THE STRANGE AND THE FAMILIAR IN ALICE MUNRO

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Alice Munro has such a penetrating and sympathetic intelligence and is such an accomplished writer that there are more ways of seeing the paradoxes and ironies in the substance and style of her work than will occur to any one reader.[1] The doubleness, or reciprocation, that I'd like to draw attention to in this essay might be expressed in this way: with vivid images and dramatic scenes that, as Sidney puts it in his *Apologie*, "strike, pierce, [and] possesses the sight of the soule," she presents, and makes real and convincing, concepts that we usually think of in cloudy, abstract terms and—Sidney again—"woordish description." Contrarily, she charges common and familiar incidents with surprising meanings and insights. In other words, like Coleridge, she makes the strange familiar, and, like Wordsworth, she makes the familiar wonderful; thus she illuminates and enriches both the strange and the familiar. Adapting the terms she herself used in the *Weekend Magazine* of 11 May 1974, one might say that Alice Munro makes the Mysterious Touchable, and the Touchable Mysterious.

The passages I shall examine in this essay appear at the beginnings of several of her books. The first group—the opening story, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and the first two chapters, "The Flats Road" and "Heirs of the Living Body," in *Lives of Girls and Women*—will show us the very form and pressure of a concept that we might provisionally call "tradition" or "inheritance." In "Royal Beatings," the opening chapter of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, we shall also see Alice Munro revealing the strange barely-suspected currents flowing withershins and in conflict beneath the smooth surface of what is (or was) a fairly familiar incident: a father giving his daughter a hiding. Although this essay will confine

[1]For discussions of some of these ways, see Helen Hoy, " 'Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable': Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5 (Spring 1980), 100-115, and Hallvard Dahlie, "The Fiction of Alice Munro," *Ploughshares*, 4, 3 (Summer 1978), 56-71.

itself to the single aspect indicated by its title, it will serve I hope to show Alice Munro's unostentatious profundity and consummate artistry.

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy" the narrator, a sensitive and intelligent young girl, is listening to her father:

> He tells me how the Great Lakes came to be. All where Lake Huron is now, he says, used to be flat land, a wide flat plain. Then came the ice, creeping down from the north, pushing deep into the low places. Like *that*—and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground where we are sitting. His fingers make hardly any impression at all and he says, "Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power behind it than this hand has." And then the ice went back, shrank back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left its fingers of ice in the deep places it had gouged, and ice turned to lakes and there they were today. They were *new*, as time went. I try to see that plain before me, dinosaurs walking on it, but I am not able even to imagine the shore of the Lake when the Indians were there, before Tuppertown. The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility. Even my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in . . . I wish the Lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown.[2]

She is being initiated, naturally enough, by her father into an awareness of history and the human condition, especially its precariousness and possible terrors. However, his affection tempers the fright for his lamb; by virtue of a resilience that belongs to the courageous imagination necessary for human life, he scales the vast drama down, without falsifying it, and contemplates it with genial familiarity, making it not altogether horrifying, and meaningful, manageable and stimulating for his daughter. We feel her grappling and coming to terms with the drama, and we are reasonably sure that, following her father's example, she will be as cheerfully valiant as he in the face of eternity's challenges. And the maturing child begins to see her father, who has seemed so different from herself, as a fellow-being; fellowship takes on a new meaning. The passage links with another at the end of the

[2]*Dance of the Happy Shades* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968), p. 3. Later references to the pages of this edition will appear in parentheses in the text, the title abbreviated to *Dance*.

story: "I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine" (*Dance*, p. 18).

Cognate with the interplay between the strange and the familiar is another double process: the girl is becoming more aware of herself as a distinct individual, and at the same time beginning to experience what Conrad refers to in his Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*: "the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate—which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world." The awareness of individuality and the experience of community are different and seem to be opposed and conflicting, but in Alice Munro's story they are seen—like the feelings involved with strangeness and familiarity, and the perceptions of similarity and difference—to depend upon and feed each other in this imaginative child; they constitute one complex development.

What we are seeing in the long passage about the Great Lakes that I have quoted is nothing less than the child entering into the ardours and the responsibilities of her inheritance, the transmission from father to daughter of human tradition and life itself. The ability to charge simple-seeming scenes with such deep and moving significances without embarrassing us with sentimentalities or resorting to portentousness and platitude is, it seems to me, the mark of a writer of very considerable stature.

A bold and conceptually brilliant exhibition of a similar process, but on a grand scale, is presented in "The Flats Road," which opens *Lives of Girls and Women*. Uncle Benny occupies the stage at the very beginning of the first chapter, and this is an indication of his importance in the novel, which is about Del, and especially about the growth of her mind and imagination up to the point when she begins to practise as a conscious literary artist[3]; so we must understand his significance for Del. He thinks and talks as if "the river and the bush and the whole of Grenoch Swamp more or less belonged to him, because he knew them, better than anyone else did. He claimed he was the only person who had been right through the swamp, not just

[3]See J. R. Struthers, "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in *Lives of Girls and Women*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 3 (Fall 1975), 32-46.

made little trips in around the edges."[4] Though the swamp belongs to him and he to the swamp, he nevertheless "ate at our table every day at noon, except Sunday" (*Lives*, p. 8); "So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection" (*Lives*, p. 25). Others may merely accept him as an oddity, but for Del he is a knotty phenomenon that she must make sense of and place in some kind of relation to herself. Thus when she writes out his address for him—he can't write but seems to be able to read a little—she does it in full, thus: "*Mr. Benjamin Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe*" (*Lives*, p. 11). She is trying to place him in a perspective in which she too appears, in order to make the strange familiar.

One can feel in the intentness with which Del observes him just how fascinating she finds Uncle Benny: "He stuck his gum on the end of his fork [as Henry Bailey does in 'Boys and Girls' (*Dance*, p. 127)], and at the end of the meal took it off and showed us the pattern, so nicely engraved on the pewter-coloured gum it was a pity to chew it. He poured tea into his saucer and blew on it. With a piece of bread speared on a fork he wiped his plate as clean as a cat's. He brought into the kitchen a smell, which I did not dislike, of fish, furred animals, swamp" (*Lives*, pp. 8-9). When we put all this together with the fact that he cultivates no crops or vegetables—in fact one of the reasons why he wants a wife is perhaps so that he can make the transition to agriculture: in the letter he dictates to his prospective wife he holds out the hope that she "could have a good vegetable garden if you could keep off the rabbits" (*Lives*, p. 12)—it is not I think too fanciful to suppose that to Del he represents something like the hunting or neolithic stage of man's development. There is in him a hint of an even earlier phase of pre-history, and perhaps even of evolution itself—of the emergence of life from the swamps. His milieu is the swamp, and his surname is Poole!

It is a matter not only of Uncle Benny's habits but also of the quality of his mind and the patterns of his thoughts.[5] He is naive, believing in a literal "Heaven" (*Lives*, p. 11); he tells stories that in

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[4]*Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), p. 2. Later references to the pages of this edition will appear in parentheses in the text, the title abbreviated to *Lives*.

[5]I believe I am hereabouts, and elsewhere in this essay, indebted to conversations with James Carscallen, but any deviations from good sense and truth are my own.

their simplicity and extravagant melodrama have the quality of myth, legend and folk-tale, stories "that my mother would insist could not have happened, as in the story of Sandy Stevenson's marriage" (*Lives*, p. 9). For all its extravagance, Uncle Benny's story about Sandy Stevenson is based on at least some literal truth—"I seen the bruises, I seen them myself" (*Lives*, p. 10)—and is also, ironically, true as prophecy, because it foreshadows Uncle Benny's own unfortunate matrimonial venture. His stories deserve to be pondered; they cannot be lightly dismissed as mythical, meaning untrue, as Del's rational mother supposes. In presenting the nature and quality of Uncle Benny's mind so completely, without making him a target for facile ridicule or diminishing him with undignified farce, but, on the contrary, by paying as it were oblique tribute to the validity of his experience, Alice Munro demonstrates how generous and yet illuminating she is in her art.

How alien Uncle Benny is in the modern world becomes very clear when, looking for his errant wife in Toronto, he "got lost among factories, dead-end roads, warehouses, junkyards, railway tracks" (*Lives*, p. 25). No wonder! His element is the primeval swamp, which to modern citified man is as strange as Toronto is to him. Despite his strangeness, Del's family makes him an honorary uncle and has him at its table. But Del goes further than mere social tolerance: she seems to accept him as a sort of spiritual forebear. Her imagination has been able to embrace his strangeness and make it truly familiar—an etymological pun is intended here!—because she has recognized in him herself, her part in mankind's history and pre-history. In this *Bildungsroman* Del passes through phases analogous to those of the foetus, which is said to reflect in the womb the stages of evolution; she also passes through the stages of pre-history that children are said to rehearse as they grow up. It is her intelligent imagination that allows her to do this so completely; it makes what is strange familiar by bringing her to the knowledge that she is a part of mankind and that nothing human is alien to her.

The second chapter of *Lives of Girls and Women* is "Heirs of the Living Body"; it deals with issues that are similar, more immediate, though in a sense more limited, in a much more specific form. Del's relation with her family is a matter that she can address herself to more consciously and deliberately. If the honorary uncle, Benny, represents pre-history, the real aunts and uncles of this chapter embody history, and with a very present and sometimes pressing

force. They and Del are the heirs of the same living bodies, but we see the counter-weighted irony that Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace—their very names are long out of fashion—embody patterns and standards which, though they prevailed only a generation or two before, are strange, almost antediluvian—in some ways stranger even than Uncle Benny. But Del is nevertheless fascinated by her aunts' avocations, attitudes and codes; though they remain for her somewhat alien, she is able to admire and feel affection for them. Indeed she evokes their ethos lovingly and in detail.

But perhaps the deepest and most ironical truths of the chapter are reached through the portrayal of Uncle Craig, who is so very diligently and literally the transmitter of tradition that his life is now devoted to compiling a laborious and pedestrian history of Wawanash County: "During the spring, summer, and early fall of that year a large amount of building went forward in Fairmile, Morris, and Grantly townships . . ." (*Lives*, p. 61). When he dies the aunts piously and formally hand the unfinished opus over to Del to complete; because she has, as they put it, "the knack for writing compositions," they think she "could learn to copy his way"! Del is scornful of this pettifogging history and dedicated to Art with an ardour and confidence that seems to derive from Aristotle and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: she believes that "the only duty of a writer is to produce a masterpiece," and allows the manuscript that has been accumulated with such care to lie in the cellar, where it becomes "just a big wad of soaking paper" (*Lives*, p. 62).

But Alice Munro, through her surrogate, Del, doesn't allow us easy laughs at Uncle Craig's expense any more than she does at Uncle Benny's. One of the most striking merits of Alice Munro's work is that in its final effect it is just, rising above all the snobberies of fashion, class and the intellect. Uncle Craig's aim, which is to record "the whole solid intricate structure of lives supporting us from the past" (*Lives*, p. 31), is admirable and enlightened, and, by a telling irony, it later becomes Del's aim too; even Del's method is similar to his:

> It did not occur to me [at the time of the events described towards the end of *Lives*] that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee. Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out at Jenkin's bend, writing his History, I would want to write things down.
>
> I would try to make lists. A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main street and who owned them, a list

> of family names, names on the tombstones in the Cemetery and any inscriptions underneath. A list of the titles of movies that played at the Lyceum Theatre from 1938 to 1950, roughly speaking. Names on the Cenotaph (more for the first World War than for the second). Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in.
>
> The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking.
>
> And 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.
>
> (*Lives*, p. 253)

The mature artist that Del is yet to become knows that these methods will not achieve what she wants; only art can hold it all "still" and "together—radiant, everlasting," in the way that Hugo's story, in "Material," will lift Dotty "out of life" and hold her "in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly" that Hugo, the writer, "has spent all his life learning how to make."[6]

But when she reaches that stage in her art, Del will not be as easily scornful of Uncle Craig's work as she was in her girlhood because, in the words of T. S. Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*, she will realize that Uncle Craig has nourished "the life of significant soil." She will know that in many senses, both literal and figurative, she is the heir of a living body that comprises many aunts and uncles, real and honorary, and that Uncle Craig deserves a high place among them.

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* even Milton Homer, the "village idiot,"[7] is recognized by Rose, as Bobby Sherriff is by Del at the end of *Lives*, as a kindred spirit, and the aged in the County Home, where "bodies were fed and wiped," are seen as continuing "to participate in the life of the world" (*Who*, p. 182); in fact one of the old ladies shares with Rose and other artists an interest in words, the very medium of tradition, even if her enthusiasm takes the somewhat ridiculous form of a mania for spelling.

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[6] *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), p. 43. Later references to the pages of this edition will appear in parentheses in the text, the title abbreviated to *Something*.

[7] *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 193. Later references to the pages of this edition will appear in parentheses in the text, the title abbreviated to *Who*.

But what about Miss Madeleine Howey, the almost unspeakable Mrs. Benjamin Poole, Uncle Benny's bride? Is she an indigestible bolus, beyond the reach of Del's, and our, sympathetic imagination, an unresolved complexity, too strange ever to become in any sense familiar or to be felt as kin? Del records her family's response at the end of "The Flats Road": "After a while we would all just laugh, remembering Madeleine going down the road in her red jacket, with her legs like scissors, flinging abuse over her shoulder at Uncle Benny trailing after, with her child . . . We remembered her like a story, and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause. 'Madeleine! That madwoman!' " (*Lives*, pp. 26-27).

It would be typical of Alice Munro's truthfulness, which often uses irony as its instrument, to present us in Madeleine with an exception, a member of the human race who is not part of the greater identity, the Living Body. But on the other hand, perhaps there is a suggestion of uneasiness and guilt in the family's laughter, and the very fact that Madeleine is having stories told about her, suggests that the folk imagination, and Del's too, is incorporating even her into the tradition. She provides the stiffest challenge of all, but she too in the end must be seen as a member of the human family.[8]

There is more to be said about our theme in that second chapter of *Lives*: "Heirs of the Living Body." A fairly simple meaning declares itself in the scene at Uncle Craig's funeral in which Del bites Mary Agnes and is said to have blood on her mouth (*Lives*, p. 55): she experiences a moment of great intensity, "the very opposite of the mystic's incommunicable vision of order and light" (*Lives*, p. 57). Del finds Mary Agnes inimical, even though she is her cousin—another case of Munrovian irony in family relationships—and is perhaps trying to force a sort of *Blutschwesterschaft* to correspond with what she knows she ought to feel for Mary Agnes. In spite of the intensity of her feelings of shame at her misbehaviour, Del knows that the family "would not put me outside," would not expel her from the Living Body. It's not surprising that Del "felt held close, stifled, as if it was not air that I had to move and talk through in this world but something thick as cotton wool" (*Lives*, p. 57). The community sense is by no means always an unmixed blessing; family feeling can amount to virtual suffocation.

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[8]Here too I believe I am particularly indebted to conversations with James Carscallen, who has written on Alice Munro and will, I hope, write a good deal more.

But this scene is linked with another in the same chapter, where the meanings, though they are fully realized, are by no means simple, and in fact provide a sort of culmination of the movement towards an awareness of community that I have been largely concerned with thus far in this essay. It is the scene with the dead cow. Mary Agnes is unfeeling and even callous as "she laid her hand—she laid *the palm of her hand*—over it, over the eye" of the dead cow (*Lives*, p. 45); Del is horrified at Mary Agnes's casualness. In contrast to Mary Agnes, Del feels an intense fascination with the cow, and this is conveyed in her description of it:

> The eye was wide open, dark, a smooth sightless bulge, with a sheen like silk and a reddish gleam in it, a reflection of light. An orange stuffed in a black silk stocking. Flies nestled in one corner, bunched together beautifully in an iridescent brooch. I had a great desire to poke the eye with my stick, to see if it would collapse, if it would quiver and break like a jelly, showing itself to be the same composition all the way through, or if the skin over the surface would break and let loose all sorts of putrid mess, to flow down the face. I traced the stick all the way round the eye, I drew it back—but I was not able, I could not poke it in.
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> Mary Agnes did not come close. "Leave it alone," she warned. "That old dead cow. It's dirty. You get yourself dirty."
>
> "Day-ud cow," I said, expanding the word lusciously. "Day-ud cow, day-ud cow."
>
> "You come on," Mary Agnes bossed me, but was afraid, I thought, to come nearer.
>
> Being dead, it invited desecration, I wanted to poke it, trample it, pee on it, anything to punish it, to show what contempt I had for its being dead. Beat it up, break it up, spit on it, tear it, throw it away! But still it had power, lying with a gleaming strange map on its back, its straining neck, the smooth eye. I had never once looked at a cow alive and thought what I thought now: why should there be a cow? Why should the white spots be shaped just the way they were, and never again, not on any cow or creature, shaped in exactly the same way? Tracing the outline of a continent again, digging the stick in, trying to make a definite line, I paid attention to its shape as I would sometimes pay attention to the shape of real continents or island on real maps, as if the shape itself were a revelation beyond words, and I would be able to make sense of it, if I tried hard enough, and had time.
>
> (*Lives*, pp. 44-45)

There are many meanings here. Faced with this death, Del feels herself close to the mysteries of life and death and longs to part the

veil, but her spirit quails in awe. To her the dead cow is of the utmost importance. Even her impulse to desecrate it stems from her notion that it is in some sense sacred. The "day-ud cow" is for her the corpse of a fellow creature. Here she is on the edge of an awareness of being the heir not only of the Living Human Body, of human history and tradition, but of all life; she has gone even further, and with a fuller conscious awareness, than she went in her relation with Uncle Benny in the previous chapter. In contrast to Del, Mary Agnes, despite the meanings suggested by her names, or because—as well as being backward—she is as conventional as they are, has no such sense of respect or reverence. She is not mainly afraid, as Del thinks, but mainly indifferent, as she shows when, as we have seen, she puts the palm of her hand over the cow's eye.

All the scenes I have discussed thus far, involving a father with his daughter, and Del with Uncle Benny, her real aunts, Uncle Craig, Madeleine Howey, and a dead cow, show us a young girl—of exceptional intelligence and imagination, it is true—entering into a full human consciousness of her life in time and space. The word "tradition" is too feeble and abstract to suggest more than a thin shadow of the meanings entailed here. Have these meanings ever been rendered better, with fuller insight into the comic, ironic and pathetic complexities, with deeper sympathy, or a surer moral grasp of all the issues?

It remains for me to illustrate the second half of my original statement: that Alice Munro makes the familiar strange and wonderful—an easier task because this is what almost all writing, at least since the advent of the novel, has addressed itself to, and nowhere is the process more clearly seen than in "Royal Beatings," the opening chapter of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

This chapter that deals with the beating of Rose by her father contains a very different kind of story, told by Flo, about another beating, the horsewhipping of old Tyde. Flo's stories, which might remind one of Uncle Benny's story about Sandy Stevenson, suffuse the first part of the novel, and they have some of the qualities of folk tales: they simplify, exaggerate, and sensationalise, thus contrasting with Alice Munro's story about the beating of Rose, which is, typically, far from simple, though it is about a familiar domestic event. In fact it becomes a complex fabric of inconsistencies, paradoxes and ironies, and yet, on closer examination, it discloses a comprehensive pattern,

even if the pattern lies in the consistency of its inconsistencies. And yet all these surprises seem right and true; one remembers that Dr. Johnson said that the creations of genius strike the reader as being at once both "natural" and "new."

Alice Munro introduces the inconsistencies unobtrusively; at first they are natural enough results of Rose's immaturity and inexperience. For instance, she imagines "royal beatings" in "a tree-lined avenue" with "a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves," but in "real life they didn't approach such dignity" (*Who*, p. 1); she can't reconcile the life she knows at the grocery store with the "orderly, far gentler and more ceremonious time" that she imagines her parents spent there before her mother's death (*Who*, p. 2). However, the discrepancies soon become not conflicts between the present and a childishly imagined past, but actual incongruities that seem to press more or less urgently for a resolution: "the person [her father] who spoke these words and the person who spoke to her as her father were not the same, though they seemed to occupy the same space," and "the person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected with the person who walked out" (*Who*, p. 4). This pattern of discrepancies culminates in this: "How can this [the beating] go on in front of such daily witnesses—the linoleum, the calendar with the mill and creek and autumn trees, the old accommodating pots and pans?"; "treachery is the other side of dailiness" (*Who*, p. 16).

It is the quality of Rose's mind and imagination that creates these ambivalences in her experience and that leaves her with the un-Aristotelean result that some things both can and cannot be, and especially that she can feel and behave in two or more ways that are logically inconsistent. Her reactions bring her the surprises and puzzlements of the sort that atomic physicists have been faced with in the twentieth century: she is both the passive victim that she would be in an ordinary stereotyped account of such an affair, but also an active participant, wanting and actually helping the beating of herself to take place. Alice Munro's fiction constantly flouts the stereotype and the cliché, which are the enemies of art.

Rose approaches "the dangerous moment, the delightful moment" (*Who*, p. 12); because the father is like his daughter in many ways, as he prepares to beat her his look can fill "with hatred and pleasure"; his face, like his voice, is quite out of character. He is like a bad actor, who turns a part grotesque. As if he must savor and

insist on just what is shameful and terrible about this. That is not to say he is pretending, that he is acting, and does not mean it. He is acting, and he means it" (*Who*, p. 16). "He [the father] throws Rose down. Or perhaps she throws herself down," and "Rose goes up the stairs, stumbling, letting herself stumble, letting herself fall against the steps"; "she plays his victim with a self-indulgence that arouses, and maybe hopes to arouse, his final, sickened contempt" (*Who*, p. 17). The event, the ritual, seems to have taken on a life of its own, to have established a script that they must act out; they "can't help continuing." Even Flo becomes "amazingly theatrical" (*Who*, p. 13), which is an additional surprise, because, whereas Rose, who eventually becomes an actress, seems throughout the novel to have to choose between various possibilities, Flo seems almost never to have a choice; she is almost always simply herself, a well-established persona. For Rose it is always possible, theoretically at least, to modify her behavior, to play a different role, and perhaps be a different person. For this reason her life is richer than Flo's, and more exciting, but also more dangerous, more beset by occasions for subtle insincerity and plain error. For Rose the question in the title of the novel is more urgent than it is for most: she must find out who she really is. This first chapter shows us how consummate a role-player she is, and explains why for her the answer to the question is more elusive than it is for others.

Although imaginative characters like Rose are more inconsistent than the common run of mankind, Alice Munro shows that most people are odder and less sensibly logical than they will be prepared to admit. In "The Found Boat" the light reflected off the flood-water "woke or revived in people certain vague hopes of disaster" (*Something*, p. 125). Alice Munro shows that ordinary sensible people are quirky, and less reliable than statistics; the familiar is strange.

As we have seen, Flo is caught up in the drama and, like Rose and her father, she behaves somewhat strangely and inconsistently. But Alice Munro is here, as usual, very precise in maintaining differences within similarities. The difference between Flo and Rose in this scene is that Flo doesn't seem to be conscious of any inconsistency in herself; she is less self-aware. She goes headlong into the quarrel, but then, when the father picks up the momentum that she has sought to impart to him, she wants to pull back: "Do you have to use the belt?" she pleads (*Who*, p. 16); a little later she is shrieking, "*Stop, stop!*" (*Who*, p. 17), and later still she is taking "little sand-

wiches, neat and appetizing," and also "canned salmon of the first quality and reddest color, plenty of mayonnaise" (*Who*, p. 19) up to Rose in order to propitiate her. Finally, in the family circle, Flo is party to "a geniality not exactly false but a bit more emphatic than was normal, without company" (*Who*, p. 19). Yet she gives no sign that she can observe herself veering and tacking in this manner, which is perhaps not the least familiar, and yet also one of the strangest facets of the whole episode.

What I have tried to illustrate is a single aspect of Alice Munro's art: like Blake's and James Joyce's, it deals with oppositions, contraries, tensions, inconsistencies, and then resolutions, implied or achieved; in literary terms the oppositions produce ironies and paradoxes, but also moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled, at least in the imagination. It is because Alice Munro's fiction is constantly addressing itself to and approaching these oppositions, and trembling on the edge of this sort of consummation, when the familiar and the strange, the touchable and the mysterious, the similar and the different, become one, when in Yeats's words "all the planets drop into the sun" ("There"), that her work is so readable, exciting and satisfying.

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