



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

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# Part One

## Narrative Techniques, Forms, and Critical Issues: Establishing a Presence

By the early 1980s, Alice Munro was recognized as being among Canada's leading writers. She had won two Governor General's Awards, for *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*; by the end of 1980 she had published six recent stories in the *New Yorker* and several others in competing commercial magazines, both American and Canadian; the first academic conference on her work was held in March 1982 at the University of Waterloo (Munro was there for a reading); and that fall *The Moons of Jupiter*—her strongest collection yet—was published by Macmillan, with its American edition appearing from Knopf early in 1983. Munro's career was not only well established: it was building momentum, and that momentum would deepen and be confirmed in 1986 with *The Progress of Love*, for which she took her third Governor General's Award.

Following in the wake of such ongoing publication and widespread interest, more critics began writing about Munro's stories, and they did so in more technical ways. Critical articles were appearing with increased frequency in literary journals. In 1983 the first critical book on Munro's work, *Probable Fictions*, was published, and it included an interview and nine essays focused on matters of style, technique, diction, syntax, and structure. These critics probed just how Munro was able to affect her

readers. Subject and theme, although not altogether ignored, were treated in relation to these matters. This first book was followed over the course of the latter half of the decade by a succession of critical monograph studies that elaborated Munro's art and its effects in extended and detailed ways. Taken together, W. R. Martin's *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* (1987), E. D. Blodgett's *Alice Munro* (1988), Ildikó de Papp Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable* (1989), and Beverly J. Rasporich's *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* (1990) constitute both deep analysis and protracted critical attention. Each of these studies sought to treat Munro's *oeuvre* as a whole, and in so doing they both furthered the prominence of her fiction and deepened understandings of it. Although they varied in their individual strengths, there is no question that together they established Munro's standing as a major author, a figure whose work deserved and rewarded close analysis.

It was in such contexts—both authorial and critical—that the essays and reviews in this section of *Reading Alice Munro* appeared. Read now together, they assert ways of understanding Munro's stories that had, and continue to have, critical purchase. The first two, "Clear Jelly" and "Connection," published in 1983 and 1984, respectively, examine narrative structure and Munro's handling of persona and time, as well as Munro's relation to and use of her home place, Southwestern Ontario's Huron County. Critical questions on these aspects of Munro's work have continued to vivify her writing throughout her career, up to (and even especially including) her 2012 collection *Dear Life*. Similarly, the third article here, "So Shocking a Verdict in Real Life" (originally delivered at the 1987 University of Ottawa symposium on autobiography and Canadian literature and published in 1988), still resonates in Munro criticism, in particular with regard to *Dear Life*'s "Finale" section. Questions of autobiography in Munro's work have always been ubiquitous. Finally, the three reviews included here establish contexts relevant to the 1980s, both aesthetic, in the review of *The Progress of Love*, and critical with the other two—both "Munro's Progress" and "Conferring Munro" appeared in 1987, and "Go Ask Alice" was published in 1991. Read now, each of the latter catch the feeling of Munro's expanding aesthetics at that time and the qualified (and sometimes paltry) reflection of it in the criticism. "Go Ask Alice" in particular does this, its cheekiness and allusive title aside.

## “Clear Jelly”: Alice Munro’s Narrative Dialectics (1983)

Beginning with her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Alice Munro has received consistent praise for her style. Yet, strangely enough, most such comments have come from reviewers—of the several articles that treat Munro’s work, only three have focused upon her style, and none have analyzed her narrative technique (See New “Pronouns,” Hoy “Dull,” and Martin “Strange”).<sup>1</sup> But a close examination of her early uncollected stories and those contained in *Dance of the Happy Shades* suggests that Munro’s style developed from her first stories on; its development, moreover, is best seen through an examination of narrative technique. By the time her first collection appeared, Munro had perfected a distinctive retrospective narrative approach that she has used throughout her subsequent work. It is, in her stories, the means by which past and present commingle, the narrator’s humanity is communicated, and each narrator, and several other individual characters besides, is allowed their articulate moments. Simply put, it is the catalytic factor in Munro’s substantial art.

Munro’s first published stories appeared in the University of Western Ontario’s undergraduate literary magazine, *Folio*, while she was a student there. Two of these, “The Dimensions of a Shadow” and “The Widower,” reveal no real portents of her later success with the short story. The third-person omniscient narration is heavy handed and Munro’s narrative

tone didactic, although she does show some facility with descriptions of physical detail. The remaining story, however, entitled “Story for Sunday,” reveals a glimpse of the narrative technique that would become her hallmark, while at the same time it shares some of the others’ flaws. As the story begins, the youthful protagonist, Evelyn, is hurrying to Sunday school, where she is a teacher’s assistant. While Munro’s omniscient third-person narrator concerns herself with the story’s setting, as in the previous story, Munro concurrently reveals Evelyn’s sense of anticipation over seeing Mr. Willens, the Sunday school superintendent, once again. Later, while Evelyn waits for the service to begin in church, the narrator tells us that “[t]oday when she [Evelyn] looked at the pictures it was not quite the same; even in the depth and stillness of the moment she remembered Mr. Willens.” (Laidlaw, “Story” n.p.) And, drawing upon Evelyn’s memory, the narrator flashes back to the source of the girl’s anticipation: the previous Sunday, having returned to an isolated room to retrieve her gloves, Evelyn happened upon Willens. He complimented her on her helpfulness and then took her in his arms and kissed her. As a result, the impressionable Evelyn has transformed him into a special being: “He was not handsome; his face in profile was somewhat flat, almost convex, not handsome at all, but beautiful.” In so saying, Munro’s narrator has made a key distinction: memory has transformed Willens into a romanticized being. Because of his attention the previous week, Willens has inadvertently altered Evelyn’s view of herself. For example, looking at the other girls in church, who were concerned with mere boys, Evelyn considers herself superior because “she moved in a clear, cold flame of love which they [the other girls] could not even see.” Of course, Evelyn plans to position herself for another kiss, but, upon returning to the isolated room once again, she finds Willens reenacting their kiss with the church’s piano player, Myrtle Fotheringay. Overall, “Story for Sunday” is not profound literary art; it is significant only because it shows Munro, at a very early stage in her career, consciously manipulating past and present, holding the two realms together for the reader to see. Hence, through this commingling of past and present, Evelyn is allowed an articulate moment.

During her first few stories, Munro appears to have experimented with a variety of narrative stances, fluctuating from the first-person point of view to that of the third and back again, something that continued

through the *Dance of the Happy Shades* stories and continues still. In the early stories, however, the shifts in narrative perspective are often marked. In "Story for Sunday," Munro uses third-person narration but is primarily concerned with Evelyn's thoughts and feelings. Her next published story, "The Idyllic Summer," also uses third-person narration, but Munro treats its protagonist in a far more objective manner. It deals with the relationship between a wholly cerebral classics professor and his somewhat intellectually disabled daughter who is, therefore, primarily emotive. Munro uses the professor's letters to his colleagues to display the character's pious and pompous manner, while she describes the daughter, Clara, through her third-person narrator's analyses of both the girl's actions and the setting. The focus is on Clara, the inarticulate character, because her father is able to speak for himself. Yet in "The Idyllic Summer" we see Munro dealing with the two character types seen throughout her stories: the articulate character speaking for himself and the inarticulate character rendered through third-person objective description and carefully delineated setting; in her next two stories, Munro concentrates on each separately. Thus, Munro's approach to her subject varied during this period, just as it would in the stories composed after "Thanks for the Ride," alternating between a focus on an individual character's thoughts and feelings as they present them and an emphasis on less articulate characters rendered through their actions and setting.

In her next story, "At the Other Place," Munro adopts for the first time the first-person point of view, a narrative stance that became dominant in her first two books. It is, as well, the first in which a conventional family is depicted and also the first in which an immediate sense of place is vividly described. Because Munro's presentation of setting figures evocatively in her characterization, it is worth noting that from her very first stories on she handled setting well. In "At the Other Place," her narrator creates a definable texture of place for the reader, replete with sights, smells, and colours:

It was a very hot day, but there had not been enough hot weather yet to burn the country up. The roadside bushes were still green and the money-musk was blooming unfaded in the long grass. Haying-time was over, but in some of the fields the coils were

still standing. No one was working anywhere; the country was all hot and still in the sun, in the plum-blue shade of the heavy oaks and maples. The cows were lying down in the pastures, the horses dozing on their feet, under the trees. We passed a field of buckwheat in flower; it smelled as sweet as clover. (Laidlaw, “At” 131)

Munro here is finely attuned to the kind of surface detail that allows the reader to mentally recreate the scene she is describing. Through these figurative images, the reader is able to grasp the sensual context of the story, which in turn lends the dramatized scenes a further sense of immediacy.

“At the Other Place” is also the first story in which the narrator’s voice reveals two personae: though the narrator is ostensibly a child, her perceptions and the resulting descriptions are not strictly those of a child. Hence, her distinctions are often quite discerning; they are more mature in their judgement than the narrator’s age would indicate, and she couches them in language sophisticated beyond her putative years. Munro produces these two aspects of the narrator’s sensibility, the child and the remembered child, through an approach that is similar to the way she blends past and present in “Story for Sunday,” although here, instead of simply allowing the discrepancy between past and present to be inferred, Munro deliberately cultivates it.

The story describes an afternoon outing to “the other place” owned by the narrator’s family, the place where her father grew up. Within the story, Munro recreates the immediacy of a child’s understanding through memory and through her narrative approach, and combines this with the weight of understanding of the older narrator (the adult who was the young girl), resulting in descriptions and evaluations that are a merging of past and present. Thus, when considering her father, a farmer dressed incongruously in his Sunday best, the narrator allows that

my father, in a stiff blue shirt and suit with wide stripes, looked shrunken and stooped, red and grizzled in the face, much less his own man than he was in overalls and mechanic’s cap. About this time I began to be puzzled and sad when I saw him in his good clothes—for when we saw him in the fields or holding the

reins of a team or even sawing wood he was sure and powerful,  
a little more than life-size. (Laidlaw, "At" 131)<sup>2</sup>

Not only does the narrator reveal her sophisticated perception and linguistic sense here, she also reveals that the immediacy of the story is feigned: "About this time." It is an active reminiscence.

While visiting the other place to have a picnic and to care for the family's sheep, the narrator liked to explore the house where her father grew up. Reflecting, she recalls that she "sat on the window-ledge, looking through the open doorway at the big hard-maple that had been there when my father was little, and the slow movement of its branches, the way the sunlight caught on its leaves, gave me a forlorn and beautiful feeling of time and changes, and changelessness" (Laidlaw, "At" 131–32). Once, when her father came to the house to inspect an old wood stove, the narrator states that "[h]e did not look around or grow thoughtful as I thought he should" (Laidlaw, "At" 132). Because of her own pensiveness, revealed here, the narrator is not entirely the 12- to 14-year-old she otherwise seems to be. Rather, as the story's narrator, she is nominally a child, narrating her immediate perceptions and thoughts; but upon closer examination we see that she is actually an adult, or at least an older adolescent, remembering her experiences on a particular day. Just as she uses memory in "Story for Sunday," Munro here holds up past and present together. And by giving the story the appearance of immediacy—she is not trying to hide the fact that an older narrator is remembering—Munro lends her narrator a unique ability. The narrator in "At the Other Place" recreates through memory the immediate reality of the story, while at the same time she is able to infuse the narrative with the subjective importance of the memory, realized only as she matured. Thus, her comments about her father, quoted above, unite both past and present, and so by their interaction expand what Munro is getting at.

Surveying the stories chronologically, it is apparent that Munro came to use this retrospective narration (first seen in "At the Other Place") with increasing frequency; indeed, in later stories she experimented with the technique, shaping and adjusting it to fit her subject, and as her narrators became more articulate, her art became more complex. But this represents only her overall direction; other stories written at this time



reveal a different emphasis. In an unpublished interview, Munro comments that in her early stories she was more interested in setting than in character (Gardiner Interview 173).<sup>3</sup> Her subsequent story, “The Edge of Town,” reflects this. Its protagonist, Harry Brooke, is an incessant talker who, ironically, cannot communicate with those around him, neither the townsfolk nor his own family. Having adopted the third-person point of view, Munro is concerned with setting from the story’s very beginning:

Up here the soil is shallow and stony; the creeks dry up in summer, and a harsh wind from the west blows all year long. There are not many trees, but wild-rose and blackberry bushes in little pockets of the hills, and long sharp sword-grass in the hollows. On an August day if you stand on the road leading out from the town, you can see miles and miles of brown blowing grass, and dust scooped up from the roads, and low, bumpy hills along the rim of the sky, which might be the end of the world. At night the crickets sing in the grass, and every second day, at supper time, a freight train goes through the town. (368)

Into this setting Munro places Harry Brooke, whom she treats objectively, never directly venturing into his thoughts. She delineates Harry’s isolation by employing setting as a symbolic index of character and, in a manner analogous to the style of Eudora Welty, transforms details of setting into symbolic counterpoints for character.<sup>4</sup> As well, having been born and raised in the same sort of social environment in which she places Harry, Munro is able to describe his place in the town knowingly, unequivocally, as she presents the town’s reaction to his babblings:

His expectancy, his seeking, made them wary, uneasily mocking. In a poor town like this, in a poor country, facing the year-long winds and the hard winters, people expect and seek very little; a rooted pessimism is their final wisdom. Among the raw bony faces of the Scotch-Irish, with their unspeaking eyes, the face of Harry was a flickering light, an unsteady blade; his

exaggerated, flowering talk ran riot amongst barren statements and silences. (371)

The opening passage, previously quoted, underscores this detached analysis. Living in such an environment brings about the “rooted pessimism” Munro sees in the townspeople, and their stoicism, indeed, serves to set apart and objectify Harry Brooke, whose questions violate their “barren statements and silences.”

“The Edge of Town” is sandwiched in between two stories that use the internalized first-person retrospective technique, “At the Other Place” and “Good-by Myra,” suggesting that Munro was working concurrently on two separate ways of rendering character. She chose to present characters like Harry Brooke in this story and Clara in “The Idyllic Summer” objectively, through their actions and through setting; such treatment is, indeed, in keeping with the characters’ inability to communicate.

Another story in which she uses this technique is “The Time of Death.” But elsewhere, Munro chooses to present first-person narrators who articulate their own experiences, thereby deriving their own understanding. These narrators are found in “At the Other Place” and, as will be seen presently, in “Good-by Myra.” In working on each approach separately, Munro was developing greater skill with two major components of fiction: setting and character; and by the time she wrote her mature stories, like “Thanks for the Ride,” she was able to fuse observer and participant into one narrative voice. Thus, Munro followed two separate, but by no means divergent, approaches to narration in her early stories.

Because “Good-by Myra” is the first story with a narrator who is actively shaping her memories in a somewhat covert manner, giving the impression of immediacy and a detached understanding, it should be considered in some detail. The story deals with the development of a relationship between Helen, the narrator, and Myra Sayla, the outcast of Helen’s grade 6 class. Myra is an outcast because of her family background and her younger brother’s dependence on her while they are at school. As Helen tells us: “Jimmy Sayla was not used to going to the bathroom by himself and he would have to come to the grade-six door and ask for Myra and she would take him downstairs” (17). Jimmy’s dependence extends to the playground as well: because Jimmy’s classmates pick on him, the

Saylas spend play periods standing together along the dividing line between the boys' and girls' playgrounds. Moreover, they do not fit into the Scots-Protestant ethos of the town; their parents are Eastern European immigrants, and the family is Roman Catholic. When a well-meaning teacher attempts to intercede on Myra's behalf, the grade 6 girls, who had previously ignored Myra, turn on her as an object of derision.

Helen takes part in mocking Myra and does so without any apparent qualms. But one day while walking to school, she notices that Myra is ahead of her and is slowing down to wait for her, so she befriends Myra, stating that "[a] role was shaping for me that I could not resist playing." The other girl's "humble, hopeful turnings" (55) affect Helen, and she leaps to the superior role they afford her. Throughout their meeting, Helen responds to Myra as a person; prior to this she had thought of Myra only as an odd presence: "It was queer to think that Myra, too, read the comics, or that she did anything, was anything at all, apart from her role at the school." A bond is forged between the two when Helen persuades Myra to keep the prize she found in Helen's Cracker Jack. After forcing it on Myra, Helen realizes the implications of her act: "We were both surprised. We looked at each other; I flushed but Myra did not. I realized the pledge as our fingers touched; I was panicky, but all right. All right, I thought, I can come early and walk with her other mornings. I can—I can go and talk to her at recess. Why not. Why not?" (56). Despite this realization, Helen has some misgivings about the friendship; she is wary of her peers' reaction. But her fears prove inconsequential because Myra, having become ill with leukemia, stops attending school shortly thereafter.

Miss Darling, the grade 6 teacher, organizes a birthday party for Myra—despite the fact that it is March and Myra's birthday is in July—to be held at the hospital. Typically, Myra's disease grants her new status among her classmates: "The birthday party of Myra Sayla became fashionable" (57). Once the party is over and the girls are leaving, Myra calls Helen back to her bed. She offers Helen a brush and comb set that Helen had earlier noticed, and they make plans to play together when Myra returns from her treatment in London. Helen, however, is apprehensive, having premonitions that Myra will never return:

Then I stood beside the bed wanting to say something else, or to ask something. Outside the hospital window, in the late sunlight, there was a sound like birds calling, but it wasn't, it was somebody playing in the street, maybe chasing with snowballs of the last unmelted snow. Myra heard, too; we were looking at each other. At that clear carrying sound her face changed, and I was scared, I did not know why.

"When you come back—" I said...

Here Helen is faced with the life outside and the fact of Myra's impending death, which she intuits. Helen "understood the demand she [Myra] made. And it was too much." As Helen leaves, she "called back quickly, treacherously, almost gaily, 'Good-by!'" (58). The demand Myra made on Helen was of personal commitment, something that, as Helen herself suggests, is too much for an 11-year-old to bear. Yet by narrating "Good-by Myra," Helen is remembering and purging herself of guilt. In the words of another of Munro's narrators, Myra has been "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." Like the character being spoken of here, Myra "has passed into Art. It doesn't happen to everybody" (*Something* 43).

Such is the intention of Munro's own art. She creates a dialectic within the first-person narrator: Helen, the girl who knew Myra as an 11-year-old, and Helen, the older person actually narrating the story, combine to give the story two levels of reality. Because of Helen's memory and her detailed description, the texture of the story in "Good-by Myra" is a commingling of the remembered event, vividly described so as to lend it immediacy, and Helen's understanding of it, a detached understanding because of the time that has passed since Helen knew Myra. The dynamic interaction between these two aspects of the narrator, the dialectic between them, is at the core of Munro's rhetoric; it is the way by which she creates her own "clear jelly."

Although Munro uses the retrospective technique tentatively in "At the Other Place," she uses it in a thoroughgoing way in "Good-by

Myra”—the first time she does so. Remembering Myra as she was in the schoolyard, Helen recalls the Saylas in mythical terms: “Over their dark eyes the lids were never fully raised; they had a weary look. But it was more than that. They were like children in a medieval painting, they were like small figures carved of wood, for worship or magic, with faces smooth and aged and meekly, cryptically uncommunicative” (17). As perceptive and descriptive as this passage is, it is not the product of the mentality of an 11-year-old girl. The language and diction are too refined, and the narrator’s understanding of the scene’s ramifications is too acute. In passages such as this, Munro combines her first-person narration with omniscient description. Yet the omniscience does not jar the reader, because it is a suitable intrusion, subtle and illuminating. The central simile contained here expands the reader’s understanding of the Saylas quickly and unobtrusively.

This technique embodies the net effect of human memory: the reader is presented with Myra not as she actually was, but as Helen remembers her. Although the two images of Myra may very well be one and the same, they do not have to be, because memory tends to blur the picture, disregarding and enhancing details to create a desired impression. Helen is scared and does not know why because she has instinctively recognized another person’s impending death, and the knowledge is beyond her intellectual scope. Yet the sensibility of an older Helen is able to grasp the idea of Myra’s eventual death; this recognition is implied throughout the story’s last paragraph, as Helen “treacherously” calls “Good-by!” to Myra (58).

Another reason that “Good-by Myra” is central to this consideration of Munro’s developing narrative technique is because of major revisions she made before republishing it, as “Day of the Butterfly,” in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Comparing the two versions reveals the direction in which their author was moving. In the stories written and published after “Good-by Myra”—many of which were included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*—Munro moved more and more toward using this retrospective first-person narrator as the teller of the tale. Although this narration was first seen in “At the Other Place,” Munro first uses it in a consistent and somewhat covert manner—she neither draws attention to nor provides specific information about the older narrator—in “Good-by Myra.” In revising this

story in order to sharpen the memory of the older narrator, Munro reveals her main concern. Her remembering narrators inform, judge, understand, and ultimately illuminate—theirs is an essential presence in her fiction, a catalytic one. Munro's desire to sharpen the narrator's understanding of Myra Sayla is, therefore, in keeping with the development of her distinctive narrative voice.

"Day of the Butterfly" bears a greater similarity to those stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* in which Munro's retrospective narration is most refined—"Boys and Girls," "Red Dress—1946," "Walker Brothers Cowboy," and "Images"—than to her early stories. Thus the earlier version of this story is a harbinger of things to come, whereas the revision suggests an author who has attained a much firmer grasp of her narrative voice in the interim between drafts. The two versions diverge at the point when Helen describes the "clear carrying sound of somebody playing in the street" (*Dance* 110). In the earlier version, Helen echoes Myra's plans for her eventual return, but in "Day of the Butterfly" she does not. In "Good-by Myra," the sound makes Myra's face change, which in turn frightens Helen, but in the revision the sound "made Myra, her triumph and her bounty, and most of all her future in which she had found this place for me, turn shadowy, turn dark" (110). In the first version, Helen's feelings are ambiguous; she is frightened by the change in Myra's face but does "not know why" (58). In the revision there is no ambivalence: Helen knows that Myra will go to London and die. Helen's fright in "Good-by Myra" comes out of her intuition of the eventuality, but in the revision, the adult narrator, with her sharpened memory, states the realization more emphatically.

Further, the delineation of Helen's memory has transformed the presents lying on Myra's bed. In the earlier version, they are without subjective significance, but in "Day of the Butterfly," Helen finds them threatening: "All the presents on the bed, the folded paper and ribbons, those guilt-tinged offerings, had passed into this shadow, they were no longer innocent objects to be touched, exchanged, accepted without danger." Helen's memory here is more exact, and her realization more profound; by characterizing the presents as "guilt-tinged offerings," she links them to the girls' previous cruel treatment of Myra—treatment to which she was a party. Helen's recognition here does not differ in kind from the

earlier version, yet its personal exactness leads both the narrator and the reader to a deeper understanding of the relationship. Moreover, Helen's attempt to withdraw quickly from the room, which is stated explicitly in the first version, is stated more subtly in the second. Likewise, Helen tries to give the present back to Myra in the first version, but in the second she mentally denies the "guilt-tinged offering": "I didn't want to take the case now but I could not think how to get out of it, what lie to tell. I'll give it away, I thought, I won't ever play with it. I would let my little brother pull it apart" (110). In this instance, too, the scope of Helen's realization is broadened; because the rejection is thought rather than stated, Helen's older self is shown to be shouldering more responsibility for it. Perhaps Helen recalls her own role when she and her peers were taunting Myra.

Finally, the most important change Munro made is in the last paragraph of "Day of the Butterfly." In "Good-by Myra," Helen's final goodbye is allowed to stand alone, while Helen thinks only of getting outside into the spring air. In "Day of the Butterfly," however, Helen's reaction to a nurse's admonishment to leave is far more explicit:

So I was released, set free by the barriers which now closed about Myra, her unknown, exalted, ether smelling hospital world, and by the treachery of my own heart. "Well thank you," I said. "Thank you for the thing. Goodbye." Did Myra ever say goodbye? Not likely. She sat in her high bed, her delicate brown neck rising out of a hospital gown too big for her, her brown carved face immune to treachery, her offering perhaps already forgotten, prepared to be set apart for legendary uses, as she was even in the back porch at school. (110)

Myra may be "immune to treachery," but Helen certainly is not. Moreover, since Myra is the subject of the reminiscence that comprises the story, she has been "set apart" for Helen's own "legendary uses." In comparing the two versions, then, it is possible to chart Munro's expansive delineation of memory when applied to a crucial childhood event. Helen's recollections in "Day of the Butterfly" are more precise; the adult recollections of the mature narrator are presented with a higher degree of comprehension in

the second version. The narrator in "Day of the Butterfly" recognizes the "treachery" in her own heart, which she does not attempt to avoid, and she understands her "treachery" better than she did in the original version of the story. It is a recognition that, as the narrator, she cannot deny: Helen must deal with her childhood responsibility. Another noteworthy difference is in the differing tones in the two versions of Helen's retreat. In "Good-by Myra," Helen impetuously departs, quickly calling "Good-by!" (58), whereas the second Helen is more cerebral and more serene, as if she is aware of her responsibility toward Myra. Thus, her farewell is not an exclamation; instead, it is a flat statement: "Goodbye" (110). Overall, Munro's revisions produced a more thoughtful evaluation of her narrator's memories.

In an unpublished interview, Munro comments on the differences between the two versions: "I've just changed the rhythm to get the voice of the narrator. I began to do that a lot better.... They [the changes] matter a lot to me. I don't decide to make the changes; it's just [that] when I start rewriting I start hearing the narrator's voice" (Gardiner Interview 176).<sup>5</sup> Her comments reveal her awareness of the separate narrators in the stories and, more importantly, her recognition of her own narrative development. Her comments also implicitly recognize a change in the narrator's situation, dictated by the author's own growth in her perceptive ability during the interim between drafts. Thus, it is fair to say that as Munro changed, her perception of Helen's responsibility changed, and the sharper focus in "Day of the Butterfly" reflects this change. The shift lies with the author and the narrator rather than with the story's essential intent, because Helen's moral responsibility toward Myra remains unaltered.

As indicated earlier, Munro developed as a narrative craftsman along two separate, but by no means divergent, lines. That is, although she tended increasingly toward the type of narration seen in "Good-by Myra,"<sup>6</sup> she still occasionally wrote stories in which characters are presented objectively, without recourse to memory, through a third-person narrator. Such stories as "The Time of Death" and "A Trip to the Coast" are strongly related to "The Edge of Town" in that setting and atmosphere predominate and characters are treated symbolically.<sup>7</sup> They are also Munro's least successful stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Their presence, however, is significant within Munro's work because they forced her to observe in a



detached manner. Commenting on “An Ounce of Cure,” a story written just after “Good-by Myra” and which is patently a first-person reminiscence, Munro says:

One thing in it I think is interesting, now that I look back on it: when the girl’s circumstances become hopelessly messy, when nothing is going to go right for her, she gets out of it by looking at the way things happen—by changing from a participant to an observer. This is what I used to do myself, it is what a writer does; I think it may be one of the things that make a writer in the first place. When I started to write the dreadful things I did write when I was about fifteen, I made the glorious leap from being a victim of my own ineptness and self-conscious miseries to being a godlike arranger of patterns and destinies, even if they were all in my head; I have never leapt back. (“Author’s” 125)

This statement reveals Munro’s essentially rhetorical approach to fiction, because like their author, her protagonists are both participants and observers. Through the interaction of these two modes of perception, Munro is able to present coherently the entire significance of a story’s events. It is therefore not remarkable that in some stories she prefers to simply observe in the third person—without reference to the participant’s thoughts or emotions. This allows her to concentrate on setting and atmosphere as the primary determinants of character, especially in “The Time of Death.”

In “Thanks for the Ride,” Munro brings her two separate narrative approaches together within one story. Dick, the story’s narrator, is one of her finest characters; he is both participant in and observer of the story’s action, a “pick-up” liaison, and Munro’s sole male first-person narrator.<sup>8</sup> Lois, his partner in their evening activities, is almost wholly inarticulate, meaning her character is defined through Dick’s observations of the town’s environment, her physical appearance, and her home and family. Because of his function within the story, Dick is a commingling of first-person commitment and third-person detachment. As the story opens, he is sitting in the single café in a small Ontario town, presumably near Lake

Huron, with his cloddish cousin, George. The pair have been thrown together by circumstance and are planning an evening together, though Dick is not overly enthusiastic. His descriptions of the café and town are those of a detached third-person narrator:

My cousin George and I were sitting in a restaurant called Pop's Cafe, in a little town close to the Lake. It was getting dark in there, and they had not turned the lights on, but you could still read the signs plastered against the mirror between fly-speckled and slightly yellowed cutouts of strawberry sundaes and tomato sandwiches....

It was a town of unpaved, wide, sandy streets and bare yards. Only the hardy things like red and yellow nasturtiums, or a lilac bush with brown curled leaves, grew out of that cracked earth. The houses were set wide apart, with their own pumps and sheds and privies out behind; most of them were built of wood and painted green or grey or yellow. The trees that grew there were big willows or poplars, their fine leaves greyed with the dust. There were no trees along the main street, but spaces of tall grass and dandelions and blowing thistles—open country between the store buildings. The town hall was surprisingly large, with a great bell in a tower, the red brick rather glaring in the midst of the town's walls of faded, pale-painted wood. (*Dance* 44, 46–47)

There is nothing in these descriptions that suggests the first-person narration, except possibly “surprisingly”; they serve to define the setting and, as such, act as a symbolic counterpoint later on for the inarticulate Lois, who is apparently as rough as her environment and is roughly used by boys up from the city, boys like Dick and George. Indeed, this is her town. Later, after Dick and George have met Lois’ friend Adelaide and have located Lois walking down a street, they all go to Lois’ home so that she can change. Dick follows her into the house to wait for her, and through his observations we observe how adroit Munro is at welding together his roles of observer and participant:

She opened the front door and said in a clear, stilted voice: “I would like you to meet my family.” The little front room had linoleum on the floor and flowered paper curtains at the windows. There was a glossy chesterfield with a Niagara Falls and a To Mother cushion on it, and there was a little black stove with a screen around it for summer, and a big vase of paper apple blossoms. A tall, frail woman came into the room drying her hands on a dishtowel, which she flung into a chair. Her mouth was full of blue-white china teeth, the long cords trembled in her neck. I said how-do-you-do to her, embarrassed by Lois’s announcement, so suddenly and purposefully conventional. I wondered if she had any misconceptions about this date, engineered by George for such specific purposes. I did not think so. Her face had no innocence in it that I could see; it was knowledgeable, calm, and hostile. She might have done it, then, to mock me, to make me into this caricature of The Date, the boy who grins and shuffles in the front hall and waits to be presented to the nice girl’s family. But that was a little far-fetched. Why should she want to embarrass me when she had agreed to go out with me without even looking into my face? Why should she care enough? (*Dance* 49–50)

Here, in this paragraph, is the essence of Munro’s narrative art. Having written stories like “The Edge of Town,” in which her third-person narrator describes, analyzes, and pronounces, and having written stories like “At the Other Place” and especially “Good-by Myra,” in which her remembering narrators both participated in the action and articulated its significance, Munro brings the two separate approaches together in this finely wrought story. Dick is, as far as the reader can see, observing, describing, participating, and remembering, seemingly all at once. He is both descriptive and thoughtful as a narrator, as the two separate parts of the above paragraph show: at first he describes the room, and once this description is accomplished he falls to musing over Lois’ expectations. In this way, in her finest stories—of which this is the first—Munro’s adroit narrators communicate by varying their perspective: describing, reacting, confirming, denying, and, above all, remembering—as each is needed.

Thus, her stories are best understood through an analysis of her rhetoric. Munro's narrative technique, usually subtly adjusted for the needs of each story, defines the dialectical basis of her style.

An example of these adjustments is the manner by which Munro communicates Lois' plight of being trapped in the small resort town, for we also see her donning her Saturday night finery for almost every city boy in town during the summer in the (apparently futile) hope that he will be "The Date." Because Lois is presented objectively, from Dick's point of view, Munro draws upon Dick's own curiosity about her character: he is inexperienced in pick-up affairs and so relates to Lois as a person, not as an object. In addition, Dick's description of the town, quoted above, underscores Lois' character, in that she is the human counterpart of those "hardy ... red and yellow nasturtiums." Despite Lois uttering little more than a dozen lines during the entire story, the reader is perfectly aware of her multitude of reasons for an "abusive and forlorn" cry at the story's end (*Dance* 58). Because he is describing what he observed from memory, Dick lends subjective weight to objective facts. Thus, when he first comes into Lois' house, he notices "the smell of stale small rooms, bedclothes, frying, washing, and medicated ointments. And dirt, though it did not look dirty" (*Dance* 50). With his urban middle-class background, Dick is unaccustomed to Lois' mode of life at the edge of poverty, and his memory lends subjective weight to his initial impressions.

As he notes Lois' grandmother, whom he likens to a "collapsed pudding," Dick fills out his impression:

Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her. It was a smell of hidden decay, such as there is when some obscure little animal has died under the verandah. The smell, the slovenly, confiding voice—something about this life I had not known, something about these people. I thought: my mother, George's mother, they are innocent. Even George, George is innocent. But these others are born sly and sad and knowing. (*Dance* 51)

This is not to suggest that Dick could not have had such thoughts while glancing at Lois' grandmother peering in from the edge of the living room,

but one doubts that they would have been so well articulated. Through her descriptions, Munro is here—as she is throughout her other stories—juggling reminiscence so that it gives the appearance of immediacy. That is, should the readers care to think about it, they would see that the entire story is written in the past tense, and as a result, Dick’s emotions are recalled in tranquility. But Munro’s descriptions and other details lend such clarity to the presentation of her story that readers think the events are unfolding before them. This ability, based on her narrative technique, allows her to fashion art out of a pick-up affair, a first kiss, or a runaway horse—commonplace events all.

This retrospective technique, which allows the now-older narrator to comment on what happened when they were younger—to become, as she says, a “godlike arranger of patterns and destinies”—is not, by any means, unique to Munro. A more widely known and recognized example of it is in James Joyce’s “Araby,” one of the stories of childhood in *Dubliners*. In her unpublished interview with Munro, Jill Gardiner presented the author with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s analysis of the technique as it functions within Joyce’s story. Munro’s response was as follows:

The adult narrator has the ability to detect and talk about the confusion. I don’t feel that the confusion is ever resolved. And there is some kind of a central mystery, as in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” that is there for the adult narrator as it was for the child. I feel that all life becomes even more mysterious and difficult. And the whole act of writing is more an attempt at recognition than of understanding, because I don’t understand many things. I feel a kind of satisfaction in just approaching something that is mysterious and important. Then 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. (Gardiner Interview 178)

Such a statement certainly calls into question the thematic analyses offered by critics who purport to define Munro’s vision of the world—because, as her devotion to the short story suggests, Munro sees the world

as in flux. Thus, her pronouncements are few and her insights tentative and fleeting. Conversely, the central importance of her rhetoric takes on a greater validity in light of this statement—narrative technique is, after all, the vehicle for Munro's "approach and recognition."

A passage from "Thanks for the Ride" underscores this point. Sitting in a car parked on a lonely country road, passing a bottle of bootleg liquor back and forth, Dick observes Lois and tries to understand her:

Each time Lois handed the bottle back to me she said "Thank you" in a mannerly and subtly contemptuous way. I put my arm around her, not much wanting to. I was wondering what was the matter. This girl lay against my arm, scornful, acquiescent, angry, inarticulate and out-of-reach. I wanted to talk to her then more than to touch her, and that was out of the question; talk was not so little a thing to her as touching. Meanwhile I was aware that I should be beyond this, beyond the first stage and well into the second (for I had a knowledge, though it was not very comprehensive, of the orderly progression of stages, the ritual of back- and front-seat seduction). Almost I wished I was with Adelaide. (*Dance* 53)

Here Dick is describing, observing, participating, and remembering. This passage could support a study of diction and syntax that would lead inductively, through an understanding of Dick's position as narrator, to a well-grounded presentation of theme. The adjectives define Lois: "contemptuous," "scornful," "acquiescent," "angry," "inarticulate." Lois is all of these, but in using these adjectives, Dick is also both "approaching something that is mysterious and important"—Lois—and revealing his position as a narrator. These adjectives, and others like them throughout the story, suggest that Dick, the narrator, is recalling the entire evening after he has heard Lois' "abusive and forlorn" cry: "'Thanks for the ride!'" (*Dance* 58). It was only after he left Lois that he recognized her to be a "mystic of love." But however important Dick's ruminations are to him, they mean nothing at all to Lois, who knows nothing of them. So far as she is concerned, Dick was just like all the rest of the city boys, perhaps even worse, because he showed her a glimmer of a relationship based on

something other than sex and then dashed that hope. His penultimate description of Lois—"this mystic of love" who "sat now on the far side of the carseat, looking cold and rumpled, and utterly closed up in herself" (*Dance* 57)—is apt. She looks "cold and rumpled" because that is the way she is, and that is the way she has every right to be.

Munro's retrospective narrative technique allows the reader to understand both Lois' defiant isolation and Dick's palpable regret—the two emotions held in tandem. This effect is the product of technique. Whatever view of life Munro has and that is reflected in her stories comes, as she says, from "just approaching something that is mysterious and important"—and that, indeed, is achieved through her craft and through her adroit use of a distinctive, retrospective narrative technique. Because the narrative voice is not tied to time, it roams freely through the narrator's current impressions and memories, and illuminates as it evaluates. In "Thanks for the Ride," we see it for the first time in its full flower.

Munro continued to use and refine this technique subsequent to the late 1950s, as can be seen in the balance of the stories contained in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Five of these—"The Peace of Utrecht," "Boys and Girls," "Red Dress—1946," "Walker Brothers Cowboy," and "Images," in the order of their composition<sup>9</sup>—are her most mature and refined stories in the collection; they are so because Munro employs her retrospective narrative technique subtly and with dexterity. This ability certainly owes to the experience of writing the earlier stories.

Munro refined this technique by the time she published *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and has used it consistently in her subsequent work. Throughout *Lives of Girls and Women*, the book's narrator, Del Jordan, treads a fine line between the two points of view found in stories like "Day of the Butterfly." Her older voice seldom intrudes overtly; instead, it is used subtly to instruct, clarify, and expand the younger narrator's pronouncements. For example, in the last segment of "Baptizing," when Del and Garnet French recognize their differences and tacitly reject one another, the older voice comes in to comment: "We had seen in each other what we could not bear, and we had no idea that people do see that, and go on, and hate and fight and try to kill each other, various ways, then love some more" (*Lives* 240). Such covert intrusions, which contain the older Del's knowledge, are found throughout *Lives of Girls and Women*.

In this way, the technique Munro employs in *Lives of Girls and Women* is a distillation of the one she developed through her early work; it is essentially the same as the technique employed in the earlier stories considered here.

Munro's next published work, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, is another matter. The reader is startled by its range of narrative points of view, for Munro's narrators are constantly shifting in age, demeanour, and station in life. Some of the stories, such as "The Found Boat" and "The Ottawa Valley," are directly related to Munro's earlier work, focusing upon some remembered childhood experiences. Others suggest a new direction; in "Tell Me Yes or No," the narrator imagines that her lover is dead, which alters the reader's impression of what is real. Munro's range has also widened with this collection, in that she is often concerned with the question of marriages gone sour, as in "Material" and "The Spanish Lady."

But despite the wider range found in the collection, Munro's basic narrative technique is still essentially the same as that developed by the end of *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Within most of the stories is a polarity of perception, either the narrator's or the central character's, and it is partially resolved through some sort of reconciliation or epiphany. Although she uses a wider range of character types for her narrators, the way in which she communicates each of their situations has some precursor in an earlier story. For example, the dramatized reminiscent technique found in "Material," "Memorial," and "The Ottawa Valley" was first used in "The Peace of Utrecht," first published in 1960 and later included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. By rendering her narrators' memories dramatically, however, Munro treats overtly the dual-voiced retrospective technique she had employed covertly in "Day of the Butterfly" and "Thanks for the Ride." Munro is using essentially the same narrative techniques in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* that she had perfected by the time she published her first collection.

Although Munro uses the third-person narrator much more in *Who Do You Think You Are?* than in her previous work, it, too, continues her use of her characteristic retrospective technique. Here the narrator, Munro, juxtaposes her younger, innocent view of herself and of her life with a more definite and comprehensive understanding, which derives from



her subsequent experience. Using the third-person narrator in this way, Munro presents Rose's initial impressions in concert with the character's eventual understanding—and in doing fulfills the role of the first-person narrator of adding subjective weight to earlier impressions, as seen in "Day of the Butterfly" and "Thanks for the Ride." Because of the detachment occasioned by the third-person narrator, Rose's story is less immediate to the reader than Myra's, or Lois' and Dick's, to be sure, but the narrative technique used in *Who Do You Think You Are?* is derived from Munro's experience in writing the earlier stories.

Munro's distinctive narrative technique, which she had perfected by the time her first collection appeared, is the basis of her felicitous style. It has enabled her to create a dialectic between present and past, between experience and understanding. This, in turn, has enabled her to transform commonplace, everyday experiences—like a girlhood acquaintanceship, a pick-up affair, or a first date—into finely wrought art. Munro's narrative dialectics, which balance one point of view against another, allow her to create her own "clear jelly," and to present a comprehensive understanding to her readers. This, in the words of Munro's narrator in "Material," "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).

## Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario (1984)

Critics have long recognized the evocative presence of the small town in Ontario writing: Susanna Moodie's Belleville beckons as an island of civilization within a wilderness prison in *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), Sara Jeannette Duncan's Elgin plays a central role in *The Imperialist* (1904), and no list of fictional Canadian small towns is complete without Leacock's Mariposa. More recently, Robertson Davies' Deptford trilogy has broadcast the Canadian small town far beyond Canada's borders, probing as it does the legacies of this particular—some would say peculiar—place, inherited by those real and fictional souls who inhabited them and inherit them still (see Reid). Yet the Ontario small town as an archetype is a conundrum: a province that has grown to become urban and sophisticated believes itself rural and simple. Much like the notion Davies calls the Canadian "Myth of Innocence," Ontario prefers to see itself as a place of small towns, its cities notwithstanding; as he writes: "deep in our hearts we Canadians cherish a notion—I do not call it an idea, because an idea may be carefully formulated, whereas a notion is an elusive thing that takes form from every mind that embraces it—we cherish a notion that we are a simple folk, nourished on the simpler truths of Christianity, in whom certain rough and untutored instincts of nobility assert themselves" ("Dark" 43).<sup>1</sup> So, too, Ontario—urban Ontario—persists in seeing

itself—through its literature, the stuff of myths—as a place of small towns, formed and informed by the sway of Elgin, Mariposa, Deptford and the like. Such a notion has some basis in fact, in that many Ontarians live in small towns today, though most do not. Thus the small-town ethos in Ontario gains its primary importance as a myth—that is, as a falsehood that is somehow true—of the sort that Davies defines. In contemporary Ontario writing, the small town ethos is a legacy, an inheritance that helps explain the present by assessing and redefining the past. Thus, as an inherited presence, the Ontario small town remains central to contemporary writing in Canada; in the work of Robertson Davies, George Elliott, James Reaney, Alice Munro, Marian Engel, Matt Cohen, and numerous others, the legacy of the small town is palpable.

Of those who focus on the small town as a setting, presence, and legacy, Alice Munro seems to do so in the most pointed manner; in her stories—perhaps because they are stories rather than novels—the presence of Ontario's past is not only recurrent, but ubiquitous. Again and again, Munro takes her reader to Jubilee, to Hanratty, and, more recently, to Dalgleish, Ontario. We see and feel these towns through Munro's descriptions and analyses; her narrators remember rural Ontario during the 1930s and 1940s, balancing it against an often more urban, more sophisticated present of the 1960s through the 1980s. Her characters strive to understand themselves and their surroundings at key moments in their lives, at moments of epiphany, and in order to understand who they are, they first must recognize where they have come from. Almost always this is from rural Ontario, along Lake Huron.<sup>2</sup>

Munro creates Ontario's identifiable surfaces, she says, incidentally; Ontario is important in her stories because it happens to be her place, as she explains in a recent interview: "I don't think the setting matters at all. A lot of people think I'm a regional writer. And I use the region where I grew up a lot. But I don't have any idea of writing to show the kinds of things that happen in a certain place. These things happen and place is part of it. But in a way, it's incidental" (Hancock Interview 88). Despite this attempt to disavow the importance of setting in her work, Munro's fiction defines Ontario as a fictional place; the key comment in this quotation, then, is: "These things happen and place is a part of it." Indeed it is, but to Munro, place is a part of the whole tale she tells; to her, place and

character are inextricably connected in a story—it is an interdependence born of the vagaries of birth and life. These associations are, of course, wholly random, but they are nonetheless significant for being so, as one of Munro’s narrators explains in “The Moons of Jupiter”:

Once, when my children were little, my father said to me, “You know those years you were growing up—well, that’s all a kind of blur to me. I can’t sort out one year from another.” I was offended. I remembered each separate year with pain and clarity. I could have told how old I was when I went to look at the evening dresses in the window of Benbow’s Ladies’ Wear. Every week through the winter a new dress, spotlight—the sequins and tulle, the rose and lilac, sapphire, daffodil—and me a cold worshipping on the slushy sidewalk. I could have told how old I was when I forged my mother’s signature on a bad report card, when I had measles, when we papered the front room. But the years when [my children] were little, when I lived with their father—yes, blur is the word for it....

Those bumbling years are the years our children will remember all their lives. Corners of the yards I never visited will stay in their heads. (*Moons* 222; 223)

This musing defines Munro’s use of place: at the core of her art lies her own experience of Huron County, Ontario, a place remembered, recovered, revised, and, at times, renounced. In Munro’s fiction, from her first stories published in the 1950s as an undergraduate through to the recently published “The Ferguson Girls Must Never Marry,” Ontario as a fictional place is central to her stories’ content and form. Small-town Ontario—its mores, perceptions, and prejudices—infuses Munro’s art, allowing Ontario readers to recognize their place, certainly, but ultimately offering us much more. Munro’s stories transcend the local and the provincial to reach the universal, which she captures and communicates. She does this by taking her readers, in some sense, to Ontario—if not physically, then through her memory of it.

As such, small-town Ontario is not only of thematic importance to Munro's work, it is technically significant as well, centrally so; indeed, her remembering narrators, in reflexively shifting from present to past and back again, create what one critic has called Munro's "jerky" narrative pace—but those shifts, and thus that pace, are essential to her stories.<sup>3</sup> Munro's work is dependent on a narrative technique that combines the past with the present, intermingling the two so as to reach toward a narrator's understanding of herself. However jerky it is, then, Munro's juxtaposition of an Ontario past with an Ontario present is fundamental to an understanding of her work. Through this juxtaposition she takes her reader to Ontario, sometimes focusing on the past almost exclusively, sometimes focusing on the present in the same way, but most frequently balancing the one with the other, as seen from the narrator's perspective. Consequently, the reader finds a well-defined relationship between the present and the past in Munro's fiction, to which the presence of the Ontario small town is crucial. Even in smug, urban, and sophisticated 1980s Ontario, the legacy of the small town persists, rearing its conscience-stricken head.

Defining her characters by their identities and their connections with rural Ontario, Munro adopts much the same approach as Eudora Welty, whose stories of the American south she has praised. Indeed, Welty's observations on the role of place in fiction define not only her own use of Mississippi, but also Munro's use of Ontario. In "Place in Fiction," Welty writes:

It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations—associations more poetic even than actual. I say, "The Yorkshire Moors," and you will say, "*Wuthering Heights*," and I have only to murmur, "If Father were only alive—" for you to come back with "We could go to Moscow," which certainly is not even so. The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?"—and that is the heart's field.... Fiction is properly at work on the here and now, or

the past made here and now; for in novels *we* have to be there. Fiction provides the ideal texture through which the feeling and meaning that permeate our own personal, present lives will best show through. (*Eye* 118, 117)

“The past made here and now.” This observation, like Welty’s and Munro’s fictions, emphasizes the relationship between the past and present, and the power of place to conjure up that relationship through memory and to synthesize the two.<sup>4</sup>

Yet that relationship and that power can be misunderstood, as Munro has learned. As her fiction has gained reputation during the last dozen years, Munro has found herself caught up in controversy. Two incidents bear directly on this discussion. In 1976 the Peterborough, Ontario, school board removed *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)—along with Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974)—from its approved high school reading list because of its alleged explicit treatment of sex. More recently, the *Wingham Advance-Times*, published weekly in Munro’s childhood hometown of Wingham, Ontario, ran an anti-Munro editorial in response to an article on Munro that appeared the week before in *Today* magazine. Entitled “A Genius of Sour Grapes,” the editor intones: “Sadly enough Wingham people have never had much chance to enjoy the excellence of [Munro’s] writing ability because we have repeatedly been made the butt of soured and cruel introspection on the part of a gifted author.” Taking a chamber-of-commerce tone, the editorial disputes the accuracy of Munro’s claim that parts of Wingham featured “bootleggers, prostitutes, and hangers on,” concluding, “something less than greatness impels her to return again and again to a time and a place in her life where bitterness warped her personality.” These incidents suggest, like the ubiquity of the small town in Ontario fiction, the persistence of its myth today (“Genius”). Despite its sophistication and urbanity, Ontario still holds its small-town moralists who, as in Peterborough (certainly not a small town itself), rise up and inveigh against immorality. At the same time, the Wingham paper’s stand ironically justifies Munro’s consistently held view that such towns are stultifying for the imaginative, however imaginatively escapable. Both incidents show, finally, that the small-town ethos is far from dead: the past continues to weigh upon the present.

After the editorial appeared, Munro discussed the controversy, describing Wingham as a place she can live neither with nor without. She acknowledged her unpopularity there, attributing it to her having told all—"the country gossip tattling her tales to city folk" (Wayne 9). Thus like Leacock, Davies, and other Ontario writers, Munro criticizes the small town at a price; it is stifling, to be sure, for the native with imagination and drive, but it also cannot be escaped. For Munro as a fiction writer, particularly, Wingham is her place—she must live in an uncomfortable connection with it. Munro's narrative technique evolved along two parallel lines: her stories employ either remembering first-person narrators or third-person narrators, usually limited to the protagonist's perspective. The first of these approaches predominated her writing up to and including *Lives of Girls and Women*; the second, though used consistently since Munro's first stories, has appeared far more frequently in her two most recent books: *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). Munro herself is quite aware of her dual approach, though she does not try to explain it. In a recent interview, for example, she comments: "And you get a feel for what you should do. But a lot of my stuff I write in both first and third person. Or I start off one way, and then I do it the other way" (Struthers Interview 24).

At the same time, Munro has spoken often about her attitude toward objects. For example, she remarks during an interview conducted by Graeme Gibson: "I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life." She is seeking to obtain "the exact tone or texture of how things are," and "can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture" (Gibson Interview 241, 256–57). Such concern with evoking surface detail is evident from her earliest stories on. Take, for example, the opening passage of "The Edge of Town," published in 1955:

Up here the soil is shallow and stony; the creeks dry up in summer, and a harsh wind from the west blows all year long. There are not many trees, but wild-rose and blackberry bushes in little pockets of the hills, and long sharp sword-grass in the hollows. On an August day if you stand on the road leading out from the town, you can see miles and miles of brown blowing grass, and

dust scooped up from the roads, and low, bumpy hills along the rim of the sky, which might be the end of the world. At night the crickets sing in the grass, and every second day, at supper time, a freight train goes through the town. ("Edge" 368)

Munro often refers to her stories as being one of two types: adequate or inadequate (in her most recently published interview, these are "the real material" and "holding-pattern stories"). Without question, "The Edge of Town" is a holding-pattern story, for Munro has rejected it "almost entirely as a contrived and as an artificial story" (Gardiner Interview 173).

Her own condemnation notwithstanding, "The Edge of Town" establishes the texture and surface of place as an important presence in Munro's stories from the beginning—and, as here, that place is virtually always southwestern Ontario, whatever the name of the town. Passages such as the one above are certainly vital to the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968): the descriptions of Lois's town in "Thanks for the Ride," the river land walked along by the protagonist and her father in "Images," and the description of Lake Huron in terms of geologic time in "Walker Brothers Cowboy." So, too, are they crucial to *Lives of Girls and Women*: "The Flats Road" and "Heirs of the Living Body" depend on the texture of place.

What has changed is how she has used such passages. In "The Edge of Town," and "Thanks for the Ride," first published in 1957, she uses setting to help the reader understand a character who is essentially inarticulate; environment is a symbolic index to character. In the latter story, Munro is far more successful. "Thanks for the Ride" succeeds while "The Edge of Town" fails largely because of a shift from third- to first-person narration—Dick, the story's narrator, sees Lois in terms of place and so understands her entrapment through setting, caught as she is between two role models, a winkingly knowing mother and a caustically cynical grandmother. Thus "Thanks for the Ride" combines place and character—Dick, as participating narrator, cannot understand Lois without understanding her town—whereas in "The Edge of Town," place is separate from its protagonist, Harry Brooke, as the previously quoted passage, in its evocative description of starkness, suggests.



In the same interview in which she condemns “The Edge of Town” as an artificial story, Munro mentions that when she began writing, setting was much more important to her than character (Gardiner Interview 173).<sup>5</sup> This is borne out by her stories: the different way she uses place in “The Edge of Town” and “Thanks for the Ride” indicates the direction in which she developed. Place was separate from character in many of Munro’s early uncollected stories, serving as objective setting only, but became progressively more internalized within her stories as Munro began to tailor her settings to make them subjective and dependent on an individual narrative point of view—one that connects one place to another by uniting sensibility and memory.

Rural Ontario is Munro’s own place, her own “past made here and now,” in Welty’s phrase. Its qualities within her stories are well summarized by the final paragraph of “The Ottawa Valley,” published in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974). The story recounts a trip the narrator took to the Ottawa Valley as a pre-teenage girl with her mother and sister. There the narrator sees her mother differently—connected to a world she doesn’t know, represented by her Aunt Dodie and other relatives from her mother’s girlhood in the Ottawa Valley. More importantly, the narrator realizes that her mother has contracted Parkinson’s disease; during the visit she recognizes its presence for the first time and so recognizes, as well, her mother’s mortality, and that she will not always be there to provide comfort. This latter recognition, by far the more painful, comes when she questions her mother about Dodie’s statement that her mother has had a stroke; nervously, “recklessly, stubbornly,” the young girl persists, not really satisfied by her mother’s response, saying, “Is your arm going to stop shaking?” The narrator understands in retrospect that she had been demanding that her mother “turn and promise me what I needed. But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me. She went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent” (*Something* 244). Here, through memory, the narrator first recognizes the disease that would eventually kill her mother, and she her mother’s action as a recognition of her fate. The story’s final paragraph encapsulates several of Munro’s concerns:

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. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose, because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. Now I look at what I've done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents' old camera used to take. In these snapshots Aunt Dodie and Uncle James and even Aunt Lena, even her children, come out clear enough.... The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid* of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (*Something* 246)

Here then is Munro's Ontario, Munro's life, described in her own terms through the perspective of a remembering narrator; place is a web of chance connections—some sensual, some human. In trying to understand one's life, a person must live willy-nilly, concerning herself with the past—past places, past people, past worries. Associations spring forth from memories, often triggered by places or events—as the following discussion will show—and impinge on the present like old, brownish snapshots, leading us back into the past through memory, like the woman who was the young girl in "The Ottawa Valley," trying once more to capture, and so to understand, her mother. These two realms of past and present are inextricably linked in Munro's stories, and the form they take is reflexive: past is ever present; now depends upon then.

This reflexive use of Ontario is seen in most of Munro's stories; one may cite numerous instances of the interlayering techniques she uses. But the discussion here is limited to an examination of "The Peace of Utrecht,"

one of the first stories to establish Munro's characteristic use of place, and that does so most thoroughly. First published in 1960 and included in a revised form in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, "The Peace of Utrecht" concerns a visit Helen makes with her children to the town of Jubilee to see her sister Maddy for the first time since the death of their mother from a long, lingering illness. Helen begins her narration by emphasizing her estrangement from her sister:

I have been home for three weeks and it has not been a success. Maddy and I, though we speak cheerfully of our enjoyment of so long and intimate a visit, will be relieved when it is over. Silence disturbs us. We laugh immoderately. I am afraid—very likely we are both afraid—that when the moment comes to say goodbye, unless we are very quick to kiss, and fervently mockingly squeeze each other's shoulders, we will have to look straight into the desert that is between us and acknowledge that we are not merely indifferent; at heart we reject each other, and as for the past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien and forfeited her claim. (*Dance* 190)

Helen begins by opening wounds, asserting her separate pain, and thereby directing and intriguing the reader. She embarks, through memory, on a voyage of self-discovery, moving gradually toward a searing recognition; Helen realizes that she has abandoned both her sister and—far more importantly—her mother to their respective fates. By examining herself, Helen is gauging her own responsibility, and her own interdependence and independence. This dynamic, this drama of memory, is informed by Ontario past; Jubilee brings back memories and thus forms and informs the story—its Protestant ethos demands that Helen acknowledge her responsibility. "I felt," she says at one point, "as if my old life was lying around me, waiting to be picked up again" (*Dance* 201).

Helen's narration reveals Munro's dependence on the evocative effects of memory. Helen begins by acknowledging the rift between her

and her sister, and in this way the story's narrative order is not chronological. Instead, its movement depends upon a dialectic relationship between Helen's memory and her perception of her present situation, and is directed by her looming awareness of her dead mother. The mother acts like a wedge between the sisters, a function underscored by Helen's nostalgic recollection of the fullness of their childhood relationship, juxtaposed against the emptiness of their present relationship. But Helen is unable to sustain her nostalgia, because she is aware that the rift between the two of them has been caused by Maddy's life in Jubilee, "the dim world of continuing disaster, of home" (*Dance* 191). Helen managed to escape to a husband and family, to a life far away. So in addition to confronting her mother, Helen must also gauge her responsibility toward her sister's present dissatisfaction, which verges on desperation.

After delineating the effect of their mother's illness and death on her relationship with Maddy, Helen steps back and places their story within the social milieu of the town itself. Thus Jubilee is an informing presence, a source of values—some repudiated, some not. Helen recognizes that her mother's lengthy illness is a part of the town, and encroaching on her own sense of identity: "And now that she is dead I no longer feel that when they say the words 'your mother' they deal a knowing, cunning blow at my pride. I used to feel that; at those words I felt my whole identity, that pretentious adolescent construction, come tumbling down" (*Dance* 194). Helen realizes that when the sisters tried to hide their "Gothic Mother" from the town, it rejected the attempt: "We should have let the town have her; it would have treated her better" (*Dance* 195).

After the sisters' own social history, and the effect of the visit, are explained, Helen begins her self-analysis. From the moment of her arrival three weeks earlier, Helen felt as if she was home—yet she knew she was not:

There is no easy way to get to Jubilee from anywhere on earth. Then about two o'clock in the afternoon I saw ahead of me, so familiar and unexpected, the gaudy, peeling cupola of the town hall, which is no relation to any of the rest of the town's square-built, dingy grey-and-red-brick architecture. (Underneath it hangs a great bell, to be rung in the event of some mythical

disaster.) I drove up the main street—a new service station, new stucco front on the Queen’s Hotel—and turned into the quiet, decaying side streets where old maids live, and have birdbaths and blue delphiniums in their gardens. The big brick houses that I knew, with their wooden verandahs and gaping, dark-screened windows, seemed to me plausible but unreal. (Anyone to whom I have mentioned the dreaming, sunken feeling of these streets wants to take me out to the north side of town where there is a new soft-drink bottling plant, some new ranch-style houses and a Tastee-Freez.) Then I park my car in a little splash of shade in front of the house where I used to live. (*Dance* 196)

Here Munro combines place and character: Helen’s recognitions begin with the town itself. Having been long away, Helen assesses the ways in which Jubilee is still the same while, parenthetically, acknowledging the ways in which it has changed. Implicitly, the same might be said of Helen. Remembering, Helen finds the place she left, but now she must identify and digest its changes, literal as well as personal. By defining the rift between Helen and Maddy announced in the story’s first paragraph, Munro begins with physical place and the changes it has undergone, which Helen notices, in order to move towards plumbing the psychological changes now separating the two sisters.

Emotional changes—leading inexorably toward their mother’s death—are introduced through the family home, still maintained by Maddy. Helen’s response to her daughter’s incredulity at her first glimpse of Helen’s childhood home, gives voice to Munro’s awareness of the disparity between imagination and reality. As Helen enters the house she views herself in a mirror:

Then I paused, one foot on the bottom step, and turned to greet, matter-of-factly, the reflection of a thin, tanned, habitually watchful woman, recognizably a Young Mother, whose hair, pulled into a knot on top of her head, exposed a jawline no longer softly fleshed, a brown neck rising with a look of tension

from the little sharp knobs of the collarbone—this is the hall mirror that had shown me, last time I looked, a commonplace pretty girl, with a face as smooth as and insensitive as an apple, no matter what panic and disorder lay behind it. (*Dance* 197–198)

Helen realizes that she did not turn to see her reflection; she turned in expectation of hearing her mother call “*Who’s There?*” (*Dance* 198). Helen’s introspection and her guilt about her mother are, accordingly, thrust toward the reader, and though multifaceted, her guilt stems largely from recognizing that she had gradually become insensitive to her mother’s suffering.

The house’s rooms—the physical surfaces of place—trigger memories for Helen that help explain her trepidation and that lead her to acknowledge her responsibility toward both her mother and sister. While away from Jubilee, Helen had become detached from the situation at home, something that is evident as she describes her mother’s decline:

In the ordinary world it was not possible to recreate her. The picture of her face which I carried in my mind seemed too terrible, unreal. Similarly the complex strain of living with her, the feelings of hysteria which Maddy and I once dissipated in a great deal of brutal laughter, now began to seem partly imaginary; I felt the beginnings of a secret, guilty estrangement. (*Dance* 200–201)

Despite her absence, Helen is able to be nostalgic about her youth in Jubilee and her relationship with Maddy: “I thought of us walking up and down the main street, arm in arm with two or three other girls, until it got dark, then going in to Al’s to dance, under a string of little colored lights. The windows in the dance hall were open; they let in the raw spring air with its smell of earth and the river; the hands of farm boys crumpled and stained our white blouses when we danced” (*Dance* 201). Such experiences, which juxtapose the past with the present, take on an almost

mystical significance in Munro's stories. Helen continues, but is unable to sustain a sentimental perspective:

And now an experience which seemed not at all memorable at the time (in fact Al's was a dismal place and the ritual of walking up and down the street to show ourselves off we thought crude and ridiculous, though we could not resist it) had been transformed into something curiously meaningful for me, and complete; it took in more than the girls dancing and the single street, it spread over the whole town, its rudimentary pattern of streets and its bare trees and muddy yards just free of the snow, over the dirt roads where the lights of cars appeared, jolting towards the town, under an immense pale wash of sky. (*Dance* 201–02)

As with the later passages, quoted earlier from “The Ottawa Valley” and “The Moons of Jupiter,” Munro is here defining character through place; identity is dependent on memory, on association, on connection. Helen concludes this musing: “Maddy; her bright skeptical look; my sister” (202). Thus, here her nostalgia is balanced—and deflated—by the perspective and knowledge afforded from looking back from the present—Helen's rueful remembrance of Maddy's “bright skeptical look” is undercut by both her more cynical point of view and her knowledge of Maddy's present desperation.

Because Maddy refuses to discuss their mother's death with her sister, Helen must discover the truth from their maiden aunts Annie and Lou—foils who suggest a shared old age the younger sisters have escaped. The aunts' role, too, is to speak for the town, and to articulate its judgement of Maddy's treatment of their mother. During a visit to the aunts' home, Helen is led upstairs by Annie, ostensibly to give Helen her mother's clothes, which the older woman has neatly mended, washed, and saved. Throughout the exchange, Munro emphasizes the ethical gulf between them, one Helen recognizes and feels guilty about, but can do nothing to bridge. When Annie almost furtively offers the clothes, Helen responds

curtly, cementing these differences and defining the gulf between her own inherited values and those she lives by:

“I would rather buy,” I said, and was immediately sorry for the coldness in my voice. Nevertheless, I continued, “When I need something, I do go and buy it.” This suggestion that I was not poor any more brought a look of reproach and aloofness into my aunt’s face. She said nothing. I went and looked at a picture of Auntie Ann and Auntie Lou and their older brothers and their mother and father which hung over the bureau. They stared back at me with grave accusing Protestant faces, for I had run up against the simple unprepossessing materialism which was the rock of their lives. Things must be used up, saved and mended and made into something else and used again; clothes were to be worn. I felt that I had hurt Aunt Annie’s feelings and that furthermore I had probably borne out a prediction of Auntie Lou’s, for she was sensitive to certain attitudes in the world that were too sophisticated for Aunt Annie to bother about, and she had very likely said that I would not want my mother’s clothes. (*Dance* 206)

Immediately after this exchange, Aunt Annie comments, “She was gone sooner than anybody would have expected.... Your mother,” beginning what Helen thinks may be “a necessary part of our visit” (*Dance* 206). The aunt continues to tell Helen, in great detail, the story of her mother’s final weeks, which included a January escape from the hospital in bathrobe and slippers. Helen is not surprised; though she prefers a less harsh view, such as her nostalgia about her childhood relationship with her sister, Helen has divined the truth before Annie offers it: Maddy put their mother in the hospital to die.

This scene, focusing as it does on the differing values of successive generations, dramatizes Munro’s use of Ontario’s past and present in her stories. Each generation is connected to the one that preceded it, just as it is to the one that succeeds it. At the core of Munro’s work lies the confrontation between each generation’s point of view, each generation’s values.



Implicit in such scenes as this, in which no agreement is possible, are the changes that time has wrought, and a recognition of a deep connection, despite these changes. Auntie Annie concludes, telling Helen what they thought of Maddy's treatment of their mother during her final days: "'We thought it was hard,' she said finally. 'Lou and I thought it was hard.'" Helen responds quizzically, capturing the essence of Munro's use of her own Ontario background; she wonders, "Is this the last function of old women, beyond making rag rugs and giving us five dollar bills—making sure the haunts we have contracted for are with us, not one gone without?" (*Dance* 209). This recognition is central to the story, just as it is to Munro's use of place, and just as it is to her art. "The Peace of Utrecht" dramatizes Helen's recognition of her own isolation, and the means by which Munro accomplishes this are through Helen's memories of Jubilee vis-à-vis the Jubilee she finds during her visit. They are, and yet they are not, the same place, Helen learns. Nonetheless, each of these Jubilees is hers, and she must find herself in both versions, because the two are inseparable, held together by her memory and perception. Munro uses both Helen's memories of her past and her realizations about the present to define the changes the character has undergone. In this, setting is accidental, as Munro suggests, but it is also crucial, because it is largely through setting that Helen gauges and articulates her changed perspective.

The story's title, for example, underscores the casualness of association that Munro captures so readily: looking about her former room just after her arrival, Helen opens the drawer of the washstand and discovers some pages "from a looseleaf notebook. I read: 'The Peace of Utrecht, 1713, brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession.' It struck me that the handwriting was my own. Strange to think of it lying here for ten years—more; it looked as if I might have written it that day" (*Dance* 201). Thus the Peace of Utrecht is also Helen's own personal peace—just as with her decade-old handwriting, Helen recognizes psychological connections that she must acknowledge: her own responsibility for her mother's death, her lost intimacy with Maddy, and, finally, her permanent connection to Jubilee and thus to "the haunts" she has "contracted for." Though she feels "a secret, guilty estrangement" (*Dance* 201) from Jubilee, and would prefer to feel nostalgic, Helen cannot avoid knowing about the more threatening implications of what she has found in Jubilee during this visit. In this

way she comes to understand the depth of her own isolation in tandem with Maddy's, which accounts for the phrase at the story's opening: "at heart we reject each other." In her return to Jubilee and in recognizing the changes she herself has undergone, especially through Auntie Annie's tale of her mother's flight and struggle, Helen finds the truth she has sought throughout the story—though it is by no means a gentle truth.

This interpretation is reinforced by the guidance Helen offers Maddy when she returns home after visiting her aunts—after Maddy admits that she put their mother in the hospital to die, Helen tells her, "Take your life, Maddy." (210). For her part, Helen has reconciled her life away from Jubilee and her attachments there. She has come to an understanding that stands in marked contrast to her sister's.

This extended treatment of "The Peace of Utrecht" is justified because the story is central to Munro's canon; she has often called it one of her first "real" stories, and her "first painful autobiographical story" (Metcalf Interview 58; Struthers Interview 23). At the same time, it focuses on the relationships within families, one of her recurring concerns. From her earliest stories, Munro has been using this narrative approach based on memory to tell her stories; in it, the rural Ontario small town is a crucial presence, in that its mores form the basis of both the confusion with which a story begins and the understanding, however tentative, that emerges at its close. In "The Peace of Utrecht," Munro fully dramatizes this process for the first time. Helen's return to and rediscovery of her home place is followed by Del Jordan's in *Lives of Girls and Women*, by various figures' in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, by Rose's in *Who Do You Think You Are?* and, most recently, by the protagonists' in *The Moons of Jupiter*. Indeed, Helen's rhetorical response to Auntie Annie—wondering if her final function is to ensure the continuation of personal "haunts"—is a restatement of Munro's perpetual attempts to understand each of her characters. For Munro, meaning is created when place and character are intertwined, just like past and present—when associations and connections are brought into focus at a crucial moment. In her early works, like "The Edge of Town," it is possible to see place as separate from character, but from "The Peace of Utrecht" on, this becomes virtually impossible; from this point on, place and character—that is, identity—so control the

direction of a Munro story as she focuses on her protagonist's central mystery that they cannot be separated.

Munro's development in this manner—toward a more vital integration of place and character—is something she herself recognizes. In the 1973 interview in which she rejects “The Edge of Town,” Munro states: “At first I think I was just overwhelmed by a place, and the story was almost ... a contrived illustration of whatever this place meant to me—O.K.? And yet, you know, [the opening passage from “The Edge of Town”] was not an imagined setting. I actually lived [it] ... it's all real. It's all there. I did not make it for its meaning. I was trying to find a meaning” (Gardiner Interview 173–74).<sup>6</sup> This is what Munro does in her stories: she tries “to find a meaning.” At times she complains of the inadequacy of her attempts, such as with the final paragraph of “The Ottawa Valley,” but though her triumphs are momentary, her insights fleeting, Munro writes stories that capture the uncertainty of the present. Vital to this is Ontario's past: images of the past, recalled by memory, help her characters understand their current situations, even if those memories are negative ones, such as an Aunt Annie scolding and condemning the younger generation who have inherited a connection.

The recent story “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection” illustrates Munro's continued use of the past in the same manner as in “The Peace of Utrecht.” The narrator begins by recounting a memorable visit made by four maiden cousins—the Chaddeleys—to the narrator's girlhood home in Huron County. They are irreverent and fun-loving, and fill their hosts with joy and laughter; during their stay, the narrator says: “My parents, all of us, are on holiday” (Moons 18). Juxtaposed against this memory is a present-day visit made by the only remaining living member of the four—known by the narrator as Cousin Iris. The narrator—now grown, married, and living in Vancouver with her condescending and supercilious husband—is tense and craves for the evening to go well. Iris approves of the husband but he does not reciprocate; he does not volunteer to take her back to her hotel, and once she leaves, says: “What a pathetic old tart.” He continues to mock Iris and, the narrator says, “was still talking as I threw the pyrex plate at his head” (Moons 17). Immediately after this revelation, the story concludes in a manner reminiscent of Helen's nostalgic recollections of Maddy and of an earlier Jubilee—Munro places a fond

memory, described earlier in the story, in stark contrast to the narrator's hostility toward her husband:

*Row, row, row your boat*

*Gently down the stream.*

*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,*

*Life is but a dream.*

I lie in bed beside my little sister, listening to the singing in the yard. Life is transformed, by these voices, by these presences, by their high spirits and grand esteem, for themselves and each other. My parents, all of us, are on holiday. The mixture of voices and words is so complicated and varied it seems that such confusion, such jolly rivalry, will go on forever, and then to my surprise for I am surprised, even though I know the pattern of rounds—the song is thinning out, you can hear the two voices striving.

*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,*

*Life is but a dream*

Then the one voice alone, one of them singing on, gamely, to the finish. One voice in which there is an unexpected note of entreaty, of warning, as it hangs the five separate words on the air. Life is. Wait. But a. Now, wait. Dream. (*Moons* 18)

This lyrical, yet somehow frightening, memory contrasts palpably with the glaring ugliness of the act that precedes it, and through it the reader comes to understand the narrator's situation, her present versus her past. This, quite simply, is what Munro does in her stories, and this is how she uses the Ontario small town—earlier in the story the narrator concludes:

“Connection. That was what it was all about” (*Dance* 6). In this final image, which haunts the narrator, Munro recreates and holds in evocative juxtaposition a single delightful memory from that earlier summer visit: a song shared by the visitors as they went to sleep outdoors one night in the cool of the evening, overheard by the narrator. Faced with her husband’s sneers, she comes to understand it as her connection to another time and another place that is far preferable to her present situation. As with Helen in “The Peace of Utrecht,” it is a connection that cannot be denied, and a vital part of her being. The remembered voice, too, is like the single voice Munro offers in all of her stories: that of a person far away in time or space, confirming a crucial connection to Ontario. This memory defines the narrator’s separation from those who do not share this connection; her sneering husband does not, will not, and cannot understand. But the reader, through Munro’s art, does understand. For Munro, a connection to Ontario and its past always beckons: “Connection. That was what it was all about.”

## *Critical Interlude:*

### Conferring Munro (1987)

*The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*. Ed. Judith Miller. Waterloo: U of Waterloo P, 1984.

A witticism making the literary rounds a few years ago described Canada's preeminent women writers as "the three Margarets": Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro, thus consigning Munro to odd-woman-out status by virtue of her un-Margareted name. Using critical attention as a measure, one might well see Munro's role within this trinity in much the same fashion—as an odd woman out. Though her stories began appearing around the same time as the other two Margarets' works, and Munro's offerings were as roundly praised as theirs, her work has only recently begun to get the extended critical attention long accorded theirs. *The Art of Alice Munro*, which publishes some of the papers delivered at the March 1982 University of Waterloo conference on Munro's fiction, follows hard on the heels of *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* (1983); together, they are a part of what appears to be an avalanche of critical attention. Five volumes of "Munroviana"—a term coined by one of the critics included here—have been published or were scheduled for publication between 1983 and 1986, and that's not counting Hallvard

Dahlie's monograph on Munro included in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, nor books in which Munro figures as one of several writers being critiqued.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Munro has been conferred a new critical status, receiving attention befitting the author of so many stories first published in the *New Yorker* and, ultimately, collected in *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *The Moons of Jupiter*. The latter book has cemented Munro's position as one of Canada's best.

That Munro's art should receive progressively greater scrutiny by critics is hardly surprising, of course, given that readers and reviewers have noted subtleties and complexities in her stories from the very first—refinements belied by their apparent simplicity in subject, narration, structure, and tone. As well, critical attention is at least in part cyclical and faddish, with enthusiasts rushing holus-bolus to the latest rage, whether for purposes of a graduate thesis or the invitation of a handy conference or a call for papers. For good or ill, Munro's time has come. Such concerns are germane in assessing *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, because this volume evinces all the strengths and weaknesses its form—the conference collection—usually offers and, at the same time, reflects something of the state of Canadian criticism in relation to Munro's newfound celebrity.

Like most conference collections, the products of occasions, *The Art of Alice Munro* is uneven: two of its essays are excellent by any standard, two are quite good, another makes a reasonable point but is seriously flawed, another offers an oral address—enthusiastic though not especially well-informed—and the remaining two are simple-minded at best and puerile at worst: what they have to say would have been better left unsaid. The collection also includes, inevitably, an interview with Munro, which is balanced, less inevitably, by a fine overview of the Munro papers held by the University of Calgary. Yet this book's flaws exceed the expectations for such occasional volumes. Throughout, there is little evidence of the tough-minded editing necessary to transform conference presentations into a credible volume of essays; what emerges instead is simply a printed record of a conference on Munro.<sup>2</sup>

After Miller's introduction, which offers little more than summaries of the essays (and exaggerates their accomplishments more than a bit), *The Art of Alice Munro* begins with Joseph Gold's "Our Feeling Exactly: The Writing of Alice Munro." Despite its title, the essay does not really

take up Munro's writing; it concentrates on *Who Do You Think You Are?*, with asides to *Lives of Girls and Women*. More importantly, Gold's essay is little more than an appreciation, an oral presentation in print. There is little development of argument and Gold quotes far too much; he also indulges in overstatement ("Rose's orgasm blows up Ontario" [8]) without accounting for himself, and leaves his reader adrift. This is a pity, for Gold is a critic of some acuity, and his thesis—the relationship between feeling and language—is central to Munro's work.

Equally troubling, but from another point of view, are Margaret Anne Fitzpatrick's "'Projection' in Alice Munro's *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*" and Nora Robson's "Alice Munro and the White American South: The Quest." Neither author has a point worth making. Fitzpatrick sounds as if she has swallowed a psychoanalytical textbook when she is not sounding sophomoric: "In this paper I will first briefly elucidate the psychological nature of projection and then, by example, show how Alice Munro has used projection in the construction of certain of her characters and plots" (16). Her point—that Munro's characters feel self-conscious and so project their anxieties outward in a variety of ways—is obvious in the first place, so Fitzpatrick's five-page "glimpse" adds little and might well have been based on other (and better) examples from Munro's stories. Robson, on the other hand, dips into her M.A. thesis to make a point that has already been made, that Del Jordan "passes through experiences related realistically or symbolically in ways not unlike those of the writers of the American South" (73). J. R. (Tim) Struthers published "Alice Munro and the American South" in 1975; thus Robson's essay—which only points up thematic parallels that Munro freely admits to anyway—seems unnecessary.<sup>3</sup> Both these essays represent the kind of uninformed fannishness that characterized Munro criticism during the late 1970s, and that to some extent characterizes it still.<sup>4</sup>

It is one thing for a critic to expect an essay to be something it is not—and perhaps cannot be—and quite another to ask that it be something it bloody well should have been and is quite capable of being: well-written and to the point. Barbara Godard's "'Heirs of the Living Body': Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic" has an excellent point to make, when it gets around to it. Looking at *Lives of Girls and Women*, Godard eventually argues that the book (whatever it is, *Lives* is not the



novel so many of these critics simply assume it to be) is a *Bildungsroman* written against James Joyce's male point of view, a revision of both his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, so that Del ultimately "will dissect and demystify, rewrite tradition to include women's lives while sounding out the limits of language" (70–71). Fine. Excellent point. But seldom have I seen a published essay so in need of an editor: Godard rambles about for almost 10 pages before she gets around to Munro, citing feminist literary theory and trendy criticism (Harold Bloom's "deconstructionist poetics" [50]) galore, making asides to other Canadian writers (Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Atwood), and generally showing us what she's read. Almost 30 pages in printed form, Godard's essay should have been half its length. True, Godard does need the theorists she uses to set up her argument—by no means a simple one—but her 10 pages of rambling should have been a single page and a few windy footnotes. As it is, a fine article on *Lives*—offering the best reading yet on the Joyce connection—is buried beneath a mass of too-detailed allusions.

Before moving on to the better offerings in *The Art of Alice Munro*, I must carp one final time: Harold Horwood's interview with Munro reveals nothing substantively different from other interviews in print, save perhaps its discussion of writing on trains (they both do) and the fact that *Lives of Girls and Women* was written in a laundry room. At the same time, I was struck by how little Horwood seemed to know about Munro prior to the interview.

On to better things. The balance of the essays included are of quite a different order: very good, and two especially are excellent. Jean F. Tener's "The Invisible Iceberg" presents a succinct overview of the history of the Munro papers at the University of Calgary library—how they arrived, something of the problems involved in cataloguing them, what is included, how Munro assisted in setting up the archive—and concludes with an invitation to scholars to come and use them. In addition to the library's more detailed listing—*The Alice Munro Papers: First Accession*—Tener's essay serves as a point of departure for scholars wishing to use the holdings. She certainly arouses our curiosity, especially those of us interested particularly in Munro's style.

If Robson's essay shows how the major purpose of a graduate thesis is not necessarily to contribute to the field as an article, Linda

Lamont-Stewart's "Order From Chaos: Writing as Self-Defense in the Fiction of Alice Munro and Clark Blaise" shows how it can certainly serve such a purpose, as well as become the foundation for additional work. In a precisely written and detailed argument, Lamont-Stewart demonstrates that in both Munro and Blaise's stories, "the writing of fiction is in part a defensive tactic: the writer's ironic awareness of the artificiality of fictional reality affords some protection in a disorderly world" (120). In a similar vein, J. R. (Tim) Struthers argues convincingly in "Alice Munro's Fictive Imagination" that Munro's art is "metafiction" and, though he alludes widely to many of her stories, relevant criticism, and other metafictional writers, he establishes his point mainly through a fine discussion of "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You." That story "makes the reader swirl in virtually unimaginable psychological depths, in a 'natural confusion' (*Something* 23). It is fiction that questions its own truth and mocks its own telling" (106).

But if these essays are good, then the remaining two are singular, significant contributions both; W. R. Martin and James Carscallen are alive to every nuance in Munro's art, knowing, as Martin puts it, that she "seizes on telling connotations" (31). Martin's essay, "'Hanging Pictures Together': *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*," demonstrates a logic of arrangement in the collection based on the very "telling connotations" he sees with sensitivity and precision in the fiction. Following him, we understand the connotations, too, seeing his pairings of stories—"hanging pictures together"—as the product of a compelling internal logic dictated by the stories themselves. Rather than rehearse his argument, I want to offer a passage of Martin's prose that offers a crucial insight:

I am prepared to guess the reason why [Munro] prefers writing short stories to novels: she feels that writing a novel calls for a deliberate and lengthy setting out in detail of all the connections and relationships between all the characters, episodes and other aspects of a work that is by definition of a certain length, and requires a full analysis of motives as well as a thorough following through of circumstances. If I am right, Alice Munro feels that detailed circumstantiality and exhaustive explanation

soon lead to the obvious and the tedious, which she, with her quick and lively mind, thoroughly abhors. Writing short stories, on the other hand, allows her to create entities which stand apart or move in orbits at some distance from one another, and yet, across the spaces that separate them, powerful, or subtle and at first barely-felt gravitational pulls and ironic repulsions can operate, sometimes over great distances. A reader can become aware of all sorts of tensions, attractions, currents, and cross-currents without being flatly told about them, and can appreciate them the more because his faculties have been roused to act. Someone has said that the most beautiful parts of music are the silences between the notes. Something like this is true of Alice Munro's short stories. (33–34)

While Martin presents a rationale for the arrangement of stories in a collection, Carscallen's "The Shining House: A Group of Stories" presents a group of stories—from across Munro's works—that offer a common perspective. In so doing, Carscallen is impressively sensitive to the whole of Munro's art, for his essay deals with narration, point of view, subject, and character as each is germane, and he ultimately displays an understanding that is refined and cogent. What he sees in many of Munro's stories is an "expansive world" (88), which he likens to the classical biblical Egypt of wealth and power—based on various allusions to Egypt in the stories—and which he calls "Egypt" as a convenient term. Throughout these stories, "the body, what is, finds a reflection in what is not: in thoughts, emotions, pictures, signs—the world, in other words, of 'images'" (91). The power of Munro's stories is derived from the interplay between the body—the narrator/protagonist—and these images.

A detached reflection—for that is what it is—steals away the life of the thing it reflects, and that life then returns as an alien power: perhaps the current of a river, perhaps the other kind of current that almost electrocutes Dotty (in "Material"); or it may be the emotional shock of Joe Phippen's attack (in "Images"), which leaves the child "electrified," or, as in "Privilege," the "flash flood" of love or hate (93).

Insights like these abound in Carscallen's essay, which I think is one of the best yet on Munro. His argument is compelling, his knowledge of Munro encyclopaedic, and the associations he explains are doubtlessly Munro's own—Carscallen, like Martin, is true to Munro's art.

In sum, *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable* is no more nor no less than it purports to be: the printed record of a conference on Munro. Would that more editorial control had been exerted, although if it had, according to my judgement, there would have been no volume at all. Perhaps there should not have been, letting the half worth reading find homes in journals, as certainly they would have.

I might, in closing, invoke a passage from the narrator of "Material" who, when standing back and assessing her ex-husband Hugo's story about their landlady, Dotty, sums up very nicely—through her ambivalence—my own feeling about *The Art of Alice Munro*: "Don't be offended. Ironical objections are a habit with me. I am half-ashamed of them. I respect what has been done. I respect the intention and the effort and the result. Accept my thanks" (*Something* 43). To qualify this only a bit (just as this narrator does later in the story), I do wish the result had been more impressive. As it is, I am one Munro critic grateful for two of these essays, happy to have another three, and dismayed by the rest. An odd woman out no more, Alice Munro deserves better than this, particularly when a book is called *The Art of Alice Munro*.



## Munro's Progress (1987)

Alice Munro, *The Progress of Love*.  
McClelland & Stewart, 1986.

Some years ago, while being interviewed for Jill Gardiner's 1973 University of New Brunswick MA thesis, Alice Munro spoke about her use of retrospective narrators and the problems they confront in her stories, saying that as we grow older, "life becomes even *more* mysterious and difficult," and 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" (Gardiner Interview 178). *The Progress of Love*, Munro's sixth collection since she began publishing during the 1950s, displays everywhere its author's unequalled maturity, her unerring control of her materials, and their multitude of interconnections. It leaves its reader enraptured—over the stories as narratives, certainly, but more than that: over their human detail and most of all over the uncompromising *rightness* of the feelings they describe, define, depict, and convey. Yet at the same time, and in keeping with her sense of the mysteries of being, Munro's insights here are both more ambivalent and more technically complex than those she has offered previously.

One does not so much review this collection as savour its delicacies. In "Eskimo," Mary Joe, a doctor's receptionist/mistress, embarks on a plane over the Pacific. Amid the strange things she sees and dreams while aloft, we are offered this recollection of her doctor, and a snippet of their relationship:

He liked her when the braces were still on. They were on the first time he made love to her. She turned her head aside, conscious that a mouthful of metal might not be pleasing. He shut his eyes, and she wondered if it might be for that reason. Later she learned that he always closed his eyes. He doesn't want to be reminded of himself at such times, and probably not of her, either. His is a fierce but solitary relish. (*Progress* 194)

When the narrator of the title story, now a divorced real estate agent, visits the house she grew up in, her memories drive her to lash out at an off-hand remark made by the man she is with, Bob Marks. He immediately apologizes and, conciliatory, asks, "Was this your room when you were a little girl?" This question is equally inaccurate, but the narrator acquiesces so as to smooth things over. She then explains to herself, and to us:

And I thought it would be just as well to let him think that. I said yes, yes, it was my room when I was a little girl. It was just as well to make up right away. 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)

Trudy, the protagonist in "Circle of Prayer," recalls her feelings after her husband, Dan, left her for another woman. She holds these feelings together with a memory she has of Dan's mother playing the piano in the ramshackle hotel where the older woman lived, and where Dan and Trudy, years before, had spent their honeymoon. Munro describes Trudy's thoughts:

Why does Trudy now remember this moment? She sees her young self looking in the window at the old woman playing the piano. The dim room, with its oversize beams and fireplace and lonely leather chairs. The clattering, faltering, persistent piano music. Trudy remembers that so clearly and it seems she stood outside her own body, which ached then from the punishing pleasures of love. She stood outside her own happiness in a tide of sadness. And the opposite thing happened the morning Dan left. Then she stood outside her own unhappiness in a tide of what seemed unreasonably like love. But it was the same thing, really, when you got outside. 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)

Reading passages such as these in context, we first notice family resemblances with other Munro stories—in subject, technique, tone, and effect—but the maturity of these stories eclipses her earlier efforts and even exceeds those in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). “Jesse and Meribeth,” for example, which tells of the connections between two girlhood best friends, is related in subject and treatment to “Boys and Girls,” “Red Dress—1946,” and “The Shining Houses” from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), as well as *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). At the same time, Munro is extending her range; “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” has a nostalgic air about it as it matter-of-factly tells the histories of two brothers from the farm boarding in town to attend business school. Calmly and in great detail, Munro recounts their activities and the difficulties that lead to their sudden flight from the town, eventually offering—through perspectives gained a lifetime later—a sense of resolution. The story is beautifully done, and unlike most of Munro’s other work. Another story, “A Queer Streak,” deals also in familiar materials—weaving the interlayered relations and connections of four generations together—but it does so at much greater length.

But more than such comparisons, *The Progress of Love* offers both greater complexity and, oddly enough, greater uncertainty than we have seen before—not uncertainty of purpose, control, or detail, but rather



of meaning and of being: these stories offer a complex wonder at the strangeness of it all. The passage quoted earlier from “Eskimo,” for instance, builds matter-of-factly to the telling descriptive line—“His is a fierce but solitary relish.” The detail is so precise and right in its focus, encapsulating the doctor’s stern, Ontario-WASP demeanour, and yet it is offered only incidentally, a snapped, subtle phrase. In the narrative itself, Mary Jo either misunderstands or misperceives a scene between two fellow passengers on her Tahiti-bound plane, an Inuit man (the “Eskimo” of the title) and a teenaged Métis girl he is travelling with. After she becomes considerably vexed over their disagreement, she offers to help the girl. She then sleeps and has some bizarre dreams that include these passengers, and when Mary Jo awakens she finds that: “Somehow a pillow and a blanket have been provided for her as well. The man and the girl across the aisle are asleep with their mouths open, and Mary Jo is lifted to the surface by their dust of eloquent, innocent snores.” Munro concludes “Eskimo” with: “This is the beginning of her holiday” (*Progress* 207). Although generally still offering some sense of ending throughout *The Progress of Love*—through a suitable summary paragraph—Munro now seems, most overtly here in “Eskimo,” loath to say what it all means.

Though they may not be composed explicitly to convey the fragility of being and of understanding, the stories here proclaim Munro’s uncertainties through their structures and through her masterful interweaving of events disparate in time yet inescapable in connection, and so in the way they resonate with readers. Two differences are striking in this collection: Munro’s preference for the third person, evident since *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), has persisted, and these stories, more than ever, reflect her own return to Huron County. Indeed, they seem to present southwestern Ontario in something of the same way as *Dance of the Happy Shades*, though balanced now by an older narrative perspective. We no longer see Huron County from the point of view of one growing and going away from her home place—the stories in *The Progress of Love* encompass more time, offering us the longer view, often the cradle-to-middle-age perspective of a returned native. From her earliest stories, Munro’s narrative perspective has gradually grown older, and as a result many characters in this collection, like Mary Jo, have personal histories—and therefore perspectives of time and space—roughly equivalent to Munro’s own: 40 or 50

years of age, born in rural Ontario, living there still or living there again, divorced, remarried, preoccupied with spouses and mature children, and growing older (though not yet old).

These characters, whose perceptions and perspectives Munro recreates through her emphatic yet detached way, share a common task. In these stories, their “real work,” as the narrator in “Miles City, Montana,” says, is “a sort of wooing of distant parts” of themselves (Progress 88). Perhaps the most complex story in the collection, “Miles City, Montana” interweaves the narrator’s childhood memories of a young acquaintance who drowned, with more recent memories of her own daughter’s near drowning on a family holiday. The narrator interconnects memory with incident, and with perspective on both her former self and her now-former marriage, marvelling, in the words of another Munro narrator, at “all this life going on” (*Dance* 31). 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 come to emphatically recognize life—as it is lived, experienced, and wondered about. Through them, Munro’s “real work” proclaims in every way the precise delicacy of her approach, recognition, and progress.



## “So Shocking a Verdict in Real Life”: Autobiography in Alice Munro’s Stories (1988)

In the penultimate scene in Alice Munro’s “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection,” the story that opens her fifth collection, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), the narrator throws a pyrex plate with a piece of lemon meringue pie on it at her husband’s head; she is responding to his sneering rejection of a cousin of hers, Iris, who has just visited, and whose presence has occasioned for the narrator a flood of memories of a previous visit that Iris and other Chaddeley cousins made to the narrator’s girlhood home in Dalglish, Ontario. Munro describes the scene, and the couple’s reactions:

The plate missed, and hit the refrigerator, but the pie flew out and caught him on the side of the face just as in the old movies or an *I Love Lucy* show. There was the same moment of amazement as there is on the screen, the sudden innocence, for him; his speech stopped, his mouth open. For me, too, amazement, that something people invariably thought funny in those instances should be so shocking a verdict in real life. (*Moons* 18)

The implications of the final phrase are key to understanding both this story and its partner, “Chaddeleys and Flemings: 2. The Stone in the Field,” but, more broadly, they also reverberate throughout Munro’s entire *oeuvre*. She submitted *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) to her publisher under the title “Real Life,” and “Material” (*Something*) was called “Real People” in an earlier manuscript (37.8.8.); “True Lies” was one of the titles considered for *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978).<sup>1</sup>

Given these concerns about the relationship between fact and fiction in her titles, we might well begin by asking what Munro means when she uses the phrase “real life.” Since the publication of her first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), reviewers and critics have noted parallels between her protagonists’ lives and Munro’s own life. Indeed, questions of autobiography are commonplace, though they have been asked most frequently concerning *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, collections that concern adolescence in Munro’s Huron County, Ontario, most thoroughly. Recently, Margaret Gail Osachoff and Lorna Irvine have examined, respectively, Munro’s use of the autobiographical forms of memoir, confession, and meditation, and her treatment of women’s power. Although no one has yet attempted a close examination of the relationship between Munro’s art and her life, the need for such a study has been given new urgency by the recent publication of her sixth collection, *The Progress of Love* (1986). Here Munro appears to have come full circle, for these stories reflect her return to her “home place,”<sup>2</sup> Huron County, where she has lived for the past 13 years since moving from British Columbia.

Munro, of course, is a writer who prefers to let her writing speak for her, abominating the panels, papers, readings, and receptions that fall to acclaimed authors—here one recalls the caustically sneering descriptions of the celebrated academic writer, Hugo, that open “Material” (*Something*). Like the events in her stories—“deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (*Lives* 249)—Munro’s own life appears (from the outside) to offer little that is extraordinary: twice married, three children, some travel but mostly living quietly in Ontario or British Columbia; indeed, her celebrity stems wholly from her writing. She does not court notoriety in any way, participating only reluctantly in the publicity that surrounds her as a now-famous writer. But although most readers are ignorant of Munro’s

own history in its specifics, they know many of its details simply by having read her work: growing up on the edge of Wingham (Jubilee, Hanratty, Dalgleish), her father a sometime fox farmer from Huron County stock, her mother from the Ottawa Valley; the latter dying some time ago after a long battle with Parkinson's disease, the former more recently of heart problems (Tausky, *passim*). "Miles City, Montana" might well be seen as an example of these autobiographical links: the 1961 transcountry trek from British Columbia to Ontario through the States, the two daughters, the former husband who had an office job, the narrator's background and personality—all of which fit the circumstantial details of Munro's own life at the time.

Yet one must emphasize that these details are circumstantial, even though she has confirmed the autobiographical aspects of many of her other stories, most notably "The Office," "The Peace of Utrecht," and "The Ottawa Valley," and she has said that most of her first two books are based on autobiographical elements (Tausky, *passim*). More recently, she has confirmed autobiographical aspects in both "Dulse" and "The Moons of Jupiter."<sup>3</sup> Somewhat ironically, it is the underpinning of autobiography in Munro's stories that lends them considerable validity as fiction. In fact, autobiography lies at the very core of Munro's celebrated ability to offer stories of such precision, haunting beauty, and versimilitude.

Munro's notion of the "wooing of distant parts" of the self directly highlights the issue of autobiography. Thus, whether one sees her fiction as autobiography—in the way William C. Spengemann or Janet Varner Gunn, among others, use the term—or as the kind of confessional fiction that, according to Eugene L. Stelzig, differentiates fiction based on an author's experience from works in which a writer consciously narrates her own life, Munro's stories share the defining of the self—the primary urge in autobiography—as their central aim.

John Metcalf once asked Munro about the autobiographical aspect of her work. Her response, by its very meanderings, suggested that the difficulty in assessing the autobiographical nature of her work is directly related to her primary focus on defining the self. Metcalf asked her, "How far is your work autobiographical," to which she responded:

Oh. Well. I guess I have a standard answer to this ... in incident—no ... in emotion—completely. In incident up to a point too but of course, in *Lives of Girls and Women* which is a ... I suppose it could be called an autobiographical novel ... most of the incidents are changed versions of real incidents. *Some* are completely invented but the emotional reality, the girl's feeling for her mother, for men, for life is all ... it's all solidly autobiographical. (Metcalf Interview 58; ellipses in original)

Such uncertainties or equivocations have also consistently characterized Munro's fiction. This wonder speaks directly to the question of autobiography in the stories, and also to Munro's relationship with her narrative personae over time.

Most specifically, autobiography can be seen in the way Munro writes her stories, for she sees her writing as an "art of approach and recognition," a way of looking at and evaluating life's confusions. She goes on to say that "we don't solve" the mysteries surrounding the sorts of incidents she uses in her stories: "in fact, our explanations take us further away." As we grow older, she says, "life becomes even *more* mysterious and difficult" (Gardiner Interview 178). Thus by approaching the mystery inherent in her own life, she has forged an art that offers not understanding but momentary glimpses and fleeting insight—she is ever aware that "people's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (*Lives* 249). Her stories probe the depths of her characters' lives; throughout them is a complex relationship between the story told and the life lived, a relationship borne of point of view, as the narrator in an unpublished draft of "Bardon Bus" (*Moons*) concludes ruefully:

But suppose you are going along, making up your story, the story of your life, and at the same time your story is being made up for you, from the outside. This is what happens with everybody, to a certain extent. Only at some points do the two stories coincide. I am making up my story which features X, and Alex Walther is resting his head in Kay's lap. When such

discrepancies are forced on your attention, you have to let go. If you don't want to go crazy you have to let go, and I don't have the stamina, the pure, seething will, for prolonged craziness. I have to let go my story of X though I may recall it, with faded emotions, at a later time. (38.8.5.5.f1)

Munro's narrative focus on self-definition—and its attendant and growing uncertainties—conforms to much theoretical analysis. Indeed, quite eerily, Munro's fiction seems to be almost a correlative of Paul John Eakin's comment that twentieth-century autobiographers "no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past." Their autobiographies express "the play of the autobiographical act itself." In defining this act, Eakin encapsulates Munro's narrative technique:

The materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness. Autobiography in our time is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of the imagination; indeed, memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice. (5–6)

This is, of course, what Munro's narrators do in her stories, in which "the needs of present consciousness" are paramount; indeed, hers is an art that juggles this interplay between past and present—always shifting back and forth, and perpetually understanding the present moment in terms of a newly seen relationship with the past. Put another way by one of Eakin's reviewers, the writer, during the autobiographical act, is able to "repeat and re-stage (often metaphorically) past self-imaginings through which we became who we are" (Sheringham).

Yet, Eakin is focusing on fictional elements in self-conscious autobiographies; Munro's focus is on autobiographical elements in fiction. Here again, though, dividing lines are difficult to distinguish, and



autobiographical theory seems particularly apt when applied to Munro's work. Gunn writes of the autobiographical situation, asserting that "autobiography completes no pictures. Instead, it rejects wholeness or harmony, ascribed by formalists to the well-made art object, as a false unity which serves as no more than a defense against the self's deeper knowledge of its finitude" (25). Munro's progress as a writer—viewed from the perspective of her most recent collection—has been a movement away from the very "false unity" Gunn posits toward the absolute certainty of the finiteness of the self, a movement critics have discussed using the term "metafiction" (see Struthers "Fictive"). This movement accounts for the growing authorial equivocation that has emerged in tandem with her growing artistry. Munro's recent stories offer none of the capsule summary conclusions—the "false unity"—found so often in her stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Now instead, Munro's narrators stand back and stare at the mystery of being they have just unfolded, approached, and recognized—either loath or unable to tell what it all means. Beneath this movement—call it metafiction, magic realism, or sure-handed artistry—are Munro's own experiences. The autobiographical impulse is at the core of Munro's art, and although many stories are certainly not explicitly autobiographical ("Thanks for the Ride," in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, for example), we cannot claim with any certainty that any of them escape Munro's autobiographical urge.

Speaking to Metcalf, for example, Munro pointed out that her "first really painful autobiographical story ... the first time I wrote a story that tore me up was 'The Peace of Utrecht' [*Dance*] which I didn't even want to write" (Metcalf Interview 58; see Thacker "Connection"). In it she tackles her mother's death, a subject that she dealt with more directly a second time in "The Ottawa Valley" (*Something*) and that she often alludes to throughout her work, most recently in *The Moons of Jupiter*. In "Utrecht," Munro heavily handedly attempts to create a "false unity" through the supposed "peace" of the story's title and through Maddy's broken bowl at the story's end and her protestations to her sister that she cannot pick up the pieces of her life, now that their mother is finally dead (*Dance* 210). Moving away from such formal symmetry in her next attempt to treat her mother as a character in "The Ottawa Valley," Munro focuses on the narrator's recollection of the first time she noticed her mother's shaking arm,

which was the same time that she realized her mother was impotent to stop the disease. Yet here, when Munro steps back and assesses her story, she is quite likely speaking in her own voice:

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. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose, because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents' old camera used to take.... The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid* of, her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (*Something* 246)

This passage not only demonstrates Munro's autobiographical impulse, it also reveals her doubts over the whole business of fictionalizing—that hers are ineffectual “tricks”—as well as her doubts that she will ever write “the truth.”<sup>4</sup>

Three of the stories in *The Moons of Jupiter*, the two “Chaddeleys and Flemings” stories (both “Connection” and “The Stone in the Field”) and “The Moons of Jupiter,” also take up Munro's relationship with her parents, the first two stories dealing with each side of the narrator's family—she is unnamed but was identified as Janet when the stories were to be included in *Who Do You Think You Are?*—and the title story dealing with her father's final hospitalization. “Connection” ends with the narrator's haunting memory of her cousin Iris' visit to Dalgleish, juxtaposed with

the plate she had just thrown at her sneering husband—"so shocking a verdict in real life" (*Moons* 18). "The Stone in the Field," however, is its partner story in that it, too, focuses on a "shocking ... verdict in real life," this time the identity of Mr. Black, the man who lived for a time in a shack across from the narrator's aunts' farm and who died there. And as in "The Ottawa Valley," the narrator closes both "Chaddeleys and Flemings" stories by stepping back and commenting directly on her materials, critical of the younger writer who, one thinks, would have forced a "false unity" on them:

If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story. I would have insisted on Mr. Black's being in love with one of my aunts, and on one of them—not necessarily the one he was in love with—being in love with him. I would have wished him to confide in them, in one of them, his secret, his reason for living in a shack in Huron County, far from home. Later, I might have believed that he wanted to, but hadn't confided this, or his love either. I would have made a horrible, plausible connection between that silence of his, and the manner of his death. Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. I don't believe so. Now, I can only say, my father's sisters scrubbed the floor with lye, they stooked the oats and milked the cows by hand. They must have taken a quilt to the barn for the hermit to die on, they must have let water dribble from a tin cup into his afflicted mouth. That was their life. My mother's cousins behaved in another way; they dressed up and took pictures of each other; they sallied forth. However they behaved they are all dead. I carry something of them around in me. But the boulder is gone, Mount Hebron is cut down for gravel, and the life buried here is one you have to think twice about regretting. (*Moons* 35)

The narrator's palpable uncertainty about the meaning of it all is characteristic of Munro's recent work. The story from which this passage is taken

combines autobiographical and fictional detail—which detail is which, finally, seems to matter less than the combination of memory and imagination that Munro uses to forge her delicious insights. Whether “grafted on from some other reality” (“Material,” *Something* 42) or directly experienced, autobiography infuses Munro’s stories from first to last.

Munro herself best describes the ultimate effect of this process in “Material,” a story that combines her own experience of marriage with a cold-blooded scrutiny of writers’ egotism and craft—brought together by memory. Thus after reading her ex-husband’s story, which involves their former landlady, the narrator speaks not only for herself but, quite clearly (though self-reflexively and ironically), for Munro as well:

What matters is that this story of Hugo’s is a very good story, as far as I can tell, and I think I can tell. How honest this is and how lovely, I had to say as I read. I had to admit. I was moved by Hugo’s story; I was, I am, glad of it, and I am not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks. There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his 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. Dotty was a lucky person, people who understood and value this act might say (not everybody, of course, does understand and value this act); she was lucky to live in that basement for a few months and eventually to have this done to her, though she doesn’t know what has been done and wouldn’t care for it, probably, if she did know. She has passed into Art.

So has Alice Munro. “It doesn’t happen to everybody” (*Something* 43).



## *Critical Interlude:*

### Go Ask Alice: The Progress of Munro Criticism (1991)

*Alice Munro*. E. D. Blodgett. Twayne's World Author Series 800. Boston: Twayne, 1988.

*The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Studies in Canadian Literature. Linda Hutcheon. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988.

*The Canadian Short Story*. Michelle Gadpaille. Perspectives on Canadian Culture Series. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988.

*Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro*. Ildikó de Papp Carrington. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989.

*Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. Beverly J. Rasporich. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990.

*Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*. Coral Ann Howells. London and New York: Methuen, 1987.

Midway through *Private and Fictional Words*, while discussing Mavis Gallant's stories, Coral Ann Howells quotes an evocative and precise passage from Gallant's 1982 essay in the *Canadian Forum*, "What is Style?":

This is what fiction is about—that something is taking place and that nothing lasts. Against the sustained tick of a watch, fiction takes the measure of a life, a season, a look exchanged, the turning point, desire as brief as a dream, the grief and terror that after childhood we cease to express. The lie, the look, the grief are without permanence, the watch continues to tick where the story stops. (103)

Fiction writers generally and short story writers in particular are drawn, seemingly perversely (they often say), to such moments as this, ever trying to capture their own essence—and the essence of others and imaginary others—on the static page. They strive to make of their art, as Willa Cather wrote in her *The Song of the Lark* (1915), “a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.” Similarly, W. B. Yeats asked in his “Among School Children”: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (Cather, *Song* 254, Yeats, “Among” 217). How, indeed? And if writers are drawn to such moments for the stuff of their art—perversely or otherwise—we critics are drawn to that art—probably doubly perversely—for many of the same reasons. At two removes from “the shining elusive element,” life itself, we try to gauge the whole of the art, to understand the ensemble that is the primary text, with reference to the author, with reference to “life” (however that is defined), with reference to the reader (whoever she is), with reference to other texts (thus Cather and Yeats, as will be seen below), with reference to our own readers, with reference, with reference. Dancer and dance, indeed.

The late 1980s seems a particularly propitious time to be a critic and scholar of English-Canadian literature. Others are better able to generalize about the field’s breadth and extent, and have done so; what is clear to me, however, is that the criticism and scholarship surrounding Canadian literature in English has, during the last several years, reached new levels of maturity. The evidence is everywhere: as a subject, Canadian literature is accepted in the academy (perhaps begrudgingly); reference books (Gale, ECW), scholarly editions (Carleton University’s Centre for Editing Early

Canadian Texts and its attendant publishing program, which is pushing near completion, and the University of Toronto Press's Strickland sisters editions), and critical books and articles of all sorts have appeared; and conferences and symposia have been held and attended. Thus manifestations of serious discussion are everywhere to be seen, and they have taken a multiplicity of forms and points of view. Moreover, and with increasing frequency, some of this has happened outside of Canada, which is probably a healthy sign. In fact, one way of gauging the putative "arrival" of Canadian literature is its recent appearance in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* in the form of an exchange between Robert Lecker and Frank Davey over the Canadian canon.<sup>1</sup>

Such a debate suggests, as well, that Canadian literature in English is in the ironic position of having been forming a canon while the impetus in literary studies has been to deny such privileging of either authors or texts, because canons omit far more than they include and, insidiously, reflect the mores, values, and priorities of the dominant classes. Thus women and minorities have been largely ignored in the canons of imaginative writing in English, as have those who challenged the literary modes of their day. Noting this, Lecker argues that "Canadian literature was canonized in fewer than twenty years" and maintains that "the canon is the conservative product of the conservative institution that brought it to life. The power of the canon and the power of its members are inseparable: the institution *is* the canon; its members *are* the texts" (656, 658). What is more, of course, is that texts are valourized by (the mostly male) critics who select one author's writings over another's, enshrining its values and, typically, singing its praises in the university English classes they teach, at the conferences they attend, and—perhaps most permanently—in the reviews, articles, and books they write.

Yet, though this process continues, any critic writing today knows that "canon"—like "genre"—may well be an outmoded term, whatever its usefulness in defining courses of study; that texts, whatever their form, are mutable; that no single reading is ever enough, nor that "enough" will ever be reached (or, in any case, would more likely be reached not as a critic but as a scholar, with a better understanding of the multiplicity of views and voices); and—and this I say most emphatically—that "he" is a pronoun that refers to an *individual* critic, not *the* critic, just as "she" is as



likely—perhaps more likely—to be the author as “he.” Much more than this is to be found in the larger critical context, including the seemingly inscrutable jargon that carries many such discussions—all of which is so easy to scorn, while the “significations” they carry concerning texts are difficult, often impossible, to refute.

In Canada, these issues are arising in far more places than the Lecker-Davey exchange—and as the books under review show to varying degrees, postmodernism has gotten down into the trenches, as it were, by serving as the theoretical basis of extended single-author studies. This is seen most clearly in Blodgett’s *Alice Munro*, but postmodernism’s sway is felt throughout the others as well. Such methods notwithstanding, these books also show that the sociological process of canon-formation that Lecker so decries continues, for each volume takes its place in the edifice that is Canadian literature, and each has been put there by a publisher both aiming at and attempting to define a particular audience. However all of this is understood—any reviewer about to plunge into six critical books loosely configured around Munro and her texts (such are the lines of demarcation that the fuzziness is deliberate here) must remember the dancer and the dance, as well as, for perspective alone, a comment made by one of Munro’s characters in “Goodness and Mercy”: “Also, professors are dumb. They are dumber than ordinary. I could be nice and say they know about things we don’t, but as far as I’m concerned they don’t know shit.” (*Friend* 158). All of this is necessary context.

## **1. Alice Munro: A Paradigm Case (or, The Progress of Criticism)**

The author, Alice Munro. She has longed seemed in many ways something of a paradigm case of “the canonization of a Canadian Author.”<sup>22</sup> Since the publication of *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982)—her first collection composed preponderantly of stories first published in the *New Yorker*—Munro’s work has received progressively greater attention, what might be called “the progress of criticism.”<sup>23</sup> With the books under review here, her status as a writer of the first rank is utterly confirmed: in the wake of W. R. Martin’s *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* (1987), four book-length

critical studies of her work have been published, and Linda Hutcheon mentions a fifth, by Magdalene Redekop, apparently in the offing (xv).<sup>4</sup> In addition, Munro's fiction plays a key role in the other three books under review—though Hutcheon notes that it is largely absent from *The Canadian Postmodern*, clearly feeling that Munro ought to have been included, especially because Del Jordan keeps popping up anyway.

Ultimately, these books demonstrate the profound density of Munro's *oeuvre*, and what is more, their differing approaches and insights attest (and not hyperbolically) to what Blodgett calls "the grandeur of [her] writing" (147). Critics are drawn to her power and vision—to what she sees. As the narrator of "An Ounce of Cure" states: "But the development of events on that Saturday night—that fascinated me; I felt that I had had a glimpse of the shameless, marvellous, shattering absurdity with the plots of life, though not of fiction, are improvised. I could not take my eyes off it" (*Dance* 87–88). Such passages are worth keeping in mind as we wade into the warring of preferences that make up critical analysis, for it is in offering illumination of the fiction that the critical act is undertaken, however tentatively or persuasively.

Before taking up the substance of each of these books, some comment on each as a "canon-affirming product" seems in order. Three of these titles are a part of a publisher's series—Gadpaille's *The Canadian Short Story* and Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* are volumes in two new series offered by Oxford University Press, and Blodgett's *Alice Munro* is the 800th (!) title in Twayne's World Author Series. Being included in a series is, of course, indicative of a certain heft, but I cannot fathom the audience assumed by Oxford's "Perspectives on Canadian Culture," if *The Canadian Short Story* is any indication.<sup>5</sup> Quite apart from whether or not this *mélange* can legitimately be taken as "culture," a series of short (Gadpaille's is 126 pages plus an eight-page introduction) paperbacks on large subjects assumes an audience in need of introductory books that go beyond standard reference discussions on the same subject. Gadpaille's certainly does not; what is more, she offers what amounts to a skewered view of her subject, one that completely ignores relevant scholarship and ultimately would be better off unpublished. I do not really blame the author—her readings of stories and authors are reasonable enough—but the space is too limited; important as their work is, Gallant, Munro, and

Atwood get about half the ink in a book called *The Canadian Short Story*. Even then, Gadpaille's treatment of their work is rushed, and in the remaining chapters dozens of other figures rush by; little more than an annotated bibliography, *The Canadian Short Story* offers nothing of the sort. In 1973, Clare MacCulloch published *The Neglected Genre: The Short Story in Canada*, another short book of about one hundred pages on this same subject. At the time, such spare treatment could be justified as a way of encouraging critical discussion by simply bringing up the subject, but that moment has passed, as any publisher active in the field ought to know.<sup>6</sup>

Happily, the same critique cannot be extended to Oxford's "Studies in Canadian Literature" series under the general editorship of Richard Teleky. Here the press is publishing—in quality paperback form—the writings of noted critics of Canadian literature. These books fill a need. In addition to Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern*, the series includes collected essays by Robert Kroetsch and Adele Wiseman, and Janice Kulyk Keefer's writing on Mavis Gallant. Similarly, Blodgett's book, one of a dozen volumes on Canadian writers in the Twayne World Author Series, also fulfills a need—though the mind boggles at the thought of 800 titles in the series. Indeed, one of the interesting things about Blodgett's *Alice Munro* is the way he is able to stretch the usual Twayne format, although the result may be a book a bit too sophisticated for Twayne's usual undergraduate audience.

Moreover, both Oxford series and Twayne's inclusion of Canadian writers in their series reveals an interest in Canadian fiction abroad, as do both Howells' *Private and Fictional Words* and Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable*. Howells, an Australian living and teaching in Great Britain, addresses a British audience and tailors her arguments in ways wholly appropriate to that audience. The Carrington volume is one of several critical studies on Canadian literary topics published recently by American university presses, a phenomenon that, to my mind, bodes well for Canadian literary studies and Canadian studies more generally.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, though not part of a series, Beverly J. Rasporich's *Dance of the Sexes* could be seen as completing this grouping of books, commenting as it does on the currency of feminist topics—although Munro herself asserts that she does not see herself as a feminist in any political sense, something

Rasporich admits (though she seems to reluctantly) and Carrington too stridently pronounces. Thus in *Dance of the Sexes*, Rasporich—analyzing the “female, feminine, and feminist sensibilities” of Munro’s art—offers a critical dance of her own, often trying (despite her disclaimers) to force Munro’s fiction “into a feminist’s Cinderella slipper.” The “honest fit” (viii) Rasporich seeks eludes her because of Munro’s own statements and, more importantly, because of the tentative wariness and, ultimately, the complexities of her fiction. Without question, Munro’s is as fundamentally a female way of viewing the world as might be found—“I write about myself because I am the only truth I know,” she says (xix)—thus the arguments that try to force her work to conform to feminist ideology make as little sense as those of critics who, previously, found garrisons throughout her early work (after all, Munro is Canadian, and Northrop Frye had said that garrisons are Canadian) (See Macdonald, “Madman”). Taken together, these six volumes ultimately confirm, in microcosm, the relevance of the issues debated by Lecker and Davey; they are also the manifestation of the progress of Munro criticism, if only in the sense of its multiple forms, though they offer much more than that. In the balance of this essay I will discuss each of these books in turn and suggest how each may be seen as fitting into Munro criticism, itself part of the larger “edifice” of Canadian literary criticism.

## 2. Contextualizing Munro: Contemporary Criticism

The subject each of these critics share is the body of texts published by Munro. For its part, Munro’s writing has displayed increasing and demonstrable complexity as she has matured as a writer, despite seemingly re-traversing many of the same problems, places, and situations, drawn ever more tightly by her virtuosic command of the genre she writes in almost exclusively, the short story. Critics have moved away from such simplistic conceptions as the garrison mentality and other thematic approaches that characterized earlier discussions of her work, drawn increasingly to style, form, language, and symbolism in her stories, elements that reflect and refract, seemingly endlessly, back and forth upon one another. For a time a consensus appeared to be forming that Munro was essentially “a magic

realist” whose work could be legitimately characterized as “metafictional” (Struthers “Fictive”). What the critics at hand ultimately confirm, however, is that such arguments do not go nearly far enough in gauging the complexity and self-reflexivity of Munro’s writing. Blodgett summarizes the matter succinctly while commenting on a key story, “The Moons of Jupiter” (1978):

The art of Munro is an art of accommodating contradictions, and this is what her principal figures, narrators or not, must be brought to learn. Their gradually acquired habit, which comes to fruition in “The Moons of Jupiter,” is to learn how to be “at the mercy” without asking for much more. Something of the design within which they are figures must always be beyond their grasp. (126)

The phrase “at the mercy” appears in another seminal story, “Material” (1973)—both of these stories are central to the arguments of each critic who concentrates on Munro’s work alone, and “The Moons of Jupiter” is key to Howells’ discussion of her work. This is as it should be, for the progress of Munro criticism offers convincing evidence that several stories are pivotal within her *oeuvre*. These are but two.

Given the sensitivity and density of argument offered by scholarly critics like Hutcheon, Blodgett, and Carrington, it is probably unfair to group Gadpaille’s *The Canadian Short Story* with their books. Still, publishers need to be told that publishing short introductions to complex and widely discussed subjects simply misses the point. In general, *The Canadian Short Story* is both descriptive and reductive: it rushes through the nineteenth century, offering summaries of well-known and well-discussed figures (McCulloch, Haliburton, Leacock, Roberts, and Seton), then pauses for a chapter to offer a good discussion of Knister and Callaghan before “giving extended attention to Canada’s contemporary masters of the short story” (vii), Gallant, Munro, and Atwood. Gadpaille concludes with another quick-and-dirty chapter covering “The Sixties and After.” Although some might find Gadpaille’s discussions useful, her treatment of Munro offers nothing new. Electing to sidestep *Lives of Girls*

and *Women* (1971) (Munro's putative novel that is not a novel, whatever it is), she discusses the stories through to *The Progress of Love* (1986) reasonably and perceptively, showing familiarity with published criticism on Munro. Oxford provides a detailed index—good for them—but the absence of a suitable bibliography is inexcusable. Whether we like it or not, critics must be scholars, too, and scholars acknowledge their sources. Again, blame rests largely on the publisher here, for scholarly apparatuses are notoriously denigrated; truth, however, derives from critical discourse in these matters, not publishers' preferences. Unfortunately, there has been far too much of this sort of thing in the criticism of Canadian literature, and although the balance of books under review are most heartening in this respect, we still have a ways to go.<sup>8</sup>

Moving on to better things. By looking at 11 writers, *Private and Fictional Words* "attempts to map an exciting new territory of Commonwealth literature and to examine the ways in which these women's Canadianness informs their fiction" (1). In addition to Munro, a chapter each is devoted to selected works by Laurence, Atwood, and Gallant, while two more broadly drawn chapters examine a novel each by Marian Engel, Joy Kogawa, Janette Turner Hospital, Audrey Thomas, and Joan Barfoot. By way of justifying the use of "Canadian" in the book's title (however controversial that decision may be, Howells concedes), a final chapter looks at two novels by Marie-Claire Blais and another by Anne Hébert. With such an approach, Howells is unable to mount extended arguments for any of the books she considers. And yet, though she has only a little more compass than Gadpaille, Howells manages to say something of consequence on her subject.

Beginning with an overview chapter entitled "Canadianness and Women's Fictions," Howells surveys the critical issues impinging on her subject. Throughout, she is sensitive to such matters as thematic criticism (she neither embraces nor rejects "Canadianness" as an approach, wisely, given the introductory nature of her book), nationalism in Canadian writing; generic issues (she looks at Laurence's *A Bird in the House* [1970] along with Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*), feminist criticism and gender issues, and the distinction between the personal and the public. The fiction she examines offer words that are "private" because they are borne "out of personal and often unconscious emotion and 'fictional' because

the experiences have been transformed into the controlled multivoiced discourse of art” (32). This chapter is precise and cogent, thoroughly setting up the discussion that follows.

That discussion is characterized by several features, not the least of which is Howells’ evident overbrimming enthusiasm for her subject. Beyond that, her readings often involve analogues to writers not commonly alluded to in other critical texts—such as figures from British literature, especially Virginia Woolf—and a deft precision of analysis. Her discussion of Munro’s “novels,” *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), in particular, reveals a close attention to textual detail, and a sensitivity to overall design. Howells builds upon the critical consensus available to her in the mid-1980s by using it as a point of departure for her discussion, and in many ways throughout her discussion of Munro’s extended narratives she anticipates the more sustained arguments of Blodgett and Carrington.<sup>9</sup> She concludes, in a passage that bears quotation at length:

Munro’s stories are enclosed textual spaces which always throw their windows open onto “inappropriate and unforgettable scenery” [a phrase from “Simon’s Luck” in *Who Do You Think You Are?*] which threatens dissolution of her ordered structures. Indeed her fictional order includes such acknowledgements of disorder, but the structures of a Munro story is like a house which contains secret labyrinths within it and does not collapse into a fragmented postmodernist mode. The framework remains realistic while at the same time her shifts of emphasis into fantasy narrative challenge realism as an authoritative account of reality in an awareness shared by readers and narrators of the incompleteness and partial truth of all fictional structures. (88)

It was Hutcheon’s overriding concern with what Howells calls here “the fragmented postmodernist mode” that led her to write *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Clearly, as well, the implied dissolutions and questions of fictional “truth” Munro

raises in her stories—especially since *Lives of Girls and Women*—are what make her work particularly attractive to Hutcheon. Still, the negative connotations of “collapse,” as Howells has used the word, might evoke Hutcheon’s ire, if not an outright disavowal. Hutcheon’s book, which grew out of her assignment to write the chapter entitled “The Novel (1972–1984)” in *The Literary History of Canada* (v. 4, 1990) (that chapter is included as an appendix to Hutcheon’s book), allowed her to bring several occasional pieces together as a whole, and she sets out to offer, she writes, “an investigation not into the general phenomenon of postmodernism, but into the particular forms in which it appears in contemporary Canadian fiction” (vii). Rather than get into the bases for her definitions or into the definitions themselves, it is perhaps best to let Hutcheon “situate” (a key term in this discourse) the effects of postmodernism herself: “Certainly I no longer read books the way I once did: that eternal universal truth I was taught to find has turned out to be constructed, not found—and anything but eternal and universal. Truth has been replaced by truths, uncapitalized and in the plural” (viii–ix). This passage is representative of Hutcheon’s writing: succinct, to the point, and memorable. She uses the jargon of feminism, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, Marxism, and several other isms besides, effortlessly, and with a fluidity borne of extended, extensive, and important work in critical theory (see Hutcheon).

The importance of *The Canadian Postmodern* for this essay is contextual, for, as noted, Hutcheon’s references to Munro are fleeting and minor, however numerous. Given her ability as a critic, I do wish she had not deferred, because Munro’s work lends itself to Hutcheon’s mode of analysis, and what is more, the context she defines is far more necessary to a sophisticated, thorough treatment of Munro’s writing than that offered by Gadpaille, Howells, or (as we shall see) Rasporich—Carrington and Blodgett are another matter, for they recognize the implications of Hutcheon’s analysis as intrinsic to Munro’s art. Essentially, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism offers “art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive—in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware that it is written and read as a part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as the social present” (1). In practice, a postmodern text “both sets up and subverts the



powers and conventions of art” (2). Throughout her introduction, which cogently outlines the whole of her argument, Hutcheon advances a compelling case that English-Canadian writing reflects Canada’s status as a “borderline case” whereby the facts of its social and cultural marginality—as a colony, as a small-time player in world affairs—have seemingly engendered a postmodern point of view. Thus Canada’s writers “may be primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their history” (4). What is more, she argues, this imaginative position—which she calls that of the “ex-centric”—aligns Canadians, whether female or male, with feminism: there is a strong analogy between the political position of women and that of the Canadian. Citing Lorna Irvine’s *Sub/version*, in which Irvine writes “that the female voice ‘politically and culturally personifies Canada,’” Hutcheon argues that “on a national level, male aggression is usually associated, by analogy, with the United States, while Britain represents the stiffling force of colonial tradition” (6–7).

These matters are worked out in the literature in a variety of ways. Hutcheon begins by harkening back to what she calls “the Early Postmodernism of Leonard Cohen,” through a discussion of his *Beautiful Losers* (1966). She then follows this with chapters on postmodernist technique, historiographic metafiction, the postmodernist challenge to literary genre (mostly Ondaatje), women writers, Atwood, and, finally, the most postmodern of Canadian postmoderns, Kroetsch. Throughout, Hutcheon’s writing and arguments are daunting: she is in complete command of her concepts and language, and, what is far more unusual for a theorist, is equally in complete command of her primary texts. She uses her thorough knowledge of each realm to demonstrate that, in contemporary Canadian writing, “art and theory are both actively ‘signifying’ practices—in other words, that it is we who both make and make sense of our culture” (23). Hutcheon particularly demonstrates how this process occurs in her discussions of Cohen, Ondaatje, Findley, and Atwood, showing how their narrative strategies enforce an the kind of awareness articulated by Kroetsch: “it would be an error not to perceive the differences between life and art, just as it would be an error not to see that they are the same” (182).

### 3. "With honour, if I possibly can": Many Munros

Turning, finally, to the three critics who have written full-length studies of Munro's fiction, I want to acknowledge that in many more ways than I have indicated, Gadpaille, Howells, and, especially, Hutcheon have, if you will, defined the terms of engagement. If Rasporich, Carrington, and Blodgett demonstrate anything, it is that the intricacies of Munro's *oeuvre* not only reward close attention—that should be axiomatic at this point—they also demand our involvement in ways that test our understandings of life itself. (For example—and by way of my own situation—I just reread "Home," largely because of Carrington's discussion of it, a story Munro published in 1974 but which has never been collected. It's certainly eerie, and almost frightening, how this story confirms the whole of Hutcheon's thesis and Kroetsch's assertion. Punctuated by italicized passages that comment on what she has just written, Munro visibly challenges genre, convention, and any knowable version of "truth," ending the story with: "*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*" ["Home" 1974, 153].)

Rasporich's *Dance of the Sexes* has been some time in the making. Her intentions in the book are primarily twofold, she writes: first, to "pay tribute to one of Canada's most accomplished writers, Alice Munro" (vii) and second, to "investigate the feminist possibilities of her art." At the same time, Rasporich writes, she is "primarily concerned with introducing the student of feminist literature, rather than the expert, to the imaginative female worlds of Alice Munro" (viii). These competing intentions make *Dance of the Sexes* a difficult book to get a handle on: it seems to want to be many things—tribute, biography, critical analysis, and something of a polemic—and is addressed to an ill-defined audience, and as a consequence it succeeds in doing none of these things very well.

After a brief introduction that discusses her various points regarding the female, feminine, and feminist perspective in Munro's work, Rasporich offers five chapters. The first, "Alice: The Woman Behind the Art," begins with a brief biography—which includes some new details—before presenting a rather disjointed, even aimless pastiche of interviews that Rasporich conducted with Munro at various times. These are characterized, beyond the usual "why do you write" sorts of questions, by Rasporich attempting

to characterize Munro in this way or that, only to have Munro consistently qualify Rasporich's assertion or, at times, slip away altogether. Overall, this is a curious chapter; although I readily concede—and in no way dispute—Rasporich's use of Hutcheon's assertion that women “‘must define their subjectivity before they can question it’” (xix), I nevertheless wonder if, beyond a few biographical details, Rasporich's first chapter goes substantially beyond the 15 printed interviews with Munro that Carrington cites (Rasporich cites only a few of these herself). I do not really think so.

The same sort of problem occurs with the second chapter, “Feminist: Her Own Tribe: A Feminist Odyssey,” and, although conversely, with the fifth and final chapter, “The Short Story Writer as Female: Forms and Techniques.” As suggested above, despite her assertions to the contrary, Rasporich strives mightily to “shoe-horn” (her own term) Munro into “a feminist's cinderella's slipper” (viii). Munro does not really fit, and in any case, Rasporich's attempt is based on a reading of the collected fiction. Rushed as it is (50 pages for Munro's six books) and based on questionable generalizations, Rasporich fails to convince. For example, in discussing the narrator's reaction to her father's former girlfriend, Nora, in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (*Dance of the Happy Shades*), Rasporich writes: “In contrast to the girl's sick and decorous mother, however, and the grey, naturalistic despondency of the scene, Nora is a flash of color in her ‘soft brilliant’ dress and a hearty woman capable of uproarious behaviour and active invitation” (40). Although this is true for a short time in the story, Nora ultimately seems lonely and embittered. As well, Rasporich writes that “Munro is even prepared to join that group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century female artists who have used the fictional character of the deranged woman ‘as the symbolic representation of the female author's anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition’” (85);<sup>10</sup> this despite Munro's assertion in Rasporich's first chapter that “madness doesn't seem to me a gender thing—I have more madwomen simply because I know more women and I know stories through women” (30). Questionable generalizations such as these characterize Rasporich's discussion of Munro's putative feminism. The point here is not that the case Rasporich is trying to make cannot be made; rather that, given her approach to the fiction, her use of it, and the structure of her argument, Rasporich's case has not been made here. Indeed, one might say that it has already been made by

Irvine ("Changing Is the Word I Want," *Sub/version*). In the fifth chapter, on form, Rasporich's problem is the opposite: she treats an extensive topic, forms, and techniques, too briefly. In light of Carrington's masterly discussion of the subject—down, almost, to the slightest nuance of interconnection—*Dance of the Sexes* pales in comparison.

Rasporich's other chapters, "Folk Artist and Ironist: Humor Comes Best to those Who are Down and Out" and "Regionalist: Wawanash County: A Landscape of Mind, a Mythic Place," represent the core of the book's contribution. Arguing first that "food in Munro is charged with feminine value" and, further, that Munro is a "literary folklorist of female culture" (95, 98), Rasporich convincingly cites numerous instances where these assertions are seen to be so. In fact, so compelling is her discussion of humour and irony that I would have liked a much more detailed argument on that subject. Similarly, when in the next chapter Rasporich discusses place and argues that "Munro is able to authenticate a fictional female world by expanding her characters' inner lives into place, and by manipulating place as feminist inquiry" (122), her own "feminist inquiry" springs to life. This part of Rasporich's argument is excellent, although here she is not as fully in command of the scholarly context as she ought to be.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the "introduction to the feminist possibilities of [Munro's] art" (xiii) is, ironically, either too introductory or too ambitious; with regard to three of her chapters, the case has been made elsewhere, or in order to really differentiate Rasporich's perspective, needs to be made more fully here. At the same time, her discussion of folk aspects and place could easily have been expanded into a book itself.

By contrast, Blodgett's *Alice Munro* and Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable* are critical books to celebrate; in each, Munro's work receives the sustained and detailed analysis it demands, proving itself far more than equal to such scrutiny. The two volumes are nicely complementary, moreover, in that Blodgett offers the more sophisticated analysis in terms of theory while Carrington's more thorough control of detail in Munro's writing—extending into the uncollected stories—is exhaustive and compelling. Each volume, finally, is well rooted in a foundation of Munro scholarship.

As earlier noted, one of the intriguing things about Blodgett's volume is the way in which he is able to stretch the normal Twayne format.

Instead of the usual opening biographical chapter, the reader here finds “Signifying a Life,” a chapter containing far more than biographical facts. In it Blodgett offers an even-handed discussion of the autobiographical in Munro’s fiction—he opts for Munro’s own distinction that much of her material is “personal,” rather than autobiographical (5)—while offering the factual details of the author’s biography almost *passim*. In so doing, Blodgett introduces his critical stance on and approach to Munro’s fiction, and the result is compelling. *In medias res*, Blodgett does argue for seeing Munro’s life in three stages: Wingham (until her attendance at the University of Western Ontario, 1931–49), Western Ontario and Vancouver/Victoria (1949–72), and her return to rural southwestern Ontario (1972 to the present). This way of approaching Munro and her work—through place and biography—is amplified by Blodgett’s highlighting of a comment Munro made in an interview with Peter Gzowski: “I write about where I am in life” (6). Though it is seemingly straightforward, Blodgett writes that this “point of departure for Munro’s work is deceptively ambiguous, for while the world lies there as a gift, it also lies there as a problem of meaning. Her question as an artist is: How is the world to be understood, and is it possible, finally, to do so?” (6).

Both Blodgett and Carrington, in their own ways, set out to analyze this process as it may be seen in Munro’s fiction. Blodgett draws on the writings of Derrida and Barthes, applying their thinking to excellent purpose when he writes: “The narrator, furthermore, is a hermeneutic problem whose presence in the text—separated from her narrated self and vainly trying to re-place herself—exemplifies how hard it is to speak of the presence of the real in Munro, and how every effort to find it is equally vain.” Carrying this thinking further—balancing “Munro’s life” and fictive versions of “life” (or lives, given Munro’s shifting manipulation of points of time in her characters’ lives)—Blodgett offers a passage that bears quotation at length:

It is the process by which the self becomes a text, falling apart as it does so. But as a text, and it is to this perception of the real that Munro seems inevitably to progress, the self becomes no other than what is, returning, so to speak, to itself. Within all

the play of signifiers of which a text and a self are composed, the finished narration acquires a kind of mark of destiny and perfection, some inescapable core. At least this appears as one of the ineluctable signs of Munro's mature work, in which the narrator gradually glides into the narration, and its arrangement into a certain disposition of parts becomes the narrator's as well, illuminating her at once as giver and receiver of the world remade. "I write about where I am in life" [quoting Munro once more]: or should we not say that she writes about where she is in the text that her life, finally, is? (10)

Though passages such as this may well leave those unfamiliar with contemporary literary theory wondering what it could possibly mean, Blodgett's point here—on which a good part of his subsequent argument is based—is crucial. Essentially, the question of reality is central to Munro's way of seeing; lines of demarcation—be they generic, chronological, or, seemingly, factual—are not immutable in the world she delimits in her fiction, and that is just the point of it all. Both Blodgett and Carrington demonstrate this process by looking at "The Progress of Love," another pivotal story. Further, it is probably worth noting that in the same issue of the *Canadian Forum* that included Gallant's "What is Style?," Munro contributed an essay called "What is Real?"

Dancer and the dance, indeed. Limiting his discussion to Munro's collected fiction, Blodgett successively devotes a chapter to each of Munro's books, asking numerous questions about form, technique, and analogues, and using these questions and his answers to them to allow his argument to build force as it proceeds. In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, he writes, "the first problem of Munro's narration is that it assumes the shape of exploration, and the burden for the reader is knowing how to assess the discovery" (16). Similarly, Munro offers in *Lives of Girls and Women* a "search for the right mode of discourse" (60), while in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) "what we discover is that true authority is not imposed upon the material. It is acquired by surrendering to it. The mark of the narrator is her vulnerability and, consequently, her inability to control loose ends" (68). Ultimately, Blodgett convincingly argues that

essential to Munro's art is a process whereby readers see her—through her narrators—“endeavoring to locate the meaning that unifies, yet always wary of it” (68).

Unlike Rasporich's discussion, which seldom seems to be entirely sure of the sum of any particular story or group of stories, Blodgett's analyses convince by their mastery of the whole fabric of Munro's art. To be sure, there are times when one would like him to go into greater detail, or to respond to this or that objection, yet one never wonders over his ability to do so, given the space. Indeed, his chapters are tightly woven and at the same time inclusive of important—and seemingly idiosyncratic—detail. Thus when discussing “Dulse,” in *The Moons of Jupiter*, Blodgett is sensitive to how Munro is using the character of Willa Cather in a multiplicity of ways. Lydia, the protagonist of that story, meets a man on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick (where Cather had a summer cottage), who, quite simply, worships her. Lydia questions his reverential attitude; thus, as Blodgett says, Cather represents a way of knowing that Munro implicitly rejects: “If the knowledge of character is mysterious and perhaps, finally, beyond knowing, we cannot very well put faith in the author, who is required to possess this knowledge” (113).<sup>12</sup> Finally, Blodgett uses this discussion to make a point that, especially in view of his fine subsequent treatment of *The Progress of Love*, may be extended to the whole of his analysis:

For no one with Munro's sensitivity to the way language fabricates a world can make the reader believe that there is a pure knowledge, unaffected by language. Thus her strategy is one that not only makes one wary of realism, but also heightens one's awareness of how fragile our sense of self and the other is, so utterly dependent as it is upon language and consequent conflict of meanings. (115)

This passage and the discussion around “Dulse,” especially, serve as suitable transition to Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable* in that, as Blodgett remarks elsewhere, “one is urged to read Munro as one bent on using fiction as a method for understanding what the limits of fiction

are" (121). Central to this process are notions of "control" (highlighted in Carrington's title), which relate to art as artifice, or the fashioning of some "mould," as Cather wrote in *The Song of the Lark*, "in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself." "Dulse" illustrates a key difference in Blodgett's and Carrington's studies, for, although Blodgett limits himself to Munro's collected fiction (curiously—and inaccurately—labelled "novels" in his bibliography), Carrington demonstrates again and again that the process of understanding through language continues in Munro's work between published versions of her stories. Thus "Dulse" appeared in the *New Yorker* as a first-person story but in *The Moons of Jupiter* was revised into a third person story.

Carrington begins where a scholar ought: by acknowledging her debts to those who have discussed Munro's "use of paradox in both style and structure" before her. Nevertheless, she maintains that "the most central and creative paradox of Munro's fiction is its repeated but consciously ambivalent attempt to control what is uncontrollable, to split in half to control a suddenly split world. These internal and external splits produce the 'intense ... moments of experience' that pattern Munro's stories" (4, 5).<sup>13</sup> Carrington argues persuasively that "these methods of splitting point of view and manipulating narrative time allow Munro's watching narrators to back off—temporally, psychologically, and spatially—from her participating characters. *Back off*, with its consciously cautious connotations of distance and self-protection, is another frequently repeated phrase" (8). Passages such as this characterize *Controlling the Uncontrollable* as a whole, with Carrington balancing generalization with telling and specific detail. Clearly, this is a critic who is also a scholar. She knows Munro's work, and Munro criticism, inside and out.

Unlike Rasporich and Blodgett, who generally structure their analysis chronologically, Carrington devises her own groupings. Thus after an introductory chapter, "The Medium of Control: The Humiliations of Language," she offers successive chapters focused on thematically grouped stories: first, stories that involve "frightening eruptions," such as a character striking out at another, in "The Time of Death" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) or, more recently, "Fits" (*The Progress of Love*); second, stories that involve the same first-person narrator; third, a large grouping of characters struggling for control; and, finally, parents and daughters. This approach



seems eminently sensible and, more importantly, it allows Carrington to move throughout Munro's *oeuvre*; in each instance, moreover, she demonstrates that these concerns have characterized Munro's fiction from first to last. This approach also allows Carrington to argue effectively against notions that have become clichés. For example, when Munro published *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), many critics commented that it was reminiscent of *Lives of Girls and Women*, based on much the same material. Examining *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Carrington concludes that Munro does not "repeat herself"; rather, "she demonstrates the validity of her own aesthetic: by returning to the same theme, she clarifies her misconception of what she thought was happening and sees what she had not understood in her earlier attempt" (98).

Again and again, Carrington offers analyses that illuminate Munro's stories in ways that are new. This is especially so in her chapter on parents and daughters, which examines the effects of autobiography, place, shifting authorial perspective, and repeated treatments throughout Munro's writing as the author has attempted to come to terms with her mother on the one hand and with her father (in very different ways, to very different purpose) on the other. As well, her discussion of the influence of Yeats on "Wild Swans" (*Who Do You Think You Are?*), though not an original point, is the most sustained treatment to date (125–28); such a comparison suggests, further, the level of literary stature—in terms of canonical pecking order—that Munro is reaching (See Martin, "Alice" *passim*, and Gold, "Feeling" 10).<sup>14</sup> Her discussion of language, moreover, is simply daunting in its detail. There are problems, to be sure: Carrington is entirely too strident in protecting Munro from feminist readings; I am sympathetic, but I do not think it is that large of an issue, really. She also sees Munro's characters consistently as writers, often when there is little basis in the text for such a designation. These matters are mere quibbles, for the strength of *Controlling the Uncontrollable* lies in its exhaustive scholarship and sensible, well-defined arguments.

The final effect of Carrington's approach—especially when paired with the greater theoretical analysis of Blodgett's *Alice Munro*—is to demonstrate the utter density of Munro's work and, as well, its continuity of both focus and purpose. Clearly, Munro's writing is of a stature to command the attentions of such intense critical scrutiny as is considered here,

and it renders the insufficient and uncertain dissemblings of critics like Gadpaille and Rasporich paltry. Indeed, what Blodgett calls Munro's "unassailable moral integrity" (151) is borne out in her fiction by the various shifts, doubts, and re-explanations Munro repeatedly offers, always with an eye to discovering "what is real," and asking how one can really know, ever. This has been so throughout her work, and it has grown in frequency, intensity, and complexity as she has progressed as a writer, as *Friend of My Youth* has just recently demonstrated yet again, if more demonstration were necessary. Munro wrote in "Home": "*I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can.*" That she does in her stories, impeccably, always (though not forever: controlling the uncontrollable). They *are* real. Dancer and the dance, indeed. Go ask Alice.

