

A SENSE OF ENDING IN LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

L.M. Eldredge

Stories that most of us would call "traditional" usually feature plots that promote a definite and satisfying conclusion—the hero succeeds and marries the girl or is thoroughly and completely defeated. Within the strictures of a traditional plot, character functions to fit the demands of the form and to satisfy the reader's psychological need for closure: Oedipus is blinded, Nicholas is scalded in the towte, Joseph Andrews marries Fanny, Emma marries Mr. Knightly, and we are all well pleased with the rightness of their respective fates.

But because lives do not follow conventional plots, novels which attempt genuinely to probe the lives of characters often end with an arbitrary turn of events that seems to flout tradition. The drowning of Mrs. Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* seems to many readers improbable and out of character, but a combination of plot and propriety push her to that end, no matter what her strong character makes more probable. Saul Bellow's Augie March ends his career with a declaration that looks toward the future, as if it were impossible to conceive an ending that would both resolve the issues raised and at the same time be consistent with the character's potential. Frank Kermode describes the situation as a "tension between paradigm and reality, . . . the resistance of fact to fiction, human freedom and unpredictability against plot."¹ The closer a writer gets to reality in his characters, the further he must depart from the strictures traditional plots lay upon character. And the converse is also true: a traditional plot requires characters less than true to life.

Alice Munro's sense of plot in *Lives of Girls and Women* is not traditional. The novel is structured as a series of episodes in which Del Jordan copes with some fundamental problem and finds her way through it. She deals with the limited vision of ignorance and near madness in the chapter called "The Flats Road," with death and families in "Heirs

¹Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 113. See also the chapter entitled "Literary Fiction and Reality," pp. 127-52.

of the Living Body," with knowledge and her mother in "Princess Ida," with God in "Age of Faith," with rôle playing and reality in "Changes and Ceremonies," with the beginnings of sex in "Lives of Girls and Women," and with love and sexuality, power and knowledge in "Baptizing." Such a series of events, linked by character and theme but not by plot, defies a traditional conclusion. In fact it would seem very much as if the only end to Del's story is the end to Del's life many years later and that what must intervene are many episodes similar to those we have already dealt with—the first job, a growing sense of independence, success in writing, a more mature love affair, and so on until full of years and honours and grandchildren she dies of old age. We might then see Del arrive at the condition of Beckett's narrator in *The Unnamable* whose apparent objective is to exhaust his store of words at the same moment that death exhausts his capacity for utterance. But such a novel would be impossibly long and impossibly unselective—it would try our patience, however good each episode might be.

Yet all endings that stop short of this ultimate finality are to some extent arbitrary. The novel ends after Del's affair with Garnet French because that is where Munro decides to end. It is a reasonable decision. Del has nearly finished being a girl and is about to become a woman. She has negotiated several pitfalls in getting to the point where she is—avoiding the torpor of Jerry Storey, who belittles her and lacks sex appeal; avoiding Garnet French, who is sexually satisfying but wants to dominate her; avoiding the pattern followed by Naomi, who has prepared for marriage, become pregnant, and now marries through inertia; avoiding her mother's attitudes, which embrace learning of any kind and deny sensual experience.² She stands on the edge of a new future, and clearly the future is the stuff of another book.

One might reasonably ask then what purpose the "Epilogue" serves.³ Here Munro moves us into another dimension of the story, a dimension where Del ceases to be the actor undergoing experience and becomes the writer contemplating experience. Although some events in the "Epilogue" precede those of "Baptizing," there is a subtle shift in Del's point of view. There are other such shifts in literature, and it is worthwhile distinguishing among them in order to see what effect Munro achieves.

²Rae McCarthy MacDonald, "Structure and Detail in *Lives of Girls and Women*," *SCL*, 3 (1978), 199-210, treats these experiences more broadly.

³Munro herself asks this question and expresses some doubt about the validity of the "Epilogue" in John Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro," *JCF*, 1, no. 4 (1972), 54-62.

Toward the end of *Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee reacts with almost mystical pleasure to find that he and Frodo have become the very stuff of poetry. After they have been rescued from the foot of Mt. Doom and brought to Aragorn's court, Sam hears a minstrel say that he will sing "of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom. And when Sam heard that he laughed aloud for sheer delight, and he stood up and cried: 'Oh great glory and splendour! All my wishes have come true!'"⁴ Here art and song overtake events rather more quickly than usual, and Sam and Frodo find themselves survivors listening to the legend they helped create.

A more eerie moment occurs toward the beginning of the second part of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, when the Don and Sancho Panza comment on Samson Carrasco's account of a book about them, the book that in fact forms the first part of the novel. Having lived these experiences, they are anxious to see that events are reliably told and parts properly assigned, as if they were eye-witnesses testifying to the veracity of the news of themselves.⁵ What strikes the reader as uncanny about this event is the fact that fictional people comment on the fiction in which they are characters, a situation that can give rise to the sneaking suspicion that we too may be characters in someone else's fiction, commenting upon our actions as if we were actually free.

Munro does something similar to Cervantes and Tolkien. She causes Del to overtake her own story and become the author of it.⁶ The subject of her discourse in the "Epilogue" is the problems of writing a story, but the problems she describes are solved successfully in the novel we have just read, so that the epilogue gives us the uneasy feeling that the character has become her own author. I know of no place in literature just like it, for it too shares an eeriness with Cervantes, suggesting that we may be both actors in the fictions of others and actors and authors in our own.

In the "Epilogue" Munro ostensibly deals with a series of technical problems such a writer might encounter in ending a novel similar to *Lives of Girls and Women*. The first suggestion is suicide, but that is promptly rejected and identified with Del's mother, whose opinions,

⁴J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, part III, "The Return of the King" (New York: Ballantine, 1965), p. 268.

⁵Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, part II, ch. iii-iv. In J.M. Cohen's translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), pp. 485-97.

⁶See also on this point Phyllis S. Perrakis, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl," *Atlantis*, 7, no. 2 (Spring 1982), 61-67.

Del says, she treats with “skepticism and disdain.”⁷ Then too there is the problem of the credibility of suicide. Marion Sherriff seems to Del an unlikely candidate for death, although the reader may not find it surprising that a family of alcoholics and neurotics should also produce a suicide. For Del there is a stubborn ordinariness to Marion’s photograph that simply belies the action, and she finally cannot reconcile the photograph with the girl who drowned herself.

As a reaction against reality Del decides “that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel” (p. 203). As the novel takes shape in her mind, the Sherriff family is transformed from the unfortunate but ordinary family in Jubilee into something rich and strange. Caroline especially, the metamorphosed Marion, becomes an incredible creature:

She bestowed her gifts capriciously on men—not on good-looking young men who thought they had a right to her, . . . but on middle-aged, weary husbands, defeated salesmen passing through town, even, occasionally, on the deformed and mildly deranged. But her generosity mocked them, . . . She was a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones, . . . but it was she, more than they, who survived. (pp. 204-205)

At this point reality has been left far behind, and the arrival of the photographer whose pictures show their subjects twenty to thirty years older than they actually are removes us further still from the real concerns of people in Jubilee. In fact Del herself comments, “The main thing was that it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story” (p. 206).

The True, as Del envisages it, is accurate to a vision of reality formed by total experience—of books, of the world, of Jubilee, of everything that has made up her life to this point. The Real, on the other hand, is accurate in that it conforms to and reflects the actuality of this lumpish and truculent world. The three Sherriff children—one an alcoholic, one a suicide, one a neurotic—are Real: the two Holloway children, one mad and the other a demonic whore, are True. What is True is shaped by notions of fiction, that which is out of the ordinary. The Real is all the half-demented people out on the Flats Road; the True is a magic photographer whose pictures reveal the presumed truth beneath the surface of the here and now.

The main problem with the True is that the Real becomes negligible

⁷Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 202. Subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and are identified parenthetically by page number in the text.

once the story is invented. Del says, "I did not pay much attention to the real Sherriffs, once I had transformed them for fictional purposes" (p. 206). So with her novel unwritten in any concrete form and the Real rapidly fading in significance, Del could be well along the familiar road to the worldless neuroticism of the person who fancies himself a writer but cannot actually write.

Then the Real Bobby Sherriff comes home from the "asylum" for a visit of uncertain duration. He invites Del to sit on the porch and have a piece of cake and a glass of lemonade. He behaves with courtesy and without any sign of his "madness" becoming threatening or bizarre. In fact it is just that ordinariness that finally strikes Del as contradictory to all that she had invented: "The ordinariness of everything brought me up short, made me remember. *This was the Sherriffs' house* . . . The truth was that some damage had been done to [my novel] that I knew could not be put right; (p. 208, italics Munro's). The True here gives way before the Real, and Del is surprised to discover that the brute facts, the ordinariness of things, remain to plague her even after inventing the True: "It is a shock when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there" (p. 209). Bobby continues to shock her by behaving in an ordinary fashion—not like a madman of fiction (one who claims Napoleon for his father) but very like an ordinary man, a former university student, concerned with proper nutrition for people on low incomes.⁸

Del then asks herself what the real secret to madness is: "There must be some secret to madness, some *gift* about it, something I didn't know" (p. 210, italics Munro's). Clearly she is looking for the answer to the puzzle that existence poses: what really goes on beneath the surface of our lives? What actually moved Marion Sherriff to commit suicide? What is the secret underlying the life of any one of the characters in the entire novel? Del cannot answer. She can only offer the palpable slice of reality, the town and its people. "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" (p. 210).

Del seems at this point to have reached an impasse: True is impossible because it leaves reality unaccounted for and stubbornly in

⁸Helen Hoy, "'Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable': Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," *SCL*, 5 (1980), 100-15, treats this ordinariness more broadly.

place. Real is impossible because no effort to record it can ever get it all, exactly as it is. Real is mute and unspeaking. We do not know Bobby Sherriff after seeing him in this epilogue. We do know something of his family, and we can guess that a mild-mannered person like Bobby would stand little chance of being normal as a member of such a family. But Bobby's emotions and mind remain complex and largely unknown to us. Even Del we hardly know, and we have been following her career in detail from the beginning.

The solution to the impasse is provided by Bobby Sherriff in the last few lines of the story. He has cleared away the dishes on which he served Del the cake and lemonade:

With those things in his hands, he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. (p. 211)

This gesture, this statement in code, characterizes the entire story that we have just read. And yet like all gestures except the conventional ones it is devoid of content: pure, studied, elegant, graceful, it remains a gesture, something written in an alphabet we do not know.

Thus at the very end of her elaboration of the problem, Del appeals to the stylized gesture, a *tertium quid* neither True nor Real. By putting aside the older established forms of fiction with their pat and satisfying endings, Del presents us with the gritty and specific details of reality— weird though many of these are, even unprintable in an earlier age. Yet because of the fidelity to her own purposes, she ultimately creates a new form—one not seen or known before, one of beauty and grace and a stylized meaning—but in an alphabet we do not know. And that is why Del must become the writer in the “Epilogue” to *Lives of Girls and Women*. She must step out of her own beautifully performed gestures in order to introduce us to the nature of the alphabet she has invented to write the story we have just read. The eeriness that we feel when she does this is appropriate: whatever we are made to feel about the task of compromising a life, we know from our feeling that it is no ordinary experience.