention, and stranger dimensions to her life. This attention was what I was bound not to give, not to be blackmailed into giving. I give it now, being safe. (135–36)

Readers of Munro will see at once the connection between this passage and “The Progress of Love,” the title story of her sixth story collection—there the story's narrator, Phemie, revisits the house that she grew up in and notices, among many other things, that in one place the wallpaper—which she had put up with her mother—“hadn't been stripped off when this new paper went on.” She can “see an edge of it, the cornflowers on a white ground” (*Progress* 27). Equally, readers will see similar figures to the narrator's mother in “Home” in “The Peace of Utrecht,” “The Ottawa Valley,” and “Friend of My Youth,” to name only the best-known

instances. For all of them, Munro's mother, Anne Chamney Laidlaw, who died in 1959 of Parkinson's disease, served as a model for much of the detail about a character and her circumstances.

What readers do not generally know, though, is the path by which Munro arrived at her finished stories—thus, the balance of this essay will, first, examine the composition of “The Progress of Love” and, second, extend the consideration beyond this single story to the larger issue of Munro's continuing writing and rewriting of her parents, especially her mother. I am arguing that in writing “Home,” Munro has literally and emphatically been writing home—that her life has been her text, that Huron County has been her imaginative nexus, and ultimately that her career has demonstrated that this “ordinary place” has been “sufficient” for her needs. “The Love of a Good Woman,” whether in the *New Yorker*, *Prize Stories* 1997, or *The Love of a Good Woman*, has shown as much, yet again, and most complexly.

One might argue that the title story in each of Munro's collections is the pivotal story, which would set apart “The Progress of Love,” as well as “The Moons of Jupiter” and “Friend of My Youth” in their respective collections. (One might wonder, though, if this pivotal status is always correct: “The Moons of Jupiter” was to be the penultimate story in *Who Do You Think You Are?* as it was originally configured [38.4.6.f6], and the arrangement of the stories in *The Progress of Love* was established late in the process, and at one point “The Progress of Love” had been the seventh story [Third accession, 11.3].) Each story, however, is pivotal for arguably better reasons: each continues Munro's apparently lifelong meditations on who is fit for parenthood, on her relationships with her parents (especially her mother—here “Chaddeleys and Flemings,” both parts, needs to be added as a companion to “The Moons of Jupiter”), and on the cultural legacy of a Protestant, rural, southwestern Ontario upbringing during the 1930s and 1940s.

The first appearance in the Alice Munro Papers of one of the central incidents in “The Progress of Love,” Phemie's grandmother's suicide threat, is in “Suicide Corners,” one of the vignettes for an Ontario photo album by Peter D'Angelo, for which Munro was to have written the text; although she worked on it for some time during the mid-1970s, the book was never published (37.13.10.14). According to Catherine Sheldrick Ross,

Munro got the idea of the hanging from her second husband, Gerald Fremlin, whose father had been a policeman in Clinton and had been called to stop just such a suicide (87). It appears again in a fragment, apparently part of *Who Do You Think You Are?* In it, Flop Morgan threatens to hang himself because his wife has called him a liar, but Rose's father talks him out of it. The scene contains a detail that also appears in "The Progress of Love": the rope is not tied, but subsequently the character still succeeds—"Flop dangling from the beam in his barn was just doing what his name has always predicted" (37.16.12).

The hanging appears in a draft story in a notebook included in the second accession, a story that Munro entitled "Suicide Ladies." It is told from the point of view of a girl named Winona (drafts exist of both first- and third-person versions), and the suicide attempt is made by a Mrs. Cole at the end of a pregnancy. Three relatives (Iris, Marianne, and Flor) are visiting Winona's mother, Winifred, and her family, and the news of Mrs. Cole's attempt at suicide is delivered by her son, Franklin, who says, "'She says she's going to hang herself in the barn' ... and then he did laugh, in embarrassment and dread and apology. He began to hiccup." The text continues:

Franklin's mother was in the barn, just as he had said. She was standing on a kitchen chair in the middle of the space her husband usually parked the car in, and she had a noose around her neck. Phylis and Margory and the dog were hanging around the barn door.

"Oh, Mrs. Cole!" said Winona's mother in a tired voice[.]  
"Come down out of that."

Mrs. Cole's figure made a stunning impression on Winona. At that time women did not go out when in an advanced state of pregnancy, and she had never seen anyone so disfigured. Mrs. Cole was a tall, thin woman normally and as sometimes happens with narrow hipped women she seemed to be carrying the baby not as something fitted into her body but as something precariously hinged on; it didn't seem possible her skin could have stretched so far. She wore the shapeless kind of housedress

that poor women wore, several sizes too big; it kept sliding off one shoulder; her hair also was cut in the style of a poor woman[.] short, straight, held back with a bobby pin.

“I said I was going to do it.” She said in a high voice. This was the first time I had heard her say anything except when she called the children or dog Wig, from her back door. (38.11.2)

Such passages—coupled with the advantages of hindsight—define connections between stories. This one suggests that Munro had included the hanging incident in the story that became “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection” (1978), given that Iris, Marianne, and Flora are likely the visiting cousins in that story (here they see the threatened hanging as the “entertainment” of a summer’s morning). There are, as well, connections between this passage and “Miles City, Montana” (1985), another meditation on parenting and parenthood. Thus, this anecdote, consistent in its particulars, was to have been included in (at least) the photo text, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, and “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection” (itself once just “Chaddeleys and Flemings”—it was first submitted for publication as one very long story but later divided into “Connection” and “The Stone in the Field”) before becoming an essential part of “The Progress of Love.” There, of course, it is a visible explanation of Phemie’s mother’s hatred for her father, a hatred so deep that she burns the money he left her in his will—her legacy—in the family stove.

This, the second major incident in “The Progress of Love,” may also be seen being developed toward its ultimate place through more than one version. There is, for example, an autograph draft story called “Money to Burn” for which there are two versions of the beginning. The first begins with the unnamed narrator going to town one evening with her aunt Tizzy, who is referred to simply as Tizzy. The time period is probably the early 1940s: “The radio ran on batteries. There was no electricity in the house—a fact I remembered only when the lamps were lit. The news we listened to at home made you feel the world was full of doom, but under control. The news here indicated that the world beyond the farm was a jumble of disasters and sprees and jokes of nature that even a man as

cocky and worldly wise as the newscaster has trouble crediting" (Third accession 6.7).

Tizzy has been married twice, and there is a mystery to her first marriage: she went on her honeymoon but came back unmarried, though pregnant, and then lived with her parents before marrying Wyck, the narrator's uncle. In the second draft, the details are much the same, though Tizzy has become Aunty and Wyck has become Wick.

Munro uses the name Wick in "A Queer Streak" (1985–86), and the aunt is reminiscent of Beryl in "The Progress of Love" (whose visit in that story echoes the visits of Del Jordan's American uncle in *Lives of Girls and Women* [1971] and of the cousins in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection"). In the same notebook is evidence that Munro tried to use the burning-money episode in the story that became "Fits" (Third accession 6.7). Here, too, she was working on the story about Franklin; it is much bigger than "The Progress of Love" and derives from the notebook work that uses characters from "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection." It contextualizes Marietta—the grandmother in "The Progress of Love"—offering much more family detail. Indeed, as the story developed, Franklin's role became Marietta's in the finished version.

I could continue to compare details; my comparisons here address some of the material found in autograph drafts. In another one, for example, Bob Marks initiates sex with Phemie while the two are visiting her girlhood home—his desires are evident in the completed story. Such handwritten material is then changed further—and sometimes changed back again—in the authorial typescripts that follow and in the typist's typescripts that follow those. The story could be taken further yet, into the differences between its first publication in the *New Yorker*, where the point of view is third person, and its subsequent publication in book form, where the point of view is first person (both points of view are found in draft materials).

Elsewhere I have argued for the appropriateness of Eudora Welty's essay "How I Write" to Munro's compositional methods; two passages from that essay are worth quoting here: first, "The story is a vision; while it's being written, all choices must be its choices, and as these choices multiply upon one another, their field is growing too," and second, "Relationship is a pervading and changing mystery; it is not words that make it so in



life, but words have to make it so in a story. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to” (245, 250). Both comments—from one of Munro’s admitted influences—speak directly to her composition of “The Progress of Love,” as revealed in the little-examined Alice Munro papers at the University of Calgary Library. “The story is a vision”: in the archive, which admittedly is random in that it is made up of what has been saved (doubtless much was lost, and probably some burned; see 37.14.28), one can see several stories in gestation at the same time, each overlapping the other, some destined to emerge transformed, many destined not to emerge at all.

Throughout, Munro may be seen shaping, adjusting, honing, and sharpening her articulation until she finds it satisfactory. This trying out of incidents, such as a suicide threat or the seemingly senseless burning of three thousand dollars, is at the source of her method. Her immediate source of material is almost always Huron County. Such personal anecdotes are necessary for Munro, as she wrote eloquently in a story called “Material”—in it, the story’s narrator considers a story written by her ex-husband, Hugo, that he derived from their time together: “how strange it was for me to realize that what was all scraps and oddments, useless baggage, for me, was ripe and useable, a paying investment, for him” (*Something* 43). Welty wrote that “relationship is a pervading and changing mystery,” and Munro uses words “to make it so in a story. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people.” For Munro, the mystery of being shapes her stories, doing so until the shapes cohere, until they seem fit and proper.

In “Suicide Corners,” one of the vignettes from the photo text, Munro wonders: “More men seem to come to it [suicide] than women. Is that the truth? And if it is the truth, why?” (37.13.10.14.f2). What the Munro archive reveals is that, after trying it out numerous times in various stories drafted over a decade, the threatened hanging at the core of “The Progress of Love” still yields a mystery. It is the incident through which the story’s most essential question is asked; it is the incident that prompts the burning of money, which perplexes Phemie still. As she says, wondering about her parents in a phrase that echoes “Suicide Corners,” “It seems so much the truth it is the truth; it’s what I believe about them. I haven’t stopped believing it. But I have stopped telling that story” (*Progress* 30). Munro

may have stopped telling the story that is “The Progress of Love,” but the Calgary archive reveals that the story will always confirm that “relationship is a pervading and changing mystery,” and her words certainly make it so.

### **“The Bitter Lump of Love”: Mothers, Fathers, and Autobiographical Sequence**

The image of Phemie wondering about her parents might be seen as something of a tableau in Munro’s writing; as is widely acknowledged, one of her key focal points is the relationships between generations, especially between daughters and mothers. Although well known among critics, the means by which Munro managed this—as seen, like the previous discussion, in the Calgary archive—indicate ways in which her stories might be better understood. I have put forward an autobiographical approach to Munro generally; nowhere, probably, does that approach better apply than in her various depictions of her father and, especially, her mother: figures based on them are commonplace throughout her work (see Thacker, “So Shocking”). Two groups of stories are relevant to this configuration, one involving the mother, the other the father. In the first group, most depict Munro’s mother as someone who is dying or has died of Parkinson’s disease. She is usually characterized by the narrator as an overtly haunting, now long-dead presence. Intimations of this figure are found in other stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, but the first extended treatment of her is in “The Peace of Utrecht” (1960), included in that first collection. She appears—emotionally if not precisely—in *Lives of Girls and Women* as Ida, in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* in the stories “Winter Wind” and “The Ottawa Valley,” and, during the same year of publication, in “Home.” She returns in “Friend of My Youth.” These stories offer a “family resemblance” born of their autobiographical provenance, and when looked at sequentially they create a deeper understanding of Munro’s process.

By returning again and again to subjects of autobiographical obsession, Munro is, as she has said, editing her life as she goes along (Carrington, *Controlling* 196). But she is also creating a broader fictional world, one born of her sequences and that, given time and continued publication,

may eventually be seen as almost Faulknerian in its complexity. James Carscallen has tried to argue as much in *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* (1993), and given Duffy's analysis, the argument can also apply to "The Love of a Good Woman." Indeed, Munro's sequencing may well help to account for the minimal—though not unheard—dissent over her return to material that readers have seen before in her stories—most obviously in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which many reviewers considered in many ways a redone *Lives of Girls and Women*.

Although some critics consider mothers to have a more important place in Munro's work than fathers and offer good reasons for thinking so—gender identity, female desire, among others (Irvine, *Sub/version* 91–110)—such judgements are of less moment than their presences throughout the stories. Moreover, the amount of time Munro had with each parent offers some insight into the very different relationships she had with each parent: her mother died in 1959, when Munro was 27, and her father lived until 1976, when she was 45. Looking at her earlier fiction, if we divide the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* on the basis of mothers and fathers, it comes out to a draw, with two stories concerned primarily with mothers ("The Peace of Utrecht" and "Red Dress—1946"), two with fathers ("Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Images"), and one pitting the roles against each other ("Boys and Girls"). In *Lives of Girls and Women*, however, Del's father is something of a nonpresence, living out at the farm bachelor-style with the hired man, while Del, her mother, and their boarder live in Jubilee; yet throughout that book the theme of gender roles dominates, and, although not represented by fathers, male characters—Mr. Chamberlain and Del's boyfriends, Gerry Story and Garnet French—are still certainly important.

\* \* \*

These themes continue in diverse ways in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, such as with the story "Material," a meditation on men's power, and the title story, about secrets. In "The Ottawa Valley," though, Munro's mother reappears; although the story focuses on a moment in their relationship other than that found in its predecessor, "The Peace of Utrecht," the relationship is unmistakable. In the earlier story, the narrator returns

to Jubilee from the West Coast to visit her sister, Helen, and her two small children. Their mother, who suffered a long decline, died earlier, and the purported “peace” of the story’s title is as much between the two sisters as it is between the narrator, the facts that she learns about her mother’s death, and the responsibility that she shares with her sister (see Thacker “Connection”). Carrington discusses the autobiographical details of this story thoroughly, noting that Munro, in her reminiscence “Working for a Living,” describes her “adolescent attitude toward her mother’s disease: ‘Most of the time I was angry at her, for her abdication and self-absorption. We argued’” (186).

In “The Ottawa Valley,” Munro focuses not on the details of death but on the memory of that critical moment when the narrator, as a young girl visiting the valley, tested what she knows about the valley against her mother’s mythic descriptions of it as her home place, and recognized for the first time that her mother’s infirmity would get the best of her:

“So, are you not going to get sick at all?” I said, pushing further. I was very much relieved that she had decided against strokes, and that I would not have to be the mother, and wash and wipe and feed her lying in bed, as Aunt Dodie had had to do with her mother. For I did feel that it was she who decided, she gave her consent. As long as she lived, and through all the changes that happened to her, and after I had received the medical explanations of what was happening, I still felt secretly that she had given her consent. For her own purposes, I felt she did it: display, of a sort; revenge of a sort as well. More, that nobody could ever understand. (*Something* 195)

Such a passage is precisely Munro: the immediacy of the here and now is connected with the then and gone, with what is remembered. The “reckless” and “stubborn” inquisitiveness of the young girl is not to be allayed, so she pushes on, asking, “Is your arm going to stop shaking?” and demanding that her mother “promise” her what she needs. “But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me. She went on

as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent" (195).

However, the passage from the story that has received the most attention from critics—and which I have quoted myself elsewhere—is the final, metafictional paragraph, a separate summing up in which Munro questions the very process of creating fiction; indeed, she comments on what has gone before in her own voice or perhaps in the narrator's, beginning with, "If I had been making a proper story out of this," and going on to realize that the central impetus of this story has been to purge herself of her mother, to "*get rid* of her." Munro concludes that this attempt has not worked, because her mother is still there in memory; "she weighs everything down," for "she looms too close, just as she always did" (246). Memory is obsessive, indeed.

Judging from "Friend of My Youth" and "My Mother's Dream," Munro's mother is still looming. The former, a story within a story, tells of the family relationships of Flora Grieves, with whom the narrator's mother boarded while teaching school before her marriage, and whose story is fascinating to the narrator herself; it is framed by the narrator's description of her dreams of her dead mother, a woman who bears the attributes of the mothers in "The Peace of Utrecht," "The Ottawa Valley," and "Home." The frame begins thus:

I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dream stopped, I suppose because it was too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness.

In the dream I would be the age I really was, living the life I was really living, and I would discover that my mother was still alive. (The fact is, she died when I was in my early twenties and she in her early fifties.) ... She would be looking quite well—not exactly youthful, not entirely untouched by the paralyzing disease that held her in its grip for a decade or more before her death, but so much better than I remembered that I would be astonished. Oh, I just have this little tremor in my

arm, she would say, and a little stiffness up this side of my face. It is a nuisance but I get around.

... I would say that I was sorry I hadn't been to see her in such a long time—meaning not that I felt guilty but that I was sorry I had kept a bugbear in my mind, instead of this reality—and the strangest, kindest thing of all to me was her matter-of-fact reply.

Oh, well, she said, better late than never. I was sure I'd see you someday. (*Friend* 3–4)

Munro then turns to the story of Flora and her sister, Ellie, who has been impregnated by Robert, Flora's betrothed. Robert marries Ellie, continuing to live with both sisters, though they physically divide the house into separate apartments. Ellie dies of too many failed pregnancies, followed by cancer, and, romance be damned, instead of marrying Flora (finally), Robert marries Audrey Atkinson, an officious nurse who looked after Ellie. Atkinson is reminiscent of Mary McQuade in "Images" and anticipates Enid in "The Love of a Good Woman" (this is another textual "progress" derived from the mother figure that ought to be traced further). Eventually, Flora leaves the farm to them and takes a clerk's job in town. The connection to the narrator's mother is left hanging in the air, as it were, until deftly taken up again: Flora is the "friend of my youth" of the title, a form of address that the narrator once saw on one of the numerous letters that her mother, in her infirmity, began but seldom completed—written in the same schoolteacher's handwriting mentioned in "Home." Munro's concerns are with the mysteries of sex in her mother's generation ("sex was a dark undertaking for women. She knew that you could die of it" [*Friend* 22]), her attachments to long-unseen friends such as Flora, and ultimately the narrator's connection with her mother.

Through a frequently used device that characterizes her later stories, Munro concludes her story, completes her frame, echoes her earlier stories, and offers an equivocal insight in her final paragraphs:

Of course it's my mother I'm thinking of, my mother as she was in those dreams, saying, It's nothing, just this little tremor;

saying with such astonishing lighthearted forgiveness, Oh, I knew you'd come someday. My mother surprising me, and doing it almost indifferently. Her mask, her fate, and most of her affliction taken away. How relieved I was, and happy. But now I recall that I was disconcerted as well. I would have to say that I felt slightly cheated. Yes. Offended, tricked, cheated, by this welcome turnaround, this reprieve. My mother moving rather carelessly out of her old prison, showing options and powers I never dreamed she had, changes more than herself. She changes the bitter lump of love I have carried all this time into a phantom—something useless and uncalled for, like a phantom pregnancy. (26 )

Adding to the equivocation here, or to the mystery, is the story's final paragraph. There Munro offers the seemingly factual, but also ambiguous, definition of the Cameronians—the sect to which the Grieveses belonged—ending, as I noted at the outset, with the panache of one of the Cameronian “ministers,” who, “in a mood of firm rejoicing at his own hanging, excommunicated all the other preachers in the world” (26). Although it is tempting to brush this paragraph aside and deal merely with the concluding, resonant image of the story proper (the narrator's “bitter lump of love” transformed “into a phantom”), Munro does not allow it. The penultimate ending echoes numerous other stories—“The Peace of Utrecht” and “Home” generally, and “The Ottawa Valley” explicitly, even down to some of the same language (“Of course” with reference to summarizing her mother)—and it extends to the main substance of the “Janet Stories” (“Chaddeleys and Flemings” and “The Moons of Jupiter”) through their multiple mysteries of the bonds in families. It also suggests a reasonably clear summing up—an epiphany—of the sort found in Munro's early stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* and in some of the recent stories in *The Love of a Good Woman* (such as “Rich as Stink”). Yet “Friend of My Youth” ends not with the words “something useless and uncalled for, like a phantom pregnancy,” but with the triumphant Cameronian minister excommunicating all the others. And there that paragraph sits, mysterious, suggesting its meaning, offering not closure

but continuance, “just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish.” Munro, writing “Home,” tracing “The Progress of Love,” finding “The Friend of [Her] Youth,” wondering over the touchability and mystery of being, of being from and in Huron County. Munro, writing on...





## *Critical Interlude:*

### What's "Material": The Progress of Munro Criticism, Part 2 (1998)

*Introducing Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women.* Neil K. Besner. Toronto: ECW Press, 1990.

*The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro.* James Carscallen. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993.

*The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence.* Ajay Heble. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

*Some Other Reality: Alice Munro's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You.* Louis K. MacKendrick. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993.

*Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro.* Magdalene Redekop. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

*Alice Munro: A Double Life.* Catherine Sheldrick Ross. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992.

*Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy.* Karen E. Smythe. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992.

In one of the holograph drafts of Alice Munro's "Dulse" (1980), the narrator meets a "Mr. Middleton from Boston," who in the finished story becomes Mr. Stanley, the man fixated on Willa Cather's writing, her person, and the refuge that was hers on Grand Manan Island. Hearing that Middleton has spent his life working on newspapers, the narrator says:

“I was surprised, I had taken him for a university man, a professor of literature, I had thought that no other job in the world would allow him his pedantic preening[,] his serene absorption” (38.8.19.f1, 3). In what looks like a subsequent typescript in which the narrative has been shifted to third person, the now-named Lydia notes “the fact” of this man’s “admiration, his adoration, of the chosen writer. It was not faked. It was true, fervent, engrossing. She thought he could not be a teacher, such worship being too far out of style, too unlikely even in his day” (38.8.20.f3). Also among the papers held at the University of Calgary is an autobiographical note in which Munro recounts the first time she heard from John Metcalf regarding her work; his letter buoyed her because Munro was “reeling” from “a painful session with a man [at the University of Victoria] who told me that my work reminded him of the kind of thing he himself had been writing when he was fifteen and had abandoned with the first glimmerings of maturity.” This view, she writes, “was damaging only because I had a most exaggerated respect, then, for academic opinion” (6.6).

Beginning here, speaking for myself, this is the second time I have taken up a group of critical books focused on Munro’s writing. In the first review, I ended by citing a phrase from E. D. Blodgett’s *Alice Munro* (1988), which asserts that Munro’s “‘unassailable moral integrity’ is borne out in the fiction by the various shifts, doubts, and re-explanations she repeatedly offers, but always with an eye to discovering ‘what is real,’ and how can one really know, ever?” Concluding, I offered one of Munro’s own doubts from her uncollected story, “Home” (1974): “*I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can,*” and left readers with the perhaps wry, though still apt, invocation: “Go ask Alice” (*Reading Alice Munro* 109).

Embarking on this second essay at Munro criticism, I am thinking about these threads: the compelling mass of Munro’s *oeuvre*, emphatically including the still largely unstudied intricacies of the Munro archive in Calgary; “the pedantic preening’ of academics” (38.8.19.3); the commonplace and not-at-all-abandoned “adoration” many of us bring to “the chosen writer,” Munro; and Munro’s own skepticism toward academics generally and literary critics in particular. She wrote, after all, the two scathing paragraphs that begin “Material” (1973), as well as—and here I am again reminding those of us who do this for a living—this notable trio of sentences from “Goodness and Mercy” (1989): “Also, professors are dumb. They are dumber than ordinary. I could be nice and say

they know about things we don't, but as far as I'm concerned they don't know shit" (*Friend* 158). *I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can.*

## Of Critical and "Munroian" Contexts

One of the reviewers of two of these titles begins by asserting that they "belong to the 'second generation' of Munro criticism, one that is no longer in awe of the mimetic qualities detected by first-phase Munro critics but brings sophisticated theoretical frameworks to bear on her work" (Canitz 247). Although I will address such matters as "mimesis," "awe," and "sophistication" presently, the notion of "second generation" seems a good point of departure for the examination of the current critical contexts surrounding Munro's writing. Clearly, the books reviewed in my first attempt—Blodgett, Carrington, Rasporich—had followed others published during the 1980s; together, they constituted the first extended attempts to evaluate Munro's writing (see Dahlie, MacKendrick *Probable*, Martin, Miller, Pfaus). So the books taken up here do represent, as Canitz asserts, a second phase. What is more, they appear within a context in which Munro has been lionized—the reception accorded *Open Secrets* (1994) having surpassed those of her two previous books, however improbable that might have seemed. More broadly, critical articles abound and appear to be published with increasing frequency. Munro has clearly done far more than arrive: she has established herself as a writer of the first rank—like, she knows very well, Cather—and so, as "the chosen writer" herself, is more than fit to be a subject for adoration. As well, like Cather and others, she has been set upon by critics in a way that is daunting in its extent and in its intensity. Like Cather, too, she is skeptical of such attention.<sup>1</sup>

Like the various quotations from the archives with which I began, this, too, is a necessary context here. There is more: apart from my previous review essay and various articles and bibliography that I have contributed to Munro criticism myself, I bring to this task the perspective of a critic who has been working on Munro's fiction consistently since 1973, when I read my first Munro story, "Material" in *The Tamarack Review*; my M.A. thesis on her early stories and *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) was

among the earliest critical assessments. Although Canitz and others are free to identify and deprecate the “naïve awe” such critics as I putatively felt at Munro’s mimesis in the first phase, I find myself equally dubious—and this while fully appreciative of its so-called critical sophistication—of much of what I have reviewed here. Together with many recent critical articles, some of these books—Heble’s, and Smythe’s, certainly, and perhaps even Carscallen’s—are of doubtful worth; they establish their authors’ presence and fulfill academic career needs—probably their most urgent function—but do very little for Munro studies. Indeed, much of Canitz’s vaunted “second generation” criticism merely reiterates the first using other terms.

Before taking up each book and detailing such evaluation, a word of my own on Munro’s fiction after reading these books and surveying journal articles from the late 1980s through 1996 (the most recent article I found appeared in *Contemporary Literature* [Clark]). Reading over such a disparate grouping, one is struck by several things having to do with the relationship of Munro’s work to its critics. Foremost among these are the ways by which Munro’s writing creates what amounts to almost an empathetic connection among readers, most especially among critics. We are drawn to her writing by its verisimilitude—not of mimesis, so-called and much maligned by Heble as “realism,” but rather its feeling of being itself, or as I have said elsewhere in a review of *The Progress of Love* (1986), of just being human. Thus what seems to drive critics who have taken up Munro’s work—and this is especially so of those who have embarked on book-length studies—is a desire to articulate some personal relationship to the work, to replicate in the criticism our feelings upon reading Munro’s work. I certainly feel this myself.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, a passage from “Circle of Prayer” (1986) that I quoted in the review of *The Progress of Love* is relevant here: “What are those times that stand out, clear patches in your life—what do they have to do with it? They aren’t exactly promises. Breathing spaces. Is that all?” (*Progress* 273). The beginnings of this passage are found in a draft holograph fragment of “Dulse” (38.11.7), and this relationship encapsulates a quality in Munro that seems ever to beckon reader and critic alike. The “progress” of insight, from momentary vision to larger understanding—fleeting, tentative, illusory, yet powerful. Standing back from this

recent body of Munro criticism, I am struck by this same quality, the desire of the critic to, as Redekop writes, identify “the story that I hear Munro telling me” (*Mothers* x). Each critic does this, of course, according to her or his lights—however bright or dim—seizing Munro’s work most often at these “clear patches”; that is, at those moments of story where her artistry is most evident, and most pointed. There is consensus among critics that her work is never transparent, always elusive, with compounding points of view and meanings, and patterns emerging out of other patterns. Katherine J. Mayberry has stated the matter succinctly:

Munro’s understanding of the function of narrative is mordantly paradoxical. Throughout her career, she has insisted on the existence of prelinguistic experience, of a truth that originates outside of, independent of language. This truth is wholly experiential and wholly personal, never going beyond the bounds of individual perception. Particular and circumscribed, it would seem a simple truth, though as Munro’s vision matures, its constitution grows increasingly intricate, its excision from the surrounding web of falsehoods, uncertainties, silence, and alternative perceptions increasingly difficult. But simple or complex, this truth admits little access. The approaches attempted by most of Munro’s characters are memory and narrative—virtually equivalent faculties in that they both order past experience, re-collect lived moments within a chronological frame.

She concludes that in Munro, “narrative is finally not the province of truth; to tell is at best to revise, but never to perfectly review” (540).<sup>3</sup>

What Mayberry calls “lived moments” here are Munro’s “clear patches,” her “breathing spaces”—insights based on moments or incidents that appear briefly in a draft or earlier story, only to emerge as central in a later one.<sup>4</sup> This process—one that Carscadden balloons out of proportion in *The Other Country*—has resulted in a group of Munro stories that might themselves be seen as especially indicative of her work’s complexity. That is, owing to what seems their centrality to Munro’s work—one of the functions of this being the extent to which they attract critical

attention—these stories are most often seen as paradigmatic. “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (1968), “Images” (1968), “Thanks for the Ride” (1957), “The Peace of Utrecht” (1960) and “Dance of the Happy Shades” (1961) are arguably among this group in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) it would include “The Flats Road,” “Changes and Ceremonies,” “Baptizing,” and “Epilogue: The Photographer.” In *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), three stand out: the title story, “Material,” and most especially “The Ottawa Valley” (1974). Most recently, “Meneseteung” (1988) and “Carried Away” (1991) appear to qualify. This is not the place to elaborate a theory of such selection; it is sufficient, however, to see such stories as embodying Munro’s most urgent concerns and displaying her most artful effects—the moments that resonate with each of us, as readers more than as critics. Such instances demand our attention, as readers and as critics. Carscallen articulates this point: “In a way opaque to ordinary logic, though implicit in it, we know that the one and the many, like truth and reality, do not ultimately shut each other out. We are our fully individual selves; we are also members of one another—participants in a humanity that is no bare abstraction” (*Other* 88). What this has meant to Munro criticism, especially regarding Carscallen’s *The Other Country*, is that beyond moments of epiphany—the “clear patches”—Munro’s art is about “Connection. That was what it was all about” (*Moons* 6). Interpersonal connections, perceptual connections, echoes of other stories, other incidents, other characters, other scenes: Munro’s art is shaped by a sensibility defined by the weight of her own separateness, her own connection, of who she is.

**“This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn’t.”**

In *Some Other Reality*, Louis K. MacKendrick challenges the view that “Material” is primarily Munro’s own meditation on writing and writers. He maintains, rather, that the unnamed narrator is a nasty person who has not forgiven her former husband, Hugo, and the story she writes is something of a calling him to reckoning (39–45)—thus the assertion used here as a section heading. However viewed, we need to remember that

Hugo is a particular kind of writer: an academic writer—not, as Munro ultimately implies, a “real” one. Hugo is one of those “vain quarrelsome men,” she says, “bloated, opinionated, untidy men ... cosseted by the academic life, the literary life, by women” (*Something* 24). Clearly from this, Munro has thought about the university as a place in which people live, pursue careers, succeed and fail—as, I expect, have we all. Indeed, part of this calling to reckoning in “Material” is the narrator’s wonderment that someone as irresponsible, capricious, and incapable as Hugo has found a place in which he is able to not only survive, but thrive: “Do you wash, Hugo?” she asks. “Do you call your girl students fond exasperated dirty names, are there phone calls from insulted parents, does the Dean or somebody have to explain that no harm is meant, that writers are not as other men are?” (*Something* 28–29).

Recognizing, as she does here, the hierarchy animating the academy, Munro provides a fit point of departure for this review project. I wonder: What need do these books fill? What audience do they address? Do we need them? By my count, we now have 11 sole-author critical books on Munro’s work—another, by Coral Ann Howells, is in press—a couple of collections of critical essays, one short biography, a monograph, and about 100 critical essays and shorter pieces. Munro, of course, has herself published eight books, a dozen uncollected stories, and some fugitive pieces. *A Selected Stories* appeared in the fall of 1996, and the fall of 1998 will see the publication of another collection, *The Love of a Good Woman*. Given such a field, I have elected to approach these books skeptically, wondering in the first instance over their very existence.

Introducing his argument in *The Tumble of Reason*, Ajay Heble notes “a few revisionist studies which” he thinks “warrant consideration in the present context.” Later, though, he complains about this, saying:

On the one hand, I ought, perhaps, to feel inconvenienced by the fact that I am no longer the only one to respond to Munro’s fiction in the context of this renewed critical framework. On the other hand, of course, I am pleased to see that Munro’s stories are finally beginning to receive the kind of critical attention they deserve. (15, 17)



My first response to these comments is, oh? But then I see that Heble is attempting to assert his own version of Munro. In any case, here is his argument:

As a result we find Munro abandoning a kind of rational discourse—which assumes that reality is stable, intelligible, and masterable—and replacing it with an equivocal discourse which signifies on the level of the paradigm....

[Munro's] paradigmatic discourse enables us, as it often enables Munro's characters, to imagine possible correlations between sets of phenomena and consider how "reality" might be different if something absent or potential were substituted for the way things are. In making use of this kind of discourse, Munro will substitute direct referentiality with what contemporary critical theory might call "textuality." Her fiction, in part, attempts to force us to reconsider the metaphysical category of reality in textual terms. The world of facts, details, and objects, which, at first, serves to ground the reader in a safe and recognizable reality, is suddenly called into question as Munro makes us aware that we are reading only an attempt to represent these things in fiction, that language is being used to re-present reality. (6–7)

Thus there is, in these terms, disruption in Munro's writing—critically totted up for the present moment—and Heble demonstrates his case in seven chapters, one for each of the books in print up to *Friend of My Youth* (1990).

Though intelligent, precise and thorough with respect to those of Munro's texts it examines, *The Tumble of Reason* need not have been a book; it should not have been a book. It was already a dissertation—one I have not read, though I have looked at its abstract—and what this book offers beyond that publication is not, likely, very much. Heble's introductory chapter posits his "corrective" theory well enough, and his readings of Munro's books demonstrate his ability, but they certainly do not challenge our understanding of Munro's writing in any way sufficient to

justify another book. Heble's readings are selective, they are not based in the full scholarly record—archival, sequential, or critical—and they do not advance our understanding of Munro's art very much, if at all. This is a book that should have remained a dissertation and been published as one or two good articles. One need only read the last paragraph of each chapter: there is its point.

The same assessment is inevitable regarding Smythe's *Figuring Grief*, though in her case she managed four published articles before the book. Smythe posits a theory of the "fiction-elegy" and argues that

in the late modern fiction of Gallant and Munro, the trust in language and art is questioned, and the exploration of grief and loss is conducted not only on the formal level of representation but also on the conceptual and tropological levels in terms of figuring memory, history, and the past. (21)

(Given the context of this review, I will forebear any comment on Smythe's reading of Gallant, though I suspect that my comments below would apply there as well.)

Smythe offers two chapters on Munro. The first, "Munro and Modern Elegy," suffices to demonstrate the limitations of her approach. Without question, Smythe is on to something: death—whether impending, recalled, actual, or imagined—figures often and to great effect in Munro's "material"; indeed, how it figures in a Munro story is often as interesting as its specifics. Smythe insists on identifying an elegiac figuring in the works of both writers, as per her thesis; for her it is paramount. Thus in a subsection of "Munro and Modern Elegy" entitled "Shapes of Death: the Meaning of Loss in Munro's Early Stories" (112–22), Smythe examines the following stories in this order: "Walker Brother Cowboy" (1968), "Images" (1968), "Memorial" (1974), "The Time of Death" (1956), "Day of the Butterfly" (1956), "Winter Wind" (1974), "Material" (1973), and "Tell Me Yes or No" (1974). It may be that my own work on these stories has valorized chronology, but I would not call stories written over nearly 20 years "early," nor would I treat the earliest stories within the frame of later stories. Smythe also manages to assign *Something I've Been Meaning*

to *Tell You* (1974) the wrong year of publication. And when she turns, in the next subsection, to Munro's intervening volume, *Lives of Girls and Women*, Smythe makes no mention of Besner's book.

More than matters of scholarship and structure, what strikes me most in *Figuring Grief* is the drive to apply a thesis. Smythe's reading of Munro is essentially a thematic overview. She sets out to illustrate her points—and treats Munro's stories seemingly randomly, without any clear order—doing so only with an eye toward her own thesis. The argument is well informed by and rooted in relevant authorial statements and critical texts—though, as noted, there are lapses—but ultimately the whole is reductive. Smythe's own thesis is of far more importance than Munro's fiction, which, to my mind, is frequently shoehorned into a series of thesis-driven points. Overall, *Figuring Grief* reads like the academic exercise it was; like *The Tumble of Reason*, this should have remained a dissertation and a series of articles.

That this is the best I am able to offer regarding Heble and Smythe is unfortunate, and it reflects poorly on the present state of the profession of English criticism. Readily conceding that others will disagree with my assessment of these two books—seeing them as effective, necessary critical texts—I nevertheless wonder how each of these authors came to be advised to publish them in their present form. True, they are published by reputable academic presses, but each author would have benefited from a few more years of post-PhD rumination, whether presses, granting agencies, mentors, and authors think so or not. The smug self-congratulation of Heble's comments on Munro criticism, quoted above, and the dissertationese of Smythe's writing, chock full of "I argues" and "I perceives" (vii), fail to hide the fact that neither has much depth of understanding—theirs is quite appropriate for a doctoral degree that, still, should be the beginning of a career as a professional scholar and teacher, not the ending. Yet books like these, which many of us think are needed to ensure that our students do begin an academic career, are sad affairs. It may be that any bright PhD student needs to have a book forthcoming to ensure any hope of a place in university, but it should not be.<sup>5</sup> Without question, each of these volumes testifies more to the currency of Munro's (and Gallant's, in Smythe's case) critical reputation than to the abilities of these critics.

## "I respect the intention and the effort and the result"

Willa Cather, when writing about Sarah Orne Jewett (arguably the single most important artistic influence on her own work), makes an observation that is apt for a consideration of Carscallen's *The Other Country* and Redekop's *Mothers and Other Clowns* in this section, and for the balance of these volumes in the next.

If [a writer] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine.

The artist spends a lifetime in pursuing the things that haunt him, in having his mind "teased" by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius. ("Miss Jewett" 79–80)

Something of Cather's idea is working in each of the volumes yet to be considered, because each is the product of quite a number of years spent reading, ruminating, and weighing Munro's substantive art, itself the product of just the sort of imaginative process Cather describes.

As he concludes his massive, delightful, and peculiar book, *The Other Country*, Carscallen takes up a little-known piece Munro published in 1974, "Everything Here Is Touchable and Mysterious," which deals with her sense of Huron County, particularly her "home place," "Loretown"—a 'stragglng, unincorporated, sometimes legendary non-part' of Wingham, Ontario." "I am still partly convinced that this river," he quotes Munro, describing her hometown's river, the Maitland, "not even the whole river,

but this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures.” Carscallen continues with a passage that bears quoting at length:

The same thing, as I have tried to indicate, is true of Munro’s writing itself as it follows its not very extensive course. And while its adventures may often come to tragic ends—the river itself supposedly has “deep holes, ominous beckoning places,” eerie enough to satisfy Uncle Benny—there is something here that transforms even the depths.

We saw how an unincorporated region like the Ottawa Valley can equally be the Church of St. John, where the Creator is celebrated for the bright and beautiful things he has made. Munro speaks with the same wonder of the living creatures along the river, or the names which they also are: “I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable.” And so, she concludes, “this ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious.” The touchability of things is their reality, the mystery of them is their truth—or, if we prefer, their truth is what can be grasped and their reality remains mysterious, as in a way reality always does; but in either case it is by the grace of naming, and its counterpart story-telling, that these contraries are gathered into one. Through names and stories, then, Munro offers us true reality: the ordinary made marvelous in its distinctness and the abundance of its life. (534–35)

Before commenting on Carscallen’s last words, here, I want to go back—over 535 pages back—to his first: “The following book is offered, not just to Munro specialists, but to anyone who has found her work enjoyable and moving” (vii). Carscallen has been working on Munro, so far as I can tell, since the late 1970s; he published an early profile of Munro in 1980 and then two other essays a few years later. Judging by *The Other Country*, Munro’s fiction has certainly “teased” his mind for some time, and to a very considerable extent.

I called this book “peculiar” for several different reasons. Though written in what he calls “plain English”—doubtless his rejection of the hipcrit jargon offered by others, such as Heble and Smythe, about the University of Toronto’s English Department—the density of language and, especially, of argument belies any hope that this book will be read in its entirety by anyone but Munro specialists. Indeed, such are the shifts, asides, allusions, promises, and recollections in *The Other Country* that even a person with a detailed command of Munro’s writings will have trouble following Carscallen’s meanderings. (Indicative of this are the twin facts that I had trouble following his numerous arguments when reading the book toward the end of a semester-long seminar on Munro during which I reread her entire *oeuvre*.) Clearly peculiar, this approach may be a major problem. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that Carscallen concerns himself wholly with Munro’s published works, generally eschewing archival materials and statements of authorial intention.

What Carscallen does do, and overall does very well indeed, is to have us take an entirely different tack toward Munro’s work. Instead of theme, character, point-of-view, chronology, disruption, composition or other ways into the fiction, Carscallen sees patterns. By this he means the numerous ways texts reflect, elaborate and echo one another: “single stories seem to me to fit implicitly into a larger one of the same kind as themselves. . . . Thus pieces from anywhere in a book may help to illustrate a phase with which those in a particular location are linked in a more special way” (viii). A student of Frye, Carscallen displays that influence here in the ornate and detailed patterns he elaborates in Munro. Offering an account of his own discovery of Munro’s patterns, he takes up *Lives of Girls and Women*, noting that “Mrs. McQuade’s whorehouse is located next to the B. A. service station. As I myself mused on this unremarkable but included fact, it first occurred to me that, in the world of the chapter, a whorehouse and a service station have somewhat the same function.” He then goes from this to King Solomon, who “cultivated wisdom as well as arms and pleasure”—parallels he finds in Del and her mother’s pursuit “of enlightenment”—and then goes on to note that there are two allusions to the biblical David. Though fearing that he was engaging in “creative reading,” Carscallen ultimately concludes—in a phrase that could be seen as having paradigmatic significance in relation to Munro’s fiction—that

“once she has established a pattern by putting two worlds in parallel, the pattern assimilates whatever will fit into it” (10–11).

But this is not landmark Munro criticism. *The Other Country* is not a book for a general reader, nor, even, for an interested undergraduate. Nevertheless, it offers a great many insights and bears scrutiny, contemplation, and frequent consultation: Carscallen’s is an intricate erudition. At the same time, the book’s index of titles and characters, the daunting detail of the discussion—each chapter appears with scores of end notes—are well worth having. I have no quarrel with the approach Carscallen adopts, but I do wonder about the argument’s extent and, as well, alternative explanations of what he sees. He takes the Bible as primary referent and, through an analysis of characters’ names and a typing of stories—the Apocalypse, the Exodus, the Book of Judges—sees mythopoeic relationships between, throughout, and in great detail. Jumping back and forth between stories and other materials, promising to get into something later, weaving one interpretation of a story into another, and then another, Carscallen offers a view of Munro’s fiction like none seen before—though hard to follow, it is often quite worth the trouble.

Even so, a reader finds himself wondering over the degree to which connections are a product of Carscallen’s own proclivities—he has also written, one notes, on *The Faerie Queen*—and the degree to which this is a private system of meaning. As well, Carscallen’s assertion that Munro thinks through charged images—such as his fine discussion of the story of that title, “Images,” in relation to “Monsieur Les Deux Chapeaux” (1985) in terms of their “clear patch” scenes (107–17)—seems relevant, too, especially in light of Cather’s point. Although the notion that Munro—not, evidently, an especially religious person—would consistently use the Bible as an analogue seems a bit farfetched, Carscallen’s recognition really is an elaboration that her art is rooted in Huron County and in its Scots-Irish culture. That is, the patterns Carscallen finds are derived from the cultural images Munro inherited and has imaginatively dwelled upon and drawn upon for her fiction. These are patterns created by an imagination “teased” for years by her inherited cultural material, “Material,” she has returned to repeatedly throughout her career. Part of that material, of course, is the biblical stories Carscallen elaborates, the names, the meaning, and, most especially, the images that demand probing from Munro

herself—one “Carried Away” by her “Material,” from Huron County, where “Everything ... Is Touchable and Mysterious.”

Like her colleague Carscallen, Redekop brings another sort of background to her work on Munro; she notes at the beginning of her book that “The Progress of Love” is, both ironically and appropriately, the title of a poem by Jonathan Swift. By using “that phrase as a title, he initiated a satiric questioning and Munro pushes further with those questions.” She does so, indeed, in a seriously mocking way, also like Swift: thus Redekop’s title, *Mothers and Other Clowns*—“Munro invokes details from her own life not as a traditional autobiographer would do, but as a clown would do” (xiii). Although I wonder what Redekop means by “traditional autobiographer,” the notion of clowning, like Carscallen’s patterns, is an important one. So is this one:

The narrator of “Material,” herself “pregnant with Clea” reproduces Dotty’s litany of complaints. It includes three miscarriages. “My womb,” says Dotty, “is in shreds. I use up three packs of Kotex every month.” Our laughter cannot take away from the reality of Dotty’s suffering, the material conditions of her life in “material” [sic]. The narrator of “Material” tries to write a letter to Hugo about his story. The letter is intercepted by the reader and here is what we read: “This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn’t. You are mistaken, Hugo.” I see Munro’s stories as a response to the challenge issued by that jabbing sentence. It is not enough to see madonna and harlot as all dolled up to join the parade. They must be domesticated by being taken up into the family. How may a woman’s reproductions act to resist a mimicry that is simply a burlesque, like Del’s rag-doll dance? The question will partly turn itself into a question of how the woman can learn to be the clown instead of the rag-doll dummy used by the clown. The answer will lie ... in Munro’s focus on looking. (15–16)

As this suggests, *Mothers and Other Clowns* approaches Munro’s work through an analysis of the female perspective; as such, this book covers



much of the same ground as Rasporich's *Dance of the Sexes* (1990). It does so, however, in a far better and more informed way, certainly displacing the earlier book.

What Redekop offers is her own reading of Munro, to some degree an idiosyncratic one, though by no means as much so as Carscallen's. She is, as well, quite critically informed, and goes so far as to suggest that "Munro's stories have a lot to teach theorists writing today." Thus despite Munro's own disavowal of any aesthetic, Redekop has "excavated an aesthetic from Munro's stories" because she wanted to "invert" the premise of feminists "finding a vocabulary to explain what the storytellers are doing" (xii). This she does largely through the "Argument" section, which makes up the first 40 pages of the book. Two quotations encapsulate the approach Redekop takes:

The result of reading Munro's fiction is not to allow the reader—whether male or female—to be comfortable and smug. It is rather to find ourselves caught in the act of smugness—certainly defined as a part of a group. This is the most subtle of Munro's many tricks, to make us initially unaware of our participation, to lure us into a position where we settle into our own prejudices and stereotypes—then to follow this up by making us excruciatingly aware of our own self-deceptions....

Munro's own tricks do not stop with the thrill of power or even with the moment of ironic understanding. Her clowning offers comfort because it leads to a mutual failure. We read for enlightenment and arrive, repeatedly, at the point of recognized blindness. In this experience, however, we have company: reader and writer share this discovery of mutual foolishness. (30; 34)

Redekop is arriving, in both of these comments, at the point at which the power of Munro's art is most deeply apparent: that is, when reader and writer—alike and together—commingle in empathy. Thus she writes, again with reference to "Material," that "at the deepest level of Munro's

writing is her constant awareness that a writer, in the act of writing, is using people" (131).

As in Carscallen's book, there is an idiosyncratic density here. Yet, in contrast to his book, where the connections leading to patterns threaten to envelop a reader, Redekop keeps her readings of Munro's stories balanced, and always in sight of her own argument. At the same time, and again like *The Other Country*, there is a leaping about within Munro's works that at times proves disconcerting: Redekop discusses stories without reference to order of composition and, as well, has no apparent knowledge of the Calgary archives. And given the argument offered here, which has much to say about autobiography both in theory and in Munro's approach to it, about mothers and daughters, and about "The Ottawa Valley" in particular, the omission of any sustained reading of "Home"—despite its inclusion in the bibliography—seems singularly odd.

Not a great book, *Mothers and Other Clowns* is a good one—its "Argument" section is much the best part of the book, theoretically alert and well grounded in Munro's art. Although I would have liked a cleaner rationale for the examination of the fiction—why these stories were chosen, a greater awareness of provenance, and much more critique of other critics in light of her own readings—the one found here is sustained, precise, and convincing. Some of these deficiencies, I recognize, are the same as those I noted above with reference to Heble's and Smythe's books. Yet the difference between the two pairs ought to be clear: the depth of understanding Carscallen and Redekop offer outweigh their books' weaknesses. Theirs are books worth having.

### **"A fine and lucky benevolence"**

Early in *Some Other Reality*, Louis K. MacKendrick makes a point that bears echoing and is, indeed, one already made here; after surveying the various book-length critical studies available to him, he concludes his chapter by writing that "it may be evident that studies of individual stories, not subject to large schematic argument, continue to reveal Alice Munro's truer achievements as a writer. Though this method has not been a consistent practice in Canadian literary criticism, it suits Munro's fictive

particularities handsomely” (25). That is, Munro’s material—like her “Material,” of which more in a moment—best lends itself to close textual treatment on the same more narrow scale she adopts herself. And as this assertion suggests, MacKendrick—followed at only a slight distance by Neil Besner in his *Introducing Alice Munro’s Lives of Girls and Women*—is by far the best critic of this group. His knowledge of his subject is clearly as deep and precise as any of the others’, and the format he employs—one book sharply focused on, thoroughly contextualized and textualized—yields the best and most useful sustained criticism.

This, I confess, surprised me: I had not expected the books from ECW—of which these are two from its Canadian Fiction Studies series, now numbering over 30 volumes—to be as good as they are. By contrast, and as I have said elsewhere, Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s *Alice Munro: A Double Life*—one of the first volumes published in ECW’s Canadian Biography series—shows the limitations of the series format (Review). Although she has produced a very good and useful book—one quite effective as a class text—Ross’s biography is exceptionally constrained by the series format. In this regard, too, my survey of criticism here has confirmed one particular need in Munro studies: an extended critical biography, one that shapes its material to its construction of Munro’s writing life. Ross begins that process, but in her rush to fit into ECW’s limitations, this book falls far short of the need.

I want to take up MacKendrick in more detail and with more consideration, so as to conclude this—“with honour, if I possibly can”—with the story that has been a mainstay throughout my own “Munrovia” career, and a leitmotif here, “Material.” But before that, a brief note on Besner’s book. His introduction to *Lives of Girls and Women* is excellent, thorough, and precise. In keeping with the ECW format, he offers a chronology, addresses “The Importance of the Work,” considers its critical reception and stature, and then offers a detailed reading of the book. Besner manages all of this in a balanced way: showing a fine knowledge of the book’s provenance and of Munro’s intentions and difficulties, and acknowledges with a rare generosity the work of the book’s other critics. What is more, he manages to say something original about a book that has received a disproportionate share of critical attention.

Besner is at his very best when he discusses the ending of *Lives of Girls and Women*, particularly when he considers another leitmotif in Munro criticism: the difference between what is real—the title of one of her essays—and what is true. Having rejected Garnet French at the end of “Baptizing,” bereft of scholarship, Del confronts “Real Life” (238). Carscallen attempts to meld the two in his final sentence: “Through names and stories, then, Munro offers us true reality: the ordinary made marvellous in its distinctness and the abundance of its life” (*Other* 535). Contrasting the book we have in our hand with the “Halloway novel” that Del writes, Besner asserts:

The writer’s art, regardless of its conventions, creates a reality which, regardless of its own “truth,” is both autonomous and related to the world it refers to, however diffuse or symbolic this connection may be. Paradoxically, it is in the Halloway novel that we (along with Del) may be able to see more clearly the relations between the real world and the fictional world. In *Lives of Girls and Women* itself, the relations are more mysterious, for all of realism’s supposed mimetic properties; and Del is discovering this mystery at the heart of what will be her art as she sits with Bobby Sheriff, who is himself only the last of the several Jubilee eccentrics who have confronted Del with unknowable and yet alluring realities. (109)<sup>6</sup>

Besner is asking, along with Munro, “What is Real?”, and, also along with her, he is acknowledging that in the world, generally, and in Munro’s Jubilee, particularly, “Everything Is Touchable and Mysterious.” Besner continues, recognizing that *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) amounts to Munro’s return to many of these same questions; he might have taken the ending of *Lives of Girls and Women*—with its tension between what is real to Del and what is true, what is Munro’s fiction and what is Del’s—stopped off for a bit at the ending of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, and continued on to “Meneseung,” another of Munro’s attempts at the Caroline–Marion problem in *Lives of Girls and Women*.

Early in her celebrity, Munro told an interviewer that “writing is the act of approach and recognition,” an act of “just approaching something that is mysterious and important.” “I believe that we don’t solve these things—in fact our explanations take us further away” (Gardiner Interview 178). Thus Munro may be seen moving from Del to Rose to Almeda, and the mystery continues, as Pam Houston has argued about “Meneseteung,” a “clear patch story” par excellence:

What is true is untrue, what is untrue is true. We have an hysterical bleeding woman inside an admittedly fictitious account, written by a narrator who doesn’t even know her name. We have a distortion of reality within a distortion of reality, within a story that is also a poem, and sometimes a river. Nothing here will stay long enough to mean just one thing. (90)

Welcome, one is tempted to say, to Munro where everything is paradoxically touchable and mysterious—that is, not graspable. Explanations do take Munro—and us—“further away,” and yet, as Redekop says, this is an author who has much to teach literary theorists: “Also, professors are dumb.”

MacKendrick makes substantially the same point when he writes, early in his reading of the text of *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*:

It is quite hopeless and redundant to expect an Alice Munro story to surrender a clear, indisputable, and singular “meaning.” The language itself is the prime variable, and it is complicated by an almost predictable complexity of her first-person narrators, few of whom are able to remain disengaged from what they are relating. It is a little surprising, then, that given the possible permutations of language, character, and event, the critical interpretations of her writing should have such an occasional, but interdependent, element of repetition. This is no guarantee, however, that Munro’s work will not be used to prove a prescriptive formula of fiction, or a single-minded argumentative philosophy. (26)

Here MacKendrick has provided text to account for the several books reviewed here, plus those that preceeded them. The problem, of course, is in which Munro—by rendering in a long critical form “my” Munro, the authors of such texts are constructing her fiction along the lines of personal proclivities: theoretical, structural, or linguistic. Even MacKendrick, here, tends to privilege “first-person narrators” who, until *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, seemed to be increasing in frequency. Ever at the ready, Munro has since tended more toward third person, folding much of the first-person narrator’s uncertainties into the narrative voice—as in “Meneseteung.”

As he works his way through the stories in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, MacKendrick offers readings of each story that are convincing, certainly, but more than that they show him to be ever alert to nuance—and in this Munro volume, which is transitional in several ways, that means looking back to earlier work as well as forward to more recent, and more complex, renderings. Thus

Munro’s stories may have almost cheerful and unapologetic interruptions in any expected narrative line—generally by her preferred voice, a first-person narrator. Very often in reading a Munro story we become pleasantly aware that along with perfectly credible or “realistic” characters and situations we are also variously hearing echoes, reverberations, repetitions, ironies, juxtapositions, contrasts, digressions, interpolations. We are hearing not only a storyteller’s tricks but we are hearing them almost as a matter of narrative course. Very often we are hearing a truly oral narrative, a distinctive and personalized voice. (29)

Although his reading of the collection’s title story is especially fine—and complex—it is MacKendrick’s reading of “Material” that interests me most here. Following on his final point, he concentrates on the oral quality of the narrative, saying that “Material” “is a thorough and consistently revealing self-portrait, with enough ramifications of character that the narrator, ranging through moods and tones, virtually comes to life beyond the confines of this chronicle.” What is more, “in the story’s present

she is marking test papers in history, and Hugo is to be assigned a grade after all the material has been considered—after she has written her history of their relationship.” Seeing this narrator’s narrative as a “sometimes unflattering self-portrait,” one that “is a contest . . . between a professional creative writer and his ex-wife, a teacher and corrector, who has nothing to lose and everything to win, for she is the only one aware of the contest” (39).

As MacKendrick notes, “Some of Munro’s critics believe the passage [in which she acknowledges Hugo’s successful artistry] to be one of [Munro’s] personal testaments about her fiction” (43). I have said so myself, and I still believe it is. But I also see the “real truth” of MacKendrick’s careful close reading of Munro’s text, one that ultimately sees this narrator as a nasty, vituperative person who does, indeed, both “envy and despise” the men in her life, Hugo and Gabriel both, for not being “*at the mercy*” (*Something* 44). Thus “her personal past demons and lingering resentments have once again been dealt with. Gabriel’s discovery of Hugo’s story has precipitated a farrago of memory, bitterness and self-justification, and an apparent summary confession of spite, jealousy and error. Yet the narrator continues to be a vigorous combatant in her own arena” (45). Writing of the same story, taking a very different tack, Redekop asks, “Has the narrator appropriated some of the power invested in Hugo, the writer? She has, after all, written this story: the story ‘Material’” (31). “‘Yes,’ I said, instead of thank you” (*Lives* 250).

What the critic is asking, in both cases, though most thoroughly in MacKendrick’s reading, is “What’s ‘Material’?” What we have as critics, in the first instance and to use another phrase of MacKendrick’s, are Munro’s “Narrative Acts.” What we do with them, as MacKendrick asserts and I certainly echo based on what I have examined for this review essay, is largely whatever we want. Each of us shapes a Munro to suit—privileging this, downplaying that, exaggerating here, ignoring there—and we emerge (as I certainly do myself, here) having shaped a version of the Munro critique. Perhaps entertaining, perhaps wry, perhaps illuminating, perhaps dry: the answer to all this, again and ever, is the same as before: Go ask Alice, where “Everything Is . . . Touchable and Mysterious.”

## Mapping Munro: Reading the “Clues” (1999)

My connection was in danger—that was all. Sometimes our connection is frayed, it is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn't we rather have destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days?

—Alice Munro, *Open Secrets* (127)

This quotation is from “The Albanian Virgin” (1994)—a story in which, perhaps, Alice Munro has strayed as far as she yet has (at least culturally if not geographically) from her “home place,” Huron County, Ontario. In that straying, we seem both to have left Munro country and, at the same time, not: here is a narrator's voice, caught in the quintessential Munroian act: divining, wondering over, articulating, and defining “connection”—connection to the world, connection to various parts of (what she has called “wooing”) the self, connection to others. “Connection. That was what it was all about,” Munro wrote in “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection” (*Moons* 6). As I have been arguing for some time, for Munro *the* most urgent connection has been to her rural southwestern Ontario birthplace in Huron County, Wingham—the “home place,” her cultural



map, her profound talisman. Flowing through the town, we know, is a mystical and mythic river, the Maitland—called “The Menesetung” by the local Indigenous peoples, as Munro noted in a brief 1974 essay:

I am still partly convinced that this river—not even the whole river—but this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious. (“Everything” 33)

Yes. “Everything [t]here is touchable and mysterious,” as Munro has demonstrated, again and again. But our understanding of those demonstrations falters yet.

Last summer, I wrote an extended review essay focused on the Munro criticism published since 1990; it follows another on work published during the 1980s that appeared in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* in 1991. Munro has had, already, 11 single-author volumes published on her work—itsself consisting of, one notes, eight volumes plus the *Selected Stories* (1996). Among the books I looked at, the most spectacular is James Carscallen’s almost-600-page tome, *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* (1993). Ironically, given Munro’s unwavering attachment to the short story as a form, most of these have posited—in effect—master narratives of putative discursive patterns, à la Carscallen. As well, the journal/article count (via the *MLA International Bibliography*) is now approaching 200.

Given this, I want to suggest another way of “Mapping Munro,” one that seems to me to be most needed. First, I am struck by several things having to do with the relationship of Munro’s work to its critics. Foremost among these are the ways by which Munro’s writing creates what amounts to almost an empathetic union among readers, most especially among critics. We are drawn to her writing not so much by its verisimilitude but by how it makes us feel. This is reality, we think, not artifice. Such a quality in the fiction draws critics to read and critique further. Just as I said in that review essay, the essay preceding this one.

Take as but one instance Munro's early story "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960). In it, the narrator, Helen, returns to Jubilee, enters her childhood home, and looks in the hallway mirror; in it, she sees

the reflection of a thin, tanned, habitually watchful woman, recognizably a Young Mother, whose hair, pulled into a knot on top of her head, exposed a jawline no longer softly fleshed, a brown neck rising with a look of tension from the little sharp knobs of collarbone—this in the hall mirror that had shown me, last time I looked, a commonplace pretty girl, with a face as smooth and insensitive as an apple, no matter what panic and disorder lay behind it. (*Dance* 197–98)

The processes of self-analysis and self-understanding evident here are symbiotically conjoined in the relationship of each narrator to her home place, and that textual trail is intricate.

The importance of "The Peace of Utrecht" to Munro's *oeuvre* is obvious, as is its demonstration of the fundamentally autobiographical connection the author has to her home place (see Thacker "Connection"; Weaver). Munro has called this her "first really painful autobiographical story," and, more to the point, she has returned to its circumstances again and again (Metcalf Interview 58). The story meditates on the mother–daughter relationship, and that relationship, as any reader of Munro knows, is central to her work: it plays a central role in "The Peace of Utrecht," "Red Dress—1946," "Images," *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Winter Wind," "The Ottawa Valley," "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection," "The Progress of Love," and "Friend of My Youth." As Munro writes parenthetically in the uncollected story, "Home" (1974), commenting metafictionally in her own voice in the opening pages of the story: "*Also the bit about Mother, who probably doesn't belong in this at all but I can't come in reach of her without being invaded by her.*" (137, italics in original). The mother's presence is but a single autobiographical instance in Munro's work, but it is one redolent with meaning, and one that confirms Munro's ongoing critique of being human—"being a human being." As well, mainly because she works through the short story, Munro offers what amounts to a

persistent, recurrent, and multilayered attempt to articulate the mysteries of being—one that has left multiple traces, or multiple “clues,” for the critic.

This latter point needs to be asserted because of what is in the Munro archives at the University of Calgary. The materials there reveal numerous instances in which Munro may be seen trying to find a suitable place for this or that detail or story from her own past and, most often, out of her own home place. The multiple pieces in the archive demonstrate, too, in connection with various single texts, the need for better maps of Munro’s work. These resources have been left largely untouched by critics—the most recent group as much as those who published books and articles in the 1980s.

\* \* \*

An example: During the mid-1970s, after her marriage had broken up and she had moved back to Ontario, Munro worked on the text for a book of photographs of Ontario scenes by Peter D’Angelo, which was to have been published by Macmillan. For reasons that are unclear, it never appeared—judging from the archival material, however, Munro spent a good deal of time working on her text. It is made up of short, Sherwood Anderson–like vignettes, few of which are more than a page or so; they are anecdotal, descriptive, and reminiscent. They are also haunting and looming. Among them is one entitled “Clues”:

## CLUES

In a little glassed in side-porch, from which people can look out at the street, but not be seen themselves, very easily, the following things can be found, on window-sills or tacked up on the wall:

A calendar picture of a kitten asleep between the legs of a Great Dane, the dates torn off.

A photograph of Princess Anne as a child.

A Blue Mountain pottery vase with three yellow plastic roses.

Six shells from the Pacific coast.

*The Lord is My Shepherd*, in black cut-out scroll sprinkled with glitter.

An amber glass cream jug, from Woolworth's, with a bunch of wildflowers, drooping. White and orange daisies, white and purple money-musk.

Newspaper photograph of seven coffins in a row. Father, mother, five children. All shot by the father a few years ago in a house about five miles out of town (hard to find but most people have persisted, asking directions at the gas station on the highway and then at a crossroads store; most people have driven past).

[Typed, struck out] A mobile of blue and yellow paper birds, crude and lovely, made by a seven-year-old child at school, bobbing and dancing on undetectable currents of air.

[Replaced with, in Munro's hand] Some blue and yellow paper birds, cut by the wobbly hand of a seven year old child, strung from sticks so they bob delicately on undetectable currents of air. (37.13.11.f27-28)

It is with stark, material images such as these that the author of "Material" (1973) begins, and, indeed, has always begun. During this period, certainly, Huron County material was prominent—her next book was to be *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978)—but such home-place material is never distant for Munro, though if her characters may be.

A particularly good example of such a crux is "Miles City, Montana" (1985). It ends in the book version with the parents, back in the front seat of their car, yet again heading east toward Ontario from British Columbia, the story's central excitement having ended and their younger daughter, Meg, now quite fine after her brush with drowning in Miles City, Montana. As it ends, Munro refers once more to the image with which she began the story—the drowning of eight-year-old Steve Gauley, his body carried across the field by the narrator's father, though the narrator doubts the veracity of her memory of the event. Munro also develops complicity between the parents and this child's drowning—only Steve's father, who believes life is merely random, is exempt. The book version ends:

So we went on, with the two in the back seat trusting us, because of no choice, and we ourselves trusting to be forgiven, in time, for everything that had first to be seen and condemned by those children: whatever was flippant, arbitrary, careless, callous—all our natural, and particular, mistakes. (*Progress* 105)

Passages like this stand out in Munro's work—they are, in fact, “breathing spaces” (*Progress* 273), and her stories frequently end with them, without really concluding them. Most often, what is valued in Munro's stories is the precision and exactitude of emotion that such passages communicate while also articulating the utter uncertainty and ambivalence of being. Thus among the most interesting—and vexing—questions revealed by the Munro archives are those that have to do with how she got to passages of the sort just quoted. Submerged beneath that paragraph are a welter of emotions, most seemingly contradictory, all of which are made more identifiable by comparing them to, if you will, their earlier selves—that is, reading the “clues,” a word redolent with meaning within the context of mapping Munro. Consider a paragraph from the end of a holograph draft of “Miles City, Montana,” in which the main action of the story is pretty much as it is in the published versions as she works toward an ending:

Why wasn't it enough for me, just to have escaped? I didn't believe in escape, that was it. Andrew believed in luck, his luck, would celebrate it like a virtue. If something not lucky happened, he would shove that out of mind, ashamed. That was why he never mentioned the dead baby. And my mentioning it would seem a kind of sickening parade of misfortune, a dishonesty. I understood, I too hated fiercely that reply clinging onto miseries the gloating voices of women saying ‘a tragedy['] so how could we understand what we were doing. Who is ready to be a father, a mother, who is fit? I always hated to hear the names of my children called in the streets, I had hated when my own mother called me, in public, as I had hated the name she had chosen: Le-on-a. The names proclaimed the mother's ownership, her creation. I didn't want my own children burdened

like that. What was more, I didn't want them to be crowning products of my life, so I was trying out this less definite, humorous, even tentative, statement of motherhood, thinking we would all be the better for it. (Third accession 7.3)

Though this passage appears to be an early version of the paragraph that now ends the story, it also contains elements of the paragraph that immediately precedes the return to the narrator's memory of Steve Gauley's funeral (103). The dead baby—an autobiographical detail—has also been dropped in the published versions. Yet the question asked here—"Who is ready to be a father, a mother, who is fit?"—and indeed the whole mystery of the narrator's wondering over her "escape," envelopes "Miles City, Montana" and, arguably, the whole of Munro's work. In what is perhaps her first perfect story, "Thanks for the Ride" (1957), Munro describes such moments with the phrase, "*that headlong journey*"; they pose questions of wonder, unanswerable: "To find our same selves, chilled and shaken, who had gone that headlong journey and were here still" (*Dance* 56–57, italics in original).

Implied within such passages, too, are the narrator's recollection of Steve Gauley's drowning and the memory of her ambivalence over his death, her ambivalence toward her former husband, and her feelings for her relatives whom she was about to visit, both her father and her in-laws. Each of these invocations ties the narrator to Munro's home place, to the rural Ontario of her youth, to the years she spent in British Columbia in her 20s and 30s, and to the circumstances of her marriage. They are offered, too, from the perspective of the Ontario native who has returned—though this perspective is largely mute.

The archives also reveal what might be called Munro's recurrences; that is, her repeated returning to an image or incident. From the late 1970s on, for example, she repeatedly tried to find a place for the threatened hanging now at the centre of "The Progress of Love" (1985). A graphic instance of this, and perhaps more interesting, is the recurrence of an industrial decapitation, which first appeared briefly in "Thanks for the Ride"—a story Munro submitted to Robert Weaver at the CBC in 1955—as the cause of Lois's father's death. In the story, the incident is briefly described to Dick by Lois's mother (*Dance* 51). It becomes a major

focus in “Carried Away” (1991), in which Louisa’s imagined suitor, Jack Agnew, is killed in the same type of accident, described in much more detail—his severed head being “carried away” by the factory owner, Arthur Doud, whom Louisa eventually marries (See Carrington “What’s”).

What I am suggesting by this too-brief discussion of what is to be found in the Munro archives is that Munro’s methods of composition, often readily discernible there, lend themselves to archival analysis. Those methods need to be probed more thoroughly than they have been. This is because Munro’s methods are fundamentally organic—that is, as she has written in the introduction to her *Selected Stories*, she often imagines a scene, seeing it as an image, and then tries to write its contexts, to discover what it means. As she both imagines and works through the story, focused on such contexts, she leaves clues throughout her holograph drafts and typescripts. As she works toward the ending, as with “Miles City, Montana,” Munro may be seen also discovering the essence, the feelings and meaning, of the story she is telling, based on the connections she is making. Throughout these drafts, such clues abound. And because of this, and especially because Munro’s work is in the short story form, hers is an art that demands mapping in ways not yet done. To my mind, all such maps begin in Calgary.