

## SOME HIGHLY SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES: A BRIEF POLEMIC AND A CHECKLIST OF WORKS ON ALICE MUNRO

J. R. (Tim) Struthers

Individual writers or audiences feel comfortable with different literary conventions. Consequently, the forms of literary criticism vary, from the personal essays of George Woodcock to the scholarly essays of E. D. Blodgett or Louis K. MacKendrick. We can enjoy each kind of writing. What is difficult for me to accept — due to my schooling in formal scholarship and my experience as an editor, critic, and bibliographer — is writing which presents itself as original scholarship but ignores all existing criticism about the subject of study. How many “first” studies of *The Stone Angel*, *Fifth Business*, *The Mountain and the Valley*, *Surfacing*, or *Lives of Girls and Women*, for example, can we already number?

In the case of criticism on Alice Munro, the statistics are astounding. The first section of the following checklist identifies more than *eighty* articles and sections of books which discuss Munro’s fiction sometimes only in passing but often at substantial length. While there are obvious and justifiable reasons why many of these works need not have placed their arguments in the context of other studies on Munro (the early dates of composition of some items, the brevity or survey nature of others), still it is somewhat shocking to discover that only *three* articles quote or comment on the work of other critics. One of the three, an introduction to a collection of critical essays, is supposed to talk about the essays on Munro and other writers contained in that volume. The other two reach no further than the *Literary History of Canada*, an elementary and readily accessible reference aid, while one of these actually plagiarizes ideas, research, and even phrases from another unacknowledged article on Munro. A few other critics follow the notoriously suspicious practice of referring only to their own previous work.

Criticism is meant to enrich our understanding of literature and it should serve as a guide to future critics of an author’s work. It should be studied and acknowledged whether critics agree or disagree with their predecessors. It is not sufficient, as a number of Munro critics have done, to limit one’s research to the statements which an author has made in

assorted interviews and commentaries. These are extremely valuable for the stimuli which they provide for understanding someone's work and for the ways in which they can be used as a kind of authorisation or support for arguments which a critic wishes to make. But the critic who wishes to contribute significantly to the detailed, in-depth study of an author's work must go further. He must absorb the criticism published in the forms of books, articles, and reviews, as well as the available theses and dissertations, decide what is appropriate to his own task, and use these materials with intelligence and respect.

In my view, the act of writing and submitting a piece of literary criticism is to lay claim to some degree of originality, a claim which the author's editor upholds by his acceptance and publication of the work in question. To publish a work of criticism which ignores the ideas and analyses of other critics in the same field is to make a larger, and possibly a much larger, claim for a critic's own originality and scholarship than circumstances often warrant. In varying degrees depending on each critic's personal style, scholarly essays should engage directly in a critical debate by affirming and contradicting, amplifying and modifying, existing criticism while presenting new interpretations.

As a guide to editors and future critics, and as a help to teachers and students, I offer the following checklist of works on Alice Munro. The checklist, which draws upon the format established by Robert Lecker and Jack David in ECW Press's *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors*, includes items under the three categories of Articles and Sections of Books, Theses and Dissertation, and Interviews and Profiles; but it excludes, for the present purpose, the following materials: bibliographies, bio-bibliographical sketches, newspaper articles, and book reviews.

In preparing this checklist, I have consulted relevant bibliographical sources and in many instances have been led by them to information hitherto unknown to me. These sources include such serials as Bruce Nesbitt's "Annual Bibliography of Canadian Literature," the *Canadian Periodical Index*, the *MLA International Bibliography*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, and Other Creative Writers*, and *Contemporary Authors: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works*, as well as individual bibliographical studies by Michael Gnarowski, R. E. Watters, D. E. Cook, Frank Davey, Margery Fee and Ruth Cawker, Linda Marie Rankin, Lorraine McMullen and Margaret Broad, Susan J. Warwick, Paul Denham and Mary Jane Edwards, Linda

M. Leitch, and Catherine Sheldrick Ross.

For readers interested in finding information about Munro's own works and about reviews of her first three books, a good source is D. E. Cook, "Alice Munro: A Checklist (To December 31, 1974)," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 16 ([1976]), pp. 131-36.

## A CHECKLIST OF WORKS ON ALICE MUNRO

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London, Ontario