

**“THE OTHER SIDE OF DAILINESS”:
THE PARADOX OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN
ALICE MUNRO’S FICTION**

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But o, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing-lines and Hall’s Distemper Boards . . .

—Philip Larkin, “Lines on a Young
Lady’s Photograph Album”

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In various writings and interviews, Alice Munro has often expressed interest in photography and photographic realism. In an “Open Letter” to a small Wingham, Ontario journal, *Jubilee*, Munro summarized her feeling about the emotional power of local detail by referring to an Edward Hopper painting. This canvas, entitled “The Barber Shop,” is a fairly static, symmetrically-composed, sunlight-flooded interior scene; yet for Munro it becomes “full of a distant, murmuring, almost tender foreboding, full of mystery like the looming trees.”¹ This Conradian phrase, so akin to Marlow’s concept of “the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion,”² reveals precisely that which characterizes the vision of Munro and the photographic realists—paradox. In fact, it was while reading Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, a searching commentary on the art which is couched in paradoxical terms, that I realized that Munro’s fiction reveals those very same paradoxes and syntheses. Although studies have been written outlining the use and frequency of paradox in Munro’s fiction (most notably Helen Hoy’s “Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro’s Fiction,”)³ there has been no satisfactory answer as to why paradox is so congenial to her particular way of “fictionalizing” experience.

¹Alice Munro, “An Open Letter,” *Jubilee*, 1 (n.d.), p. 7.

²Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 232.

³Helen Hoy, “‘Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable’: Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro’s Fiction,” *Studies in Canadian Literature*. Spring 1980, 110-115.

Munro's fiction, like the Edward Hopper painting and like the work of photographic "realists" from the 1920's on, centres on the paradox of the familiar and the exotic. What Victor Shklovsky termed "defamiliarization" (*ostraneniye*),⁴ the making strange of common experience, is precisely what the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) group and Americans like Paul Strand and Edward Weston wished to accomplish in their photography.⁵ Weston, with his close attention to surface textures, took the most prosaic and humble of objects—a paprika—and transformed it into a lusciously-textured object resembling a sitting nude. Closer to Munro's own concerns, however, is the work of a journalist-photographer team to which she makes fleeting reference in an interview with John Metcalf⁶—that of James Agee and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* takes the humblest of human subjects—Alabama tenant farmers in the 1930's—and combines literary and visual images to turn them into hauntingly strange visions of both nobility and despair.

To return to one of the central paradoxes of the photographic vision, one discovers that characters in Munro's fiction witness both the familiar and prosaic becoming unfamiliar, even threatening and the reverse process as well. In "The Ottawa Valley" it is the foreboding sense of sickness and loss which turns the most familiar of presences—the mother—into something dark and remote:

She went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent. She withdrew, she darkened in front of me, though all she did in fact was keep on walking along the path that she and Aunt Dodie had made when they were girls . . . It was still there"⁷

This remarkably compressed passage contrasts the vulnerable present with the comforts to be found in memory (unshifting as it is) and in physical objects.

Objects, however, as many of Munro's characters realize with profound amazement, have a mysterious inner layer as well; they possess the hidden potential to turn treacherous or supremely indifferent. As

⁴Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, edited by L. T. Lemon and M. Reis (New York, 1965), pp. 12-13.

⁵Helmut Gernsheim, *Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends 1839-1960* (Boston, 1962), pp. 175-76.

⁶John Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1 (Fall, 1972), 57.

⁷Alice Munro, "The Ottawa Valley," in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto, 1974), p. 244. Hereafter referred to within the text as WDYTYA.

the young protagonist in "Day of the Butterfly" witnesses the future of an unpopular schoolmate "turn shadowy, turn dark" in the hospital ward, she also has a new vision of the schoolgirls' hypocritical gifts as "guilt-tinged offerings." She muses that "they were no longer innocent objects to be touched, exchanged, accepted without danger." In the last event, then, she avoids the danger that is human sympathy; Myra's parting gift to her is indifferently shrugged off as "the thing."⁸

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* the source of this threat is an objective nature which is simply indifferent to human sentiment. As Rose gradually foresees her argument with Flo reach its malicious climax, she fixes her eyes upon the shoddy linoleum tiles. At this moment she sees with frightening clarity that even familiar objects are not man's familiars:

Those things aren't going to help her, none of them can rescue her. They turn bland and useless, even unfriendly. Pots can show malice, the patterns of linoleum can leer up at you, treachery is the other side of dailiness."⁹

Distortion of the commonplace becomes specifically identified with art—photographic art, in fact—in the epilogue to *Lives of Girls and Women*, entitled "The Photographer." Like Del's fictional treatment of Marion Sheriff, the art of her photographer has the frightening power to create grotesqueness from surface innocence:

The pictures he took turned out to be unusual, even frightening. People saw that in his pictures they had aged twenty or thirty years. Middle-aged people saw in their own features the terrible, growing, inescapable likeness of their dead parents . . . Brides looked pregnant, children adenoidal. So he was not a popular photographer . . .¹⁰

Munro applied this theory of the dual nature of art—both creative and parasitic—to her own writing in a manifesto statement which echoes Rose's musings about the other side of dailiness: "There is a sort of treachery to innocent objects—to houses, chairs, dresses, dishes and to roads, fields, landscapes—which a writer removes from their natural,

⁸Alice Munro, "Day of the Butterfly," in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Toronto, 1968), p. 110. Hereafter referred to as *DHS* in parentheses in the text.

⁹Alice Munro, "Royal Beatings," in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto, 1978), p. 16. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation *WDYTYA*.

¹⁰Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Scarborough, 1971), p. 205. To be hereafter referred to as *LGW* in the text.

dignified obscurity and sets down in print."¹¹ Such visual paradox, then, underlines the more morally troubling paradox of the writer who "murders to create" by representing yet altering elements of the experienced world.

Perhaps more bewildering for Munro's protagonists is the experience of the inverse paradox—the exotic becoming familiar. Del Jordan, after her sexual flights of fancy with a black negligé as stage prop, reflects after Mr. Chamberlain's sexual theatrics, "I could not get him back to his old role, I could not make him play the single-minded, simple-minded, vigorous, obliging lecher of my daydreams. My faith in simple depravity had weakened" (*LGW*, p. 144). Earlier, this faith in depravity had been slightly shaken by the shabby ordinariness of the newspapers and potted geraniums of the local whorehouse; by "the skin of everyday experiences stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust" (*LGW*, p. 128). Such bathetic transformations of the exotic into the merely prosaic fill the writings of other Canadian post-modernists, most notably Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. When the Royal Porcupine is diminished to the point of becoming ordinary Chuck Brewster, Joan Foster becomes alarmed and disillusioned: "But I didn't want him to spoil things, I didn't want him to become gray and multi-dimensional and complicated like everyone else. Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?"¹²

The frequent appearance of clearly "odd" characters has often been noted by reviewers of Munro's work, but to characterize these figures as belonging to some aberrant "other world" is, I believe, another example of making distinctions when syntheses are more in order. As in the photographs of Diane Arbus, the grotesque makes its appearance in Munro's stories in order to make us reform our Gestalt—our conceptions of what is "odd" and "normal." The eccentric hermit Joe Phippen, whom Ben Jordan takes his daughter to meet in "Images," is not so much a creature from a competing world as an additional scrap of knowledge which Del must synthesize in order to construct an "image" of her father:

Like the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrible strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from

¹¹Alice Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," in *The Narrative Voice*, edited by John Metcalf (Toronto, 1972), pp. 181-82.

¹²Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, (Toronto, 1976), pp. 271-72.

marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks . . . like them, dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word" (*DHS*, p. 43).

Unlike Sherwood Anderson, to whose work Munro's has often been compared, Munro would never say (as Anderson did of *Winesburg, Ohio*) that "All the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesque."¹³ Rather, oddity is another element in the synthesis of life in the fictional small town. "It is not true," Munro once commented, "that such a place will not allow eccentricity. Oddity is necessary as sin is . . . Within these firm definitions . . . live bewildered and complicated people."¹⁴

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* this bewildering reconciliation of truth and illusion becomes the dominant theme of the collection. I agree with Helen Hoy that Munro passes into a subtler "dialectic of the ordinary and the marvellous"¹⁵ but not merely in terms of the recognized illusoriness of Rose's adventures. Rather, it is a self-aware dialectic of an artistic nature especially which reaches a synthesis that is typically postmodern. It is no accident, for example, that the final, title story of the volume begins with the "comic" figure of Milton Homer and ends with the "tragic" figure of Ralph Gillespie. In the description of the town parade—an event which mixes theatricality (socially-sanctioned "showing off") and "real" identities—Milton Homer accentuates this blurring of fantasy and fact: "Nobody looked askance at Milton in a parade; everybody was used to him" (*WDYTYA*, p. 193). This overlapping of fiction and fact, wherein oddities become acceptable, is evidenced in his epic-serious name and is beautifully captured in the episode in which young Ralph Gillespie changes the title of Keats's sonnet to "On First Looking Into Milton Homer" (*WDYTYA*, p. 194)! In fact, this subtle bridging of these two figures becomes even more significant at the end of the story, when Ralph Gillespie, *imitator* of Milton Homer, becomes a "fiction" which Rose is unable to read:

The thing she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might 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 and wouldn't get. And it wasn't just about acting she suspected this . . . She had never felt this more strongly than when she was talking to Ralph Gillespie (*WDYTYA*, p. 205).

¹³Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-Town Life* (New York, 1919), p. 3.

¹⁴Munro, "An Open Letter," p. 6.

¹⁵Helen Hoy, 113.

Instead of prodding Ralph about his talent for mimicry, much as she might do in a public interview, Rose realizes that she might have delved further, beyond the surface fiction to the essential story of one man's life. This synthesis is completed only after Ralph's death which leaves Rose with the knowledge that "she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own" (*WDYTYA*, p. 206). Thus, the blurring of the distinctions between fact and fiction which lies at the basis of postmodernist fiction develops with increasing intensity in Munro's art, as the "Photographer" as artist and Del as experimenter fully merge in Rose—the artist of experience.

If the photograph is the meeting place of the known and the unknown, it is no less the meeting place of motion and stillness in human experience. The photograph is the static moment snatched out of the *perpetuum mobile* of time—what French photographer Cartier-Bresson described in a now-famous utterance as the "decisive moment."¹⁶ As such, it has been seized upon by postmodernists as a contemporary example of what T. S. Eliot called "the still point of the turning world"¹⁷—the breathless moment of intersection between the time-driven and the timeless. In architecture, we witness the continuum of flowing water in a curiously static setting (the home) in Frank Lloyd Wright's Bear Run House. In the visual arts, David Hockney's tiger is arrested in mid-pounce with the following admonition printed above its ferocious head: "No, this is not in motion"!

In their very form, Alice Munro's interconnected short story collections, *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* function on the same borderline between motion and stasis; each self-contained story is an image in itself, linked to the larger continuum by the main character and a roughly chronological progression. To those who wrongly approach these series of linked images as a traditional novel, however, gaps are bound to appear. This is no shortcoming but a conscious choice on Munro's part, for this imagistic effect closely resembles the very texture and process of memory.

On a more minute level, Munro uses this photographic stillness in motion consciously and overtly to create her "decisive moments." One such moment occurs at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women* with the spontaneous act granted by Bobby Sheriff to Del Jordan. His sudden

¹⁶Owen Edwards, "Cartier-Bresson: Coolly Obsessed with Humanity," *Saturday Review*, November 10, 1979, p. 47.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, 1963), p. 191.

rising upon his toes Del as artist interprets, in a self-conscious fashion, as having "a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know" (LGW, p. 211). The alphabet which Del is just beginning to learn is the flux and flow of human life, and the letter or word—those special, mysterious acts of men and women—are the keys to the code. Munro uses the same linguistic analogy, never forgetting the vital link between literary device and human experience, in *Who Do You Think You Are?*. In "Spelling," Rose visits a home for the aged, soon to be the home of her stepmother, Flo, and observes an old woman whose only participation in life is to spell out loud words supplied by others. Rose (and Munro) choose words charged with vitality which become curiously static:

Forest F-O-R-E-S-T . . .
Celebrate. C-E-L-E-B-R-A-T-E (WDYTYA, p. 183).

This contrast between the isolated, lifeless linguistic fragments and the lush vitality of the concepts which they suggest when experienced in continuity speaks volumes about the aridity of the home, and of solitary aging itself. It is intriguing, indeed, that Susan Sontag should refer to photography on exactly this dual level, as "a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."¹⁸

Munro even incorporates this contrast between motion and stasis into her imagery: in "A Spanish Lady," a woman's self-contained musings about her own troubles are jarred by the sudden death cry of an old man in a train station. She becomes transfixed in more senses than one:

It seems as if I should not leave, as if the cry of the man dying, now dead, is still demanding something of me, but I cannot think what it is . . . What we say and feel no longer rings true, it is slightly beside the point. As if we were all wound up a long time ago and were spinning out of control, whirring, making noises, but at a touch could stop, and see each other for the first time, harmless and still (SIBMTTY, pp. 190-91).

The implicit image of the spinning top, its vibrant colours never perceptible until we timidly stretch out a finger to interfere, to participate, is the perfect image of our everyday experience and of our all too characteristic reticence.

Here, as elsewhere, Munro is at one with her self-conscious contemporaries. Michael Ondaatje, in *Coming Through Slaughter*, overtly

¹⁸Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1973), p. 3.

uses the photograph of jazz master Buddy Bolden as a symbol of the meeting of stillness and fluidity in art—and experience. There is a constant melting and blurring of the lines separating subject and object, experience and fiction, as, for example, when the narrator or researcher of Bolden's story reflects, "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. The photograph moves and becomes a mirror."¹⁹ Again, the static fact becomes fluid fiction, as the members of the group photograph (their names typographically set on the page in the position they assume in the photo at one point by Ondaatje) melt into voices giving testimony, telling their own stories along with that of Buddy Bolden. In all editions of the novel this interaction between print and image is preserved through the prominent displaying of the actual photograph on or inside the cover.

This photographic seizing of the moment becomes an overt model for Munro as well in the collection which includes "The Spanish Lady"—*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. On the very last page, the photograph becomes the act of writing, of capturing and thus exorcising experience. The narrator tells us, first of all, that if she had been making a "proper story" out of her experiences, she would have altered certain details. This affirmation of fidelity to experience then assumes a visual form: "Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents' old camera used to take." Referring to her fictional creation as a journey, she claims to have undertaken it with the sole purpose of capturing for all time her mother—"To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her," but all in vain, for her edges "melt and flow" (*SIBMTTY*, p. 246). Thus, as Eliot reflects, we are left with "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" for "Only through time is time conquered."²⁰

As this comparison suggests, Munro moves to explore the further paradox of art as both power and vulnerable helplessness. In other Canadian postmodernist novels, most notably Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Hubert Aquin's *Blackout*, the association of fiction-making and power is set in an intensely sexual and political frame of reference. In the case of Aquin, though, this attempt at mastery—of one's experience, one's own national identity—is continually frustrated, for the novel, like the land which lies behind it, is the constant object

¹⁹Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto, 1976), p. 133.

²⁰Eliot, *Op cit.*, pp. 198, 192.

of a power-struggle among several controlling powers. Is this attempt to gain power over the threat of extinction really so different from the power which Del Jordan learns to exercise over her dominating lover, Garnet, and eventually over the recalcitrant details of experience? Earlier in her development, after the death of Uncle Craig, this power over extinction is sought by Del through the mastery of knowledge:

I followed her [Del's mother] around the house, scowling, persistent, repeating my questions. I wanted to know. There is no protection unless it is in knowing. I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful, waiting to get in anywhere (LGW, p. 39).

This wish for power, for security, becomes tied to a sexual theme as Del fights both a literal and metaphorical battle against being submerged by her lover in "Baptizing." "I felt amazement," she marvels, "not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me" (LGW, p. 197). Finally, the theme of artistic power over chaos is established in the epilogue, with the actual physical presentation of the lists of prosaic details which Del compiles and orders with sacred devotion:

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" (LGW, p. 210).

Interestingly, this drive to control through representation of concrete objects, besides reaching back to Neolithic cave paintings, turns up in a surprisingly parallel passage in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "If I could do it," writes Agee, "I'd do no writing here at all. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement . . ." ²¹ This consideration of the power that photography and fiction hold, to bind together disparate chunks of the world, links Munro's work to the very impulses of mimesis in man.

At the same time, however, the other half of the paradox is completed with the realization that fiction and photography reveal to man

²¹James Agee and Walker Evans *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York, 1939), p. 12.

the utter hopelessness of ever ordering the chaos of the outer world or the inner landscape. Both outer and inner chaos break forth, for example, in Margaret Atwood's poem, "Camera," in which the lover's insistence that both scenario and woman become immobilized for his "organized instant" is frustrated by the emotional wreckage of the scene. As though through a "zoom" lens, we are taken beyond the imagined chaos of dispersed leaves and coats flapping from tree-tops to the true eye of the storm:

travelling towards the horizon
 there has been a hurricane
 that small black speck
 travelling towards the horizon
 at almost the speed of light
 is me²²

As in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" or *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, this imposition of order and stasis (comparable in spirit to the fixity of the camera's view) is cynically rejected as untenable and even sadistic. Indeed, as in Ondaatje's novel, one senses the same grinding tension between photographic image and flowing experience—a tension which is ultimately darker than Munro's energetic study of paradox.

Nevertheless, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, we note a similar, though milder, process of undercutting as in the Atwood poem, after Del's brash description of her lists, with her disheartening comment, "The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking." This artistic hoarding of detail is tellingly associated with Del's saving of her own life in "Baptizing," for the simple reason that writing, for Munro, is the constant "hedge" against the chaos that is death. She observed to Graeme Gibson that writing "has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this."²³ How fascinating it is, then, to see that Munro's work, like that of Aquin, displays the curious paradox which Robert Alter notes of the self-conscious novel in our century; that while it is a celebration of generation, it more often than not proves to be "a long meditation on death."²⁴

²²Margaret Atwood, "Camera," in *The Circle Game* (Toronto, 1966), p. 46.

²³Graeme Gibson, ed., *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto, 1973), p. 243.

²⁴Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), p. 243.

The reason for such an abundance of paradox in contemporary literature lies in the age-old conflict between Romantic and Classical impulses—those of sympathetic identification and aesthetic detachment. Munro's work, representative of the twentieth-century hybrid, often reveals both conflicting tendencies. In "The Office," for example, the writer's final mental portrait of her persecutor, Mr. Malley, poses delicately and painfully this question of sympathy and distance:

Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way . . . at the toilet walls . . . arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust. While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him (*DHS*, 74).

Like the plants and teapot which Malley forces on the young writer, the "gifts" which experiences bestow on their authors have their own price, their own nagging demands which cannot be ignored. This, in effect, is the same realization which Rose reaches in *Who Do You Think You Are?* While she is prevented from turning a letter from Flo into a public storytelling exhibition by "a fresh and overwhelming realization" of the "gulf" (*WDYTYA*, p. 186) which lies between her and her past, she nevertheless comes to recognize through Ralph Gillespie that the gulf is also a living link. In terms of the photographer's art, Susan Sontag sums up these, and many of the other conflicting tendencies already noted in Munro's art, with characteristic insight:

Photography, which has so many narcissistic uses, is also a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world; and the two uses are complementary. Like a pair of binoculars with no right or wrong end, the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much further away. It offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and in those of others.²⁵

Like the photographer, then, who establishes distance through a selective rectangular frame, writing is both a selection and a distancing. Nevertheless, as Cartier-Bresson observed of his art, "in order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel involved in what he frames through the viewfinder."²⁶ This precept should be remembered by critics who deplore the constraint and morbidity of Munro's "town," for Munro

²⁵Sontag, p. 167.

²⁶Edwards, p. 47.

affirms her link to her created world in characteristically paradoxical terms: "Solitary and meshed these lives are, buried and celebrated."²⁷

Like her postmodernist contemporaries, Alice Munro is intensely fascinated by the burials and celebrations, links and gulfs, fictions and nonfictions of the world around her. By fusing these disparate elements into the synthesis which is paradox, Munro accomplishes what a recent reviewer observed of Cartier-Bresson: "He has brought his intuition to the surface of his skin and he has kept it there, bonding into single entity photographer, camera, time, and the objective world." In fact, like all sensitive men and women in a disconcerting, exhilarating age, Alice Munro is "coolly obsessed with humanity."²⁸

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²⁷Munro, "An Open Letter," p. 5.

²⁸Edwards, p. 47.