

CALLING BACK THE GHOST
OF THE OLD-TIME HEROINE:
DUNCAN, MONTGOMERY, ATWOOD,
LAURENCE, AND MUNRO

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Writing in *The Week* (October 28, 1886), Sara Jeannette Duncan pretends to regret the passing of the old-time romantic heroine, who has been pushed into oblivion by the new school of realists to which Duncan herself belongs:

It would be strange indeed if we did not regret her, this daughter of the lively imagination of a bygone day. By long familiarity, how dear her features grew! Having heard of her blue eyes, with what zestful anticipation we foreknew the golden hair, the rosebud mouth, the faintly-flushed, ethereal cheek . . . of the blond maiden! Wotting of her ebon locks, with what subtle prescience we guessed the dark and flashing optics, the alabaster forehead, the lips curved in fine scorn, the regal height, and the very unapproachable demeanour of the brunette! The fact that these startling differences were purely physical . . . never interfered with our joyous interest in them as we breathlessly followed their varying fortunes from an auspicious beginning, through harrowing vicissitudes, to a blissful close. . . . She was the painted pivot of the merry-go-round — it could not possibly revolve, with its exciting episodes, without her; yet her humble presence bore no striking relation to the mimic pageant that went on about her.

Thus directed by Duncan, we smile with nostalgia in memory of the old-time heroine and call to mind Canadian examples such as the fair Amélie in *The Golden Dog* (1877) or the fair Clara De Haldemar in *Wacousta* (1832). "To features which looked as if chiselled out of the purest Parian marble, just flushed with the glow of morn, and cut in those perfect lines of perfection . . ."¹ — this passage describes Amélie although it might do equally well for Clara. As Duncan astutely observes, such a heroine is a compositional device, "the painted pivot of the merry-go-round." She is the passive but

¹William Kirby, *The Golden Dog*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 15.

suffering centre of an elaborately patterned design of incidents: "auspicious beginning . . . harrowing vicissitudes . . . a blissful close." Plot comes first; the heroine has no character to speak of to conflict with the plot or to make the unfolding incidents less likely to occur than any others. In *Wacousta*, for example, Clara I falls victim to De Haldemar's bride-snatching tactics in order to provide the motive for Wacousta's revenge plot. Clara II gets herself captured by Wacousta so that she can be taken to his grisly tent and told, along with the reader, Wacousta's secret history. In the "realistic" novel that Duncan herself champions, however, character comes first. "The woman of today," says Duncan in the same *Week* article, "bears a translatable relation to the world" and appears in novels that are "reflection[s] of our present social state." The realistic novel sacrifices the designing power belonging to romances like *Wacousta*, where apparent coincidences are there to clarify the moral relationships among events. Instead it chooses literary conventions that bear "a translatable relation to the world" or, more accurately, conventions that make the fictional world appear to correspond with something in the world outside.

A major one of these conventions is parody. The principle here is that the more the fiction departs from or inverts the conventions of romance, the more it appears to resemble life and therefore to be "realistic." This principle accounts for the continual reinvoking of the old-time heroine's shade from oblivion, chiefly as a contrast to the real heroine of the book. In *The Imperialist* (1904), Duncan herself parodies the old-time heroine in Miss Dora Milburn, a fallen divinity contrasting in every way with Advena, who is marked out by name and character as the heroine of the future.

Dora, when we first meet her, is "perform[ing] lightly at the piano"² in the approved style for old-time heroines. The elements in her composition are all familiar, but Duncan subjects them to an unwonted scrutiny and passes judgment:

She was a tall fair girl, with several kinds of cleverness. She did her hair quite beautifully, and she had a remarkable, effective, useful reticence. . . . [Her reflections] went on behind a faultless coiffure and an expression almost classical in its detachment; but if Miss Milburn could have thought on a level with her looks I, for one, would hesitate to take any liberty with her meditations.

(*I*, pp. 53-54)

²Sara Jeannette Duncan, *The Imperialist*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 53. Cited hereafter as *I* in parentheses within the text.

Dora can never recover from the devastating effect of Duncan's word "useful." Duncan's irony emphasizes the disparity between Dora's exterior loveliness and her poverty of character. Seeing the physical beauty, Lorne ascribes to Dora all those absent moral and spiritual qualities which the reader has always gladly supplied for the heroine of romance. Duncan's literary point here — that the old-time heroine represents a false ideal — comes to the aid of the social and political themes of the novel. In presenting Dora, Duncan parodies what she considers an outmoded literary convention to criticize the dying Colonial tradition — the "Filkin tradition" — that Dora represents. Lorne's misperception of Dora, moreover, parallels his misjudgement of the Imperial question, which misjudgement itself results from the same misplaced idealism.

Advena as heroine is another matter. She forms the greatest possible contrast to Dora, for Duncan, in presenting Advena according to the conventions of realism, systematically overturns most of the established conventions of romance. Dora is to be found sitting prettily at her piano; Advena always has her nose in a book. Dora accepts male adoration as her due; Advena's mother "would have been sorry for the man if he had arrived [to court Advena], but he had not arrived" (*I*, p. 32). The plot involving Advena is a familiar one of comic romance, but Duncan gives it a new twist by parodying some of its central features. Frequently the low point for the romantic heroine is her exposure as a living sacrifice to some dreadful fate. In *The Imperialist*, drawn perhaps to mortification of the flesh because of her enthusiasm for Plato and for Yoga (*I*, pp. 105, 184), Advena casts herself in this sacrificial role. In such a spirit, she offers herself up to Miss Cameron of Scotland, who has arrived in Elgin to marry Hugh Finlay, the man Advena loves:

... she was there simply to offer herself up, and the impulse of sacrifice seldom considers whether, or not it may be understood. . . . We know of Advena that she was prone to this form of exaltation. (*I*, p. 218)

This parody of the sacrifice of the virgin is used to criticize Advena's and Hugh's immense idealism, which, like Lorne's idealism over Dora and Imperialism, must yield finally to the force of social reality.

The solution to this plot is provided by Dr. Drummond, who, attracted to Miss Cameron's mature charms and impressed by her quick understanding of the points of church administration, decides to marry her himself. This arrangement, "much more suitable in

every way" (I, p. 254), represents in the novel the conquest of "realism" over quixoticism. *The Imperialist* nevertheless conforms to the conventions of comic romance in its final ritual pairings, leaving only Lorne excluded from the general festivity; and it does not escape the reader's attention that, however ironic the texture of the book with its technique of parodying the old-time heroine, Advena is in fact involved in a plot with exactly the same structure as that which used to propel the old-time heroine from "an auspicious beginning, through harrowing vicissitudes, to a blissful close." One of the effects of the balance between Advena's plot with its happy ending and Lorne's plot with its ironic ending is to draw attention to the design of the book.

In *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), the old-time heroine, while not a separate character like Dora, nevertheless exists in Anne's imagination, embodied in the impossible Cordelias and Geraldines of her reading. Red-headed and freckled, Anne herself seems plausible, even "realistic," in comparison with those creatures with golden locks and alabaster brows who cultivate "lifelong sorrow[s]"³ and lead lives that are "a perfect graveyard of buried hopes" (AGG, p. 40). Anne tries to recreate Avonlea as a romantic setting, renaming the Avenue as "the White Way of Delight," Barry's Pond as "the Lake of Shining Waters," and herself as Cordelia. But the point made repeatedly in incident after incident is the contrast between the romantic Cordelia who inhabits a world completely bound by convention and the "real-life" Anne who lives in Avonlea where romance is sabotaged by "life." This contrast does not disguise the fact that *Anne of Green Gables* itself follows an overall structure that is pure comic romance. Anne's role is to be the "unprized precious maid" who, like Lear's Cordelia, "redeems nature from the general curse." The orphaned waif whom nobody wants or loves enters two unfulfilled lives and transforms them with her own love and imagination. Moreover, she starts off in yellowish grey wincey and ends up in glorious puffed sleeves. But the technique of contrasting Anne with the old-time heroine is the justification for Anne's claim to a verisimilitude never possessed by the completely formulaic characters of romance — and this despite the very obvious structural similarities between Anne's own story of an orphan who finds happiness winning the hero and the fairytales and romances that Montgomery is parodying.

³Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 18. Cited hereafter as AGG in parentheses within the text.

The chapter "An Unfortunate Lily Maid" shows clearly Montgomery's method of parody and the close connection between parody and what Frye calls "realistic displacement." Anne and her friends dramatize Elaine's dolorous voyage on her death-barge by adjusting the details of Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine" to the capacities of Prince Edward Island school girls. Thus Anne, whose red hair has just been chopped off after she has dyed it a "queer dull bronzy green," becomes Elaine with "all her bright hair streaming down." An old black shawl is used to "pall the barge in all its length in blackest samite"; an old piano scarf becomes the "cloth of gold for coverlet"; a tall iris substitutes for Elaine's white lily. The outcome of this episode makes the point that the "real life" heroine has to contend with unruly incursions from the actual world that never disturb the conventions governing old-time heroines:

For a few minutes Anne, drifting slowly down, enjoyed the romance of her situation to the full. Then something happened not at all romantic. The flat began to leak. In a very few moments it was necessary for Elaine to scramble to her feet, pick up her cloth of gold coverlet and pall of blackest samite and gaze blankly at a big crack in the bottom of her barge through which the water was literally pouring. (AGG, p. 237)

Anne is forced to abandon her role as the doomed lily maid and clamber onto a slippery bridge pile to wait till Gilbert comes to the rescue "rowing under the bridge in Harmon Andrews' dory." This ending undercuts the romantic formulas by asserting the superior claims of reality that, with its sharp stakes, tears the bottoms out of barges. But while achieving this effect, Montgomery has also, one notes, shifted her pattern of literary parody from romantic elegy to romantic comedy; from Elaine's fatal unrequited love for Lancelot to the story of, as Anne puts it elsewhere, "an enchanted princess shut up in a lonely tower with a handsome knight riding to [her] rescue on a coal-black steed" (AGG, p. 173). Thus Montgomery anticipates the happy outcome of Gilbert's role as patient suitor and princess-rescuer, while mocking the romance formula that she herself is using.

This episode of the unfortunate lily maid is the culmination of a series of earlier episodes that all follow — one might say too predictably — the same pattern and that all teach a similar lesson: adopting romance formulas as a basis for real life results in a mortifying comeuppance. Anne learns finally, so she says, to

distinguish between romance, which is a convention of fiction, and “real life,” which goes on in Avonlea: “I have come to the conclusion that it is no use trying to be romantic in Avonlea. It was probably easy enough in towered Camelot hundreds of years ago, but romance is not appreciated now” (AGG, p. 242). This remark by a fictional character about a set of characters whom *she* considers fictional opens up a series of receding planes, like the girl on the Dutch Cleanser container who holds a Dutch Cleanser container which has another girl. . . . The effect for the reader resembles looking at a set of mirrors: a character at one remove from the reader’s world uses parody to put at one remove from himself a romance world of recognized conventions and elaborate design.

Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) also features a red-haired heroine who tries unsuccessfully to model her life according to fictional patterns. This book is deliberate in its use of receding mirrors to suggest the relation between what the heroine herself would call art and life but what we would perceive as the conventions of romance and of realism. *Lady Oracle* begins with Joan Foster on “the other side”⁴ in Terremoto Italy, after a bungled fake suicide and a supposed rebirth to a new identity. From this vantage point, she recalls her past life, from childhood to the present, while at the same time she tries to finish off her last Costume Gothic, *Stalked By Love*. This structure of juxtaposed episodes from her own life affords an opportunity for contrast between the conventionalized characters who belong in Costume Gothics and the multidimensional and shifting characters who belong in “realistic” fiction. According to the conventions of the Costume Gothic, the hero is always tall, aloof, and Byronic. The heroine is always a pale orphaned virgin who tracks down the hero to his Gothic manor, disposes of the unscrupulous rival female, and manoeuvres the hero into marriage. According to the conventions that govern realism, characters can be both hero and villain simultaneously — like Joan’s rescuer on the bridge who “was elusive, he melted and changed his shape” (*LO*, p. 61) or like her father “healer and killer” (*LO*, p. 295). Although the contrast here concerns the differing ways two literary conventions handle character and admit elements of design, Joan — herself a fictional character developed according to the conventions of realism

⁴Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: Bantam-Seal, 1977). The opposition of “this side” and “the other side” is a recurrent metaphor used to distinguish between life and art. See pages 5, 33, 105, 109, 135, 205, and 311. *Lady Oracle* is cited hereafter as *LO* in parentheses within the text.

— naturally sees the contrast as a difference between the art world of her Costume Gothics and the real world where she herself lives:

I longed for the simplicity of that world, where happiness was possible and wounds were only ritual ones. Why had I been closed out from that impossible white paradise where love was as final as death, and banished to this other place where everything changed and shifted. (LO, p. 286)

Joan spends much of her time trying to escape from her own life by identifying herself with the heroines of romance who inhabit “that impossible white paradise” on the “Other Side” or on the “Far Shore.” In one episode Joan, imagining herself to be Samantha Deane fleeing the illicit attentions of the hero Sir Edmund De Vere in *Escape From Love*, is approached by Arthur who is banning the bomb. In the Costume Gothic, Samantha rakes Sir Edmund’s cheek with her handy crewelling needle; in the main narrative Joan is chagrined to find herself “lying on top of a skinny, confused-looking young man” (LO, p. 164) who has a cut cheek. This rhythm of romantic illusion and “realistic” accommodation, which in *Anne* is a repeated structuring principle of chapters and incidents, is in *Lady Oracle* more firmly tied to the main theme of the relation between art and life, romance and realism.

Curiously enough Montgomery and Atwood both have chosen Camelot and the Elaine-Lady of Shalott figure as their image for the shadowy world of romance. This world can be preserved only by being kept from contact with the real world, which sinks the barge, cracks the mirror, explodes the illusion. Joan remarks, “You could stay in the tower for years, weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom” (LO, p. 316). Like the mirror, the Lady of Shalott can create her gorgeous coloured tapestries only at the expense of denying herself participation in the life she depicts. The outside world is admitted into her tower only as content for the artistic form she is weaving. Once it is allowed to provide the shape, the result is that collapse of order which “realistic” fiction tries to imitate by its technique of parody and inversion.

Both Anne and Joan use the image of the double in the mirror to suggest their sense of the difference between their own mixed and often painful lives and the simpler life of a romantic heroine in an Arcadian world. Anne’s visual double Katie Maurice and her sound double Violet owe something to the myth of Narcissus and Echo:

We used to pretend that the bookcase was enchanted and that if I only knew the spell I could open the door and step right into the room where Katie Maurice lived. . . . And then Katie Maurice would have taken me by the hand and led me into a wonderful place, all flowers and sunshine and fairies, and we would have lived there happy for ever after. . . . [Near Mrs. Hammond's] there was a long green little valley, and the loveliest echo lived there. . . . So I imagined that it was a little girl called Violetta. . . . (AGG, p. 63)

Likewise Joan imagines that she has a "shadowy twin" living in the "never-never land" on the other side of the mirror (*LO*, p. 247) and enacting all the conventional wish-fulfilment plots of her Costume Gothics. The mirrors recede one plane further when Joan's heroine and romance double, Penelope in *Love, My Ransom*, herself enters the mirror world: "further into the mirror she went, and further, till she seemed to be walking on the other side of the glass, in a land of indistinct shadows" (*LO*, p. 220). And in the most obvious instance of mirror worlds, Atwood has written a book called *Lady Oracle* about Joan Foster who has written a book called *Lady Oracle*. The deeper one goes into this hall of mirrors behind mirrors, the less things seem to bear what Duncan calls a "translatable relation to the world" and the more they conform to the ritualized designs of plot, the elaborate patternings of characters, and the polarized oppositions of demonic and paradisaical that are conventions of romance.

Both Anne and Joan write their mirror-double into plots whose very clear designs are stylized versions of their own less obviously shaped lives. In the chapter "The Story Club is Formed," Anne writes "The Jealous Rival; or, In Death Not Divided." Into the conventional opposition in romance of dark and fair heroine, Anne projects her own adolescent jealousy of Diana's future husband, a jealousy already admitted to at the end of Chapter Fifteen: "'It's about Diana,' sobbed Anne luxuriously. . . . 'Diana will get married and go away and leave me. . . . I hate her husband — I just hate him furiously'" (AGG, p. 126). Here is how Anne describes "The Jealous Rival" to Diana:

"It's about two beautiful maidens called Cordelia Montmorency and Geraldine Seymour who lived in the same village and were devotedly attached to each other. Cordelia was a regal brunette with a coronet of midnight hair and dusky flashing eyes. Geraldine was a queenly blonde with hair like spun gold and velvety purple eyes. . . . Then Bertram De Vere came to their

native village and fell in love with the fair Geraldine. . . . All [Cordelia's] affection for Geraldine turned to bitter hate and she vowed that [Geraldine] would never marry Bertram. . . . [After causing Geraldine's and Bertram's deaths by drowning, Cordelia] went insane with remorse and was shut up in a lunatic asylum." (AGG, p. 223)

Wotting of these heroines' dark and fair hair, with what subtle prescience do we guess the rest. We know that the hero would have a name like Bertram De Vere, which clearly belongs in the same class as, say, Frederick De Haldimar in *Wacousta* or Edmund De Vere in Joan's *Escape From Love* and differs from names like Charlie Sloane or Chuck Brewer that identify characters of realism. The plot is a neat piece of design involving number patterns of two and one as well as the almost compulsory colour pattern of dark and fair. Likewise Joan's fictional *alter ego* of her Costume Gothic participates in a ballet for three characters — the hero, heroine, and female rival — who go through conventional motifs of amnesia, madness, and ritual death before, in this case, the inevitable happy ending. Joan's comments on her writing of *Stalked By Love* indicate her theoretical awareness of the conventional function of her characters as compositional devices in elaborate plots: "The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins" (*LO*, p. 31) and "I knew what had to happen. Felicia, of course, would have to die; such was the fate of wives" (*LO*, p. 317).

Joan's difficulty in completing *Stalked By Love* is caused by her inability, in practice, to keep separate these conventions of romance and realism, a confusion which duplicates her tendency to confuse romantic formulas with her own life. In defiance of the conventions of romance, Felicia starts to develop the rounded character belonging to realistic heroines. She acquires most of Joan's own characteristics, she becomes sympathetic, and her qualities begin to conflict with her role in the plot. Joan says, "It was all wrong. Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely" (*LO*, p. 321). While her heroine is starting to behave as a character of realism, Joan herself still yearns to be a romantic heroine in an "impossible white paradise." Her flight to Italy to the "Other Side" was of course intended as an escape from her multiple and shifting identities. Realism is a "snarl, a rat's nest of dangling threads and loose ends" (*LO*, p. 295), or at least the shaped mimesis of such; Joan wants "happy endings. . . .the feeling of release when everything turn[s] out right" (p. 321).

The multiple endings provided by the double resolutions to Felicia's Costume Gothic narrative and Joan's frame narrative bring about the predicted implosion of the conventions of romance and realism and a collapse into something approaching farce. Felicia decides to stay safely in her tower of art behind the door, as a proper romance character should. Joan decides to open the door to confront, presumably, the complexities of experience, as a realistic character should. But a reversal occurs in the last chapter when we realize that Joan, in opening the door to an unknown reporter, imagines that she is Felicia opening the door to Redmond, just as earlier she confused herself with Samantha Deane fleeing from Sir Edmund De Vere. Joan's chagrin when she realizes she has assaulted a stranger with a Cinzano bottle resembles Anne's chagrin at the outcome of the lily maid episode and results from the same painful process of being disabused of romantic illusions. Where Duncan's double ending in *The Imperialist* — comic upbeat for Advena and ironic downbeat for Lorne — clarifies the possible shape of plots, Atwood goes further by distinguishing between, and then playing with, the proper endings for realism and romance. In a concise statement of the endings available for romances, Anne remarks that it is "so much more romantic to end up a story with a funeral than a wedding" (AGG, p. 223). *Lady Oracle*, about a character modelled according to the conventions of realism (however unsatisfying Joan herself may find these conventions), denies its central character the consoling neatness of either of these endings of funeral or wedding. The botched fake suicide, whose tidiness was supposed to contrast with the disorder of Joan's actual life, is a parody of the death as ending, but not itself the ending of the book. *Lady Oracle* has to make do instead with the circular ending which is really a beginning. The book closes with Joan's returning to her old patterns as she observes that "a man in a bandage" can be as romantic as a man in a red-lined opera cloak. Unlike either Advena or Anne, Joan never relinquishes her secret idea of herself as an old-time heroine.

"Jericho's Brick Battlements," the concluding story of Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House* (1970), is another work that counterpoints the different plots of romance and realism and contrasts different versions of the heroine. There are in fact three plots: one, the romance that the narrator Vanessa is writing is regarded within the story itself as fiction; the other two, involving Vanessa and her Aunt Edna, form the frame narrative and are presented as the "real world." All three are concerned with the

theme of getting out. The parallels as well as the contrasts among the three plots form a design within which Laurence can investigate the developing role of her new-time heroine Vanessa.

Vanessa's romance, which corresponds to Anne's storyclub narratives and to Joan's Costume Gothics, is about Marie who lives "in Quebec in the early days of the fur trade"⁵ and who is, of course, an orphan. Vanessa's difficulty in completing this story comes from her sense of the resistance that literary conventions encounter from some intractable thing outside, which we can call life:

The problem was now plain. How to get Marie out of her imprisoning life at the inn and onto the ship which would carry her to France? . . . Neither Radisson nor Groseilliers would marry her. . . . They were both too busy. . . . , and besides, they were too old for her.

I lay on the seat of the MacLaughlin Buick feeling disenchantment begin to set in. Marie would not get out of the grey stone inn. She would stay there all her life. The only thing that would ever happen to her was that she would get older. . . . I felt I could not bear it. I no longer wanted to finish the story. What was the use, if she couldn't get out except by ruses which clearly wouldn't happen in real life? (*BH*, p. 178)

Vanessa's distinctions are by now familiar: there is the enchantment of romance where the ruses work and the miraculous escapes are executed; and then there is the "disenchantment" of "real life" (what we have been calling the conventions of realism) where the ruses fail and escapes, if they work at all, turn into other forms of bondage. The two endings to Marie's story — she gets out in the romance; she doesn't get out when the romance darkens into realism — are paralleled by the contrasting endings to Aunt Edna's and Vanessa's stories in the frame narrative. The story of Aunt Edna and Wes Griggs is very clearly a realistic displacement of the romantic convention of entrapment and heroic rescue, with the conventional "ruses" being given plausibility. In contrast, the story of Michael's failure to rescue Vanessa from the Brick House calls into question the ruses and suggests that some new convention must be discovered to mirror the needs of the new-time heroine who is, as Duncan put it, an intelligent agent in the "reflection of our present social state."

⁵Margaret Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 177. Cited hereafter as *BH* in parentheses within the text.

In Aunt Edna's story, diction like "old dungeon" (*BH*, p. 186), "dragon throat" (*BH*, p. 189), and "magic powder" (*BH*, p. 191) reminds us that beneath this plausible story of Aunt Edna and the train man lies the story of the hero on the coal-black steed who rescues the imprisoned princess.⁶ The dragon who guards the dungeon is Grandfather Connor, who is forever stoking the furnace in "his territory" — the basement of the Brick House. In the crucial struggle, Grandfather goes into his firebreathing dragon act, and the furnace pipes catch fire:

In my grandfather's room the pipe was a bright light crimson. From inside its dragon throat came a low but impressive rumble. . . .

The pipes were beginning to chortle evilly. The light crimson was getting lighter and presumably hotter. The stench was terrible. (*BH*, pp. 189-91)

Wes Griggs conquers with a magic weapon, "a small boxful of blackish powder." "For an instant," says Vanessa, "I half expected the whole house to go up in a last mad explosion. But no. The magic powder acted swiftly. . . . The flame-roaring subsided" (*BH*, p. 191). To conclude, there are the usual flourishes — escape from the Brick House, wedding bells, and the honeymoon trip to Montreal using a free pass on the C.N.R.

"Jericho's Brick Battlements" thus provides a comic ending for Aunt Edna's plot which the companion story "The Mask of the Bear" has left unresolved. In that story, Vanessa is writing a romance "The Silver Sphinx" about a heroine who is like "some barbaric queen, beautiful and terrible . . . wearing a long robe of leopard skin and one or two heavy gold bracelets, pacing an alabaster courtyard and keening her unrequited love" (*BH*, p. 64). Like Anne who laments the lack of romance in Avonlea, Vanessa is convinced that both "death and love" seem "regrettably far from Manawaka and the snow" (*BH*, p. 65). However, in the frame story about Jimmy Lorrimer's failure to release Aunt Edna from the Brick House prison, Vanessa begins to see structural similarities between what to her is romance and "real life." After Jimmy Lorrimer has left for good, Vanessa hears Aunt Edna crying: "There arose in my mind, mysteriously, the picture of a barbaric queen, someone who had

⁶An acknowledgement is due to Professor Donald Hair who first drew my attention to this pattern.

lived a long time ago. I could not reconcile the image of the known face, nor could I disconnect it" (*BH*, p. 78). The counterpointing of Marie and the barbaric queen from Vanessa's romance with the "real life" Aunt Edna establishes Aunt Edna, by contrast, as a character of realism. It also shows how works of realism can, by displacing patterns of romance, acquire access to mythic levels of human experience.

The third plot in "Jericho's Brick Battlements," concerning Michael's failure to rescue Vanessa, to some extent resembles the revised ending of Marie's story where the prince doesn't come and Marie stays in the grey stone inn and grows older. But the differences are perhaps more instructive. Whereas the old-time heroine of romance was the passive focus for episodes of self-sacrifice, battle, intrigue, and heroic rescue, the new heroine, in the absence of a likely rescuer, packs her suitcase and boards a Greyhound bus. Michael has promised to fly Vanessa to the "ferned forests" of British Columbia, but he actually takes her "home to the Brick House instead" (*BH*, p. 195) — back to the prison. Like Morag in *The Diviners* who discovers that Brooke is no prince to rescue her from Hill Street and transport her to the "Halls of Sion,"⁷ so here Vanessa eventually realizes that any rescuing to be done she will have to do herself. The Stephen Spender poem that Vanessa and Michael read together, "I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great," expresses the false tone of their whole relationship and hints at the coming collapse of romantic expectations. Michael turns out to have a wife, just as Raddison and Groseilliers turn out to be too old and too busy to marry orphans. But the clash with Grandfather Connor over Michael makes Vanessa into her own Joshua who trumpets down Jericho's battlements: "I shouted at him, as though if I sounded all my trumpets loudly enough, his walls would quake and crumble" (*BH*, p. 199). Soon after this incident, she goes away to university in Winnipeg. Release for the new heroine does not come with wedding bells, it seems, but with self-discovery in the city. Like Duncan, Montgomery, and Atwood, Laurence exploits the device of parallel plots and multiple endings to contrast the proper roles for the old-time and the new heroine. The ending to Vanessa's story is tentative, of course, since in realism there can be no decisive battles and no once-and-for-all releases. We could compare with this Joan's sense of her role as Houdini, repeatedly "entering the embrace of

⁷Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p. 253.

bondage, slithering out again" (*LO*, p. 335). When Vanessa gets on the bus for Winnipeg she says, "Now I was really going. And yet in some way which I could not define or understand, I did not feel nearly as free as I had expected to feel" (*BH*, p. 203).

It is the nature of a work of realism that it should claim to be asserting something about society and the realities by which we actually live. Duncan concludes her article in the *Week* by saying:

The novel of to-day is a reflection of our present social state. The women who enter into its composition are but intelligent agents in this reflection, and show themselves as they are, not as a false ideal would have them.

This "false ideal," as we by this time know, is Dora at her piano, Elaine on her death-berge, the Lady of Shalott in her tower, and the princess in her lonely prison. The new heroine is Advena, Anne, Joan, and Vanessa who, we are invited to believe, reflect in a documentary way the changing conditions of our "social state." As Del Jordan's mother says, "There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women,"⁸ and it is the job of the realistic novel to reflect this change. Still, Vanessa's boarding the bus begins to look like another literary convention when we compare her departure from Manawaka with Del's departure from Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), after very similar failures in romance. In the last chapter "Baptizing," when Garnet French does not show up as he has promised, Del looks soulfully into her mirror and in despair recites a line from Tennyson's "Mariana": "He cometh not, she said" (*LGW*, p. 200). Once again, here as in *Anne of Green Gables* and *Lady Oracle*, the Tennysonian figure is a romantic heroine from the mirror world whose insubstantial presence shadows forth, we are expected to realize, a false ideal. Del enjoys the tears of her mirror self and the ecstasy of self-torture, but eventually, like Advena and like Anne, she firmly puts from her these romantic fantasies as self-indulgent:

I opened the city paper up at the want ads, and got a pencil. . . . Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small

⁸Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Signet, 1974), p. 146. Cited hereafter as *LGW* in parentheses within the text.

suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life.

Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French.
Real life. (LGW, pp. 200-01)

Just so — “real life.” Yet whenever we think we are being told something about real life, the question keeps doubling back into matters of form, as we puzzle over how it can be said that real life is Avonlea, not Camelot; Jubilee, not Mariana’s moated grange. The epilogue of *Lives of Girls and Women* is chiefly interesting for its confrontation with these questions, for its self-consciousness and its awareness of its own forms. In “Epilogue: The Photographer,” Alice Munro mirrors the process of her own choosing between literary conventions to create Del. She does this by showing her own fictional heroine Del choosing between conventions to create *her* heroine Caroline-Marion. Del tells us how she had planned to turn the Sherriff house and family in Jubilee into material for a Gothic romance of Southern aristocratic degeneracy. The pudgy tennis-playing daughter Marion was to become the romance heroine Caroline, “taunting and secretive,” “a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones” (LGW, p. 204). But when Del actually enters the Sherriff’s house, talks to Bobby Sherriff, and observes the “ordinariness of everything,” she is brought up short and wonders:

And what happened, I asked myself, to Marion? Not to Caroline. What happened to Marion? What happened to Bobby Sherriff when he had to stop baking cakes and go back to the asylum? Such questions persist, in spite of novels. (LGW, p. 209)

Del decides for “real life” here as she does at the end of the chapter “Baptizing.” But the mirroring device of the book invites us to step outside Del’s view and to see Del’s decision as the writer’s — Alice Munro’s own — choice between the old-time heroine, mysterious Caroline, and the pudgy, ordinary heroine of realism, Marion. Alice Munro, as she has said in interviews, began young by writing Gothic tales of decay and madness, doubtless very like Del’s story of Caroline. Later she wrote stories of realism which resemble comedies of manners in their faithful recording of the texture of life at a particular time and place. Yet organizing the realistic surface are the underlying designs of the stories taken from myth and fairytales. And faintly shadowing the Marions that she has chosen to write about are the ghosts of the Carolines.

So the Carolines and the Cordelias will not be allowed to disappear altogether from our fiction. We seem to be discovering that the new heroine usually has her shadowy romantic double somewhere close by. After consigning the old-time heroine's ghost to oblivion, our writers seem unable to do without her. Just as she was "the painted pivot of the merry-go-round" in the old romances, she returns again as a compositional device in works of realism. In *The Imperialist* she appears as an actual character Dora, the debunked love goddess, whose role is to contrast with the new heroine Advena. In *Anne of Green Gables* and *Lady Oracle* she has existence only in the imaginations of Anne and Joan. Her function in these books is to enhance the distinction between, on the one hand, romantic Camelot and the "impossible white paradise" where old-time heroines live and, on the other hand, "real life" Avonlea and Terremoto. *A Bird in the House* and *Lives of Girls and Women* win plausibility for their own realistic heroines by parodying the romantic heroine's conventional role of passive suffering as she waits for rescue by the magnificent hero. The old-time heroine, then, establishes the superiority of her rival, the realistic heroine, in achieving a "translatable relation to the world." But by her own contrived presence she reminds readers interested in literary conventions that the worlds in which all heroines have residence are fictional.

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