



READING ALICE MUNRO, 1973-2013 by Robert Thacker

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Part Three

Understanding the *Oeuvre*

By 2000, Munro was established as something of a special author. When the title story of *The Love of a Good Woman* was published in the *New Yorker* in late 1996, it was remarked on because of its extraordinary length (more than 70 pages in straight text). In 2004 the magazine's editors made another audacious presentation decision: three stories by Munro—the “Juliet Triptych”—made up the bulk of the *New Yorker*'s summer fiction issue. In between, Munro had published *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), a collection containing stories of great variety and one seen by some as Munro's best single collection. During this time, too, she published a revised version of “Home” (1974), a memoir story that sharply revealed her ongoing feelings about her parents, especially her father, at the time of her return to Ontario in 1973 and redirected herself as a writer at that time. This relationship is a critical one for Munro, permeating the whole of her work. The story's reappearance in the *New Statesman* in late 2001 and, revised further, in 2006 in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and its significant place in *The View From Castle Rock* (2006), the “family book” Munro had been thinking about since the late 1970s, revealed her to be experimenting still—using what many saw as the same materials and situations but, however seemingly familiar, able still to render them new, fresh, revealing. Such was the case, too, with *Runaway* (2004), anchored as it was by the “Juliet Triptych,” telling us much of the whole of Juliet's life. In these three stories, in succession,

she is a young lover, an older daughter, and an abandoned mother. *The View From Castle Rock*, which brought together older published pieces that had never found their way into one of Munro's books, along with some newly written though long-contemplated stories, showed Munro doing something wholly different. Some reviewers blanched at the book's odd shape and uncharacteristic material, but, unperturbed, Munro returned to more characteristic times, situations, and material for *Too Much Happiness* (2009). Even so, the subject of that book's title story is unlike anything Munro had ever done—the life story of a nineteenth-century Russian mathematician—and in this collection, too, is a much-revised and much-improved story, “Wood,” first published in 1980.

Given this, the essays and review included in this third section are pieces that take a long view toward Munro's writing, a view borne of long familiarity and study. The first piece, “Alice Munro's Ontario”—written while *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* was being contemplated but had not yet taken shape—revised after it was published, uses texts I have long seen as both autobiographically revealing and key to examining Munro's compelling rendering of her parents together: “Home” and, especially, “Working for a Living” (1981). Two other essays, on Munro's Irish heritage and on the story “White Dump” (1986), were derived directly from my readings in the Munro fonds for the biography. Following her genealogical work on her father's Scots side for *The View From Castle Rock*, I realized that Munro wrote her mother's Irish ancestors into “The Ottawa Valley” and that Munro had done research on those people herself in the late 1970s. As this work suggests, Munro has long been a biographer herself. In the essay on “White Dump” I both assert that story's importance within Munro's expanding aesthetic during the 1980s and describe it as a critical story in her numerous renderings of female adultery: “The way the skin of the moment can break open”—indeed, profoundly rendered. The review of *Too Much Happiness* treats that book's effects and jousts with critics who had tired of Munro. The final piece, from a 2013 volume on Munro in a series called “Critical Insights,” brings Munro criticism up to date, to the degree that such a thing is possible.

It is not, really. Even before Munro was announced as the winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, the pace of published criticism had accelerated. As I wrote my third overview of Munro criticism during the

summer of 2011, I knew that Isla Duncan's *Alice Munro's Narrative Art* (2011) was forthcoming but would not appear in time for me to include it. This says nothing of the articles—they have appeared in their dozens since my overview. And then there are the larger volumes, many of which were occasioned by the awarding of the Nobel, but appeared prior to it. In 2012, *Narrative* published a special issue focused on a single story, "Passion" (2004), with a preface, an extended introduction, a summary of the story, five articles, and "dialogues" between the contributors. Since the Nobel, journals in Canada and abroad (China, France, and the United States, at least) have produced special Munro issues, and book publishers are planning critical volumes focused on Munro. At least four such books have appeared from European presses during 2014 to 2015. In May of 2014—unconnected with the Nobel—the University of Ottawa's long-standing annual Canadian Literature Symposium focused on Munro; its university press will produce a volume of essays before long. And while the frequency of attention brought about by the Nobel will doubtless slow as time passes, projects like the special issue of *Narrative* and the others confirm that Munro's critical literary presence is incontrovertible and will continue. I have contributed to some of these publications, and I hope to continue contributing to Munro studies for as long as I can.

Alice Munro's Ontario (2007)

Alice Munro begins "The Love of a Good Woman" (1996) with a list of items to be found in the Walley, Ontario, museum—photos, churns, horse harnesses, and porcelain insulators. The next paragraph adds:

Also there is a red box, which has the letters D. M. WILLENS, OPTOMETRIST printed on it, and a note beside it, saying, "This box of optometrist's instruments though not very old has considerable local significance, since it belonged to Mr. D. M. Willens, who drowned in the Peregrine River, 1951. It escaped the catastrophe and was found, presumably by the anonymous donor, who dispatched it to be a feature of our collection." (*Love* 3)

"The Love of a Good Woman," extremely long even for the *New Yorker*, where it first appeared, was recognized immediately as a *tour de force*—Munro critics seized on it as a crucial text and several essays have already probed its intricacies (such as Duffy and McCombs). Highlighted in its *New Yorker* presentation by a lurid cover image and subtitled with gothic flourish ("A Murder, a Mystery, a Romance"), "The Love of a Good Woman" constructs Munro as the preeminent writer she is. Margaret Atwood may well be English Canada's leading novelist, but there is little

doubt that Munro is its leading storyteller and even, perhaps, its leading writer—she is frequently cited as among the best writers working in the English language.

Although another analysis of “The Love of a Good Woman” might well be justified, I begin with it here only to introduce its subject as my own, “Alice Munro’s Ontario.” A. S. Byatt has recently written, aptly, that Munro “has learned to depict whole lives from a distance in the same strangely unworked-up and unaccented way [as did American novelist Willa Cather], while also making it entirely new, as her landscape and *moeurs* are new” (53). In the passage just quoted from “The Love of a Good Woman,” Munro manages to place the stories of several persons’ lives in critical relation to the box of optometrist’s instruments now on display in the museum in Walley, Ontario, with which she begins the story. Despite having done so in extended detail (the book version is over 70 pages long), Munro still manages to avoid telling her reader just who was responsible for getting that box of instruments into the Walley museum, and how they managed to get it there. Containing its mystery throughout, the box both opens “The Love of a Good Woman” and stands at its end as a talisman, a trope glowing with meaning yet still withholding an unequivocal explanation. Indeed, “The Love of a Good Woman” both contextualizes Munro’s rural Southwestern Ontario home place and demonstrates her ability to render her subjective relationship to a place with more complexity than any other contemporary Canadian writer—Tracy Ware’s description of Munro’s recent work is apt; he calls it “bewilderingly complex” (Email). That is certainly so in “The Love of a Good Woman.”

Beginning in 1950, Munro’s published stories have been rooted in her autobiographical home place of Huron County, Ontario. Now, over 50 years later, they still are. As “The Love of a Good Woman” demonstrates, this connection is both detailed and profound. Between 1968 and 2006, Munro published 11 volumes of stories and a putative novel. In those collections are some 51 stories that first appeared in the United States’ premier venue for short stories: the *New Yorker*. Complex and detailed, Munro’s stories proclaim her connection to Ontario as both a place remembered and one she has lived in and knows well.

Indeed, Munro's Ontario is a complexly rendered fictional territory, one borne in the first part of her career of distance and imaginative return (1951 to 1973), and, since 1973, a place intimately known and long meditated on. As John Weaver has argued, it is possible to read the whole social history of Huron County, and of rural southwestern Ontario generally, by reading Munro's fiction chronologically. This is so because Munro has textured her prose with the surface details of her Ontario place, details at once commonplace and alluring. She has long and freely admitted that she is "excited by what you might call the surface of life," and she has deprecated her writing by saying that she "can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture" (Gibson Interview 241, 257). Munro's rendering of fictional contexts in such detail may also be traced through her use of repeated figures; take, as a key example, Munro's use of the Maitland River, which flows through her hometown of Wingham, Ontario, on its way to nearby Lake Huron. In a brief 1974 essay, "Everything Here is Touchable and Mysterious," Munro once wrote:

There is a short river the Indians called the *Menesetung*, and the first settlers, or surveyors of the Huron Tract, called the Maitland. From the place where the forks join, at Wingham, it winds about 35 miles, to flow into the lake at Goderich, Ont. Just west of Wingham it flows through that straggling, unincorporated, sometimes legendary non-part of town called Lower Town (pronounced Loretown) and past my father's land and Cruikshank's farm, to make a loop called the Big Bend before flowing south under Zetland Bridge, and that is the mile or so I know of it. (33)

Such passages as this are typical of Munro: she knows the details of her home place, and she uses them precisely. Equally, too, those details yield the meaning she seeks, as is evident in the essay's final lines:

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. (33)

Munro returned to this river in a story, “Meneseteung” (1988), in which she creates a narrator who is researching the life of a local nineteenth-century “poetess,” long dead, an “old maid” named Almeda Joynt Roth. The story is mainly concerned with Roth’s near-courtship by a local eligible widower, Jarvis Poulter, as imagined, without any historical provenance, by the narrator. Among Roth’s poems is one entitled “Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung” (*Friend* 52). Such a tableau characterizes Roth’s old maid’s mindset—at one point she thinks of “Champlain and the naked Indians” (70)—but in Munro’s creation of Roth, and especially through the narrator’s research into the poetess’s life, Munro is indeed creating a myth along the Meneseteung. And if the details of Munro’s essay demonstrate one central aspect of her writing, the penultimate paragraph of “Meneseteung” offers another. Looking for Roth’s gravestone, wondering over a reference in one of the published poems, the narrator finds the name Meda written on a gravestone, and reflects that she is perhaps not the last person to make the connection between the poet and the poem, for people do “put things together ... in the hope of ... making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish.” The last paragraph continues:

And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don’t know if she took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don’t know if she made grape jelly. (*Friend* 73)

These last questions refer to incidents in the story proper, but their exact meaning is less important than the effect of the final paragraph, which Munro reinstated after the story’s first publication in the *New Yorker*. This paragraph compromises the narrator’s authority if not dashing it altogether and welcomes us to Munro’s world, where everything is both “touchable and mysterious,” a world in which 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” (Thacker “Writing ‘Home’”).

Focusing on this same story, Pam Houston discusses the relationship between Munro’s narrator and the character she describes, Almeda Roth, and asks, “‘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 metaphor to speak to them” (89). The metonymy Houston deduces here is crucial to the defining of Munro’s Ontario, although I would argue that her notion of “two women becoming one voice” is better applied to Munro herself and the speaking voice in her stories—sometimes a first-person narrator but more often not, because third-person narration has predominated in recent years.

What I mean by this is that Munro’s Ontario is constructed along the line—if a line it is—between fiction and memoir. It is a world rooted in the times and the touchable surfaces and characters of Huron County, Ontario, a place inhabited since the early 1850s by Munro’s ancestors (a time she has been taking up more and more, first signaled by “Menese-teung”), a place she has imagined fully and deeply (Thacker “Writing ‘Home’”). “A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out,” Eudora Welty wrote in “Some Notes on River Country” (*Eye* 286) and Munro’s focus on the area around “this little stretch” of the Menese-teung/Maitland River has certainly proved her assertion that it is an “ordinary place sufficient” for her work, one that she is probing even yet, as “The Love of a Good Woman” demonstrates.¹

* * *

Given these contexts, I wish here to look at what I take to be a key aspect of Munro’s method: a memoir she published in 1981 entitled “Working for a Living.” Because it began as a fiction but—for various reasons—became a memoir, the piece is apt for demonstrating Munro’s method and her Ontario-rooted art. As such a transformation suggests, what Munro has done in her stories has been to define and probe factual complexities, wondering over what she has called “the rest of the story” (Introduction, *Selected* xvi). Before I take up the memoir, however, I need to contextualize

it with some brief discussion of Munro's methods and some brief mention of other works.

As in "Everything Here is Touchable and Mysterious," Munro has several times addressed the relationship between the factual and the imaginative in her fiction. In another essay, "What is Real?" (1982), she asserts her unshakable conviction that "every final draft, every published story, is still only an attempt, an approach, to the story." To illustrate, Munro cites her story, "Royal Beatings," from *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978); rejecting any pretense of using an incident "to show anything," she says rather that she "put this story at the heart of my story because I need it there and it belongs there. It is the black room at the centre of the house with all the rooms leading to and away from it. That is all." She continues:

Who told me to write [the character, Hat Nettleton's] story? Who feels any need of it before it is written? I do. I do, so that I might grab off this piece of horrid reality and install it where I see fit, even if Hat Nettleton and his friends are still around to make me sorry.

The answer seems to be as confusing as ever. Lots of true answers are. Yes and no. Yes, I use bits of what is real, in the sense of being really there and really happening, in my story. No, I am not concerned with using what is real to make any sort of record to prove any sort of point, and I am not concerned with any methods of selection but my own, which I can't fully explain. (36)

Trying to explain, though, Munro rejects the notion that a story is "a road, taking me somewhere. ... It's more like a house. ... I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while" (5).

By speaking of "the black room at the centre of the house," Munro posits not so much an essentialist approach as a core mystery informing each story. In "The Love of a Good Woman," it is Mr. Willens' talismanic box of optometrist's instruments: how did it get into the Walley museum, yes, but more significantly, what human interactions took place to result

it Willens's death? In "Meneseteung," it is the inferred actions of Almeda Roth during a Saturday night and Sunday morning, a moment transfixed in the story, that might have brought about a connection, and with it, transformation. It does not. As these examples suggest, Munro places a crucial fact at the core of her stories—these facts are, like Mr. Willens' instruments, both evident and mysterious, leaving us aware of them but also leaving us wondering. "It's the fact you cherish," Munro wrote in a 1994 essay entitled "What Do You Want to Know For?" (208). For her, such cherished facts are the beginning of the story, the wonderings that produce the imaginative wanderings—about the imagined house—that create the story at hand.

* * *

For Munro, no house has been the site of more imaginative wondering, and more imaginative wandering, than her family home in Wingham, Ontario. It was there that she grew up, living in the house from 1931 to 1949, when she moved away to attend university and then, in 1951, to live in Vancouver with her first husband, James Munro. Although the next 22 years were spent nearly a continent away from Ontario, her "Home," Munro was ever beckoned imaginatively back to Wingham, and especially to her family home where her mother fought the debilitations of Parkinson's disease until her death in 1959. A direct result of her mother's death was "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960), a story that Munro once called "her first really painful autobiographical story ... the first time I wrote a story that tore me up." (Metcalf Interview 58). In it the narrator, Helen, visits her home in Jubilee to see her sister, Maddy, after their mother has finally died from a long, lingering illness. Helen is the sister who got away to a life of her own while Maddy stayed behind to nurse their "Gothic Mother." The story's details are less important here than its parallels to Munro's own life, as well as a passage in which Helen remembers the feelings she had on earlier trips home, seeing once more the town's familiar details: "feeling as I recognized these signs a queer kind of oppression and release, as I exchanged the whole holiday world of school, of friends and, later on, of love, for the dim world of continuing disaster, of home" (*Dance* 200, 191).

The circumstances of this story suggest that Munro got away from her “home place,” Ontario, only to return repeatedly in her imagination; more than this, Munro literally returned home to stay in 1973, long after her mother’s death but before her father’s death in 1976. This return to Ontario and to Huron County from British Columbia, where she had lived since 1952, occasioned a perceptible shift in Munro’s work. It could be seen initially in the circumstances surrounding *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978; see Hoy “Rose”), which might well be described in Munro’s own phrase, “the dim world of continuing disaster, of home.” Munro has, certainly, returned repeatedly to the circumstances surrounding her mother’s lingering death—“The Ottawa Valley” (1974), “Home” (1974), “The Progress of Love” (1985), “Friend of My Youth” (1990)—but since her return to Ontario a deepened analysis of the cultural history of her home place has been predominant—seeing her own family’s history as derived from, and connected to, the larger history of Huron County, a place first settled in the earlier nineteenth century as the Huron Tract (see Thacker “Connection”; “Writing ‘Home’”). The “continuing disaster” Munro has drawn upon in her fiction since *Who Do You Think You Are?* has been less a matter of literal disaster than a sense of, again in Munro’s own phrasing, “a devouring muddle”—that is, a recognition that any understanding is contingent, its clarity apparent only, and apt to disappear on further reflection into “sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations” (*Open* 50).

This sense may be seen developing in “Home,” Munro’s rendering of a trip she made to Wingham in 1973, just after her return to Ontario from British Columbia, to visit her father who was then living with his second wife and suffering from the heart disease to which he succumbed in 1976. One of a handful of pieces Munro published individually but has chosen not to include in a collection, “Home” may be reasonably paired with “The Ottawa Valley,” also first published in 1974.² It also takes up Munro’s mother’s illness and in it, like “Home,” Munro herself breaks into the narrative to comment metafictionally. At the conclusion to “The Ottawa Valley” she steps back and writes, “If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture.” This is the moment when her mother does not respond to the narrator’s question, “Is your

arm going to stop shaking?” “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” (*Something* 246, 244).

Throughout “Home,” however, Munro is more venturesome with her authorial interjection, punctuating the narrative with italicized authorial second thoughts: “*A problem of the voices, the way people talk, how can it be handled? It sounds like parody if you take it straight, as out of a tape-recorder. My own attitude, too; complicated and unresolved*” (142). Yet these interjections confirm that the memories offered as fiction from the home place are real—that it is actually memoir. Munro’s final paragraphs suggest this: “*There was something else I could have worked into an ending,*” the narrator writes, “*the setting of the first scene I can establish as a true memory in my life.*” Particular details follow: a flight of steps, a black and white cow in 1935, warm clothes, a three-legged milking stool. Then she adds:

You can see this scene, can't you, you can see it quietly made, that magic and prosaic safety briefly held for us, the camera moving out and out, that spot shrinking, darkness. Yes. That is effective.

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.
(152–53, italics in original)

The tension here is palpable. Munro’s decision not to collect this story until 2006 owes to her rejection of such metafictional techniques and also because she used the “characters” and situation in “Home” as a basis for Flo and her husband in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, as well as another rendering of her father in “The Moons of Jupiter” (1978). Finally revised and included in a book, *The View From Castle Rock* (2006), “Home” reappears without its metafictional commentary.

This crux, and the evident tension between memory and fiction in “Home,” can also be found in “Working for a Living,” a memoir about her parents, especially her father, that Munro published in 1981. Its provenance is also indicative of Munro’s method, because it was written by Munro just at the point of what might be called her “deep empathy” with her home place, with its well of memories. Munro began “Working for

a Living” as a story but, as I have indicated, it became a memoir. In the story version—which exists in a variety of drafts in Munro’s papers at the University of Calgary, and which was rejected by the *New Yorker*—the character Janet has an argument with the bursar at the beginning of her final year at university, and rather than compromise as she had in previous years, she leaves school and goes home. Arriving there, she sees it differently through her now-educated eyes, as a place from *Winesburg, Ohio* or a Russian village from Chekhov. Such illusions fade fast, as Janet says:

I saw my parents’ life as a tragedy. I saw it finished off, hopeless. When I read *Death of a Salesman*, I thought yes, they’re like that, they’re worse off, if anything. My tragic view of life, and particularly of their life, had an arrogance, a satisfaction about it, that I was quite unable to see. I did not actually back off the hope of improvement (my father getting out of debt, my mother having a miraculous remission); such hopes, such possibilities, never even occurred to me. But when I came home this time I threw myself into that part of life you never see in stage tragedies, rarely read about. While the speeches are being made, the emotions twisted, the truth laid bare, who is keeping the background in order, washing the sheets and towels and sweeping the floor? It seemed essential to me that the tragedy be played out in cleanliness, in comfort, that the piled-up mess disappear from the porch and the torn, dusty plastic curtains be taken down. I housecleaned ferociously and impatiently, kept the incinerator smoking all day, scrubbed down to the bedrock of poverty, which was the torn linoleum and the sheets worn out in the middle. (38.10.36.f8)

Here is Munro, as she has consistently for some time, creating fictional “effects” out of her own experience, and out of her parents’ experience. The draft continues with the returned, housecleaning Janet settling back into life in Dalgleish, taking charge at home in view of her mother’s illness, getting work, and at one point visiting her father, who was then working in a local foundry.

In the published version of “Working for a Living,” Janet is gone. She is replaced by Munro, speaking as herself, matter-of-factly and analytically, beginning: “In the first years of this century there was a notable difference between people who lived on farms and people who lived in country towns and villages” (*Grand Street* 9). Taking up her parents’ lives—there is no mistaking here that she is describing her father, Robert E. Laidlaw (1901–1976) and her mother, Anne Chamney Laidlaw (1898–1959)—Munro places them within the social history of early-twentieth-century Huron County and, retrospectively, dissects their lives through representative, though not minute, detail. In transforming “Working for a Living,” Munro made something of a “glorious leap” from fiction to memoir, a leap that if not characteristic, seems nevertheless to have been demanded by the facts she presents in the story, facts that accord with the personal family history Munro has told through her fiction: “Connection. That was what it was all about” (“Author’s” 125; *Moons* 6). Here, however, a reversal of her usual practice asserts that connection.

Munro places her father within both social and family contexts—there is a great deal of detail about his parents, some of which echoes material seen in such stories as “Chaddeleys and Flemings” (1978–79) and “The Progress of Love”—describing his education through “the Continuation School in Blyth”: these were “small high schools, without the final fifth form, now Grade Thirteen; you would have to go to a larger town for that” (10). Her father had, Munro writes,

a streak of pride posing as humility, making him scared and touchy, ready to bow out, never ask questions. I know it very well. He made a mystery there, a hostile structure of rules and secrets, far beyond anything that really existed. He felt a danger too, of competition, of ridicule. The family wisdom came to him then. Stay out of it. (10–11)

Although he might have gone on in school, Robert Laidlaw did not; instead, during high school “he began to spend more and more days in the bush,” and when the time to decide came, “he turned his back on education and advancement. They had the farm; he was the only son, the only

child” (11). Even so, he read, and “would certainly have read Fenimore Cooper. So he would have absorbed the myths and half-myths about the wilderness that most country boys did not know” (12). Munro continues, detailing her father’s path imaginatively and practically, accounting for his life:

My father being a Huron County farm boy with the extra, Fenimore-Cooper perception, a cultivated hunger, did not turn aside from the these boyish interests at the age of eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Instead of giving up the bush he took to it more steadily and seriously. He began to be talked about more as a trapper than as a young farmer, and as an odd and lonely character, though not somebody that anyone feared or disliked. He was edging away from the life of a farmer, just as he had edged away earlier from the idea of getting an education and becoming a professional man. He was edging towards a life he probably could not clearly visualize, since he would know what he didn’t want so much better than what he wanted. The life in the bush, on the edge of the farms, away from the towns; how could it be managed? (13)

Here Munro is wondering over the same question that informs her meditation on the American novelist Willa Cather in “Dulse,” a story she wrote concurrent with “Working.” In it, her narrator, Lydia, wonders about Cather: “But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live?” (*Moons* 58). As with the fictional Lydia’s questions about Cather, here, too, Munro is focused on facts: her parents, especially her father, were actual people, not characters. In this way she details her father’s move from trapping into fox farming, and the subsequent visit of a

young woman, ... a cousin on the Irish side, from Eastern Ontario. She was school-teacher, lively, importunate, good-looking, and a couple of years older than he. She was interested in

the foxes, and not, as his mother thought, pretending to be interested in order to entice him. ... She looked at the foxes and did not see their connection with the wilderness; she saw a new industry, the possibility of riches. She had a little money saved, to help buy a place where all this could get started. She became my mother. (17)

Adept as she is at describing salient human characteristics, Munro's meditation on her parents' characteristics and motives, and her own understanding of each, over time, is detailed, tentative, and ultimately profound. She imagines them as youthful, "helpless, marvelously deceived"—but realizes that she does so as much to imagine herself as a child born out of real rather than "sting" or "half-hearted" affection (17–18). As part of a detailed accounting of her parents' characteristics, Munro focuses on two memories of her own, indicative of each of them, in the balance of "Working for a Living." The first is of her mother's triumph at retailing their best furs at a hotel in Muskoka—Munro and her father drove her there in a rickety automobile that should not have been on the highway, so, she later inferred, her father took back roads as a precaution. He had little money to take on the trip, so they all depended on Munro's mother's success. Through the "gifts she had," Anne Chamney Laidlaw made the money they needed (27). In "those later years" after she had died, Robert Laidlaw

would speak of my mother's salesmanship, and how she had saved the day, and say that he didn't know what he was going to do, that time, if she hadn't had the money when he got there. 'But she had it,' he said, and the tone in which he said this made me wonder about the reservations [about her mother] I had assumed he shared. Such shame now seems shameful. It would be a relief to me to think he hadn't shared it. (28)

As this episode suggests, things were tight in Laidlaw's fox-farming business, and in 1947 it failed. Munro writes:

When my father went looking for a job he had to find a night job, because he had to work all day going out of business. He had to pelt all the stock and sell the skins for what he could get, he had to tear down the pens. ... He got a job as a night-watchman at the Foundry, covering the hours from five in the afternoon till ten in the evening. (28, 29)

One evening in 1949, while he is working there, “the last spring, in fact the last whole season, I lived at home, I was riding my old bicycle ... to give a message to my father” at the foundry (28). This visit is the central incident shared by both the fictional and memoir versions of “Working for a Living.” In it, Laidlaw gives Munro a tour of the foundry—where she has never been—and she, for her part, realizes the nature of his job there (he mops the floor, for example, something he would never have done at home). Munro moves from this to an account of a practical joke the supervisor played on a worker there, and from that to her father’s account of his enjoyment of his work at the foundry: one night, gathered in the caretaker’s room, the men discussed the question, “what is the best time in a man’s life? When is a person the happiest?” A variety of views were offered. “Then my father said, ‘I don’t know, I think maybe right now’” (36).

Munro’s father also told her about how, when leaving the foundry one night at midnight, he found “a great snowstorm in progress.” Leaving his car where it was, he began to walk the two miles home, and when nearly there was stopped by the storm:

He thought of his death. He would die leaving a sick crippled wife who could not take care of herself, an old mother full of disappointment, a younger daughter whose health had always been delicate, an older girl who was often self-centered and mysteriously incompetent, a son who seemed to be bright and reliable but who was still only a little boy. He would die in debt, and before he had even finished pulling down the [fox] pens; they would be there to show the ruin of his enterprise.

“Was that all you thought about?” I said when he told me this.

“Wasn’t that enough?” he said, and went on to tell how he ... had got home.

But I had meant, didn’t he think of himself, of the boy who had trapped along the Blyth Creek, and asked for Sign’s Snow Paper; the young man about to be married who had cut cedar poles in the swamp to build the first fox-pens; the forty-year-old man who had thought of joining the army? I meant, was his life now something that only other people had a use for? (36–37)

Munro then breaks from the text, and when she takes it up again she unites her parents in a final paragraph to mark them “off, to describe, to illumine” but not at all “to *get rid*” of them (*Something* 246):

My father always said that he didn’t really grow up until he went to work in the Foundry. He never wanted to talk much about the fox-farm, until he was old and could talk easily about anything that had happened. But my mother, as she was being walled in by the increasing paralysis, often wanted to talk about her three weeks at the Pine Tree Hotel, the friend and money she had made there. (37)

Robert Laidlaw and Anne Chamney Laidlaw are here, together, in “Working for a Living.” They have been textualized, their daughter’s words having caught something of their lives, having imprisoned the essence of who they are—even though they are gone and wondered over yet—in her text.

And yet, as Munro’s changes to “Working for a Living” demonstrate, a fictional persona such as Janet is a mask sustained at cost: the illusion that none of this happened, that all of it is fiction, made up—or if portions did happen, they did not occur in just the way invoked by the author. As Munro wrote in “Dulse,” “that is what she said to the doctor. But is it the truth?” (*Moons* 55). Around the same time Munro was working

on “Dulse,” pondering versions of “truth”—fictional, factual, and (given Cather’s presence in the story) biographical—she was also working on “Working for a Living.” That piece, by collapsing into fact, and by eliding fictional persona, defines the deep empathy at the heart of Munro’s fictions, an empathy derived from her intimacy with and long contemplation of her own home place, Huron County, Ontario. Technically, too, “Working for a Living,” like “Dulse,” shows Munro moving across the putative line between memory and imagination, recreating on the page our connections to people, to places, to memory, to the present moment: that is, the very nexus of identity. Those connections are “what it was all about” in the work of Munro (*Moons* 6); in her words, “this ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious.” For Munro, “here” is “Home,” “Home” is Huron County, Ontario.

* * *

A final quotation, one that encapsulates this whole imaginative process. Connection is “what it was all about” in Munro’s story by that title: “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection.” And as she ends that story before taking up her father’s side of the family in its second part, “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 2. The Stone in the Field,” Munro returns to the image of long-gone people singing—“a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (Cather, *Song* 254). In the story, the narrator remembers her younger self hearing her mother’s visiting cousins, singing together as sleep draws near, “*Row, row, row your boat / Gently down the stream.*” The song, the voices, the people singing in such high spirits: all are clear—until memory fades out like the song itself, like life. “To my surprise—for I am surprised, even though I know the pattern of the rounds—the song is thinning out, you can hear the two voices striving, ‘merrily’ turning into ‘dream,’ and then only “one voice alone ... singing on, gamely, to the finish ... *Life is. Wait. But a. Now, wait. Dream*” (*Moons* 18).

A “Booming Tender Sadness”: Alice Munro’s Irish (2008)

But what if the cows in my story were actually cows in Edna O’Brien’s rainy fields in County Clair? That is the sort of thing that can happen.

—Alice Munro, “Good Woman in Ireland” (2003)

The August 29, 2005, issue of the *New Yorker* included Alice Munro’s piece called “The View From Castle Rock.” It was accompanied, as is that magazine’s practice, by an apt photograph: in this case, a period image of a group of people, obviously European immigrants, crowded tightly and uncomfortably on the deck of a ship. At the centre of the photograph, a man wearing a bowler hat and suit lies awkwardly on his side, partially wrapped in a blanket, looking away from the camera. Ringed behind him, each staring at the camera, are three young women with shawls over their heads; behind them, also staring our way, are another woman and another man—she also with a shawl, he also with a bowler and a suit. But for the first man looking away, the image looks rather like a family portrait. Perhaps it is, though no one looks formal, or happy. As it was meant to do, this photograph asserts a single, overarching historical context:

immigration.¹ Coming to America, coming to Canada. I'll return to this image.

"The View From Castle Rock" begins with the incident referred to by its title: accompanying his father along with a group of men, a 10-year-old boy named Andrew who is visiting Edinburgh looks out from Castle Rock. This is how Munro describes it:

It had just stopped raining, the sun is shining on a silvery stretch of water far ahead of them, and beyond that is a pale green and grayish-blue land, a land as light as mist, sucked into the sky.

‘America,’ his father tells them, and one of the men says that you would never have known it was so near.

Ignoring comments made by the others, the father continues, “‘So there you are, my lad’—he turns to Andrew—‘and God grant that one day you will live to see it closer, and I will myself, if I live.’” Munro ends this scene with a characteristic narrative corrective before heading her reader into the story proper:

Andrew has an idea that there is something wrong with what his father is saying, but he is not well enough acquainted with geography to know that they are looking at Fife. He does not know if the men are mocking his father or if his father is playing a trick on them. Or if it is a trick at all.

Some years later, in the harbor of Leith, on the fourth of June, 1818, Andrew and his father—whom I must call Old James, because there is a James in every generation—and Andrew’s pregnant wife, Agnes, his brother Walter, his sister Mary, and also his son James, who is not yet two years old, set foot on board a ship for the first time in their lives. (“View” 65)

The family name of these people is Laidlaw, and so, although the *New Yorker* ran “The View From Castle Rock” as fiction, in it Munro is narrating the story of her Scots ancestors who left Ettrick in 1818 to immigrate

to Canada. She has surviving letters to guide her, but, typically, she has imagined much of the detail of the voyage across.

This was not the first time Munro had written about the emigration of her father's people from Scotland to America. She is herself descended from another Laidlaw brother, William, who remained in Scotland when the others left in 1818 and did not immigrate until 1836, and then to Illinois. She tells this story in "Changing Places," an essay she published in 1997. She has also used parts of it in her fiction, in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 2. The Stone in the Field," for instance, and in "A Wilderness Station." Nor will it be the last time she takes up this subject, given that *The View from Castle Rock* is the projected title (it used to be *The Power in the Blood*) of her next book, due to be published in the fall of 2006. Along with "The View From Castle Rock," that book is to include two of Munro's most powerful meditations on her family connections, "Home" (1974) and "Working for a Living" (1981). Though published some time ago and little known, neither has been included in one of Munro's books. *The View from Castle Rock* is the book about her family she has been thinking of doing since the late 1970s—and I am one who is glad that these older fugitive family pieces will be included in one of Munro's books.

Munro's maternal ancestors, the Chamneys and the Codes, immigrated to eastern Ontario—then Upper Canada—about the same time as the Laidlaws left Scotland, around 1820. Irish-Protestant farmers from County Wicklow, they settled in an area called, ironically, Scotch Corners. They farmed marginal land between the Canadian Shield and the St. Lawrence River, raised their families, and lived among a larger extended family. They were poor, poorer than the Laidlaws in Huron County that Munro's mother married into, and Munro has said that they respected themselves (see Thacker, *Writing* 19–25, 32–36).

The immigrant voyage across the Atlantic in "The View From Castle Rock" was also not the first time Munro imagined such a voyage. She did so in "1847: The Irish," a story she was commissioned to research and write as part of a CBC-TV series called *The Newcomers/Les arrivants*. The film based on Munro's script was broadcast in January 1978, and the next year it appeared in narrative form as a story—now called "A Better Place Than Home"—in a collection based on the whole series. But unlike "Changing Places" or "The View From Castle Rock," Munro's first version

of an immigrant story does not appear to be based on her own family's story. Rather, it is very much a part of the shift in subject matter that characterized Munro's work after she returned to Ontario from British Columbia in the fall of 1973. This shift was brought about by Munro's imaginative confrontation with the legacies of her family inheritances, seen in a new light brought about by her return to Ontario, a recognized writer in her early 40s. The shift can be seen especially in three family-focused stories she wrote in late 1973, when she was living in London and visiting Wingham with some regularity, owing to her father's declining health. "Home" and "Winter Wind" focus on her father, his mother, and his aunt, but "The Ottawa Valley"—arguably one of the most critical stories, if not *the* critical story, in Munro's *oeuvre*—focuses on Munro's maternal relatives and on her recollections of the onset of her mother's Parkinson's disease. That story is based on a long visit she made, with her mother and sister during the summer of 1943, to her Irish-Protestant relatives in Lanark County; there, during that visit, the 11- or 12-year-old Alice Laidlaw first realized the import of the symptoms of the disease that would eventually kill her mother, after a near 20-year struggle.

She also recalls some of the characteristics of these relatives living in Scotch Corners near Carleton Place in the Ottawa Valley. In the story, there is a character named Uncle James who, the narrator notes, had "kept the Irish accent my mother had lost and [her cousin] had halfway lost. His voice was lovely, saying the children's names. Mar-ie, Ron-ald, Ru-thie. So tenderly, comfortingly, reproachfully he said their names, as if the names, or the children themselves, were jokes played on him." This character is based on her mother's brother John, who would have had five of his six children by the summer of 1943. Coming home in a car from some event with this family, the narrator reports that

unexpectedly, Uncle James began to sing. He had a fine voice of course, a fine sad, lingering voice. I can remember perfectly well the tune of the song he sang, and the sound of his voice rolling out the black windows [of the car], but I can remember only bits of the words, here and there, though I have often tried to remember more, because I liked the song so well. *As I was a-go-en over Kil-i-kenny Mountain ...* I think that was the way it

started. Then further along something about *pearly*, or *early* and *Some take delight in*—various things, and finally the strong but sad-sounding line: *But I take delight in the water of the barley.*

As Uncle James sings, all in the car listen: “nobody broke the singing, its booming tender sadness” (*Something* 233, 237–38).

Uncle James’s singing is but an image in “The Ottawa Valley,” a story that is focused sharply on the mother and her illness: “it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken,” Munro writes in her well-known metafictional critique, the coda that ends the story. And so Uncle James with the Irish accent, the Irish lilt to his voice, the Irish songs he sings, is, in the end, like one of “the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents’ old camera used to take” (246). Yet by describing him in a succession of images—speaking, singing, and reciting a poem just before the story ends—his character lives on with its “booming tender sadness,” his presence an imagistic detail within the imagined recollection that is “The Ottawa Valley.”

These images of Uncle James take me back to the *New Yorker’s* image of shipboard immigrants looking variously away or toward the camera as their snapshot was taken. Although the magazine’s editors were merely finding an appropriate image to accompany Munro’s “The View From Castle Rock,” they were also (probably knowingly) following her own aesthetic—this is a writer who very often begins with an image that has caught her eye and then strives to figure out what that image means, working out “the rest of the story.” Such an image begins “The View From Castle Rock,” with Andrew, his father, and the others looking out at Fife. These images strike Munro at her heart, as she wrote in her introduction to the paperback edition of her *Selected Stories* (1997), and thus are at the centre of her art. In that introduction, she describes an image she saw from the window of the Wingham Public Library when she was about 15—a man with his horses in swirling snow “carelessly revealed.” Munro describes this scene as giving her “something like a blow to the chest.” Once the moment had passed “it was more a torment than a comfort to think about this [scene] because I couldn’t get hold of it at all” (Introduction xvi–xvii).

Having defined these contexts for understanding Munro's Irish heritage, I want now to take up "A Better Place Than Home," the narrative version of Munro's television script, "1847: The Irish." The television script was shot during the summer of 1977 and broadcast early in 1978, which means Munro would have been researching and writing the script around 1975 and 1976 (according to W. Paterson Ferns in a letter to Munro dated January 4, 1977; 37.2.31). What interests me most about this project is that Munro accepted it and worked on it just as she had returned not only to Ontario, but also to Huron County; she had moved to Clinton from London by September 1975. This was the same time during which she was working on "Places at Home" and, after that project was abandoned, on the stories that were published in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, as well as the three family-related stories held out of that book and published in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982): "Chaddeleys and Flemings" (two parts) and "The Moons of Jupiter" (see Thacker, *Writing* Chapter 6, *passim*). What this means, both biographically and in relation to Munro's development as a writer, is that her return to Ontario and Huron County saw her confronting, after over 20 years away, the facts of her home place, the absences of relatives and others who had been there when she left in 1951 (though her recollection of them was strong), and, with her research for "1847: The Irish," the historical contexts of her mother's ancestors. As I have argued elsewhere, when Munro returned to Ontario she was, quite truthfully, unsure about just what she would write, or even if she would write (Thacker, *Writing* 265). Seen this way, the research for her Irish project confirmed a new, research-based direction she would subsequently take in some of her stories. "Dulse" (1980) required her to research the life of Willa Cather, and in "Meneseteung" (1988) the narrator is researching the life and circumstances of Almeda Roth, putatively an historical figure. Indeed, it is quite possible to see that narrator as Munro herself as she researched "1847: The Irish."

In an undated Munro typescript called "Notes on treatment" in Munro's papers at the University of Calgary, she offers an overview of what she was researching and writing:

I see this story as paralleling pretty well the experiences of the Irish immigrants of that time—the traumatic beginning, the

bewildering and difficult struggles, the nearly paralyzing disappointments (James' death), then the slow prosaic adjustment and absorption into the country's life. There can't be any spectacular 'making it' in the new land because the Irish usually didn't get that far. They remained mostly working class, lower middle-class, or self-sufficient farmers. (Never mind Timothy Eaton)[.] But this woman, speaking in 1900, would see her family's survival, their modest occupations, as a source of great pride and satisfaction.

Here, too, she gives us a glimpse of her methods. She has been reading emigrant letters, writing that "all the letters are quite sufficiently changed from the originals, all place names, names, times, factual details are changed, but the outline, the whole development of the story is not changed." Earlier, explaining the details and events she uses in her description of the Atlantic crossing, Munro writes:

Uneatable ship's stores, unseaworthy ship, desperate, ill-prepared, sickly passengers, the familiarity with death, terrifying inroads of the fever, the despair of those taken to the quarantine sheds on Grosse Isle. The details such as the showing of the tongue, the dead baby, are true. (37.20.4.2.f1-2)

The story Munro tells is that of James and Mary, a young married couple with two small children in Ireland. (They are Catholic—Munro has told me that the board of historians who vetted the script for the CBC insisted that the characters be Roman Catholic, another detail at variance with Munro's circumstances.) Having failed in business there, James books passage to Quebec, leaving Mary and the children with her father, an Irish merchant whose fortunes have not slipped. Mary wants to follow James to Upper Canada as soon as possible but her father, against that plan, takes some time before he relents and allows her to go. James, meanwhile, has a rough passage alongside other immigrants, seeing horrific poverty, near-starvation, and many deaths from cholera among his fellow passengers. Not ill himself, he is allowed ashore and travels to Brantford,

where, as fate has it, he arrives to find that the sponsor he was seeking has just died. He attends the man's wake, drinks and eats a great deal, and leaves to find a job working on a gang building a road between Brantford and London. Receiving word that Mary and the children are coming, he heads east to meet their ship at Quebec, stopping in Montreal to pick up some work before the ship arrives. Mary arrives but James never appears, so she travels to her sister's near Chatham and waits. It takes some time, but eventually she learns that James has died in Montreal of the cholera before she travelled through Montreal herself. Unable to face a return voyage back home, she stays and ends up marrying a bachelor neighbour of her sister and brother-in-law's in Chatham, remaining there for the rest of her life.

So far as I know, Munro's script has not survived, but there are drafts of her transformation of "1847: The Irish" into "A Better Place Than Home," including two that are reasonably complete. In the first, Munro appears to be ending the story with James just off the ship, wondering how to come to terms with the horrible scenes that he's just seen aboard the ship:

He would carry the memory under his daily life, not speaking of it, but always knowing it was there, just as he knew what was under the boards of the this deck. But even as he thought this he thought he might forget[,] and that might be how people managed, passing from dreams to waking and waking to dreams, and life to death, forgetting. (37.20.11.f19)

The second draft contains the ending Munro opted for, focusing on Mary after she's learned and digested the news of James's death, and after the neighbour has begun to indicate his interest in her and his intentions:

Over at the wood pile, Henry Norris was splitting logs, with Elsie's husband. Mary took the sheet [she was folding] away from her face and looked at him. He was strong still, with the axe. He was gentle with her children. He would be good to them even when he had his own children, because he was a just

man. The wedding ring she wore had been loose on her finger for a long time. It was easy to slide it off, into her apron pocket.

Her name would be Mary Norris. She would stay here, she would die here. She would change from the person she was into someone she could not imagine, another man's wife, and would put those letters [from James] away where she could not look at them until she was old, so old they couldn't trouble her, and with so much life between her and them she would read them like a story. ("Better" 124, see 37.20.12.f19)

As Munro indicated in her treatment notes for the script, in the film this scene was explicitly placed in 1900, as Mary looks back on her life in Canada and at her family's successes there. Here in the printed version—"she would read" James's letters "like a story"—Munro may be seen doing what would become a characteristic technique once she returned to Ontario: telescoping a character's life, often at the end of a story, though not always just there, into a few sentences or a paragraph. This technique can be seen throughout *Who Do You Think You Are?* In "The Beggar Maid," for instance, Munro tells the reader everything about Rose and Patrick—their meeting, romance, marriage, life together, divorce—in a short space. In "Accident," she writes as the story ends of Frances, whose whole life was defined by the central accident of the title: "She's had her love, her scandal, her man, her children. But inside she's ticking away, all by herself, the same Frances who was there before any of it. Not altogether the same, surely. The same" (*Moons* 109). In "Miles City, Montana," in the midst of the recollection of the family vacation that makes up most of the story, the narrator abruptly announces that she hasn't seen Andrew, the husband with whom she had just been quarrelling, "for years, don't know if he is still thin, has gone completely gray, insists on lettuce, tells the truth, or is hearty and disappointed" (*Progress* 92). One reviewer called this a "single sentence, lacerating paragraph" (Thacker, *Writing* 438), and it is, so abrupt is its effect in piercing the moment Munro has so carefully constructed.

To conclude, though I am not ultimately claiming a great deal for Munro's treatment of her Irish inheritances, as I said at the beginning and as "The View From Castle Rock" again demonstrates, Munro has treated her Scots ancestors in greater detail and in a most sustained

fashion. That conceded, “1847: The Irish” and “A Better Place Than Home,” coming as they did at a critical moment in Munro’s career, played a part in the transformation of Munro’s art as she returned to Ontario, and to Huron County, after over 20 years in British Columbia. Though not focused on her own Irish ancestors, Munro’s research into the mid-nineteenth-century Irish exodus from Ireland helped contextualize the images she was happening upon in Ontario in the 1970s and that she subsequently fashioned into stories. Her research was also a template for that researching narrator in “Meneseteung,” who in researching Almeda Roth is “reading microfilm, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (*Friend* 73). This image was borne, I am sure, from Munro’s experiences researching “1847: The Irish” and “A Better Place Than Home,” and, as here, its effects are felt throughout the balance of her work.

A final, final word: speaking of rubbish, there may be reason to hope that Munro will return more explicitly to her Irish ancestry: In a recent essay, “Good Woman in Ireland,” Munro recounts the circumstances in which she discarded a version of “The Love of a Good Woman” (1996) when she was staying in Carrigadrohid, on the River Lee, in County Cork. Her dissatisfaction with that version of the story derived, she writes, from changes she had made to it while she was staying in Ireland: the problems

had all to do with something I would have to call tone. Something unmistakable but hard to define. And yet I knew now where that had come from. It had come from Irish stories, from William Trevor and Edna O’Brien and Frank O’Connor and Mary Lavin, all of whom I had read for decades, long before I went to Ireland, and whom I was not reading during that particular time in their country. I was not reading them but I was seeing through them, through their eyes and their words.

Munro discarded her story and, once home, found an earlier version of it, written before the changes, and so she decided, she wrote, to “fetch everything back” (*Good Woman* 30). Munro did, and it has made all the difference, Munro being no one but Munro.

No Problem Here: A Review of *Too Much Happiness* (2009)

Munro's Latest Continues, Extends, Returns, Surprises

Too Much Happiness

Alice Munro

McClelland & Stewart

A Douglas Gibson Book, 2009.

When Alice Munro's recent collection, *The View From Castle Rock*, appeared in 2006, some of its reviews contained an intriguing echo of the critique Willa Cather received from Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling in the 1930s. These two titans aimed gloves-off assessments at Cather, even though she was arguably the leading American novelist of the 1920s. Hicks accused her of having "fallen into supine romanticism because of a refusal to examine life as it is" (147). Trilling wrote that it "has always been a personal failure of [Cather's] talent that prevented her from involving her people in truly dramatic relations with each other" (155). Cather's response, a feisty and pointed collection of essays titled *Not Under Forty*, did not prevent Hicks' and Trilling's critiques from having staying power: Cather's art was familiar in the public mind and not, emphatically, what they felt was needed then.

This is similar to the reception given to *The View from Castle Rock*. Wrongly assuming that this would be Munro's last book, Stephen

Henighan, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, surveys Munro's career, damns with faint praise, and niggles over Canadian references, and concludes, sadly, that the collection's two "best" stories are "not the ending for which Alice Munro would have wished." Likewise, in a 2007 essay entitled "The Problem with Alice Munro," Philip Marchand asserts that Munro's "problem" is that "she has been so true to the world she has chosen to depict." He writes, "The horizons ... are uniformly low, due partly to the absence of characters whose education, experience and character might enable them to expand those horizons." Noting "the sad paltriness of her world," Marchand wonders if "the limitations of her world have to correlate so closely to the limitations of her art" (13–14).

Munro's recent Man Booker International Prize—now foremost among the many attentions she has garnered abroad—makes such Canadian considerations seem, well, so provincial. That these critics feel free to complain of Munro's limitations—however tentatively—is another indication of the strides Canadian writing has made during Munro's career. Her life as a writer in this country is in many ways an allegory of Canadian publishing since the Second World War—exposure on the CBC, publication in small and commercial Canadian magazines in the 1950s and 1960s, a first book with Ryerson Press in 1968, second and third books with McGraw-Hill Ryerson, and a move to Macmillan to work with Douglas Gibson and then, following him, to McClelland and Stewart for *The Progress of Love* and the many books since. As well, her publication during the late 1970s in the *New Yorker* and with Alfred A. Knopf brought significant international attention. "She's our Chekhov," the American writer Cynthia Ozick famously proclaimed. "Ours," you say? Her writing is too familiar, however seamless. Nothing surprising here. Quite naturally, they want to move on.

Too Much Happiness is Munro's thirteenth collection. All of its 10 stories have been published previously in either the *New Yorker* or *Harper's*. The long title story, "Too Much Happiness"—stunning and shining—appeared in the August 2009 edition of *Harper's*. Consistent with her practice, all have been revised for *Too Much Happiness*, and one, "Wood," her fifth *New Yorker* story, published there in 1980 and uncollected until now, has been added to and reshaped—which is unsurprising for an intuitive artist who never feels her stories are complete.

Throughout *Too Much Happiness*, echoes of earlier stories abound, and there is darkness everywhere: a horrific violence occurs in the first pages; there are random, accidental, and premeditated injuries and deaths; a husband dies suddenly, collapsing in front of a hardware store; an adolescent child disappears, never to be found; while another narrator recounts the effects of his facial birthmark on his life. Munro never repeats earlier stories; she extends, she probes, she develops. She does so now from the perspective of a person who has thought deeply about what she has seen and felt. “I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am,” she begins the story “Some Women.” In “Fiction,” one of the *Harper’s* stories and one that is reminiscent of Munro’s important early “Material,” a young—perhaps too young—writer, a woman whom the protagonist knew and taught music to as a child, publishes a book of short stories called “How Are We to Live.” That title, abounding with irony, could well describe Munro’s entire *oeuvre*. How, indeed? Through fiction and through personal fictions—what we know, what we remember, what we choose to believe, what we think we know.

The answer, for Munro, lies in writing stories. As she has asserted, she wants to discover “the rest of the story” herself. Meditating on such matters, in “Fiction” Munro records her narrator realizing: “here was where the writer would graft her ugly invention onto the people and the situation she had got out of real life, being too lazy to invent but not to malign” (*Too* 56). The core incident in the story happened years ago—marriages and lives have come and gone—but there it still is, glowing with meaning through both memory and being fictionalized. Tellingly, Munro’s protagonist notes that “How Are We to Live” is a “collection of stories, not a novel.” This “seems to diminish the book’s authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside” (*Too* 49–50). So, too, has Munro been seen throughout her career. Just short stories. Like Chekhov.

In “Face,” one of the several stories in the collection capturing an entire life, the narrator returns to his childhood home, which appears to be in Goderich, Ontario, intending to clean the place up and sell it, then return to Toronto. He recounts the critical childhood events that animated his family relationships—the reactions of friends and family members to his prominent facial birthmark—and describes a recent and especially

vivid dream in which part of a poem by Walter de la Mare, a poem he does not know, is recited to him by an unknown person who may be a long-gone childhood playmate. This confirms his decision to change his plans and stay in the old place. He thinks: “Something happened here. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places” (*Too* 162).

Munro knows this well, having herself returned to Huron County in 1975 to start a new life at home. That return in many ways made her art, as she acknowledges. But as if to invert present expectations—that she offers “only” the Huron County culture, about which Marchand complains—Munro closes her new book with “Too Much Happiness.” As with Cather turning to a different historical era, Munro, too, turns toward something utterly new: a detailed telling of the final weeks—in 1891—in the life of the well-known mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky. It is stunning and shining, but it contains no mention of Canada or Huron County, nor has it any of the character types we have come to expect from Munro. Instead, toward the story’s end we see Kovalevsky—little more than 40, ill, and taken to her deathbed—murmuring “too much happiness” and thinking about a story she planned to write: “Her hope was that in this piece of writing she would discover what went on. Something underlying. Invented, but not” (*Too* 301). Exactly. The discovery of lives inside an inner place. Like Munro’s, like Chekhov’s. There is never too much happiness in such writing. After all these years, Munro still surprises. No problem here.

“The Way the Skin of the Moment Can Break Open”: Reading Alice Munro’s “White Dump” (2010)

On November 1, 1977—after Alice Munro had published two stories in the *New Yorker*, “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid”—her editor at the magazine, Charles McGrath, wrote to tell her that they had decided against “Chaddeleys and Flemings.” It was a long, two-part story that ultimately became the opening of Munro’s *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). William Shawn—the longest-serving editor of the *New Yorker* and still the least understood person to hold that position—had overruled McGrath and the other fiction editors, who were in favour of printing the story. Shawn believed, McGrath wrote, that “we should publish less reminiscence and less autobiographical fiction,” and Shawn felt the piece “read more like straight reminiscence than a story.” Distancing himself from the decision, McGrath continued, writing, “I don’t know whether it’s autobiographical or not, but it’s my feeling that you’ve taken the material of reminiscence and turned it into something much stronger—a moving, complicated work of fiction” (37.2.30.5). So saying, McGrath perceived and defined *the* great critical fact of Munro’s writing at a critical moment (and perhaps *the* critical moment) of her career: that her stories’ most powerful effects derive, in some sense, from a reader’s sense that this

is too real to be fiction, that this is real life. Reading her stories, we sense that all this may have happened.

Though certainly not overly concerned about her fiction's autobiographical underpinnings—she has long admitted that “there is always a starting point in reality” and once published an essay entitled “What is Real?”—Munro is herself well aware of this issue. In *The View From Castle Rock* (2006) she decided to include three patently autobiographical pieces that she had published before but had held from including in any book of hers. Perhaps as a consequence, Munro directly addressed the question of reminiscence versus fiction in a foreword for the book, explaining her hesitation about the three pieces—“Home” (1974), “Working for a Living” (1981), and “Hired Girl” (1994):

In other first-person stories I had drawn on personal material, but then I did anything I wanted to do with this material. Because the chief thing I was doing was making a story. In the stories I hadn't collected I was not doing exactly that. I was doing something closer to what a memoir does—exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way. I put myself in the center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took on their own life and color and did things they had not done in reality.

Munro concludes by asserting that, considerations of autobiography and memoir notwithstanding, “these are *stories*” (*View x*).

Well, yes. But it is not so simple as that, as I have argued in *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. I wish to continue those considerations here by looking at the two stories that bookend *The Progress of Love* (1986)—the title story, briefly, and, at greater length, “White Dump” (1986), because the two together are indicative of the direction in which Munro was moving in the 1980s. Just as McGrath wrote when he rejected “Chaddeleys and Flemings,” she was creating “moving, complicated work[s] of fiction” from what she calls “personal material.” But however Munro's argument in the foreword of *The View From Castle Rock* is understood after so long a career drawing upon her own life for the purposes of her fiction, hers

are stories daunting in their verisimilitude. Well aware that in Munro he had “discovered”—for American and British audiences, at least—a genuinely special writer, McGrath wrote to Virginia Barber, Munro’s agent, on December 13, 1984, telling Barber that “she is simply one of the finest short story writers alive, and it’s a great honor and privilege for us to be able to publish her” (396/87.3.2a.1). To Munro herself—who has frequently produced finished stories in clumps, with great productivity followed by empty spells—McGrath had written a few months earlier that “you’re sending in these stories faster than I can edit them, and each one is more dazzling than the last. I feel the way Rilke’s editor must have felt—if he had one” (October 15, 1984: 396/87.3.2.13).

The stories McGrath was dealing with then became *The Progress of Love*, Munro’s strongest collection. Of its 11 stories, the *New Yorker* first published five—the others were placed elsewhere after McGrath and his colleagues had declined them. In his letter to Munro, he refers to three of those they had decided on: “Lichen” (1985), “Miles City, Montana” (1985), and “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” (1986). The final two they took—“The Progress of Love” (1985) and “White Dump”—became, respectively, the opening and closing stories of *The Progress of Love*, anchoring the volume. Each of these stories takes up a trio of women—daughter, mother, and grandmother—as a way of examining “the progress of love” through the generations. Paired together, these two stories both look back at what Munro had done in her previous work and look forward toward the works she would produce during the 1990s and after. When McGrath wrote Barber in June of 1985 to accept “White Dump,” he called it “one of Alice’s very best. The writing is stunning throughout, and the story performs something like a little miracle there at the end when it pulls all those different threads so beautifully together” (June 25, 1985: 396/87.3.2a.1).

“The Progress of Love”—a story whose title, Magdalene Redekop has noted, both echoes that of a poem by Swift (“Phillis, Or, The Progress of Love”) and offers the image of life as a parade (*Mothers* 175)—is among Munro’s most caustic examinations of familial inheritance, passed down through the generations. It begins with the narrator—who goes by the nickname “Fame,” from her given name, Euphemia—recalling a phone call from her father telling her the news of her mother’s death. The story

becomes a meditation on mothers and daughters, and a comparison of the lives of three women—including Fame. Fame’s mother, Marietta, was fervently religious (“My mother prayed on her knees at midday, at night, and first thing in the morning. Every day opened up to her to have God’s will done in it. Every night she totted up what she’d done and said and thought, to see how it squared with Him” [*Progress* 4]). Marietta carried a deep hatred for her father, a womanizer and gadabout who mistreated her mother. Justification for Marietta’s hatred derives from a central scene—serious but also comic—in which her mother prepares to hang herself because of her husband’s behaviour. The young Marietta awakens one sunny Saturday morning to discover her mother out in the barn, standing on a chair, a noose around her neck; Marietta’s mother tells her to “go and get your father.” (“That was what her mother told her to do, and Marietta obeyed. With terror in her legs, she ran. In her nightgown, in the middle of a Saturday morning, she ran” [*Progress* 11].) Marietta never forgot this, especially not the reasons why her mother thought it necessary to threaten suicide, so when her father dies she not only refuses his bequest to her, she converts it to cash and burns it in the family stove. (“‘That’s a lot of hate,’” one of Fame’s friends comments when she tells him about it [*Progress* 26].)

For years, Fame saw this act—the burning of the inherited money—as something her parents did together as an act of mutual support (“A solemn scene, but not crazy” [*Progress* 30]). But over the course of the story she realizes that her mother had gotten the money, taken it home, and burned it herself, alone, as a proprietary act; that is, without her father’s knowledge, presumably fearing his objection. Fame not only realizes—just as her own mother has died—that she had it wrong all these years, but also that neither her parents burning the money together, an image that had comforted her, nor her mother burning the money alone are things she approves of herself. Later, Munro telescopes a moment of shared understanding that Fame has with a former lover onto the relationship between her parents and, implicitly, between her grandparents, writing at the end of “The Progress of Love”:

Moments of kindness and reconciliation are worth having, even if the parting has to come sooner or later. I wonder if those

moments aren't more valued, and deliberately gone after, in the setups some people like myself have now, than they were in those old marriages, where love and grudges could be growing underground, so confused and stubborn, it must have seemed they had forever. (*Progress* 30–31)

“The Progress of Love” is a *tour de force* for its multigenerational cast and its explicit use of an autobiographical context. Fame’s situation is modelled, with some adaptations, on Munro’s relationship to her mother, but more significantly the story echoes the experiences of Munro’s maternal grandmother and great-grandmother in the Ottawa Valley—the womanizing great-grandfather and his religious daughter were among Munro’s ancestors. Arguably, such probing of family-based relationships has been a constant in Munro’s work from the beginning—each of her previous books contains stories that use autobiographical and ancestral material. Yet with “The Progress of Love”—both the story and the entire collection of the same name—there is a new-found distancing and shaping, what McGrath apprehended as heading toward “a moving, complicated work of fiction.”

* * *

Less frequently noted than the title story, “White Dump” is an equally powerful rendering that includes autobiographical touches without explicit personal prototype and is an apt pairing to “The Progress of Love” with its daughter-mother-grandmother comparison. Prior to writing it, Munro had published stories in which adultery was central, but with “White Dump” she signals that the subject would become of particular significance in her subsequent writing—at one point in the putting together of *The Progress of Love* she suggested “White Dump” as the book’s title, and subsequently included it in her *Selected Stories* (1996). Its situation and concerns anticipate such other stories as “The Children Stay” (1997), “The Love of a Good Woman” (1996), and “My Mother’s Dream” (1998). As McGrath wrote to Barber when accepting it, “White Dump” ends with “something like a little miracle,” as its threads are brought together in the story’s conclusion. As well, more than other of Munro stories, “White

Dump” is replete with phrases that, in context, strike to the heart of her characters and their most important concerns.

The story focuses on a late summer visit by Denise to her father and stepmother at their cottage in the Ottawa Valley. Denise runs a Women’s Centre in Toronto: “She gets beaten women into shelters, finds doctors and lawyers for them, goes after private and public money, makes speeches, hold meetings, deals with varied and sometimes dangerous mix-ups of life. She makes less money than a clerk in a government liquor store” (*Progress* 276). Denise has steeled herself for this visit—listening to Mozart in the car on the way up—to avoid arguing with her father, Laurence, who “owns a small factory,” and baits her over issues that highlight their contrasting politics. On this day, however, Denise’s “resolve has held. She has caught the twinkle of the bait but has been able to slip past, a clever innocent-seeming fish.” (*Progress* 275, 277). Instead, when his wife and daughter are discussing “various details of house renovation,” Laurence “speaks abruptly to Denise,” asking “‘How is your mother?’” “‘Fine,’ says Denise. ‘As far as I know, fine.’ Isabel lives far away, in the Comox Valley, in British Columbia” (277).

With this question and this answer, Munro moves from the visit and the frictions between Denise and Laurence over politics to her real subject: the moment when, years before, while Denise and her brother were children, their mother resolved to act on the sudden attraction she felt for a man she happened to meet. She did, with cataclysmic consequences for the family, subsequently sundered because of her act. Munro focuses not on the affair or the breakup but rather on the moment when Isabel first knew she would step out of her marriage. She does this by recalling another visit to this same cottage during the summer of 1969, “the year of the moon shot. The moon shot was actually just a couple days after” Denise gave her father a plane ride for his fortieth birthday. She had heard her father say that he wished he could look at “this country from a thousand feet up” (278). But for one, the whole family went up in the plane, including Laurence’s mother, Sophie, who was still alive then. Isabel, however, did not go up. The plane was a five-seater, and “‘somebody had to bow out, so she did,’” Laurence explains; he also told the pilot that day that “‘sitting by herself is my wife’s greatest pleasure”” (303).

Isabel does, of course, ultimately “bow out” “by herself” as a consequence of this incident—the affair she entered into was with the pilot of the plane that day in 1969, just before the moon shot, a person Isabel would never have met had Denise not decided to give her father the flight as a gift. Munro recreates the personalities and circumstances of each family member that day in 1969, detailing the day’s events as all were engaged in preparations for the celebration of Laurence’s fortieth birthday. In particular, Munro details the history of Sophie who, 40 years before, had borne Laurence out of wedlock, impregnated by a married professor when she was a graduate student. Munro also has Sophie suddenly appearing before her family, stark naked, as the birthday celebrations begin that morning. She wishes her son, who is shocked and appalled at this sight, a happy birthday and then explains that some hippies had come along during her morning swim and destroyed her bathrobe while she was in the lake.

However, any recounting of plot and character details from “White Dump” misses its most powerful effects, which derive from the way Munro constructs the story, its sense of time, its pacing. That construction, and also a succession of startling, otherworldly images, directly evoked, lend the story its especial power. Each image captures the sense of wonder that is, ultimately, Munro’s actual subject—in this case, in the “miracle” that is the “White Dump.” With the moon shot, Munro conveys people’s sense of wonder as they witness a never-before-seen event—Munro develops this sense of wonder within the family through this event. Analogous to this event, smaller but perhaps equally important in the family, is the plane ride down the Rideau Lakes where, among other things, they see a “glint lake”—that is, a lake that straddles the geologic transition from the St. Lawrence Lowlands to the Canadian Shield (*Progress* 304). A “glint,” of course, is also something seen in someone’s eye as she looks amorously toward a promising lover. Such a glint is part the critical moment in this story. The “white dump” is first referred to toward the end of the story, once Isabel has resolved to connect with the pilot. During dinner on his birthday, Laurence tells Isabel that they “saw the silica quarry from the air ... It was like a snowfield.” Isabel replies that when she went to school “we used to have the White Dump” where, because the school property backed onto that of a biscuit factory,

every now and then, they'd sweep up these quantities of vanilla icing and nuts and hardened marshmallow globs and they'd bring it in barrels and dump it back there and it would shine. It would shine like a pure white mountain. Over at the school, somebody would see it and yell, "White Dump!" and after school we'd all climb over the fence or run around. We'd all be over there, scrabbling away at that enormous pile of white candy. ... It was like a kid's dream—the most wonderful promising thing you could ever see. (*Progress* 306)

Munro is likening the sweetness Isabel saw in the White Dump to the sweetness she feels in her attraction to the pilot. However, other than telling us that Isabel has remarried and is far away in British Columbia, and that Laurence has also remarried, Munro's focus remains largely on the family's activities on Laurence's fortieth birthday in 1969. Mid-story, she shifts to an incident that occurred late the next summer, 1970, recalled from Denise's point of view. While Denise, her brother, and their father were making lunch, a woman came to the door asking for Isabel; after being told that Isabel was not there, the woman agrees to see Laurence, who takes her into a private room. The woman, who runs a catering business and had made Laurence's birthday cake the year before, is the wife of the pilot who took the family—except for Isabel—up in his plane. The interview proved to be a long one, and while Denise and her brother wait for their father to return to their lunch preparations, they listen to "the terrible sound of a stranger crying in their house" (287). Having offered this fact, Munro immediately flashes back to the cockpit of the plane when the pilot, conversationally, tells of a time when, flying, he reached out toward the plane's windshield and "flames came shooting out of my fingers. ... Little blue flames. One time in a thunderstorm. That's what they call St. Elmo's fire." Listening, a year later, to "the spurts of sound coming out of the dining room made her [Denise] remember ... the pilot with cold blue fire shooting out of his fingertips, and that seemed a sign of pain, though he had said he didn't feel anything" (*Progress* 287–88).

Ending a book entitled *The Progress of Love*, Munro's "White Dump" recreates both the inevitability of passion and the psychological effects

of deep and longtime intimacy. Running through the text are numerous details of Isabel and Laurence's intimate life—they make love the morning of Laurence's birthday before the children troop into the room to begin the celebrations; there are details regarding Laurence's proprietary tending of Isabel's body and particularly her tan, in which he relishes. As the story moves toward its conclusion, Munro shifts the chronology to intertwine both Isabel's impending affair and her ongoing sexual connection to Laurence. As these considerations swirl in the reader's mind, Munro writes of Isabel's feelings after the group thanks the pilot and says goodbye:

When they were walking toward the car, she had to make an effort not to turn around. She imagined that [she and the pilot] turned at the same time, they looked at each other, just as in some romantic movie, operatic story, high-school fantasy. They turned at the same time, they looked at each other, they exchanged a promise that was no less real though they might never meet again. And the promise hit her like lightning, though she moved on smoothly, intact.

Munro follows this with: "But, it isn't like lightening, it isn't a blow from outside. We only pretend that it is" (*Progress* 305). With this, Isabel has committed to taking actions that will end her marriage to Laurence. And knows she will take them—as is made clear here, she feels the inevitability of it.

After this, the family returns home to the birthday dinner that Isabel has laboriously prepared—including the caterer's cake—to be just so. It is over this dinner that they discuss the glint lake and Isabel tells of the White Dump of her childhood, to which Laurence responds:

"White Dump!" said Laurence—who, at another time, to such a story might have said something like "Simple pleasures of the poor!" "White Dump," he said, with a mixture of pleasure and

irony, a natural appreciation that seemed to be exactly what Isabel wanted.

She shouldn't have been surprised. She knew about Laurence's delicacy and kindness, as well as she knew about his bullying and bluffing. She knew the turns of his mind, his changes of heart, the little shifts and noises of his body. They were intimate. They had found out so much about each other that everything had got cancelled out by something else. That was why the sex between them could seem so shamefaced, merely and drearily lustful, like sex between siblings. Love could survive that—had survived that. Look how she loved him at this moment. Isabel found herself newly, and boundlessly, resourceful. (*Progress* 307)

Munro offers this thumbnail summation of the intimacy between husband and wife just before describing Isabel, the next day, returning to the airport to connect with the pilot and begin their affair. With this passage, in its precise phrasings, Munro captures the crucial moment:

In the years ahead, she would learn to read the signs, both at the beginning and at the end of a love affair. She wouldn't be so astonished at the way the skin of the moment can break open. But astonished enough that she would say one day to her grownup daughter Denise, when they were drinking wine and talking about some things, "I think the best part is always right at the beginning. At the beginning. That's the only pure part. Perhaps even before the beginning," she said. "Perhaps just when it flashes on you what's possible. That may be the best. (*Progress* 307–08)

The flash of this moment is just like St. Elmo's fire—one of the draft titles of this story. What Munro creates here is the sense of astonishment at, as she says, "the way the skin of the moment can break open." Munro does this, here and elsewhere, with both immediacy and perspective, the two

intertwined. At the core of this writing—just as with St. Elmo’s fire, the striking quality of a glint lake, the sweetness of a “White Dump”—is a sense of mystery over the very process of being, and of being human. It is the progress of love, recreated and understood, standing on a page.

* * *

Stories like this, published in the *New Yorker* throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into this century, have made Munro a “writer’s writer” in the United States and Britain. Oddly, and somewhat perversely, Munro seems to be approached abroad as an ongoing discovery and source of wonderment, especially for other writers who long to achieve similar effects themselves. Reviewing *Runaway* (2004) in the *New York Times Book Review*, for instance, Jonathan Franzen dissects the probable reasons for her putative neglect—mostly owing to Munro’s devotion to the form of the short story—and makes one crucial, though over-the-top, request, which he calls a “simple instruction”: “Read Munro! Read Munro!” (16). Francine Prose asserts in *Reading Like a Writer* (2006) that “Alice Munro writes with the simplicity and beauty of a Shaker box. Everything about her style is meant to attract *no* notice, to make you *not* pay attention” (23). In something of the same fashion, though infused with her long familiarity, Margaret Atwood introduces Munro in a new selection of stories, *Carried Away*, first published in 2006 in the United States in Knopf’s Everyman’s Library series (and in 2008 in Britain with the same title and in Canada as *Munro’s Best*). Atwood writes:

In Munro’s work, grace abounds, but it is strangely disguised: nothing can be predicted. Emotions erupt. Preconceptions crumble. Surprises proliferate. Astonishments leap out. Malicious acts can have positive consequences. Salvation arrives when least expected, and in peculiar forms. But as soon as you make such a pronouncement about Munro’s writing—or any other such analysis, inference, or generalization about it—you’re aware of that mocking commentator so often present in a Munro story—the one who says, in essence, *Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to think you know anything*

about me, or about anyone else for that matter? (Introduction xiv,
italics in original)

Atwood might well have been writing here about “the progress of love” in the parade of stories from “The Progress of Love” to “White Dump,” stories in which we readers all stand back and wonder over “the way the skin of the moment can break open” in our lives, “so confused and stubborn,” as if we “had forever.” As Munro well knows, and communicates profoundly in all of her stories—though especially well in these—we don’t have “forever.” Melding the personal with the imaginative, Munro makes her complex, caring art. As Charles McGrath understood in June 1985 as he accepted “White Dump” for publication in the *New Yorker*, it *is* “something like a little miracle.”

Critical Interlude:

Alice Munro: Critical Reception (2013)

Early in 2008, while reviewing William Trevor's *Cheating at Canasta* in the *New York Review of Books*, Claire Messud made an apt observation. She noted that Trevor's books had been praised in the same pages by a long list of "distinguished" reviewers, whom she names, and then asks, "But when did William Trevor—or, for that matter, his fellow contemporary master of the short story form, Alice Munro, the pair of them sharing of the laurels of Chekhov ... —last spark a controversy, let alone incite a debate?" (20). As regards Munro, Messud's point is ultimately fair enough, although it is possible to counter it by citing attempts to ban her putative novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) in parts of Ontario in the 1970s for being controversial; or her decisions to pull *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) from the press for restructuring just before publication, and later to follow her editor to a new publisher with an almost-finished book in hand. More recently, Munro criticized and refused to give permission to quote from archived letters to a particular critic, who, for her part, published her book without the quotations, with wounded protest. Munro also recently caused small stirs when, in 2006, she announced that she might well give up writing altogether, and when, in 2009, she announced that she had had cancer (see Thacker, *Writing* 333–36, 348–50, 418–22, 532, 549–50; McCaig, *Reading* ix–xiv).

That these small controversies escaped Messud's notice is no surprise, given that Munro herself has largely stayed out of the limelight since the beginning of her career. Instead, she just writes. Munro has written out of her own life and her own place; she writes of being alive, of just being human, of wondering, of trying to understand, of trying to maintain. She avoids politics, personalities, lessons—the stuff of controversy. And she has gained her reputation—a large one, as befits a winner of the 2009 Man Booker International Prize—by writing only short stories. As such, Munro's critical reception has been one of steady, persistent growth since she published her first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. Made up of stories written over a 15-year span, that book won Canada's highest literary award; it was followed in 1971 by *Lives of Girls and Women*, a book that quickly became something of a feminist *cri de coeur*. After another collection of stories appeared in 1974, Munro hired a New York agent, Virginia Barber, who both placed her stories in commercial magazines—most notably the *New Yorker*—and brought Munro's next book, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (published as *The Beggar Maid* in the United States) (1979), to Alfred A. Knopf. There have been nine collections since, with another announced for the fall of 2012. Her *Selected Stories* appeared in 1996; *Carried Away*, an Everyman's Library selection, was published in 2006; and stories in the *New Yorker* and in *Harper's* have continued to appear. Munro writes on, reviewers' superlatives abound, and critical analyses have increased to a level befitting Munro's major-author status. In 2005, my extended biography written with Munro's cooperation, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, was published, and an updated paperback appeared in 2011. And in 2007, Carol Mazur and Cathy Moulder released their massive *Alice Munro: An Annotated Bibliography of Works and Criticism*, supplanting earlier attempts at bibliography. The MLA International Bibliography lists almost 200 entries on Munro's work published since the mid-1990s.

Throughout the growth of Munro's reputation, reviewers and critics have consistently struggled to define and articulate just how Munro does what she does in her stories. E. D. Blodgett writes that Munro is a writer whom readers see “endeavoring to locate the meaning that unifies, and yet is always wary of it”; hers is an art of “accommodating contradictions” (*Alice* 68, 126). Ildikó de Papp Carrington sees Munro in the same

fashion, an author who tries to “control the uncontrollable.” Louis K. MacKendrick maintains that it “is quite hopeless and redundant to expect an Alice Munro story to surrender a clear, indisputable, and singular ‘meaning’” (26). Katherine J. Mayberry asserts that for Munro, “to tell is at best to revise, but never to perfectly revive” and that a Munro story “virtually defies plot summary” (540, 532). And Helen Hoy quotes a 1987 interview with Munro in which she said that in each story she is seeking “an admission of chaos” because “a belief in progress is unfounded”; as she told another interviewer, “It doesn’t make much difference ... how [a heroine] ends up at all. Because we finally end up dead.” Thus Hoy asserts that “Munro both captures life’s capriciousness and requires a simultaneous acceptance of conflicting perspectives on reality” (“Alice” 17, 18, 20). That said, Magdalene Redekop offers what is perhaps the great fact of Munro’s most effective and affective art: that each of us as readers perceives “the story Alice Munro is telling *me*,” that the “pleasure of reading Alice Munro is, in the final analysis, that we catch ourselves in the act of looking” (*Mothers* x, 3). She looks at the way life is and, at the same time, recognizes in postmodern ways the impossibility of any narrative to truly reconstruct a central event in someone’s life. Again and again in her stories, as with “White Dump,” Munro shows us how “the way the skin of the moment can break open” (*Progress* 308).

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Although Munro began publishing stories and having them read on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) during the 1950s, and made several appearances in the *Montrealer* in the early 1960s, her critical reception really began with the publication of *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The collection, and the singular nature and quality of the praise it received (one reviewer spoke of “the breadth and depth of humanity in the woman herself, and the beauty—the almost terrifying beauty—she commands in expressing it”), vaulted Munro to the forefront of Canada’s leading writers (Thacker, *Writing* 193). Such reaction not only continued but became amplified and more acute with the publication of *Lives of Girls and Women* in 1971 in Canada and with its appearance the next year from McGraw-Hill in the United States. Taken together, the reviews that these

and subsequent books received mark the beginning of Munro's critical reception (summary overviews of these reviews, gauged to Munro's biography, are available throughout my *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*).

Separate from newspaper and broadcast reviews, and from various pieces with broader treatment in the literary press, the first critical article on Munro's fiction was a thematic study of "unconsummated relationships," which appeared in early 1972 in *World Literature Written in English* (Dahlie). It was followed in 1975 by two pieces published in 1975 by J. R. (Tim) Struthers, one on Munro and the American South, the other on Munro and James Joyce in *Lives of Girls and Women*. These two critics were the vanguard, and were followed by others throughout the 1970s, with increasing critical attention on Munro as the decade passed. Articles appeared in such journals as *Canadian Literature* (Conron, Bailey), the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (Martin, "Joyce"), *Modern Fiction Studies* (Macdonald, "Madman"), *Mosaic* (Dawson), *Open Letter* (New), *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Macdonald, "Structures"), and *Studies in Short Fiction* (Monaghan). At the same time, Munro was considered very much a part of book-length studies examining Canadian fiction as an entity (Blodgett, "Prisms"; Moss, Packer). During the 1970s as well, much critical work was being done in graduate theses. The initial critical impetus was one of identification and connection, of examining central matters in the fiction, and of making connections between Munro and other writers; it also focused on her work amid what were then seen as "Canadian" considerations, given the nationalist fervor of the decade in English-speaking Canada and its concomitant concern with the growth of a definable Canadian literature. In keeping with this, Dahlie returned to Munro in 1978 with an overview essay, "The Fiction of Alice Munro," published in the American magazine *Ploughshares* to accompany one of Munro's stories, "Characters" (never republished in a collection). There he writes, accurately and presciently, that Munro's "fiction is rooted tangibly in the social realism of the rural and small town world of her own experience, but it insistently explores what lies beyond the bounds of empirical reality" (56–57). So it was then with Munro, and so it is still.

By this time Munro had made her first appearances in the *New Yorker*, and the interest that the editors of that publication and those of *Ploughshares* had in her—along with the editors of *Modern Fiction Studies*

and *Studies in Short Fiction*, already noted, from the 1970s—suggests that the growth of Munro’s critical reputation during that decade was a two-tracked affair. Although certainly seen at home as primarily, even quintessentially, a *Canadian* writer, Munro has from the early 1970s on attracted her critics irrespective of nationalist considerations, and perhaps even despite them. Munro writes of life, not nations, and because she is a Canadian writer, the ways she is read abroad—most especially in the United States—has proven to be at times a bit vexing for her critics at home.

Early in 1980, Helen Hoy published “‘Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable’: Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro’s Fiction,” a singular essay that directed critical attention away from thematics and toward language, structure, and style in Munro’s stories. “Verbal paradox ... particularly cryptic oxymoron, remains a more distinctive feature of Munro’s style, and ... functions particularly as a means of definition, of zeroing in on the individual qualities of an emotion or moment” (106). Frequently cited since, Hoy’s essay proved prescient in directing critical attention into the textures of Munro’s well-wrought stories, which critics began exploring in earnest during the 1980s. The first book devoted to Munro, *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro’s Narrative Acts* (1983), edited by Louis K. MacKendrick, offered nine essays by various hands (and an interview with Munro by Struthers); each one, seen now, proved influential in shaping subsequent scholarship—frequently noted and responded to as they have been since.

In 1984, three more publications appeared: another collection of essays devoted to Munro, *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, edited by Judith Miller; the first single-authored book-length study, B. Pfaus’s *Alice Munro*; and my own annotated bibliography of Munro in the fifth volume of *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada’s Major Authors*. Taken together, following after *Probable Fictions* and with the recently published *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) showing Munro to still be ascendant, these demonstrate an accelerating critical interest in Munro’s work. The Miller volume, a collection of presentations (and an interview) from the first Alice Munro conference held at the University of Waterloo in 1982, especially demonstrates this (see Thacker “Conferring”).

Although Pfaus's book is technically the first single-authored critical book to have been published on Munro, its brevity and many weaknesses are such that it has exerted almost no influence in Munro studies. Nothing of the sort can be said of the 10 such volumes published between 1987, when W. R. Martin's *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* was published, and 1994, when Ajay Heble's *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* appeared. More than this, during the same period, essays continued to be published, a brief though very fine biography by Catherine Sheldrick Ross appeared, and Coral Ann Howells, who would later publish what is still perhaps the best single-authored book on Munro, offered an extended consideration of Munro in her *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s* (1987). Looking back at this outpouring now, the critical books of sustaining influence have been Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable* (1989), Redekop's *Mothers and Other Clowns* (1992), and, largely because of its theoretical inflections (which engage and extend Blodgett's in his *Alice Munro* [1988]), Heble's *The Tumble of Reason* (1994). Yet two of the books published among the 10 appearing between 1987 and 1994, Neil K. Besner's *Introducing Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women* (1990) and Louis K. MacKendrick's *Some Other Reality: Alice Munro's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1993), demonstrate abundantly that Munro's art, one of always pushing the limitations of the short story, is not well served by the critical form of the single-author extended critical overview. On the contrary, Besner and MacKendrick's books, as short (about 100 pages) critical volumes focused sharply on the aesthetic and biographical contexts defined by a single Munro collection, demonstrate that Munro is an artist whose variegated stories elude broad overview. In fact, Munro's critical reception has demonstrated that her work is best understood at the level of the single story or by considering a small group of stories.¹

As it happened, in 1991 and again in 1998, I surveyed Munro criticism in two omnibus review essays published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Thacker "Go Ask Alice", "What's 'Material?'"). In these I considered the 10 critical books noted above, along with others that treated Munro as one of several authors in other contexts, and in the 1998 essay I also surveyed the critical articles. Given the availability of these essays, there seems little point in reiterating my assessments here, so I refer readers

to them. That said, I would also point readers toward Coral Ann Howells' final chapter in her *Alice Munro*, also published in 1998, in which she offers differing views on much of the same critical writing (137–53).

In 1998 as well, I edited a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* devoted to Munro, entitled “Alice Munro, Writing On...” A year later it was republished as a book, retitled *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro*; it is in the later form that it is most often noted. Following *Probable Fictions* and *The Art of Alice Munro*, *The Rest of the Story* again demonstrates that the best critical approach to Munro's art is by way of the single story, and more than that it demonstrates, too, that individual stories in each collection seem to draw repeated critical analyses. “Royal Beatings” (1977), “The Moons of Jupiter” (1978), “The Progress of Love” (1985), “Meneseung” (1988), “Carried Away” (1991), “Vandals” (1993), “The Love of a Good Woman” (1996), “The Children Stay” (1997), and “Save the Reaper” (1998) have continued to garner the most attention, most especially “Meneseung” and “The Love of a Good Woman.”

* * *

Throughout the 1990s and leading up to the publication of *The Rest of the Story*, individual critics—some with previous writing on Munro, some not—published essays that were broadly general in analyzing the bases of Munro's art and, as well, sharply focused on a single telling story. Katherine J. Mayberry did this in 1992 by focusing on “Hard-Luck Stories” (1982) from *The Moons of Jupiter*, while in the same year Pam Houston offered an early and almost immediately influential reading of “Meneseung.” Taking that story into her classroom, Houston contextualizes it within the work of numerous other renowned short story writers, and within narrative theory, and asserts that

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 still long enough to mean just one thing. (90)

Keeping close to Munro's latest stories, too, was Ildikó de Papp Carrington, who followed her 1989 book with several articles on stories from Munro's most recent works during the next decade; well grounded in Munro's techniques, always attuned to telling details, Carrington's essays persuade by their precision and well-informed research.

The work of these critics, and others, during the 1990s demonstrates that critical analysis of Munro's stories was being driven in part by her own publications; beginning with *Friend of My Youth* (1990) and continuing through the increasingly complex stories in *Open Secrets* (1994) and *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), her status well established, Munro seemed to immediately draw critics intent on discerning the complexities of her work and on probing new directions in it. Nathalie Foy, for instance, wrote that the "stories in *Open Secrets* hang together precisely because they are not continuous but layered. Some layers remain forever parallel, and some intersect in the weird geometry of this collection" (153). This notion of layering in Munro's work—spatially, geographically, historically, and especially chronologically—has drawn and continues to draw critical analysis. Writing about the same time as Foy, Charles Forceville and Coral Ann Howells ("Intimate") examined Munro's layering in persuasive ways that both acknowledge and extend our understanding of the relationship between space and time in her stories. In the same way, critics turned their attention to previously unexamined aspects of Munro's art: Robert Lecker extended John Weaver's earlier examination of Munro's telling of Ontario's history by looking at the economic and social history told in "Carried Away," while Magdelene Redekop ("Scottish Nostalgic") and Christopher E. Gittings began the discussion of Munro's use of her Scots ancestors that has continued through to the present, especially with Munro's *The View From Castle Rock* (2006) (see also Karl Miller).

During the 1990s, too, articles began appearing that, whatever their interest in Munro, seemed much more intent on demonstrating ways in which her stories confirmed the writings of various literary theorists (see for example Garson "Synecdoche"). Much less a matter of Munro's stories confirming secondary writing on theory, some critics demonstrated that her stories are themselves inherently theoretical, that they demonstrate the limitations of narrative completeness. Mark Nunes, for instance,

writes in “Postmodern ‘Piercing’: Alice Munro’s Contingent Ontologies,” an important essay, that Munro “defies [the] margins of ‘Postmodernism’ while raising the same challenges of adetermination, overflow, and the denial of totalizing narrative. Her writing, she has noted, captures the ‘funny jumps’ of living: bumps that unsettle the narrative frame” (11). Complementing this view, Mark Levene writes in a powerful essay that has much to say about Munro’s writing generally, but *The Progress of Love* through to *The Love of a Good Woman* especially, that “in the most obvious sense, Munro is a regional writer, but her regionalism, like her overt realism, is densely ambiguous not because she is really writing about covert biblical or Freudian realms, but because no world is intact, or can be assumed to be whole or predictable, to be knowable” (845).

From the early years of her critical reception, Munro has attracted commentators who have written in more personal terms about her work, with an eye toward the intimate communion they feel when reading Munro’s stories (see Wallace). Avowedly nonacademic, such writers are bent on defining, as Redekop wrote, “the story Alice Munro is telling *me*.” In 1998, Judith Maclean Miller, who edited *The Art of Alice Munro*, published the first of three such essays in the *Antigonish Review*; they are singular and complementary pieces. The first of these, “An Inner Bell that Rings: The Craft of Alice Munro,” looks closely at published interviews with Munro and connects her work to the Canadian photographer Freeman Patterson’s reverence for, and understanding of, the surfaces he photographed. In the same way, Munro

shows us not a pre-chosen, fixed, un-changing way of writing or seeing, but a deep integrity which insists on finding its way into whatever is interesting, especially what is not well understood, or talked about, to find the angle of vision from which it can be experiences, and then to find a way to construct that. (175–76)

The second essay, largely a review of *Friend of My Youth*, bears attention also, but the third, “Deconstructing Silence: The Mystery of Alice Munro,” offers a sharp and precise reading of “Save the Reaper” that wholly demonstrates Munro’s construction of mystery in that story. Miller writes: “these

are stories about strange deaths, sinister people, darkness, and also about story, about mystery, creating without ever saying so a new genre, another way to write about the unsolved, the unspoken. About what is said. Or not said" (51). Miller's impulse here, and in the creative non-fiction form she uses to express that impulse, has become frequent in the past decade or so: it has turned up in issues of the *Writer's Chronicle*—published by and for those involved in creative writing programs—in which there have been articles titled "How to Write Like Alice Munro" and "Rhyming Action In Alice Munro's Stories" (Aubrey, Bucholt), as well as a "how to" essay. Younger writers have come to Munro for inspiration and the fellowship of being writers together (Strayed), while others, also fiction writers, have sharply probed her stories out of a deep sense of shared endeavour (Glover).

As this suggests, it is possible to see Munro's critical reception at the end of the century as engaged in several separate fields. She was inspiring fellow writers, both at home and abroad. Equally, Munro was still important to questions regarding Canadian literature—in 2001, for instance, Gerald Lynch writes in his excellent *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* that "the masterful *Who Do You Think You Are?*" is central in "the continuum of Canadian short story cycles" (159). As well, owing largely to her work's ongoing presence in the *New Yorker*—by the end of 2001 she had published 40 stories there, and in 2004 its editors would publish three Munro stories in a single issue—Munro was established as a looming literary presence. As such, during the past decade, criticism and single volumes devoted to Munro have increased in both frequency and extent.

In June 2000, the Canadian writer John Metcalf published an essay in the *National Post* entitled "Canada's Successful Writers Must Count on Blessings from the U.S. First," a piece that he had originally called "Who Reads Alice Munro?" Intended to be contentious, Metcalf's point was that Munro's reputation was determined outside of Canada, not within. He hit his mark at home. Its publication brought a flurry of letters to the editor, including one from Munro herself and another from her editor at McClelland & Stewart, Douglas Gibson. She disputed the interpretations of one of the essayists Metcalf mentions, JoAnn McCaig, who had published an article in *The Rest of the Story* on her correspondence

with Virginia Barber, Munro's agent, found in the Munro archive at the University of Calgary (see Thacker "Canadian Literature's"). For her part, McCaig also wrote to defend what she was doing, and after some delay caused by Munro's refusal to allow her to quote from her letters in the Calgary archive, McCaig published *Writing In: Alice Munro's Archives* (2002). Focused on what is available in the archive—rather than on Munro's fiction—the book is more a meditation on the uses of evidence than a critical or biographical analysis. Infused with inappropriate theoretical analyses, avoiding historical and biographical contexts, and defiantly iconoclastic in its cultural studies approach to the Munro archive, *Writing In* is simply not a very good book. Even so, McCaig has at least done what only a very few Munro critics have: she has read and used the available archival sources. My own essays and biography have attempted to demonstrate this ongoing necessity in critical work on Munro, but there remains a great deal yet to do. Would that more critics stir themselves to actually use this invaluable resource (see Thacker "Mapping").

* * *

The frequency and number of critical articles on Munro published since 2000 certainly suggest that interest in her work not only continues but shows no sign of abating. Of particular note have been several influential studies in which critics have focused on a wide range of classical and mythological allusions (Stich), on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Luft), on Charlotte Brontë and Henry James (Garson "Alice"), and on Virginia Woolf (Lilianfeld). These analyses have been offered through detailed and often compelling arguments. Munro's relationship to the short story as a form—what Adrian Hunter in a masterful analysis called a "minor literature"—has received close attention; recognizing that Munro is writing within a generic continuum and that her use of history has played a critical role in her work's development, Hunter argues that her "interrogative stories dramatise an interdiction against all kinds of summary statement" ("Story" 237; see also May). Each of Hunter's essays on Munro have been significant, including another published in 2010 on Munro's use of her ancestor James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) in "A Wilderness Station" (1992). In it she argues that Hogg

and Munro both write “stories that refuse to take possession of their subjects” (“Taking” 127).

Another notable Munro critic who has emerged during the past decade is Robert McGill, who has published a succession of essays on “Vandals,” “Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You” (1974), “Material” (1973), and Sarah Polley’s adaptation of “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (1999–2000) for her feature film, *Away From Her* (2007). The latter two articles are especially good, with “‘Daringly Out in the Public Eye’: Alice Munro and the Ethics of Writing Back” of special note. In it, McGill offers what is probably the best analysis of the oft-analyzed story “Material,” which he calls “a metafiction about the ethics of writing fiction. . . . [it] considers the relationship between ethical writing and ethical living and what the criteria for each might be” (875).² With his essay on adaptation, McGill positions Polley’s film both in relation to dominant discourses on Canadian writing and, more effectively, to the effects of Munro’s story and especially her overall aesthetic of indeterminacy.

The last decade has also seen publication of a succession of Munro tribute volumes. In 2003/04, *Open Letter* published papers from an Alice Munro conference held in May 2003 at the University of Orléans, France, “L’écriture du secret/Writings Secrets.” Similarly, *Reading Alice Munro in Italy* (2008) is based on another gathering held in May 2007 in Siena, Italy, “Alice Munro—the Art of the Short Story.” Each volume is a valuable record of how Munro’s work is seen in Europe, although each includes North American critics. In *Open Letter*, Coral Ann Howells, in one of the strongest essays in the volume, concludes by wondering if Munro’s stories “are like houses that we enter, as she once suggested, or are they like floating bridges, unstable spaces thrown out over dark spaces where we can see stars reflected from above, but not the secrets hidden beneath the surface of the water?” (52). Another singular piece is the dialogue—two interwoven papers presented together at the conference in a back-and-forth style—between Donna Bennett and Russell Morton Brown. While discussing Munro’s use of time in “Save the Reaper,” Bennett asserts that “perhaps no other Canadian writer so often makes use of counterfactual statements and of past perfect and conditional perfect tenses” (192). Concluding a discussion of “The Love of a Good Woman,” and discussing the character Enid at the end of that mysterious story, Brown says, “It is

no longer guilty secrets that intrigue her; she is now preoccupied with those secrets that open one heart to another. Munro does not permit the readers to do more than speculate on how that plot will unfold" (206). Like most conference volumes, this one is uneven, but together its essays reveal the broad and extremely high critical stature accorded Munro's art. Again and again, its critics confirm an assertion made by coeditor Héliane Ventura: "To look at a Munro landscape or to read a Munro text is not to participate in the decoding of photographic realism. It is to take part in an archaeological process which consists of recovering traces that have been destroyed" (256). In the same way, *Reading Alice Munro in Italy* offers a succession of readings on individual stories, with forays into broader matters; there is also an especially good piece by Susanna Basso on translating Munro's work into Italian.

Five more recent Munro volumes are notable: Ailsa Cox's *Alice Munro* is a brief introduction published in a British "Writers and Their Works" series in 2004. It is current on both Munro's fiction and its criticism, and offers a sharply focused and detailed appreciation that displays eminent good sense throughout. Munro's work demonstrates, Cox writes, that "nothing defeats mortality, but fiction can suspend time for a while. ... But in every story, finally, words fail. There is always something which has to be left out, and can only be approximated through imagery and paradox" (85, 97). Another brief single-authored book appeared in 2009, *Daughters and Mothers in Alice Munro's Later Stories* by Deborah Heller, who had an excellent essay on *Friend of My Youth* in *The Rest of the Story*. In this book, not much more than an essay, Heller considers Munro's recent use of the perennial mother-daughter relationship in "My Mother's Dream" (1998), "Family Furnishings" (2001), and the Juliet Triptych in *Runaway* (2004). Another tribute from various hands, in 2006 the *Virginia Quarterly Review* published "Ordinary Outsiders: A Symposium on Alice Munro." It includes a biographical critical overview by Marcela Valdes and appreciations by Munro's editors, her agent, and other writers and friends. It also includes the revised version of Munro's memoir story, "Home" (1974), which was included in *The View From Castle Rock*. Also in 2006, a special issue of *Eureka Studies in Teaching Short Fiction* was devoted to Munro's work—it demonstrates a wide range of interest in teaching Munro's stories, and in their broad appeal. In 2009, Harold Bloom

included Munro in his “Bloom’s Modern Critical Views” series, republishing 10 critical essays and sections from books (most mentioned here). In his brief introduction, Bloom says he only managed to read Munro’s *Selected Stories* himself, but from that he places Munro in the second tier of “major artists of short fiction of the twentieth century”; she does not, however, make his top 10, which includes James, Chekhov, Kafka, Joyce, Hemingway, and others: all men (1).

* * *

In an important though contentious recent article, “The Problem with Alice Munro,” Philip Marchand argues that Munro’s “problem”

is that she has been so true to the world she has chosen to depict.... The horizons in this world are uniformly low, due partly to the absence of characters whose education, experience and character might enable them to expand those horizons. Instead, it’s a standoff between her hicks and her smarties. Her intellectuals have no heft and are riddled with egotism; her men of God are pale reflections of their Victorian predecessors. Her heroines, who are a combination of hick and smarty, who only want to be allowed to go off somewhere and study Greek, like Del Jordan’s mother and Juliet Henderson, are as passive and helpless in the face of the world’s unfriendliness as Munro’s adolescent girls are helpless in the face of sexual urgency.

Munro’s great talent notwithstanding, we critics should not “shirk the issue of the sad paltriness of her world,” according to Marchand. He also asks, “Did the limitations of her world have to correlate so closely to the limitations of her art?” (13–14). Marchand’s essay is less compelling than it is indicative of just where Munro criticism is now: in trying to approach Munro’s *oeuvre* as a whole, he offers salient and broad commentary on her material, some of it quite good, but he ultimately fails to convince that his objections are any more than niggling preference. The essay may also indicate, at least in Canada, some weariness over Munro’s familiar material,

her approaches to it, and, especially, her dominating presence. Here, too, “niggling” seems an apt description.

By contrast, and certainly consistently enough to see a trend, Munro’s critics during the last half dozen years have narrowed their focus, limiting their treatment most often to a single story and, more specifically, to questions of narrative structure within that story. Caitlin J. Charman does this in her examination of “Fits” (1986), Ryan Melsom on “Labor Day Dinner” (1981), and, most impressively, Tim McIntyre on “The Moons of Jupiter,” offering an extremely close, detailed, and thorough analysis. Each critic synthesizes previous commentary, too, in ways that suggest that their reading is fairly complete. Two other stories, “Meneseuteung” and “The Love of a Good Woman,” have continued to draw detailed and extensive analysis. Taking up the latter story in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, John Gerlach builds on the work of previous critics to argue that the story’s open ending is a

charged incompleteness [that is] particularly tantalizing and distinctive among open endings ... In this story, ultimate issues, good and evil, confession and repression are stunningly irresolvable. Secondly, Munro has teased us with very traditional expectation: she has written in the mode of realism, not as a self-conscious, mocking postmodern. She has teased us with variable types of closure in the various sections of the story.

Detailing this in the story, Gerlach almost exclaims, “we’ve been teased in every way possible; the rhythm of delay with stunning penultimate climaxes surely must resolve itself. But it doesn’t” (154–55; see also Carrington, “Don’t”; Duffy, “Dark”; McCombs; and Ross, “Too”).

But if “The Love of a Good Woman” has attracted considerable and sustained analysis, then “Meneseuteung” continues to be a paradigmatic text, given the sustained attention it has drawn. Two essays published in 2010—by Tracy Ware and Dennis Duffy, included in the same critical book on historical fiction, *National Plots*—demonstrate this unequivocally, and Ware and Duffy’s work is supplemented by another essay by Douglas Glover. Ware, a critic who reads criticism carefully, completely,

and thoughtfully, creates what might be called a deep synthesis of criticism already published on “Meneseung” and links it to broader theories on the uses of historical fact in fiction. Ware writes that at one point, “Munro is less skeptical of history than of the ethics of ‘historical metafiction.’ What right does she have to supplement history with concerns of a later day? How can she know she is not doing that, despite her best intentions?” (76). Drawing on these distinctions and especially on his sharp synthesis of other critics’ analyses, Ware convincingly argues that with the story, Munro “aligned her resistance to any ideological program with the skepticism at the core of much historical fiction” (77). Duffy, for his part, locates “Meneseung” deeply in what he calls “the Munro Tract”—her home place in Huron County, Ontario—and draws persuasively on Munro’s biography and on her use of prototypes for the protagonist, Almeda Roth. He argues that the “story’s fictional weight rests instead on the foundations that its narrative mode composes, a way of storytelling reminiscent of the devices of orality.” In so doing, Munro “has produced a story that appears to follow the agenda set by the traditional, continuous, and pointed historical novel but which finally slams through those guardrails, crosses the median, and drives away in the other direction of the postmodern, de-centred, and diffuse fiction familiar to us now” (210–11).³

But if Ware’s and Duffy’s essays are impressive in their deep and scholarly syntheses—and they very much are—Douglas Glover reminds critics in his “The Mind of Alice Munro” that in “Meneseung” it is all about the primary text itself:

She uses resonating structures so that various parts of the text echo off each other. She uses a complex point of view structure to create variety and contrast in the types of text threaded through the narrative (and thus a variety of perspectives). She dances with time. She creates action, conflict, and emotion even in those parts of the story that are not directly relating plot. . . . Munro seems to realize that the inner life of a man or a woman is also a text, that in our secret hearts we are talking to ourselves, muttering, declaiming; at its deepest point this is our experience of experience. (31, 35)

Concluding, Glover cites what is perhaps the most quoted line from “Meneseung,” its penultimate image of the narrator—and by extension Munro herself—engaged in research “in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (73). He then asserts that there “is this allegorical element in everything Alice Munro writes; she is always teaching readers how to read her stories as she writes them; there are always connections to be made” (37). So there are, always, as we read her stories and hear the stories Munro is telling each of us—so we, her critics, have realized from our first readings, and so we continue to realize now. Not controversial; human. Profound. Alice Munro, “our Chekhov.” Better still, our Alice Munro.

Afterword:

“A Wonderful Stroke of Good Fortune for Me”: Reading Alice Munro, 1973–2013

Having just met Alice Munro when they shared a program of readings at a New York City bookstore on March 1, 1983, Cynthia Ozick wrote Munro’s editor at Knopf, Ann Close, telling her that when she met Munro, “Alice said, ‘This isn’t the *real* me.’” Having thought this comment over, Ozick says: “I guess she meant the lectern-person, the one who *Appears in Public*. In the train going home I thought and thought about that, and felt so much of the ‘real’ Alice was there: I liked her instantly and completely. She struck me as ‘real’ all through, as artist and human being.” Ozick then concludes, writing, “It was a wonderful stroke of good fortune for me to be able to share an evening with her” (396/87.2.1.3).

As it happened, I attended those readings at Books & Company that night, for I had come down from Burlington where I was teaching at the University of Vermont to meet Munro myself—as I said in the introduction here, I was then at work on my annotated bibliography and I had some questions to ask her. She, for her part, was in New York to launch *The Moons of Jupiter* in the United States. After the readings, as I also said at the outset, I told Munro that when we had talked about Willa Cather at lunch I had not yet read “Dulse,” her considered biographical meditation

on Cather, on the writer's persona, and on the writer's egotism. "This isn't the *real* me," she told Ozick. Even so, Ozick found the real Munro that night, an "artist and human being" who she liked "instantly and completely." So did I.

The book Munro was launching on Knopf's spring list, *The Moons of Jupiter*, had already been published by Macmillan of Canada the previous autumn. Three of its stories—the title story, "Dulse," and "The Turkey Season"—had already appeared in the *New Yorker*, as had another story, "Wood" (1980), which would not be included in one of Munro's books until 2009, when a revised version appeared in *Too Much Happiness*. Three more stories in the *Moons of Jupiter* had been published in Canadian magazines. By 1983, too, critical interest in Munro's work was well established—there had been an Alice Munro symposium at the University of Waterloo, and *Probable Fictions*, the first book-length critical examination of her work, was published. "Clear Jelly," the first of my essays included here, was in that volume and just then, too, I was at work on "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection" from *The Moons of Jupiter*, work that would result in the second essay here, "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario." The third essay, a review, focused on the proceedings of that first Munro symposium. Also in 1983 I moved from Vermont to St. Lawrence University, a place that has fostered and facilitated my readings and writings about Munro ever since.

Although I certainly am not going to offer here a more detailed account of my trajectory as a Munro critic (and, later, biographer), my point about these parallels between Munro's career—and most especially her emergent international career—and my own ought to be evident. As Ozick wrote and as I have said, I consider my connection with Munro to have been "a wonderful stroke of good fortune for me": it has been a constant throughout, from my first reading of "Material" in the fall of 1973 through to my reading of *Dear Life*—as she has said, probably her last book—when it appeared in 2012. From that first meeting in New York in February 1983, I have found Munro to be just as Ozick described: "'real' all through, as artist and human being." For many years, that first meeting, a solitary telephone interview, and some time together at a 1988 conference were my only personal contacts with Munro—as a critic, I took the view that writers should be left alone to write. And given the

infrequency with which *this* writer appeared in public as a writer—not very often, mostly only when she was publishing a new book, or to accept an award for her work, or in pursuit of some personal interest—that seemed the best approach. This would change in early 2000 when Munro agreed to cooperate on the literary biography that became *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, but even then our connections have not been frequent, only regular and focused—little more than half a dozen meetings in all, with some correspondence and phone conversations, too.

My hope as I conclude this collection is that the essays reprinted here in their original form offer what I hope is a cogent record of the emergence of one of the major literary figures of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as I saw that emergence and understood it. Although I am too close to claim any real perspective, Munro certainly seems to me to be one of the greatest writers to have lived. And because I noticed her work fairly early and, more than notice, have persisted in my analyses of that work as something of an obsession—let us call it what it is—the record I offer here of a life in Munro criticism is unique. In June 2003 when I was working on my biography I was able to spend an afternoon driving Munro around Wingham and Huron County, Ontario, with the tape recorder rolling on the seat between us. Accounting this experience to others, I have often said it was like driving William Faulkner around Oxford, Mississippi: that is, around Yoknapatawpha County. Truly, it was “a wonderful stroke of good fortune for me.”

* * *

The September 19, 2011, issue of the *New Yorker* contained Munro’s “Dear Life,” a piece identified there as “personal history” and one that later provided the title for her 14th book, *Dear Life*. In that collection it is the last of the “four works” that conclude the “Finale” section, which in turn ends *Dear Life*—a grouping that, Munro writes in a descriptive coda, “are not quite stories” but are “the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life” (*Dear* 255). In its magazine version it is illustrated by a photograph of baby Alice Ann Laidlaw when she was between two and three years old. Among other things, “Dear Life” reveals a good deal about Munro’s knowledge and memories of her mother, Anne Chamney

Laidlaw (1898–1959), and also about her father, Robert Eric Laidlaw (1901–1976), from the time when Munro was in school and growing up on the family’s fox farm in Lower Town, Wingham, Ontario. It is a period stretching from the years just before Munro’s birth in July 1931 until she left for the University of Western Ontario in the fall of 1949. Describing the location of her family’s home as a way of building up the small mystery she structures the piece around, Munro writes that their house “turned its back on the village, facing west across slightly downsloping fields to the hidden curve where the river made what was called the Big Bend. Beyond the river was a patch of dark evergreen trees, probably cedar but too far away to tell.” As she had before in “Working for a Living,” Munro tells us that “even farther away, on another hillside, was another house, quite small at that distance, facing ours, that we would never visit or know and that was like a dwarf’s house in a story.” She and her family knew only the name of the person who lived in that house, “Roly Grain, his name was, and he does not have any further part in what I’m writing now, in spite of his troll’s name, because this is not a story, only life” (*Dear* 307).

Not a story, only life.

This phrase—this putative distinction—resonates throughout the whole of Munro’s work. When she wrote her foreword to *The View From Castle Rock* (2006), a volume she had long envisioned as a “family book,” Munro comments on that book’s second group of stories, which drew on “personal material” and which she had previously published but until then had kept out of her books. With them she says that she was “doing something closer to what memoir does—exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way.” She continues, saying, “Some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with.” Even so, and given this process, she asserts emphatically, “These are *stories*” (Foreword x; see Thacker, *Writing* 526–49). They are indeed, but appearing as they do in *The View from Castle Rock*, just after that book’s first section of pieces drawn from Munro’s own family history and her own memoir “Working for a Living,” it is fair to wonder. With the “works” offered as the “Finale” to *Dear Life*—which Munro says are all based on things that happened—she seems now to have backed off from her previous assertion. Not a story, only life. Or life made into a story.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this book and have also noted in other essays here, when I reviewed *The Progress of Love* for *Canadian Literature* in the fall of 1986, I noted that Munro once told an interviewer that “writing is the art of approach and recognition. I believe that we don’t solve these things—in fact our explanations take us further away”. Applying this to *The Progress of Love*—a breakthrough volume in her *oeuvre*—I commented then that that “these stories offer a complex wonder at the strangeness of it all” (*Reading Alice Munro* 73, 76).

“Dear Life” was followed in the *New Yorker* by Munro’s sixtieth publication there, “Leaving Maverley,” a story set just after the Second World War, as is usual for her, in a Wingham-like town in Ontario. It begins seeming to focus on a man who runs the Capital theatre in Maverley, Ontario, a man named Morgan Holly; it then shifts and seems to be focusing on a teenaged girl he hires as a ticket taker, but ultimately it alights on Ray Elliot, the town’s “night policeman.” He “had taken the job so that he would be able to help his wife manage for at least some part of the daytime.” His wife, Isabel, is chronically ill with “something called pericarditis. It was serious and she had ignored it to her peril. It was something she would not be cured of but could manage, with difficulty.” Isabel and Ray “had no children and could get talking anytime about anything. He brought her the news of the town, which often made her laugh, and she told him about the books she was reading” (*Dear* 69, 70–71). Munro follows these two while also following the girl hired to take tickets, Leah, who first seems to be just the eldest child of a strangely religious family dominated by the father. Ray and Isabel wonder over her personality and characteristics. But then she elopes with the visiting son of the United Church minister, moves away and has two children with him, and sometime later returns to Maverley with her children, estranged from her husband. She has an affair with the new United Church minister—and a scandal, too, because the minister confesses their liaison from the pulpit. There is, as Munro commented parenthetically in “Images” (1968), “all this life going on” (*Dance* 31).

Reading “Leaving Maverley,” we follow Leah’s disappearance and elopement, and like Ray and Isabel, who talk together about what happened, we wonder what will happen next. Munro stays with Ray and his sick wife: Isabel takes a turn for the worse, is moved to a hospital in the

city, and eventually goes into a coma. Ray stays with her, taking a job in the hospital in order to do so after she lapses into the coma. While working there after a long period in which Isabel's situation remains unchanged, Ray meets Leah again. She, too, now happens to work in the same hospital. Leah tells him the rest of her story in a happenstance meeting just before Ray discovers that "Isabel was finally gone. They said 'gone,' as if she had got up and left. When someone had checked on her about an hour ago, she had been the same as ever, and now she was gone" (89).

Here is Munro's "approach and recognition" to life itself. Just after this passage—which, incidentally, echoes the opening of "The Progress of Love"—she offers three critical, brief paragraphs, the first two each a single sentence: "He had often wondered what difference it would make," and, "But the emptiness in place of her was astounding." And then, after a paragraph of detail describing Ray adjusting to this new fact while a nurse speaks to him, is this sentence: "He'd thought that it had happened long before with Isabel, but it hadn't. Not until now." The story's title, "Leaving Maverley," illuminates layers of meaning as we read. Munro concludes the story with Ray making arrangements "for the remains":

And before long he found himself outside, pretending that he had as ordinary and good a reason as anybody else to put one foot ahead of the other.

What he carried with him, all he carried with him, was a lack, something like a lack of air, of proper behavior in his lungs, a difficulty that he supposed would go on forever.

The girl he'd been talking to, whom he'd once known—she had spoken of her children. The loss of her children. Getting used to that. A problem at suppertime.

An expert at losing, she might be called—himself a novice by comparison. And now he could not remember her name. Had lost her name, though he'd known it well. Losing, lost. A joke on him, if you wanted one.

He was going up his own steps when it came to him.

Leah.

A relief out of all proportion, to remember her. (89–90)

When I reviewed *The Progress of Love*, I noticed a passage in “Circle of Prayer” (1986) in which Munro asks, “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). Here yet again as she concludes “Leaving Maverley,” Munro offers us these passages and wonders over the “breathing space” that is a “clear patch” in Ray’s life as he realizes the “lack” that Isabel’s absence is for him, just as he “loses” her, as we say—“losing, lost,” as Munro writes. Or, as she wrote before in “Images,” “all this life going on.” Recovering Leah’s lost name, despite the lack created by Isabel’s death, keeps Ray connected to life. Partially because of this, he will go on living: “They aren’t exactly promises. Breathing spaces. Is that all?”

Yes, we answer, it is. In the penultimate sentence of my review of *The Progress of Love*, I wrote: “In these stories we approach the mystery of being, follow the narrative wooing of the self and, in the end, even if we don’t come to an understanding, we emphatically recognize life—as it is lived, experienced, and wondered about” (*Reading Alice Munro* 77). As Munro wrote in “Material”—as it happened, as I mentioned in the introduction here, my own first Munro story—Ray is another person “lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that [Munro] has spent all [her] life learning how to make. It is an act of magic, there is no getting around it; it is an act, you might say, of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love. A fine and lucky benevolence” (*Something* 43).¹ “Because this is not a story, only life.” Judging from “Dear Life” and “Leaving Maverley”—and from the whole of *Dear Life*, which with its “Finale” may turn out to be her last book, as she has said it will be—Munro has continued to wonder as she has written on into her ninth decade, still creating her own “clear jelly,” and defining and detailing her own, and our own, breathing spaces. It is a fine and lucky benevolence, in fact.

* * *

After 14 books, 62 contributions to the *New Yorker*, a raft of literary prizes, interviews and personality pieces too numerous to count, two biographies, and critical books and articles and bibliographic studies also too

numerous to count, Munro was awoken before dawn on the morning of October 10, 2013, by a reporter seeking her reaction to the news that she had been awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. Reflecting on this some weeks later, just as her daughter Jenny was planning to go to Stockholm to accept the prize on her behalf, Munro was quoted in a piece in the *Globe and Mail* titled “Vindication for a Lifetime of Short Stories” saying, “Nothing in the world could make me so happy as this.”² She also explains her 2012 decision to stop writing, saying “I wanted to behave like the rest of the world.... When you’re a writer, you’re doing a job people don’t know you’re doing and you really can’t talk about, and you’re always finding your way in this secret world. I guess I was a little tired of that.” In the article she also calls the hoopla surrounding the news of the Nobel “bewildering,” as it most certainly was for her, but maintains that, in the reporter’s words, “the prize is an acknowledgment of the importance of the arts, and that it is a vindication for the short story, the smaller cousin of the novels that usually dominate literary awards” (Perreux).

Although this is but a single newspaper article chosen from among the mass coverage that welcomed the news of Munro’s Nobel Prize—and welcome is the correct word here, with many literary commentators noting the universal joy with which the news was met—Perreux captures what it is about Munro that has made her achievements both so remarkable and so edifying to her readers and critics. Munro is a writer who—from the late 1940s on—has spent much of her working time “finding [her] way in this secret world,” the world of her writing, and the world of the short story, in which, as has long been said of both the genre and her practice of it, insights are momentary, fleeting, contingent. Episodic, just as life itself, the short story keeps a reader wondering and doubting. We wonder with Munro, who is irrefutably “a master of the contemporary short story,” as the Nobel committee asserted. But she is also, more importantly, an artist who, in her secret world, has articulated in her stories the very feelings of being alive, and of being human. We critics are always hearing and being affected by the stories she is telling us as we read through her stories toward the impeccable “Finale,” to what she has said is her last book, *Dear Life*.

There, with those “first and last—and the closest—things” she has to say about her own life (*Dear* 255), she returns again to her childhood in

the final four autobiographical pieces. In “The Eye,” “Voices,” and “Dear Life,” she is back in the thrall of her assertive and domineering mother, aware of being the eldest child (and for a time seeming the special only child), during those years before Anne Chamney Laidlaw was struck by Parkinson’s disease and the Laidlaw’s family life was transformed. In “Night,” we find a companionable Alice Laidlaw wondering over some sleeping troubles with her father, Robert Eric Laidlaw, a fox farmer whose business was failing. Finding her out of bed early one morning, troubled by dreams when she is normally asleep, he gives her good advice. As she writes, “on that breaking morning he gave me just what I needed to hear and what I was to forget about soon enough.” She then wonders about the uncharacteristically formal clothes he is wearing that morning, and why he might be wearing them. Her wondering takes us to the end of “Night”:

I have thought that he was maybe in in his better work clothes because he had a morning appointment to go to the bank, to learn, not to his surprise, that there was no extension on his loan. He had worked as hard as he could but the market was not going to turn around and he had to find a new way of supporting us and paying off what we owed at the same time. Or he may have found out that there was a name for my mother’s shakiness and that it was not going to stop. Or that he was in love with an impossible woman.

Never mind. From then on I could sleep. (*Dear* 284–85)

Munro goes from this to “Voices,” where she depicts her mother as sociable, imperious, and moralistic—suddenly dragging her fascinated 10-year-old daughter away from a festive house dance when she discovered a local madam was there, too.

But then she turns to “Dear Life,” another—and perhaps final—visitation with her mother. The central incident is of her mother, needlessly worrying over a baby Alice and holding on to the infant “for dear life,” keeping her safe from an apparently threatening neighbor. The story also focuses on Munro’s own recent discovery of what was most likely actually going on. But as she ends “Dear Life,” Munro returns, as she has so

many times before, to her mother in the final throes of her illness, finally succumbing after almost 20 years to her Parkinson's disease. In the *New Yorker* version, Munro ends the story with these two paragraphs, following a line break:

I did not go home for my mother's last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time.

When my mother was dying, she got out of the hospital somehow, at night, and wandered around town until someone who didn't know her at all spotted her and took her in. If this were fiction, as I said, it would be too much, but it is true. (47)

When “Dear Life” appeared in the collection *Dear Life*, this final paragraph had been deleted. When I asked her about this omission, Munro replied that she judged it too late in “Dear Life” to introduce this harrowing fact about her mother (September 6, 2013). True enough.

And yet I wonder. Here Munro is in the last and title piece of the “Finale” of what she says is her last book, again having returned home, again having returned to the details of her mother's death in early 1959. “Home”—she has returned again to the circumstances of “Home,” the story-memoir that begins by elaborating on the heart condition that led to her father's death. In the penultimate paragraph of “Soon” (2004), another story drawing on her mother's death, Munro writes, tellingly: “Because it's what happens at home that you try to protect, as best you can, for as long as you can” (*Runaway* 125). Reading Munro, we see her as one who has always returned “Home”: “The problem, the only problem, is my mother,” she wrote in another critical and well-known coda, ending “The Ottawa Valley” and her third book. “And she is of course the one I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken” (*Something* 246). Not a story, only life.

Notes

"CLEAR JELLY": ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVE DIALECTICS (1983)

- 1 These critics alone attempt to define the workings of Munro's narrative art. Others writing on Munro have emphasized themes, her similarities to other writers, and her "vision"; they appear to have been under the influence of the egregious prevailing thematic approach taken by critics of Canadian literature over the past decade. The inapplicability of this approach to a stylist like Munro illustrates its very limited usefulness.
- 2 Munro uses the father's clothing here subjectively as a symbol of the man. This is a technique that she uses often in the later stories included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, such as "Images" (36). In this, the most recently composed story to be included in the volume, the narrator's consideration of her father's boots as an extension of his personality corresponds to this earlier instance.
- 3 Gardiner's interview with Munro is included as an appendix to the thesis.
- 4 See Schorer. At one point, talking about the "cultivated sensitivity" of the styles of Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and Jean Stafford, Schorer states that the values in each writer's style lies "in the subtle means by which sensuous details become symbols, and in the way the symbols provide a network which is the story, and which at the same time provides the writer and us with a refined moral insight by means of which to test it" (106). Munro's style is of the same sort because the "network which is the story" in Munro's case is an aggregate of setting, character, and theme, strung together by her retrospective narrative technique, which provides perspective.
- 5 The first parenthetical insertion is mine, the second is Gardiner's.
- 6 Of the 13 stories written after "Good-by Myra" and included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, only three—"Sunday Afternoon," "The Shining Houses," and "A Trip to the Coast"—employ a detached