



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

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# Notes

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

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

- third-person narrator; the other 10 use the remembering first-person narrator, as does the whole of *Lives of Girls and Women*.
- 7 In both “The Time of Death” and “A Trip to the Coast”—each story published alone and then included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*—Munro uses setting symbolically, in the former story by the way in which she handles the first snowfall of winter and in the latter by the way she handles the first few droplets of rain.
  - 8 It is worth noting that Munro did not revise this story prior to its publication in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, as was the case with the other stories published originally in the 1950s and included there.
  - 9 This order of composition, as with that used throughout, reflects the one given by Munro in her 1972 interview with John Metcalf. This order is corroborated by Gardiner (xii). For those stories not mentioned by Munro, I have adopted date of first publication to establish order of composition.

#### CONNECTION: ALICE MUNRO AND ONTARIO (1984)

- 1 To underscore my point of the myth of the Ontario small town, see Germaine Warkentin’s 1974 anthology, *Stories from Ontario*. Although her scholarly introduction defines and describes various types of Ontario fiction—from the bush of Susanna Moodie to the urban stories of Morley Callaghan, and Hugh Garner—Warkentin selects Leacock’s nostalgic evocation of the small town in “The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias” as her “prologue.” Such editorial emphasis, which suggests Leacock’s vision is the most apt, confirms a sense of the

small town ethos in Ontario as the preferred myth.

- 2 Regarding my use of the term “epiphany,” one of the best books on the short story as a genre is Frank O’Connor’s *The Lonely Voice* (1962).
- 3 See Lorna Irvine’s “Changing Is the Word I Want” in *Probable Fictions*. I cite Irvine’s word, “jerky,” in complete agreement with its context: “Furthermore, the peculiarly jerky, I might even say breathless, pace of a Munro narrative reflects the kaleidoscope of moods that are the stories’ contents.” “Moods,” however, is not the word I would use, since the jerky quality of which Irvine speaks is produced, most often, by shifts in memory triggered by past association. A useful article in this regard is W. H. New’s “Every Now and Then: Voice and Language in Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*.”
- 4 Regarding Munro and American southern writers, see J. R. (Tim) Struthers, “Alice Munro and the American South.” Munro has also discussed this in her interviews.
- 5 See Struther’s interview for Munro’s use of “holding pattern” versus “the real material.” Regarding Munro’s use of setting to define inarticulate characters, and in particular Lois in “Thanks for the Ride,” see my “Clear Jelly: Alice Munro’s Narrative Dialectics,” the previous article here.
- 6 The ellipses here are Gardiner’s but the parenthetical insertions are mine.

#### CONFERRING MUNRO (1987)

- 1 For a contemporary review of B. Pfau’s *Alice Munro* see Lorraine M. York, “Joyless in Jubilee?” Beverly Rasporich’s “The Art of Alice Munro,” and Miriam Packer’s “Beyond

the Garrison: A Critical Study of Munro, Atwood, and Laurence,” were scheduled to be published by Quadrant Editions. Lorna Irvine’s *Subversion: Canadian Fictions by Women* has recently been published by ECW Press. And W. R. Martin has a book on Munro forthcoming from the University of Alberta Press.

- 2 The reader would have hoped for strong editing—either through blue pencil or by exclusion—but the editorial weaknesses here extend to the minute: Miller does not bother to tell us when the conference was held, beginning her brief introduction, “Here is the collection of critical papers on Alice Munro presented at the Waterloo Conference on Munro. Finally” (iii), as if we all knew about the conference and had been anticipating its proceedings. As it happens, I did know and I had been looking for the papers, but doubtless many readers will not have, and what is more, would like to have such details included. Similarly, the contents page offers us “table of contents” twice, for some reason, and, after she lists the editions of Munro’s works “consistently” referred to in the volume, Miller allows the authors to offer—repeatedly—full bibliographic citations for Munro’s works.
- 3 In addition, Munro discusses her appreciation of American southern writers as early as 1971 in “Alice Munro Talks to Mari Stainsby.” Her most well known discussion of the subject is with John Metcalf in “A Conversation with Alice Munro.”
- 4 Such a grand generalization as this requires support, certainly. What I have in mind are, essentially, two types of articles common during the late 1970s, and I exclude biographical-overview pieces in the popular press. The first sort is exemplified

by Rae McCarthy Macdonald’s “A Madman Loose in the World: The Vision of Alice Munro.” Macdonald, egregiously under the (in my view) influence of Frye’s “garrison mentality,” blithely applies it to Munro because—so it seems—the author is Canadian, and then offers a thematic discussion of some of Munro’s work. Such an approach is not only too simple, it is simple-minded. The other type of article, of the same ilk, but more troubling because editors have persisted in publishing them, is Miriam Packer’s “*Lives of Girls and Women: A Creative Search for Completion.*” In these articles authors offer only their own reading, making no attempt to avail themselves to what others have published, nor any attempt to engage in critical debate. Packer shares Macdonald’s view of Frye’s garrisons, which is bad enough, but she writes as if no one had previously published a thing on *Lives of Girls and Women*, citing only Munro’s book. J. R. (Tim) Struthers made something of this same point in “Some Highly Subversive Activities.”

#### “SO SHOCKING A VERDICT IN REAL LIFE”

- 1 With the exception of the title of “Material,” Munro has discussed these alternate titles in interviews. As a preliminary, I should like to note that this essay was written before I had the opportunity look at the Munro papers held by the University of Calgary’s Special Collections. My examination, however, confirmed in a multitude of additional ways the nature of the relationship between Munro’s life and her fiction examined here.
- 2 This phrase, of course, is Nebraska novelist Wright Morris’, whose phototext/novel *The Home Place* was published in 1948. Morris’ affinities

with his Nebraska boyhood are analogous to Munro's with Huron County, Ontario.

- 3 In connection with another essay, I recently asked Munro during a telephone conversation about her use of Willa Cather in "Dulse." She replied that she had visited Grand Manan Island—the actual New Brunswick island where Cather summered for years—with a friend, and there she met a man very much like Mr. Stanley, a person she described as "a Cather fanatic." She had been working on Lydia's story before her visit and, afterwards, brought the two events together. During the same conversation, she confirmed a personal visit to the Royal Ontario Museum's planetarium as described in "The Moons of Jupiter," though the visit took place about a year after her father's death.
- 4 Though these doubts have come to the fore in more recent work, they have been in evidence from *Dance of the Happy Shades* on. "The Office," for example, a story first published in 1962 and one which Munro says simply happened to her (Metcalf Interview 58), concludes: "While I arrange words, and think it is my right to rid of" Mr. Malley, the narrator's landlord who will not leave her alone in her office to write and who, patently, does not believe that she is writing in there. Osachoff discusses this point in relation to Munro's narrative voice.

#### REVIEW ESSAY: GO ASK ALICE

- 1 Taken together, these essays offer a reasonable summary of the critical contexts and something of the dynamics of canon formation, and note published criticism on Canadian literature writ large. Regarding the latter, a comprehensive treatment is

*Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (1990).

- 2 The notion of Munro's reception by critics as being something of a paradigmatic case was the point of departure in my "Alice Munro and the Critics: A Paradigm," a paper presented to the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, in October 1979; this part of the paper was dropped and the revised balance was published as "Clear Jelly": Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics," in *Probable Fictions* (see the first essay in this volume). Some years later, I updated this discussion in "Conferring Munro," a review of *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, edited by Judith Miller (see the third essay here). I note these activities not to toot my own horn but by way of preparing for my comments on scholarship, below.
- 3 The first book-length collection on Munro's writing was *Probable Fictions* (1983); it was followed the next year by another collection—made up of papers presented at a conference on Munro held at the University of Waterloo in 1982—*The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, edited by Judith Miller. My "Alice Munro: An Annotated Bibliography," in *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors, Volume 5*, was published in 1984 as well, as was the first "critical" book on Munro by a single author, B. Pfaus's *Alice Munro*. The latter is so bad as to make any serious scholar-critic shudder. Though technically not the first, then, W. R. Martin's *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* ought to be considered so. Throughout this period, too, articles and book chapters on Munro's work appeared with increasing frequency.

The point here, of course, is that just as Munro's work gained reputation,

so too did the critical attention accorded that work grow, quite naturally. Indeed, this phenomenon may be seen as part and parcel of reputation.

- 4 Redekop's book, putatively entitled *Alice Munro and Our Mock Mothers: Reading the Signs of Invasion*, according to Hutcheon, has not appeared in late October 1990 as I write. This time lag seems strange in view of Hutcheon's acknowledgement, which was probably written over two years ago. Perhaps ironically, this situation is reminiscent of a Rasporich volume, entitled *The Art of Alice Munro* and announced as forthcoming by Quandrant Editions in 1985 but never published (along with one by Miriam Packer, also never published); that book doubtless bears some relation to the volume at hand here.
- 5 Other titles in the series include children's books, English-Canadian theatre, film, and folklore (in print); as well as Indigenous literature, Jewish writers, science fiction and fantasy, diaries and journals, literary criticism, the press, and photography (forthcoming).
- 6 The very existence of this book, or that of any other relevant criticism on the subject, is ignored by Gad-paille. Indeed, her book is reminiscent of the short introduction to this or that Canadian author that was often the only extended critical piece available during the 1960s and early 1970s—Michael Ondaatje's book on Leonard Cohen, cited by Hutcheon (43), from McClelland and Stewart, is the sort of work I have in mind. Such volumes may be making a comeback, judging from ECW's newest series, "Introducing..."; see for example, George Woodcock, *Introducing Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel: A Reader's Guide*. Pub-

lished initially in hardback by ECW, these are short introductory readings of often-taught novels designed for the student market; they at least have the advantage of focusing on a single work.

- 7 Besides *Controlling the Uncontrollable*, two volumes were published recently by Southern Illinois University Press: *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms* (1988), edited by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro; and Karen Gould's *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec* (1989). My own *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* was published by the University of New Mexico Press in 1989; it followed Yale University Press' *Prairie Women* by Carol Fairbanks. Similarly, in 1988 the University of Wisconsin published *Nationalism and Politics of Culture in Quebec* by Richard Handler; this is less remarkable, though, since there are fields—anthropology, history, political science—where American presses publishing on Canadian topics is unremarkable; that these presses are noticeably more receptive to manuscripts on Canadian literary topics, however, seems a relatively new phenomenon.

In passing, too, I wonder if the subvention policies of the granting agencies, which largely ensure that only books by Canadians or landed immigrants receive subventions, have not played a role here as well. Scholarly presses in Canada normally do not publish without a subvention, so it is conceivable that manuscripts on Canadian topics by Americans (of whom, I should say, I am one) might be denied publication solely for the absence of such grant support. Books by non-Canadians or non-landed immigrants must pass an additional hurdle for subvention

support; in practice, this means that very few non-Canadian manuscripts receive such support.

- 8 J. R. (Tim) Struthers made this same point in "Some Highly Subversive Activities" in 1981 and I echoed him in "Conferring Munro." This remains a fundamental critical problem, to my mind. Too many "critics" fashion themselves as only that—not scholars—and editors and publishers aid and abet them.
- 9 This is not to suggest that Howells cites every discussion of *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are* in print; on the contrary, there are several pieces on each that she might well have mentioned, and I would have preferred that she had. But—and this is the point about scholarship I am making here—Howells draws upon published scholarship in a way consistent with her topic, focus, scope, and audience; clearly, she knows what the critics have written, and cites those directly relevant to her own argument. This, it seems to me, is a long way from Oxford's arrogant decision to omit all critical apparatus from Gadpaille's book; a list of cited works would not have added appreciably to that book's length.
- 10 Rasporich is quoting Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).
- 11 Rasporich makes an honest attempt to use scholarship, but there are some curious gaps; some of this may owe to the book's gestation, for at times Rasporich is right up to date while at others she is well behind. For example, given her feminist approach, I am surprised that Smaro Kamboureli's "The Body as Audience and Performance in the Writing of Alice Munro" (1986) or Constance Rooke's "Munro's Food" are not mentioned, although the timing may have been off. Similarly, while she discusses the gothic elements in Munro, and cites some scholarship on the subject, Rasporich does not directly mention Macdonald's "A Madman Loose in the World," although she does list it in her bibliography. On a personal note, despite her discussion of Ontario as place, Rasporich makes no mention of my "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario" (1984), a piece that is directly relevant to her subject. This sort of casualness in an otherwise scholarly book is problematic, for it affects the author's authority. Its presence can be noted in smaller matters, too: Rasporich gets the years of first publication wrong for both *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *The Moons of Jupiter* and consistently refers to a story entitled "Chaddeleys and Flemings 1. Connection" as "Connection." These are not big things, but they are bothersome.
- 12 Neither Blodgett nor Carrington is especially convincing in discussing Munro's use of Cather here, although Carrington consults suitable scholarly sources (see Stich "Cather").
- 13 Carrington is quoting from an interview with Beverley Slopen conducted with Munro and published in *Publisher's Weekly*.
- 14 Martin discusses Yeats in connection with Munro on several points, but he does not deal specifically with this story. Gold also suggests the parallel. Carrington sees "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Leda and the Swan" as the primary analogues, but, especially in light of Blodgett's discussion of Bobby Sheriff's pirouette at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, I would see "Among School Children" as in some ways the better

match. The point of all this—beyond display of erudition and proving the postmodern notion that texts are made of other texts—is that Munro is clearly a much more literary writer than she has traditionally been seen. In the same fashion, see Lorraine York’s “The Rival Bards.” All of these lines of enquiry—including that of Cather—warrant further critical investigation.

#### ALICE MUNRO’S WILLA CATHER (1992)

- 1 The Cather–Lewis companionship has received considerable attention; the two met by 1903, and five years later, when each was working at *McClure’s*, they began sharing an apartment. This living arrangement continued until Cather’s death in 1947, after which time Lewis guarded her friend’s reputation as executor until her own death in 1972. For a judicious overview of the relationship, see Marilyn Arnold’s foreword to the most recent edition of *Willia Cather Living*. As well, O’Brien’s discussion of it—though perhaps overstated—recognizes its importance in Cather’s life (*Emerging* 353–57).
- 2 Although “Dulse” offers the most discrete indication of the influence of Cather’s fiction on Munro, numerous other echoes are worth pursuing. Not the least of these is the structural symmetry between Cather’s “Old Mrs. Harris” (1932) and Munro’s “The Progress of Love” (1985). Both stories focus on three women—grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter—and probe the paramount values of each; that is, how each woman lives with dignity, given the social mores of the time and her own personal values. Munro, moreover, has called “Old Mrs. Harris” her favourite Cather story (Telephone interview). Similarly, this comparison could be extended

further throughout both writers’ works in that relationships between women of different generations, and especially mother–daughter relationships, is a shared central theme.

- 3 Thus when Munro published *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), some reviewers complained that it was a revisiting of her earlier material in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Carrington, however, has recently refuted these claims, arguing convincingly that Munro does not “repeat herself,” but rather that 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 the earlier attempt” (98).
- 4 Jewett’s influence on Cather—coming as it did at a propitious time, when the younger woman was struggling to free herself from her duties at *McClure’s* in order to write—has been seen as critical to her development. See Woodress (201–06); O’Brien (*Emerging* 334–52 and *passim*).
- 5 Unless indicated otherwise, parenthetical page references from “Dulse” are from its final form, that in *The Moons of Jupiter*; all quotations from Munro’s papers are from the second accession; the identification numbers are from the published catalogue.
- 6 Of those in print, Carrington’s reading of “Dulse” is much the best. “With the paradigmatic clarity of a psychiatric case history,” she writes, the story “dramatizes self-destructive ambivalence” (146). Carrington relates the story well to the rest of Munro’s work, applies Karen Horney’s work on neurosis to Lydia’s situation, and sees Cather as “an alter ego of the writer-protagonist”



- (148), but she makes no real attempt to probe Munro's Cather for its full meaning, nor does she suggest Cather's influence on "Dulse" more broadly.
- 7 Munro may have been aware that what Lydia envisions here for Cather's cottage is exactly what Edith Lewis allowed to happen to it after Cather's death, and this despite pleas from Grand Manan residents to see to repairs, according to Brown and Crone (129–36). Munro may have heard this history through the same sorts of oral sources.
  - 8 As regards Cather after her reputation was established, this description of her behaviour is accurate. What is more, a vital part of Cather's persona was her great determination to succeed, a quality she evinced from her university years onward, and which is treated autobiographically in *The Song of the Lark* (1915). In 1922 when she arrived at Grand Manan for the first time, however, her reputation was established and was in the process of being cemented. Brown and Crone, in their study of Cather in the northeast, offer a version of Cather on Grand Manan that accords with Mr. Stanley's (36–43); this book, which O'Brien has rightly called "maddeningly undocumented" (*Willa Cather* 244 n47), could probably not have been a source for Munro because it was published in the same year as "Dulse." The more likely source for Mr. Stanley's version of Willa Cather is the person whom Munro met on Grand Manan; it conforms to the folklore surrounding Cather on Grand Manan as presented by Brown and Crone.
  - 9 Though known primarily for fiction, each wrote and published poetry. Cather's first published book was a collection of poems, *April Twilights* (1903), and Munro, for her part, wrote poetry, although the extent of its publication has not yet been established. An untitled poem of hers, signed Anne Chamney (her mother's maiden name), appeared in 1967 in the *Canadian Forum*. I should like to thank Jean Moore, of the University of Calgary Special Collections staff, for bringing this to my attention.
  - 10 Gardiner's article is particularly useful as regards the workings of the autobiographical in Cather and Munro. There, drawing upon the identity theories of Erikson and, especially, Choderow, and arguing that "female identity is a process," Gardiner looks at "typical narrative strategies of women writers—the manipulation of identifications between narrator, author, and reader and the representation of memory" in order to suggest ways that an author's text relates to her own identity. Following this, Gardiner asserts that "novels by women often shift through first, second, and third persons and into reverse. Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero" (349, 357).
  - 11 This reading of the story is one that I have heard in discussions of "Dulse" but have not seen in print; it was also put to Munro herself in a letter she received just after "Dulse" appeared in the *New Yorker* (38.1.82).
  - 12 Lorenz was Conrad Aiken's second wife; Olney is reviewing her *Lorelei Two: My Life with Conrad Aiken*.

#### ALICE MUNRO AND THE ANXIETY OF AMERICAN INFLUENCE (1994)

- 1 The Struthers interview is Munro's most detailed discussion of influences, though the matter comes up in virtually all her interviews.

- 2 Critics have noticed and speculated on Munro's use of the word "connection," and one has gone so far as to count its usage: none in *Dance of the Happy Shades*; 14 times in *Lives of Girls and Women*; four times in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, five in *Who Do You Think You Are?*; and a full 19 times in *The Moons of Jupiter*, which features a story with "Connection" as its subtitle. Counts are not in yet for either *The Progress of Love* or *Friend of My Youth* (York, "Gulfs" 145). Somewhat peevishly, and owing to a long-held view that Munro critics generally do not read relevant criticism as closely as scholarship dictates, nor, apparently, do the editors who publish essays with insufficient critical bases, I must note that an essay of mine was the first to discuss Munro's use of "connection": see my "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario." Blodgett's, Martin's, and, especially, Carrington's book, however, are all exempt from this criticism. Counting aside, "connection," as both a word and a concept, continues to figure in Munro's most recent stories. During the tribute to Margaret Laurence held at Trent University in March 1988, I raised the frequent use of the term with Munro herself—she claimed not to have noticed it, but upon reading her story "Menese-teung" (*Friend of My Youth*) as a part of the tribute, both of us noticed its appearance in the final paragraph of that story.
- 3 The story was first published in the *New Yorker*—told from the first-person point of view. It was revised (to third-person, with other changes) and included in *The Moons of Jupiter*. Although all of the authors of the full-length books on Munro mentioned here nod toward the Cather connection, only Carrington treats it seriously. More troublingly, Blodgett quotes a questionable source, offering what amounts to disinformation on Cather (167 n5).
- 4 Beverly J. Rasporich seems to be moving in this direction in *Dance of the Sexes*, especially in her chapters on Munro as "Folk Artist and Ironist" and "Regionalist."
- 5 One should add in passing that W. R. Martin, to take but one example, came to Munro from a background in modern British literature.
- 6 The relationship between *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* is a good case in point; upon the latter's publication, many reviewers complained of Munro's revisiting the same material a second time. Yet, as Carrington has recently demonstrated, Munro did not repeat herself: though in some ways similar, these two books are radically different, the former growing out of its author's youth, the latter out of her return to Huron County in the seventies after years away (98).
- 7 In the 1986 interview quoted at the outset, Munro rejects her metafictional comments in "The Ottawa Valley" and "Home," saying that now she is "disillusioned with the disillusionment. I'm not going to make those pronouncements anymore." Now, she says, she would "like to rewrite ['Home'] just as a simple story like I would have done when I was 25, and get rid of that stuff about backing off and commenting on the story—which got me all sorts of praise at the time" (Freak Interview 8).
- 8 Munro has attempted nonfictional work. Her "A Better Place Than Home," a documentary script for CBC-TV, deals with the Irish emigration to Canada. She also did

- considerable work writing the text to accompany a book of Ontario photographs by Peter D'Angelo; the text was never published, although it bears some relation to *Who Do You Think You Are?* See Alice Munro Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Calgary Library, MSC 37.13.7–14; *The Alice Munro Papers: First Accession* 132–35.
- 9 The final quotation is from *The Golden Apples*.
  - 10 “Prickly” is a word used by James Woodress to describe Cather in later life; see his *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, which promises to be the standard biography.
  - 11 See, for example, Munro’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Moons of Jupiter* (xiii–xvi).
  - 12 In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O’Brien inserts “[sic]” after Cather’s use of the male pronoun as she quotes the “gift of sympathy” passage (347). Though contemporary convention must be acknowledged, I am sympathetic to O’Brien’s objection.
  - 13 See my “Alice Munro’s Willa Cather,” above.
  - 14 See Alice Munro Papers, MsC 38.8.20; *The Alice Munro Papers: Second Accession* 161.
  - 15 Although there has been an explosion in critical materials on Cather during the past decade, there were enough reminiscences, biographies, and other pieces extant to have been the basis of Munro’s depiction of Cather. There is also the possibility that the “fanatic” whom Munro met was sufficiently informative. For those interested in a good discussion of the Cather–Edith Lewis bond—the basis of Munro’s characterization—see O’Brien, *Emerging* 352–59.
  - 16 For example, what might be called the “geological dimension” of “Before Breakfast”—Grenfell meets a geologist who has set up a temporary research camp on his island; the man tells him about the geological history of the island, an episode which puts Grenfell out of sorts—has its parallel in Munro’s title story, with its meditations on the moons of Jupiter; they, too, represent a deepness, like geological time, that the human imagination can only dimly understand. Another parallel, though more tentative, is between Mr. Black, the mysterious man of European extraction who dies in the corner of the field and is buried there, beneath the stone, in the second “Chaddeleys and Flemings” story, and Cather’s Mr. Shimerda in *My Ántonia*, a suicide victim who lies buried in a similar place. There are other such parallels.
  - 17 Munro’s use of photography has been the focus of considerable comment, beginning with Struthers’ article on the American South. See, in particular, York, ““The Other Side of Dailiness.””

#### WHAT’S “MATERIAL”: THE PROGRESS OF MUNRO CRITICISM, PART 2 (1998)

- 1 Both Klaus P. Stich and I have examined the Munro–Cather relation in some detail. What it reveals, like other parallels between Munro and numerous other writers, particularly Eudora Welty, is that Munro has a deep understanding of the writer’s position vis-à-vis herself, her family, her society, and her critics. As I suggest throughout this essay, Munro quite reasonably now puts critics at the end of this line, whatever her attitude was years ago in Victoria.

- 2 Although my focus here is on critical books on Munro's work published since 1990, I want to comment briefly on journal articles that, as I say, have appeared with increasing frequency. While doing the work for this review, I read my way through those articles that appeared during the same period, as well as some from the 1980s I had missed.

One is struck that hand in hand with her international celebrity, Munro has received attention from foreign critics—American and European alike. Much of this is of little worth, owing largely to the perspective of the critics or the peculiar approach they take—far too many critics, still, discover Munro and rush to print without doing the necessary scholarship; their insights are mundane, their arguments commonplace (Sturgess, Ventura, Seyersted). Equally, too, editors have discovered Munro and commissioned overview pieces that—though probably of some use to those who have never read any of her work—would be better off left to reference books (Ditsky). One of these, by Georgeann Murphy, is particularly troubling in that it includes a full bibliography of Munro's work without any acknowledgement of the various published bibliographical sources that, doubtless, were consulted in the compilation. Other foreign critics have contributed articles that have derived from reading and teaching individual stories, and are offered without reference to Canadian literature as a subfield (Cam, Clark, Elliot, Goodman, Houston, Mayberry). At the same time, foreign critics who have established themselves as scholars of Canadian literature have continued to contribute; one, Carrington, has done so with her usual detail and zeal (see also Gilbert and Irvine).

Canadian critics, in the same vein, have continued to offer examinations of Munro that extend the theoretical and nationalist discourse with regard to her work (Canitz, Garson, Goldman, Hoy, McCarthy, Rooke, Seaman, Sellwood, Smythe, Stubbs). Others, most notably John Weaver, have approached Munro's work from an altogether new vantage point. As will become evident below, my own view is that given that Munro's form is the short story, articles are much the better format for criticism of her work than books. Indeed, since she published *Controlling the Uncontrollable*, Carrington's work has abundantly demonstrated the efficacy of the critical article to Munro; would that Smythe and Heble had done as much. And while some critics have availed themselves to the wealth of information available in the Calgary archives (Hoy, Tausky), this remains a largely untapped resource.

- 3 Even with this fine insight, Mayberry offers an example of the sort of blinkered scholarship I bemoan. In an excellent article she manages to discuss Munro's use of paradox without citing Helen Hoy's work in this area; though she does cite critics who acknowledge Hoy—Blodgett and Carrington—that hardly seems enough.
- 4 A most graphic instance of this is the recurrence of an industrial decapitation that first appeared in "Thanks for the Ride" (1957)—a story Munro submitted to Robert Weaver at the CBC in 1955—as the cause of Lois's father's death. There the incident is a brief description offered to Dick by Lois's mother (*Dance* 51). It is a major focus in "Carried Away" (1991), where Louisa's imagined suitor, Jack Agnew, is killed in the same accident, his severed head being "carried away" by the factory

owner, Arthur Doud, whom Louisa eventually marries. Such recurrent incidents seem more worth analysis than many, if not most, of the patterns Carscallen elaborates.

- 5 These two books, ironically, derive from dissertations submitted in 1990 to the University of Toronto's Department of English, the same department among whose members are Carscallen and Redekop. Largely regarded as the pre-eminent department in the country—at least by those associated with it—Toronto has been slow in establishing a hospitable environment for the critical study of Canadian writing; that history may enter into the phenomenon such books as these represent, since each author aspires to tie the argument to some discourse other than Canadian literature. However seen, such an assertion needs to be defended, certainly, especially when a reasonable response to it would be the three words “Frye,” “Atwood,” and “Davies.” See my “Gazing Through the One-Way Mirror” for a discussion of the historical contexts of Canadian writing in the Canadian academy generally, and in the English Department at Toronto particularly.
- 6 It may be worth noting that here, in 1990, Besner is critiquing mimesis in Munro, à la Canitz, without recourse to the current jargon used by Heble. It goes without saying, too, that Besner’s “sophistication” outstrips Heble’s and Carscallen’s in my view.

#### ALICE MUNRO’S ONTARIO (2007)

- 1 Munro’s relationship to her Ontario home place is of major consideration in my *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives: A Biography*, a book that was written subsequent to this essay.
- 2 In 1980, Munro corresponded with Douglas Gibson, her editor, about “a kind of family book I want to do someday” (see Thacker, *Writing* 367–68). That book is *The View From Castle Rock* (2006), which among other pieces includes “Home”—without its metafictional commentary (285–315)—“Working for a Living” (also revised, 127–70) and “What Do You Want to Know For?” (also revised, 316–40).

#### A “BOOMING TENDER SADNESS”: ALICE MUNRO’S IRISH (2008)

- 1 This image is in the collection of the Library of Congress, item LC-USZ62-7307.

#### ALICE MUNRO: CRITICAL RECEPTION (2013)

- 1 This is a point I first asserted in “What’s ‘Material’” (208). There have been no single-authored volumes focused on the fiction since Howells’ save a faulty “appreciation” by an ill-informed American reader, Brad Hooper, and a fine small book by Ailsa Cox in a British series that introduces writers to students. Another scholarly volume, by Isla Duncan, has been announced for November 2011.

- 2 Despite its many strengths, I nonetheless notice an important weakness in McGill's essay: he entirely neglects to mention Louis K. MacKendrick's *Some Other Reality*, which covers many of the same considerations of this important story; this is hardly justified.
- 3 Another essay that might have been mentioned regarding "Meneseteung" is Naomi Morgenstern's "The Baby or the Violin?"—it considers the story in concert with "My Mother's Dream" (1998), concentrating on the ethics of feminism, and paying special attention to Almeda's dream in the story. Driven by an apparent desire to demonstrate that Munro actualizes literary theory in her stories, Morgenstern offers readings of Munro's stories that are ultimately unsatisfactory.

#### AFTERWORD

- 1 I am aware that many critics, owing to their analysis of the narrator's character in "Material," see this phrasing as ironic. Whatever the animus this narrator feels toward Hugo, her former husband, I take this "fine and lucky benevolence" as genuine appreciation.
- 2 This video interview, held in November 2013 after the Nobel Prize was announced, is available on the Nobel Prize website (accessed December 18, 2013): [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2013/munro-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2013/munro-lecture.html).



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In *Reading Alice Munro, 1973-2013*, a leading Munro scholar offers a critical overview of Alice Munro and her writing spanning forty years. Beginning with a newly written overarching introduction, featuring interleaved commentaries addressing chronology and contexts, ending with an encompassing afterword, this collection provides a selection of essays and reviews that reflect their times and tell the story of Munro's emergence and recognition as an internationally acclaimed writer. Acknowledging her beginnings and her persistence as a writer of increasingly exceptional short stories, and *just* short stories, Thacker examines her career through her fourteenth collection, *Dear Life* (2012), and to the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. Altogether, this book encompasses the whole trajectory of Munro's critical presence while offering a singularly informed retrospective perspective.

**ROBERT THACKER** is Charles A. Dana Professor of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University. He is the author of Munro's biography *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* (2005, revised 2011) and the editor of *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro* (1999).



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