

"DULL, SIMPLE, AMAZING
 AND UNFATHOMABLE":
 PARADOX AND DOUBLE VISION IN
 ALICE MUNRO'S FICTION

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Royal Beating. That was Flo's promise. You are going to get one Royal Beating.

The word Royal lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: how is a beating royal?¹

In this delight in language and exuberant pursuit of absurdities despite ensuing complications, Rose reveals herself, in Alice Munro's latest work *Who Do You Think You Are?*, to be very much a child of the author herself. Munro's own sensitivity to individual words and images, her spare lucid style, and command of detail have given her fiction a precision which is one of her most distinctive accomplishments. What an examination of the texture of her prose reveals, in particular, is the centrality of paradox and the ironic juxtaposition of apparently incompatible terms or judgements: "ironic and serious at the same time," "mottoes of godliness and honor and flaming bigotry," "special, useless knowledge," "tones of shrill and happy outrage," "the bad taste, the heartlessness, the joy of it." This stylistic characteristic is closely related to the juxtaposition, in the action, of the fantastic and the ordinary, her use of each to undercut the other. So, sensational revelations of evil in pulp newspapers which leave young Del Jordan reeling, bloated, and giddy must give way to the pale chipped brick, hanging washtubs, and brown-spotted lilac bush of her home, while, by contrast, an unwelcome, retarded cousin, Mary Agnes, is revealed, in her enigmatic, daring and composed touching of a dead cow's eye, to have unexpected mystery and secrets of her own. The linking of incongruities in

¹Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are? Stories* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 1.

language or action, however, is more than a stylistic technique or fictional quirk. It reflects Munro's larger vision, one which underlies all her fiction and which emerges as a central theme in *Lives of Girls and Women* and in several of the short stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*. Paradox helps sustain Munro's thematic insistence on the doubleness of reality, the illusoriness of either the prosaic or the marvellous in isolation.

The freshness of language and image, which is Munro's great strength, she herself explains in an interview with Graeme Gibson: "I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life, and it must be that this seems to me very meaningful in a way I can't analyze or describe. . . . It seems to me very important to be able to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are."² This impulse she, of course, embodies in *Lives of Girls and Women* in Del Jordan who, as a maturing writer, attempts to pin her town to paper and realizes, "no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together — radiant, everlasting."³ The last words hold the clue to Del's, and Munro's obsession with external realities: it is an obsession which Munro, in her interview with Gibson, says can best be compared to a religious feeling about the world. So too when another interviewer John Metcalf asks perceptively whether she glories in surfaces because she feels them not to be surfaces, she agrees, adding, "It's just a feeling about the intensity of what is *there*."⁴ In the struggle to capture this intensity about very ordinary things, paradox not surprisingly becomes one of Munro's most important tools.

Sometimes this persistent "balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities" (to echo Coleridge's celebrated definition of the imagination) occurs almost in passing as an unobtrusive feature of Munro's style, in her description, for instance, of the way children whimper monotonously "to *celebrate* a hurt" (*Lives*, p. 241; italics mine). Often, though, the inherent contradictions in people and

²Alice Munro, in *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, interviewed by Graeme Gibson (Toronto: Anansi, [1973]), p. 241.

³Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), p. 253.

⁴John Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1 (Fall 1972), 56.

situations are more explicitly confronted. Paradox becomes Munro's means of capturing complex human characteristics whether wittily as in the description of successful academics as "such brilliant, such talented incapable men"⁵ or more seriously, gropingly as in Del's discussion of an egotism women feel in men, something "tender, swollen, tyrannical, absurd" (*Lives*, p. 197). In an attempt, in "Dance of the Happy Shades," to convey the reality of the Marsalles sisters, "sexless, wild and gentle creatures, bizarre yet domestic," Munro extends paradox into physical description itself, characterizing both as having kindly, grotesque faces, and eyes which are at the same time tiny, red, short-sighted, and sweet-tempered.⁶ The same incongruities multiply in the world encompassing Munro's characters. A housewife and writer finds herself sheltered and encumbered, warmed and bound by her home; a growing girl is both absolved and dismissed by her father's casual acceptance of her moment of rebellion; the struggle of wills between an amateur hypnotist and a stubborn old woman ends with her "dead, and what was more, victorious" (*Dance*, p. 189); a teenage girl feels that her mother's concern creates for her an oppressive obligation to be happy, as another feels that her mother loves her but is also her enemy; a maiden aunt, stumbling on her niece and a lover naked and passionate, perceives them as strange and familiar, both more and less than themselves. A character's feelings for her relatives are described as "irritable . . . bonds of sympathy," a writer's techniques as "Lovely tricks, honest tricks" (*Something*, pp. 180, 43). In these examples as in many, Munro employs not an elaborated paradoxical statement but a more concentrated phrase, an oxymoron, most often in the form of two parallel but incompatible verbs or adjectives. The startling fusion of warring terms gives to her style at its best a denseness and precision characteristic of poetry.

Paradox is most prominent in the fiction's portrayal of human character and emotional reaction. At times this is simply a means of suggesting inconsistencies, variations over time, as in Del's discovery (in contrast with her youthful belief in the absolute finality of some quarrels) that people can feel murderous disillusionment and hate, then go on to love again. More often, Munro explores the emotional contradictions persisting side by side in time. A character in "Tell Me

⁵Alice Munro, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), p. 25.

⁶Alice Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968), p. 214.

Yes or No" not only expects her lover, like a knight, to be capable alternately of "acts of outmoded self-sacrifice and also of marvellous brutality," she also goes on to describe him as *simultaneously* mild and inflexible (*Something*, p. 116). Paradox, therefore, is frequently an admirable means of conveying the intense emotional ambivalence of adolescence: in response to an example of purely decorative femininity, for example, Del reveals, "I thought she was an idiot, and yet I frantically admired her" (*Lives*, p. 87). She finds the idea of sex totally funny and totally revolting, hopes and fears she will be overheard shouting the forbidden word "bugger," and later is both relieved and desolate at the loss of her lover Garnet. In the same way, of other adolescent girls, we are told that "any title with the word popularity in it could both chill and compel me," that "she was quivering . . . with pride, shame, boldness, and exhilaration" (note how "shame" here is even flanked by two differing contraries), and that the pregnancy and marriage of a friend "made me both envious and appalled" (*Something*, pp. 184, 136, 198). (In the last example, the friend herself is concomitantly characterized as "abashed and proud.") Lest we conclude, however, that Munro is mainly recording the confusions of youth, we might note that almost the same formula is applied to an adult woman, in her response to some men's invulnerability: "I envy and despise" (*Something*, p. 44). Rose's friend Clifford argues that his marital dissatisfaction is not simply a change of heart over time, informing his wife, "I wanted to be married to you and I want to be married to you and I couldn't stand being married to you and I can't stand being married to you. It's a static contradiction" (*Who*, pp. 127-28).

In fact, the matter-of-fact union of incompatible tendencies is Munro's means of bringing life, precision, and complexity to her depiction of emotions generally. Occasionally, as in the example just given, she actually acknowledges and spells out the paradoxical nature of such feelings: "They [Del's aunts] respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. This was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and at the same time convey their judgement that it was, from one point of view, frivolous, non-essential" (*Lives*, p. 32). (Compare this incidentally with a later character's mingling of "flattery and a delicate sort of contempt" in her conversation with a man [*Something*, pp. 168-69].) Similarly the reader is deliberately drawn into a contemplation of the paradoxical quality of Milton Homer's unsocialized behaviour in *Who Do You*

Think You Are? as the narrator, describing his goggling, leering expressions as both boldly calculating and helpless, involuntary, asks if such a thing is possible. More often, we simply have subtle touches in the portrayal of characters, even minor characters — a landlord with an “affable, predatory expression,” an aunt “flashing malice and kindness,” a grandmother whose renunciation of love is a “self-glorifying dangerous self-denying passion,” the same grandmother predicting problems with “annoyance and satisfaction,” an unhappy lover bound by rules “meaningless and absolute.” The same duality is found on a larger scale with more central characters too, like the pathetic heroine of “Thanks for the Ride,” whose combination of defiance and need, scorn and acquiescence is summed up in the final sound of her voice, “abusive and forlorn” (*Dance*, p. 58).

At one point in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del somewhat ironically characterizes the Anglican liturgy as presenting “lively emotion *safely* contained in the most *elegant* channels of language” (*Lives*, p. 99; italics mine). In contrast to this, Munro’s own technique, rather than using language to defuse emotion, creates a resonance or current, releases an intensity through the juxtaposition of oppositely charged words or ideas. The effect is not a wild splattering of emotion — in the careful precision of Munro’s language, and a certain intellectual detachment as well, there is some of the control attributed here to the liturgical ritual — but it is controlled *energy*, a galvanic interaction between the poles of the paradox rather than a safe elegance. Through the originality not of craziness but of unexpected revelation, Munro’s oxymorons have something of the same vitality as the bizarre childhood rhyme about fried Vancouvers and pickled arseholes, which so pleases Rose for what she calls “The tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness” (*Who*, p. 12).

So positive emotions are unexpectedly qualified — “heartless applause,” “smiling angrily,” “hungry laughter,” “accusing vulnerability,” “aggressive bright spirits”; negative ones are similarly — “tender pain,” “semitolerant contempt,” “happy outrage,” “terrible tender revenge”; and even an epithet like absurd, which might seem sweeping and inarguably dismissive, must coexist with its opposite: Del’s mother in her youthful enthusiasm is “absurd and unassailable,” Del, naked, feels “absurd and dazzling,” and a boy reassures a drunken girl, with “a very stupid, half-sick, absurd and alarming expression.” While such pairings can sometimes become

automatic or mechanical in Munro's writing, most often the originality of the details produces a slight, revelatory wrenching of assumptions and perspective.

We should note that the effect of paradox in Munro is never to invalidate, rarely even to diminish either of the contradictory impulses. Characteristically, in fact, she employs the unifying conjunction "and," disregarding for her purposes conjunctions of limitation or concession. As Cleanth Brooks says of the technique in poetry, the ironic or paradoxical union of opposites "is not that of a prudent splitting of the difference between antithetical overemphases."⁷ So, Del in ignoring her aunts' dreams feels "that kind of tender remorse which has as its other side a brutal, *unblemished* satisfaction," quotes sentimental poetry "with absolute sincerity, absolute irony," and comments explicitly about her youthful curiosity over sex, "Disgust did not rule out enjoyment, in my thoughts; indeed they were inseparable" (*Lives*, p. 63, italics mine; pp. 241, 148-49). The contradictory emotions retain their individual intensity.

In her examination of human inconsistency, Munro presents the contradictions not only within emotions but also between emotion and behaviour. Again there is often little attempt to reduce the inconsistency or explain why actions defy their motivations; the two conflicting realities are simply juxtaposed — "The thought of intimacies with Jerry Storey was offensive in itself. Which did not mean that they did not, occasionally, take place," "The ritual of walking up and down the street to show ourselves off we thought crude and ridiculous, though we could not resist it," "not bothering to shake off our enmity, nor thinking how the one thing could give way to the other, we kissed" (*Lives*, p. 203, *Dance*, pp. 202, 56). At times, in fact, Munro actually uses human perverseness itself as the explanation for behaviour, in identifying the "aphrodisiac prickles of disgust" in the appeal of the idiotic saintly whore or the perversely appealing lack of handsomeness of the lecherous minister Rose encounters. Faced with an invitation to sneak away to a dance, Del feels paradoxically, "I had no choice but to do this . . . because I truly hated and feared the Gay-la Dance Hall" (*Lives*, p. 185).

The unexpected challenge to common assumptions which is the source of such paradoxes' power need not always be spelled out.

⁷Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Cornwall Press, 1947), p. 182.

The same shock of recognition, Coleridge's union of "the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects," is achieved when, for instance, Del's mother's radical defence of women's independence is described unexpectedly as innocent in its assumption of women's damageability, when Del comments on the concealed jubilation and eagerness to cause pain in parents' revelations of unpleasant realities, when the narrator of "Shining Houses" makes a matter-of-fact, parenthetical reference to the way people admire each other for being drunk, or when Rose reveals that outspoken hostility does not pose the threat to one of her friendships which genteel tact would. The freshness of perception which Alice Munro brings to very familiar situations lends itself to the creation of observations such as these which remain startling, although the underlying paradox is never articulated.

Indeed Munro sometimes even seems to go through an initial process of making the strange familiar so that she can then go on paradoxically to justify the originally familiar (but now strange) as also possible. An interesting example of this occurs in *Who Do You Think You Are?* in Rose's analysis of her reconciliation with Patrick, her fiancé. Disregarding any immediate, popular explanations like romantic love (and through silence apparently dismissing them as naïve), Munro accustoms the reader to more sophisticated, sceptical analysis by consideration of such similarly complex motivations as comradesly compassion, emotional greed, economic cowardice, and vanity (with only subtle hints of glibness). Only then, ironically, does she reveal Rose's secret explanation, which Rose has never confided and which she cannot justify, namely that she may have been motivated, oddly enough, by a vision of happiness. The paradoxical revelation of unacknowledged, even denied, but recognizable aspects of human behaviour has, in the context of worldly characters and readers, been taken a step further here and turned on itself. Having directed attention towards less obvious explanations of behaviour, Munro then revitalizes from a new perspective a vision of innocence and good will which has paradoxically become unexpected.

Verbal paradox, however, particularly cryptic oxymoron, remains a more distinctive feature of Munro's style, and, as many of the examples already cited suggest, functions particularly as a means of definition, of zeroing in on the individual qualities of an emotion or moment. More than evocativeness, it is precision which she seeks in the description of "a great unemotional happiness," "sophisticated

prudery," or a character "kind but not compassionate." In light of Munro's love for clear images and her insistence on her inability to put characters in a room without describing all the furniture,⁸ it is interesting that many of these paradoxes involve abstract not concrete language (an aspect of her style easily overlooked). It is the exactness and poetic explosiveness of the internal contradiction which give them their vividness. Admiring the discontinuities of modern experimental prose, Munro has complained that her writing tends "to fill everything in, to be pretty wordy."⁹ As this discussion suggests, however, while within a traditional narrative form and concerned with articulating rather than simply suggesting, her use of language generally is not discursive or rambling, but tight, economical, exact.

Paradox for Alice Munro, at the same time, is more than simply a means of definition and a stylistic tool for clarity; it reflects her vision of the complexity of human emotion, as we have seen, and of the human situation more generally. Munro defines writing itself as "a straining of something immense and varied, a whole dense vision of the world, into whatever confines the writer has learned to make for it."¹⁰ In the short story, "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," the protagonist Et is disgruntled to discover that her sister, bad-tempered and hot amid the steam and commotion of washday, is at the same time classically beautiful, "that the qualities of legend were real, that they surfaced where and when you least expected" (*Something*, p. 6). Et's disgruntlement, we are told, occurs because she dislikes contradictions or things out of place; the implication is that she is rejecting reality, which Munro characterizes as inherently contradictory. Among the contradictions of existence, one of the most fundamental in the author's eyes is that of the coexistence of the ordinary and the mysterious, seen in this example and spelled out in some of Munro's oxymorons. So the fiction speaks of the "open and secret pattern" of the town Jubilee, the smoky colour of a sweater "so ordinary, reticent, and mysterious," and the "terrible ordinary cities" of Uncle Benny's experience. (Compare, incidentally, a similar insistence on "the poetry and wonder which might reveal themselves in the dunghill, and. . . the dunghill that lurks in poetry and

⁸Munro, in *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, p. 257.

⁹Metcalf, p. 58.

¹⁰Alice Munro, "Author's Commentary," in *Sixteen by Twelve*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 126.

wonder"¹¹ in the work of Robertson Davies, an insistence I have discussed elsewhere.¹² The comparison is illustrative. Although Davies takes care in his fiction to root the marvellous in the commonplace, he nevertheless suggests a romantic world of good and evil found within and yet transcending everyday reality. For Munro, on the other hand, everyday existence reveals nothing beyond itself but is simply marvellous in itself. Notice in the interview with Metcalf, cited above, Munro's conclusion that, for her, surfaces are not surfaces; this formulation avoids the dualistic argument that surfaces are not *merely* surfaces.) The exploration of the prosaic and the marvellous runs through Munro's fiction, is developed most extensively in *Lives of Girls and Women*, and becomes more complex and ambiguous in *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Not surprisingly in light of Munro's fascination with tangible reality, discussed above, her fiction challenges romanticism which ignores the commonplace. A character warns, "Life is not like the dim ironic stories I like to read, it is like a daytime serial on television. The banality will make you weep as much as anything else" (*Something*, p. 176), while another, introduced to her mother's childhood home, experiences the disappointment of confronting "this source of legends, the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality" (*Dance*, p. 197). In *Who Do You Think You Are?* the reality of harmless, malicious, eccentric Becky Tyde contradicts her extravagant role in town tales of beatings, incest, infanticide, and Rose from her own experience challenges male fictional versions of the idiotic saintly whore for their omission of drooling, protruding teeth, and phlegmy breathing. This is not a reductive elimination of imagination, but a re-establishment of balance, as are the contrasting revelations of fantastic elements, like the mystery of Et's sister's beauty, in apparently ordinary experiences. In the fiction, the extravagant and the unimaginative stand in relation to each other in much the same way as do incompatible social realities in *Who Do You Think You Are?*: "What Dr. Henshaw's house and Flo's house did best, in Rose's opinion, was discredit each other. In Dr. Henshaw's charming rooms there was always for Rose the raw

¹¹Incidentally, Davies' use of the dunghill as metaphor for the unromantic reality of everyday sheds light on the prominence of references to excretion in Munro's fiction, a prominence she has herself pointed out. Alice Munro, "Alice Munro Talks with Mari Stainsby," *British Columbia Library Quarterly*, 35 (July 1971), 28.

¹²Helen Hoy, "Poetry in the Dunghill: The Romance of the Ordinary in Robertson Davies' Fiction," *Ariel*, 10 (July 1979), 69-98.

knowledge of home, an indigestible lump, and at home, now, her sense of order and modulation elsewhere exposed such embarrassing sad poverty" (*Who*, p. 67). The ultimate reality revealed is a paradoxical mixture of both. As Alva concludes at the end of "Sunday Afternoon," when she discovers a new excitement and power but also a new mysterious humiliation in her sexual attractiveness to her employers' friends, "things always came together"¹³ (*Dance*, p. 171).

The basic thrust of the short story "Dance of the Happy Shades," for example, is the confrontation, through the exquisite piano-playing of a retarded girl, between the pragmatism of "people who live in the world" and the casual acceptance of miracles of a pathetic old piano teacher, Miss Marsalles. Although the emphasis of the story, narrated from a commonsense viewpoint, is on the momentary revelation provided by this "one communiqué from the other country where [Miss Marsalles] lives," neither vision triumphs. Rather, we are told that as soon as the child has finished playing, "it is plain that she is just the same as before, a girl from Greenhill School. Yet the music was not imaginary. The facts are not to be reconciled" (*Dance*, pp. 224, 223). Similarly, the portrayal of the music teacher Miss Farris in *Lives of Girls and Women*, which begins with her doll-house home apparently containing no secrets or contradictions, ends with two conflicting pictures of her, one of her absurdly naïve flamboyance around town, the other of her apparent suicide by drowning: "Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together — if the last one is true then must it not alter the others? — they are going to have to stay together now" (*Lives*, p. 141). In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," a child's introduction to a secret love in her father's past causes her to compare his life to an enchanted landscape, ordinary and familiar while it is observed but changing mysteriously immediately afterwards. And the short story "Images" is actually structured on an easy movement away from and back to unexceptional everyday existence, as a young girl is introduced to a bizarre and frightening acquaintance of her father's. Suggesting both the reality of an ever-present mythic or nightmare world and the absorption of the marvellous into daily experience, it concludes by comparing the heroine to "the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvellous escapes and take up

their knives and forks, with humility and good manners" (*Dance*, p. 43).

Lives of Girls and Women sets out, even more directly, to investigate the nature of reality; *Real Life*, in fact, was the original title for the book.¹³ Del Jordan's growth, besides being an examination of contrasting options available to women, is an exploration of the realities of evil, death, religion, sex, and art. In this process, a series of self-contained, often mutually exclusive worlds, both communal and individual, are played against each other and against Del's uncertain sense of "real life": the world of bizarre and inventive evil of the tabloids; Uncle Benny's helpless vision of an unpredictable and unmanageable universe; the anarchical world of boys' mysterious brutality; the sealed-off country of Aunts Elspeth and Grace with its intricate formalities and private language, set against Del's mother's world of "lumps in the mashed potatoes and unsettling ideas"; Uncle Craig's world of facts and public events; the comforting created worlds of books; the solid ground of spelling bees and arithmetic problems, and the fanciful world of the school operetta, each challenging and temporarily cancelling the other; the hothouse atmosphere of winter, encouraging daydreams, and the ordinary geography of springtime; Owen's world of intense play, pitiably contrasted by Del to her own real one; the cool ordinary light of commercial classes and unreality of more academic studies; Jerry Storey's world of science and mental gymnastics; and Naomi's "normal life" of showers, hope chests, gossip, and sexual diplomacy, contrasted with a romanticized nineteenth-century life of rectitude and maidenhood. Munro is doing more here than simply identifying differences in life-styles. These visions, internally coherent and explicitly identified as independent worlds, in most cases vie with each other for the exclusive right to define experience. In the end none has ultimate authority; each is clearly presented as *one* reality in the context of others.

The insufficiency of many of these worlds lies in their disregard for life's complexity, their allegiance to either romanticism or empiricism at the expense of the other. Del's own tendency towards indiscriminating romanticism is presented ironically, or undercut by insistent everyday realities. She is mocked for her expectation of a pure depravity in the town prostitutes, "a foul shimmer of corruption," and for her insistence on seeing the ordinary details of

¹³Munro, "Alice Munro Talks with Mari Stainsby," p. 30.

their lives (the newspaper, dotted curtains, geraniums in tin cans) as merely "tantalizing deception — the skin of everyday appearances stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust" (*Lives*, p. 154). Her night-time fantasies of Frank Wales are followed by real dreams "never so kind, but full of gritty small problems, lost socks, not being able to find the Grade Eight classroom" (*Lives*, p. 135). Irony appears even in Del's final position after ending her sexual involvement with Garnet: "Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life" (*Lives*, p. 242). Romanticism, though far more subtle, persists here, for her litany of alternatives, "*Garnet French. Garnet Franch. Garnet French./Real Life*," involves a disregard (in one sense, at least) for the reality of her own past experience. (This concern becomes explicit in "Forgiveness in Families" when a character muses that everyday routines are dismissed as mere preparation for life until the fact of death gives them value.)

Again though, while romanticism is challenged, ordinary reality is shown to contain its own mystery. Uncle Craig, in his disposable, vacated condition after death, is presented as the conductor of dangerous unknown forces which could flare up in the midst of the funeral rituals. Although the simple rowdiness of the Catholic children and shabbiness of their church fail to cohere with the sensational legends of their exotic and dangerous faith, and although Del's pursuit of a dramatic religious revelation must accommodate her need to go on living as usual with her family and her fear of literally bumping into things with her eyes closed, a spiritual reality is not discounted. Del finally asks, "*Could there be a God not contained in the churches' net . . . God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith?*" (*Lives*, p. 115; roman type mine). Munro uses Del to mock sentimental fictional accounts of sex which employ symbolism, of a train blasting through a tunnel, for instance, to evade the reality; certainly her own account of Del's loss of virginity demythologizes sexuality through a clear-eyed unromantic emphasis on the numerous factual details of painful belt buckles, aching arches, indiscreetly visible bare buttocks, and entangled underpants. Nevertheless she does not strip sex of its power and wonder,

dream and reality has become more complex, no longer simply a matter of mutually exclusive spheres. Rose's romantic involvement with Clifford alters her morning kitchen with stained coffee pot and jar of marmalade into a dazzling scene, "exploding with joy and possibility and danger" (*Who*, p. 110). Is this an illusion or an actual transformation of reality? Irony colours her expectation of a glittering secret or a conflagration of adultery, the affair does fizzle out anticlimactically, Rose is tempted to condemn her suffering as the self-inflicted pain of ridiculed fantasy, and, in retrospect, she prefers to focus instead on "small views of lost daily life" like her daughter's yellow slicker (*Who*, p. 131). Yet we receive no final verdict on the substantiality of that past passion and grief, and even the narrator's tone has become more noncommittal.

The ambiguity intensifies in the depiction of Rose's encounter with Simon; although this story culminates in a familiar synthesis of the marvellous and the commonplace, the same absence of certainty in identifying idle fancy and arid materialism continues. Some of Rose's predictions about the future of this friendship — that she will persist in the "foolishness" of a miserable obsession because of intermittent "green and springlike reveries," that a return to her job will bring the shock and yet comfort of "the real world" — designate the involvement as a delusion. Its ultimate rejection though (like the rejection of Patrick's worship) is not a pragmatic if reluctant concession to probability. Fleeing involvement with Simon, Rose realizes she has been fleeing the realization of her dreams of love as much as disappointment and the collapse of dreams; whether successful or unhappy, love she believes removes the world for you. The choice seems to be between a particular material reality, represented here by the comforting solidity of thick, glass, restaurant ice-cream dishes, and another, still possible reality. Rose requires "everything to be there for her, thick and plain as ice-cream dishes" and feels that love robs you of "a private balance wheel, a little dry kernel of probity" making this awareness possible (*Who*, p. 170). The weight of the narration seems to come down on the side of mundane reality (lacking here, significantly, the everlasting radiance Del eventually perceives in all the small physical details of her world). This triumph of uninspired but adequate tangible reality over the marvellous which can invade but also distort the real world is not, however, the definitive conclusion of the episode. Rose's appraisal of the limiting effects of love ends with the ambiguous phrase, "So she

though." Rose has fled "the celebration and shock of love, the dazzling alteration"; her subsequent startled discovery of Simon's death from cancer reveals the susceptibility even of this matter-of-fact existence to "disarrangements which . . . throw the windows open on inappropriate unforgettable scenery" (*Why*, pp. 170, 172-73). Like *Lives of Girls and Women* then, *Who Do You Think You Are?* does disclose not only the importance but also the mystery of the ordinary. At the same time, the narrator here displays a greater unwillingness, even in retrospect, to make assertions about the nature of specific events, an unwillingness reflected in Rose's lingering uneasiness that in her acting and in her life, she may have been "paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get" (*Who*, p. 205).

Like her heroine Rose, caught between Patrick's contempt for her artistic friends and her friends' contempt for her reactionary husband, Munro demonstrates what is ruefully described as an ability to "see too many sides of things" (*Who*, p. 105); it is this complexity of vision which informs both themes and style in her fiction.

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