"What happened to Marion?": Art and Reality in *Lives of Girls and Women*

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"Even as I most feverishly, desperately practise it," Alice Munro has written, "I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking) an unavoidable lie."[1] Such self-questioning about the legitimacy of her art, and of art itself, has troubled Munro throughout her career, but, for the most part, she has chosen not to make this concern evident in her fiction. In the years from 1970 to 1973, however, this issue does find significant expression. Four works of fiction composed during that period dramatize uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the act of writing itself.

The quotation just cited is taken from an essay published in 1972. In the quoted passage, Munro repeats the allegation, as old as Plato, that art distorts reality. The untruth of art is beyond the power of any artist's control: it is "unavoidable." At the same time, some forms of art, it seems, are more suspect than others—Munro distrusts the art that relies upon a trick or the virtuousity displayed in the "most dazzling, apt and striking" technique. In the opening phrase of the quotation, the emotional frustration produced by engaging in a seemingly hopeless task is recorded.

I

For Alice Munro as a creator, the 1970s began with a work that seemed to reflect quite a different mood. In a conversation I had with her recently, she recalled her perception of *Lives of Girls and Women* while she was writing it:

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[1] Alice Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," *The Narrative Voice* ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972) 182.

> I saw the novel as [being about] a straight girl growing up in Western Ontario. I saw it as fairly comic, though how I could have got that notion I don't know. But, you know, I did—I saw set pieces. And it was a very high-spirited novel to me, I enjoyed writing it.[2]

In an interview with J.R. (Tim) Struthers, Munro described the process whereby a third of the narrative was written as a conventional novel, only to be adapted to suit a new plan, that of inter-related but independent stories. It was not until she reached the final stage of this project, the writing of the epilogue, that Munro realized an unanticipated theme had emerged. As she told Struthers:

> Up until now this was not the story of the artist as a young girl. It was just the story of a young girl. And this introduced a whole new element, which I felt hadn't been sufficiently prepared for. And yet, I found eventually that the book didn't mean anything to me without it.[3]

Perhaps it might be suggested respectfully that Munro did provide some signposts in the rest of the work which now direct the reader (even if they did not then consciously direct the author) to the path the work was to take eventually in its final pages. Del is rarely identified as an apprentice novelist until the end, but her bookish ways and her increasing tendency to reject community norms make her ultimate choice of vocation seem a suitable, rather than a shocking, decision.

More subtle as a foreshadowing element, but of at least equal importance, is the presence of two alternative incarnations of the intellectual life: Miss Farris, the producer of elementary school operettas, and Uncle Craig, the historian of Wawanash County. In their lives, as well as in their artistic enterprises, these figures anticipate the opposite literary strategies that present themselves to Del at the conclusion of the book.

Miss Farris is a model of the committed artist. She has the knack of inspiring vast enthusiasm in her student cast. Del's pledge of allegiance is not merely to the tinseled glamour of *The Pied Piper*, but also to the hopeful ambition inherent in the artistic undertaking itself: "devotion to the manufacture of what was

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[2] Alice Munro, personal interview, 20 July 1984.

[3] J.R. (Tim) Struthers, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro," *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview: ECW, 1983) 25.

not true, not plainly necessary, but more important, once belief had been granted to it, than anything else we had."[4] When Frank Wales, the corset lady's son, is put into a hero's garments, he becomes a hero to Del. Her ardour does not distinguish between the role and the person: "I loved him. I loved the Pied Piper. I loved Frank Wales" (132). The melting of hearts produced by art goes on everywhere: "Changes and Ceremonies" begins, before Miss Farris's appearance, with the words, "boys' hate was dangerous" (117), but, under her sway, "ritualized hostility between boys and girls was cracking in a hundred places" (133). Miss Farris's magic does not, however, extend beyond the night of the operetta's performance. In the ensuing weeks, a reaction against the frivolity of art sets in as the reformed actors find relish in the dictates of the school's Gradgrind principal.

Regrettable as this reversion to Philistinism may be, it is what we have come to expect of Jubilee. More startling is the long-term sequel, Miss Farris's death by drowning. Reporting that most people regarded the death as a suicide, Del chooses to characterize the tragedy as "a mystery . . . without hope of explanation" (141) but then offers an elegaic recapitulation of Miss Farris's destiny:

> She sent those operettas up like bubbles, shaped with quivering, exhausting effort, then almost casually set free, to fade and fade but hold trapped forever our transformed childish selves, her undefeated, unrequited love. (141)

This simile provides a visual image that recalls the elements of Miss Farris's endeavour previously conveyed through the narrative: her dedication, followed by resignation, and her ability to effect a genuine, if short-lived, transformation in the lives of unlikely protégés. Munro is careful to avoid linking Miss Farris's suicide explicitly to the despair of the unappreciated artist; nevertheless, her "unrequited" state indicates that she is a version of a frequently imagined type in Canadian fiction—the artist who is a spiritual exile within a society she cannot bring herself to leave. Within the novel, Miss Farris is a Del Jordan in decay who has suffered through her decision not to view the community with the distance of literature, but rather to strive to impose an alien culture upon it through direct intervention. A solution closer to Del's is achieved by Mr. Boyce, Miss Farris's more lightly sketched collaborator, who makes his escape by

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[4] Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971) 131. All further references to this work will appear in the text.

finding a position as a church organist in London, Ontario. In that better world, "there were some people like himself" (142).

The titles of Miss Farris's cycle of six operettas suggest that her literary taste runs to romance. Her life and death, too, are the matter of romance: the urgent claims she makes on life, her frenzied devotion to an ideal, the charged atmosphere she creates about her, her ability to inspire discipleship, her mysterious end. In her death as in her life, she is opposite in character to Uncle Craig, that uncompromising realist. Uncle Craig dies, too, but prosaically, in the middle of a card game at the Orange Hall.

Whereas Miss Farris attracts Del, Uncle Craig, alive or dead, a writer or a corpse, repels her. Though Uncle Craig's view that "it was daily life that mattered" (31) has its respectable antecedents in the theory of realism, the method he employs in his epic history of Wawanash County is a relentless transcription of reality that is not only artless but, by implication, a dismissal of art as both frivolous and a falsification.

The pattern of an uneasy relationship between Del and Uncle Craig emerges as soon as he is introduced. On the penultimate page of the novel, Del surprisingly identifies herself with Uncle Craig's literary strategies, but initially they each regard the other as seriously misguided. When they both examine a photograph, Del looks for human interest while Uncle Craig insists on historical accuracy from his niece and, soon afterwards, squelches her desire to know more about the tragic fate of the first settler.

The pages that follow in "Heirs of the Living Body" can be interpreted as a protracted struggle on Del's part to liberate herself from Uncle Craig's unwanted influence. He compels her attention by dying; commonplace as his cause of death is, to Del the event transforms him into a dreaded object. The central section of the story shows Del's desperate efforts to master her fear of death. In life, Uncle Craig was not only a realist in practice; he also could be perceived, through the methods of realism, as a man who loved watermelon pickles so much that "he always said he would like to make a meal of those" (52). In death, he is a black dot in a maze, or "the terrible, silent, indifferent conductor of forces that could flare up, in an instant, and burn through this room, all reality, leave us dark" (59). The vocabulary of realism is no longer adequate to convey the threat he represents.

Miss Farris's operettas may be like bubbles, but Uncle Craig's legacy is appropriately weighty, a thousand pages of

manuscript, apparently secure in a large, black tin box. Del's way of dealing with this literary inheritance is to recognize the value of the box as a repository for her own writing and to banish Uncle Craig's history, which might otherwise contaminate her work, to the basement, where it is subsequently destroyed by flooding. She has succeeded in throwing off the yoke of his overbearing and inappropriate literary model, an enterprise which, in her view, was "a mistake from start to finish" (62), and she finds "a brutal, unblemished satisfaction" (63) in the manuscript's ruin. Del's apparent callousness is a necessary declaration of imaginative independence.

Munro's own manuscripts, scrupulously preserved at the University of Calgary library, enable their reader to observe the author's adapting the Uncle Craig strand of the novel to accommodate the broader theme of Del's vocation as a writer. In the published text, "Heirs of the Living Body" is positioned a long way from the epilogue. This strategy gives Munro a chance to insert a hint of Del's future destiny—"they were talking to someone who believed that the only duty of a writer was to produce a masterpiece" (62)—at a fairly early point in the work. Munro told Struthers, however, that "Heirs of the Living Body" was nearly at the end of the process of composition (Struthers 25). The Calgary papers show that Munro not only wrote several versions of the Uncle Craig story, all fairly close to the published text, but also, on at least three occasions[5] attempted to link the destruction of Uncle Craig's manuscript with the agony Del endures over her own failed novel. In one version (8.23), Del speaks, as in the final text, of using the box for storing "those few poems and bits of a novel." The next paragraph of the draft begins: "The novel I was writing was about the Sherriff family" (8.23). After two pages which expand on the story of Caroline, this version returns to Uncle Craig's manuscript, by now ruined in the flood. The passage continues with sentiments opposed to those of the final text, followed by the implicit admission that Del's novel is as futile an undertaking as Uncle Craig's history:

> I was not concerned enough at that time to feel the least remorse, or the opposite satisfaction. And about the same time when I thought I would pick up my novel of Caroline, the whole thing fell to pieces.

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[5] Alice Munro papers, University of Calgary library, files 8.19, 8.23, 8.44. All further references to manuscripts are to this collection; identification by file number will appear in the text. I am grateful to the Special Collections staff of the University of Calgary library for much valuable assistance.

This particular connection is not made in the final text. The passage does reveal, however, that in Munro's creative planning Uncle Craig's history was closely associated with Del's efforts at fiction-writing. It seems proper, therefore, to consider the one allusion to Uncle Craig left in the concluding pages of the published text as significant, and also to regard the earlier segment of his life, works, and death as having a bearing on the interpretation of the epilogue.

II

The artistic crisis Munro underwent in writing the epilogue can be traced, not only in her recollections of that experience, but also in the very substantial evidence available in the Calgary papers, and in the letters Munro wrote to her editor at the time. At least ten drafts of the epilogue survive—the last paragraphs of the novel, especially, are worked over again and again.

Despite Munro's agonies of creation, critics have often suggested that the final result is a clear, unambiguous artistic credo. Del has put away the childish things of Gothic romance, and is ready for the more mature, satisfying challenge of realism. That is Margaret Atwood's view: "She transfers her imaginative allegiance from the stylized world of Gothic grotesques she has dreamed up as an adolescent to the small-town 'here' she despised when actually living in it."[6] Helen Hoy's more subtle analysis refines, but does not fundamentally challenge, this argument: "This paradoxical insistence that the truest mysteries are to be found not beyond but within the most uninspired facts, Munro underlines in the novel's final vignette, of the Sherriff family."[7]

In order to substantiate the idea that matters are both more complex and darker in spirit than these interpretations would have us believe, I must begin with a guided tour of the manuscript evidence.

Behind both "Heirs of the Living Body" and "Epilogue: The Photographer" lie some deep abandoned caves not at all paved with kitchen linoleum. Munro told me, "I was writing a version that became 'The Photographer' long before I was writing *Lives of Girls and Women*." I had not found this earlier text in the Calgary archives, and Munro was not sure whether she had kept or

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[6] Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) 193.

[7] Helen Hoy, "'Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable': Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 5.1 (1980): 112.

destroyed it. Two other strands preceding the main period in which the novel was composed do survive: several pages in a Hilroy notebook (4.18) dealing with a character named Miss Musgrave, and other passages in the same notebook concerning the Halloway family. In the final novel, Miss Musgrave does not appear, and Halloway is mentioned three times as the family name Del gives to the Sherriffs in her novel. Miss Musgrave did, however, continue to exist until a fairly late stage in the book's composition: two drafts (8.19 and 8.23) place her in the context of material from both the epilogue and "Heirs of the Living Body" that was retained almost verbatim in the published version.

Munro told me, "I was writing that Miss Musgrave stuff before I was ever writing *Lives of Girls and Women.* But I didn't know where it was going." Both in the early and later versions, Miss Musgrave occupies the top floor of a house her father built. The other tenants are the narrator's family (unnamed in the first draft) and the Oliphant family. The retarded Mary Agnes is as distasteful to Del here as in the finished book; the effect of the first version is simply to communicate an unpleasant atmosphere of disease, decay and eccentricity. In the 8.19 version, Miss Musgrave is merely a stimulus for a fictional impulse that also disappears in the final text: the idea Del has of writing a novel based on class conflict. In 8.23, Miss Musgrave's character is revealed at considerable length. Her traits of being a recluse, an alcoholic, an elderly woman involved in a mysterious liaison, and a cosmopolite are variously and characteristically analyzed by Mrs. Oliphant, Del's mother, and her aunts. To Del herself, Miss Musgrave is an "ambassadress" from the Roaring Twenties "though unwilling or unable to tell about it." For the reader, her loneliness and pathos are strongly evident.

Since Miss Musgrave vanishes from the final text, it may seem that all she needed was a quiet burial, rather than the protracted exhumation I have given her. I think it of interest, however, that Munro invented, and kept to a late point, an episode which, if included in the book, would have added to its already considerable store of lurid incidents. Miss Musgrave, especially in conjunction with Mary Agnes, is a personality of extremes, but a character presented as having a tangible reality rather than as the product of Del's immature imagination.

In the notebook draft, the Halloways figure in two capacities. Their empty house inspires the unnamed narrator with hopes of great discoveries, but when she and her friends explore it, they find nothing of interest: romance yielding to reality on a modest scale. The other passage is far more rewarding,

since it seems to represent a very early version of Del as fictional chronicler of the Sherriffs:

> By this time I intended to write novels. . . . The Halloways were my chief find, my mother-lode, a pure dark vein of madness and disaster, running right down the middle of Jubilee's history, how had nobody seen that before? When I discovered them I felt—oh, greed, terrible contained excitement, sombre joy. I felt a little bit like someone who has dreamed that in a certain place, unknown to him before, he will find something of immense importance to him, to him alone—a picture, a black dot, a scratch on the wall—and he goes and does really find it there.

The fragment goes on to suggest that the apparent discovery of the Halloways really involved the working out in narrative of imaginative patterns impressed upon Del by books or her mother. So she never completed the Halloways' story because "they had not puzzled me enough."

In this relatively brief account, we have, in cruder form, some of the motifs of the epilogue: the failed artistic effort, the consciousness of inadequacy, but also the passion that went into the creative impulse when it seemed to have a life of its own. As in the published text, the passage moves from a description of the delights of juvenile authorship to an admission of failure.

It will be noticed that the draft takes the form of an explicit analysis, ending with a clearly defined explanation for the abandonment of the project. The final version turns the idea of the Halloways into a fleshed-out narrative, the merits of which the reader can judge. Similarly, Del's turning away from romance becomes the by-product of a story, a human encounter which requires from the reader a thoughtful weighing of the shades of emotion rather than just simple assent.

Nearly all of the other versions of the epilogue evidently were written within a concentrated period of time in late 1970 and early 1971. Munro's agonized struggle with the composition of the epilogue may be traced in the letters she wrote at the time to her editor, Audrey Coffin. I am grateful to Rachel M. Mansfield, Editorial Director, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, for supplying copies of the correspondence, and to Alice Munro for her permission to reproduce the following excerpts:

> The last, short, untitled section may not fit in and could perhaps

be dispensed with. It might be better ending with the seventh.

(10 Dec. 1970)

The eighth section—those few pages at the end—isn't right and I suppose had just better be scrapped. I wanted each section to cover an area of growing-up—Religion, Sex, etc.—but creativity—how it starts & what happens to it—was beyond me. I thought of working it into section seven, but that would muddle the emphasis.

(22 Dec.1970)

I wrote another version of the final section, which seems to me closer to what I want than the one you have, though maybe still not usable. I just had to do it once more and have taken a vow I'll leave the whole thing alone now . . . . The other sections still seem to fit together
better, in a way, without this.

(31 Dec. 1970)

The last section better in the last version . . . but it's not right yet. I don't like the way it sort of "distances" things. Writing about writing always runs into this problem. A nagging feeling I didn't say what I wanted to because my energy—with regard to this work—sort of played out in early November. As if a work had a certain amount of momentum & when that's used up, the rest of the work, even if artfully done, fails in some sort of natural
conviction. What's to be done may come to me yet.

(9 Jan. 1971)

Here it is back again, with shamefaced apologies. What I was trying to do didn't work. I was trying to make M/C [Marion/Caroline] into a story section about the length of the others, adding a lot of new material, and the new material turned out to be wrong—shifted the balance somehow—just Why don't I know these things without sweating them out this way? I should have known.

I still don't like the section—it's not right, doesn't have the sort of comfortableness, depth, ease, of something properly worked through. It's stillborn. I don't think I can do anything with it, though. The time has passed. I think maybe better not to include it. But I'll send it back to you . . .

P.S. REALLY, we better forget about Marion/Caroline. It doesn't
flow—destroys credibility.

(19 Jan. 1971)

> I've enclosed the Marion/Caroline MS with the note I wrote yesterday, full of my misgivings.
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> Now, here is what I thought today I wanted to do, and do really, now, believe is right—go back to what I actually did, in the first draft of —used the bit about the book simply as part of the material in the Jerry Storey episode. Then I decided to take it out and do a special section with it. I think now I was mistaken, and have put it back in. What do you think?
>
> I think what I want to do is make this alteration in and scrap Marion/Caroline.
>
> This is getting to be like a prolonged Anxiety Dream, isn't it? I have to
>
> (20 Jan. 1971)

But Munro did not stop. The decision announced in the final letter was reversed in the published text; furthermore, at least one draft, dated "Jan 24/71" (the only draft in the Calgary papers bearing a date), intervenes before the version which appears in the book was written.

For the sake of convenience, I will compare the drafts with the published text first with respect to Del's romance about the Sherriffs and then in relation to her talk with the real Bobby Sherriff. The story of the photographer is virtually the same in all versions except one (8.23) where it is simply abbreviated. It would appear that the moulding of that tale lies farther back in an earlier stage, perhaps lost, of the composition process. The metamorphosis of Marion into Caroline is similar in principle in all versions; likewise, the depiction of Jerry Storey and Del as having opposite interests, yet both plotting to undermine Jubilee, appears in all the complete drafts. In this instance, however, Munro made an interesting revision. In 8.19, which appears to be an early version of the final phase, she breaks off the fragment:

> Meanwhile my novel lay stored away and I did not want to pick it up and touch it. It was like a beautiful piece of silk, or tapestry, which may fall to pieces, its threads having rotted in storage. I was afraid I was losing it, but I could not pick it up and find out, because I did not know what I would do if it was not there. I did not know how to bear the weight of the real Jubilee without having that novel to touch, that lovely black fable to look at it through.

The image of the novel as a rotted piece of silk appears in two other fragments (8.23 and 8.44), but not in the final version, where there is a more muted phrasing: "Damage had been

done" (251). The change is part of a broader pattern of revision whereby Munro chooses to tone down both Del's anguish in losing her novel and her direct understanding of what has happened to it. The striking characterization of the romance as a black fable is retained in the book, but at a different place, in the paragraph comparing Del's intentions with Jerry's (248).

The same phrase, "black fable," also appears (8.23) in conjunction with an evocative image which is found in two drafts but not in the final text:

> I could look at Jubilee through this black fable just as when I was younger I used [to] look through the different panes of glass in the front door at Jenkin's Bend, and see the world yellow, drowned in buttery sunlight, or forest-like, mysterious, or disastrously red.

In the "Jan. 24/71" text, "black fable" is located in the more usual setting—the paragraph linking Del with Jerry Storey—but the reader is given explicit direction which is lacking in the published version: "I secretly planning to transform it, change it into black fable which was so marvelously, inexplicably satisfying to me" (9.10).

The words "black fable" call attention to the artifice involved in the tale, its romance character, and its deliberate manipulation of reality. The colour imagery of the passage just cited also contains the same implications. Del's recollections, in both the preceding quotations and also in the final text, nevertheless place at least as strong an emphasis on another dimension of the would-be novel, the feeling of triumph over reality that it induces. Reality does not dictate terms to this apprentice writer—she sees the world as she chooses. So, as the final text and many other versions inform us, Del's fiction is a source of magical power which has the effect in everyday life of a charm:

> I carried it—the idea of it—everywhere with me, as if it were one of those magic boxes a favoured character gets hold of in a fairy story: touch it and his troubles disappear.(245)

In other words, the act of writing a romance gives Del herself the attributes of a romance character. Black as the fable may be to her imaginary creations, it is for her the entry to a golden world.

This principle finds its most striking illustration in the darkest part of the fable, the paragraphs dealing directly with the photographer. What the photographer does, in essence, is

to use his art to produce a visual equivalent of a black fable: he reveals aspects of his subjects' inheritance or future fate that they do not welcome, but which convey an underlying truth beneath the superficial distortions. "Everybody was afraid of him" (247), except for Caroline, the nymphomanical counterpart, in Del's imagination to Marion Sherriff, who pursues him and drowns herself after he abandons her.

The photographer's grotesque appearance and unpleasant habits should not conceal his positive aspects for Del. The natives of Jubilee do not weave a circle round him thrice, but they do respect his power. Elsewhere in the epilogue, Del takes pleasure in contemplating the future "danger" Jubilee unknowingly faces in her art—in the photographer she has created as an effective subverter of customary social expectations. Del's sexual experiences with Mr. Chamberlain, Jerry Storey, and Garnet French have contained strong elements of humiliation; both Caroline, with her apparent yielding and inner contempt for her lovers, and the photographer, with his callous sexual fascination, are fictional creations who offer compensations in art for the victimizations of real experience.

Looking back upon the detail that Caroline's eyes are white, but also, by implication, on the whole tale, the narrator comments, seemingly with considerable irony: "I had not worked out all the implications of this myself, but felt they were varied and powerful" (247). Self-criticism is cerainly present, but I do not think it is the only response being registered. For all its callowness, the story does have power—the reader feels its impact as much as Del does. Its strength lies in the frank and free way it sweeps aside ordinary reality. It is a fable about the power of the artist told in a way that demonstrates that power in the manner of its telling.

But, the reader may more or less gently protest, isn't all this trumpery rejected within a few paragraphs? Doesn't Del advance to a more sophisticated aesthetic that combines the grace and depth of art with more sobriety and artistic responsibility? To respond to these challenges, mainly in the negative, it will be necessary to examine the second half of the epilogue, again in the context of Munro's drafts.

In general, the revisions for this part of the epilogue are more fundamental than for the first half. One fragment (8.17) devotes only six lines to Bobby Sherriff and ends with the fear of "lost authority" that, in the published version, occurs in the middle of the talk with Bobby. Another draft contains much of the small talk about cake-making and inadequate college diets that

is found in the final text, but then goes on to a concluding paragraph that differs substantially from the familiar text. The draft conclusion begins with Del's disappointment in the real Bobby:

> He went on talking about food, and I listened not to the words but just to the soft diffident voice explaining, and thinking this was the mad brother, yes, this was Caroline's brother, Marion's brother, this was the reality. This was all I really had. (8.17 [III])

After the description of Bobby and the glimpse of Mr. Fouks, also in the published text, the draft continues with an equivalent of the deep caves passage:

> The novel was beside the point. What really happened was so much more diffuse, mysterious, broken, simpler, more amazing. And however you put it down even if you put nothing but surfaces, nothing, or if you put in every single thing that really happened . . . everything exactly, that would still be an evasion. Not lies, nothing could be a lie, not even Caroline; everything was an evasion.

These lines state with extraordinary bitterness and conclusiveness an idea that is found in every version: Del has come to realize (as Munro herself suspects, also using the word "evasion" in the quotation with which I began this essay) that art cannot hope to reflect accurately the complexity and intensity of life itself. Yet the draft then moves on to an affirmation in its own way stronger than the assertion in the final text, but without the felt experience of Bobby Sherriff's gesture to authenticate it:

> Nevertheless I did not lose hope. In fact I felt happier. . . . And I didn't know why. Just the brick wall and Bobby Sherriff's face, feeling there was something there all right, that I didn't have to make myself and couldn't get at, and it was there, and I wouldn't stop trying. Happiness.

The source of happiness here seems to be a feeling of intoxication about life rather than art. The disavowal of invention ("that I didn't have to make myself"), implicitly repudiating the lost novel, is combined with an anticipation of future failure ("couldn't get at"). Yet the artist's determination is present in the willingness to continue to make an attempt which is known to be doomed.

The seven other drafts which contain variants of the final section of the epilogue are much closer in wording to the published text. Only one (9.2), however, contains Bobby's enigmatic gesture: "when that came to me," Munro told me, "I knew I could leave it [the epilogue] in." The phrase "deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" appears once before, along with "old linoleum" in an earlier version and a looser version of the phrase in the "Jan 24/71" draft: "Our lives were deep and black, the most dangerous caves, paved with familiar old linoleum."

The insufficient quality of the lists, made apparent even in the published text, is emphasized very strongly in the drafts. In the version from which I just quoted, the idea is put as follows: "Such lists would go a little way towards getting what I wanted, but not very far." No less than six of the seven drafts follow the words "radiant, everlasting" with variations upon "No lists, or tricks either, are going to manage that," or "What tricks could manage that?" This despairing or disparaging reference to the artist's tricks in the hopeless attempt to mirror reality once again recalls the exact wording of the Munro essay quoted in my introduction.

In summary, the drafts unquestionably confirm the creative struggles Munro mentions in letters and interviews. The one version that ends very positively is substantially different in wording from the final text. In most versions, the absence of Bobby Sherriff's gesture, combined with a stronger emphasis on both the emotional pain of losing the novel and the futility of writing lists, results in a significantly gloomier tone than may be found in the published words.

No lists of Munro's drafts—radiant though they are—can manage the trick of reversing the usual interpretation of the epilogue by themselves. It could be argued that ten or a thousand drafts are irrelevant if, in the definitive text, Munro suddenly found the illumination required to affirm, rather than deny, the power of the realist's art. All I wish to say is that the evidence of the drafts reveals that Munro was agonizing over pessimistic, as well as positive, readings of Del's predicament, and that in seeking to analyze the latter half of the epilogue's final text, as I now propose to do, it is appropriate to remain alert to the possibility that Munro retained as much as she rejected of the elegaic, tentative spirit of the drafts.

Del's first reaction, after accepting Bobby's invitation to sample his cake, is, appropriately enough, to make lists. She lists his actions and then, in order, his various apologies, on the whole allowing his fussy courtliness to speak for itself. Then,

following the habits of her creator (who told Graeme Gibson, "I can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture"[8]), she describes all the furniture of the porch. The catalogues cunningly lead to Del's first emotional shock: all this "ordinariness," so painstakingly recorded by Del's documentary brain, had once surrounded Marion, and "Marion was Caroline" (250), Del's own Gothic heroine. Del's reaction, induced by a pre-existing loss of confidence in her novel, is to distrust her own creation even further: in the light of the Sherriffs' undistinguished, unadventurous tastes in porch furniture, the fiction stands revealed as an "unreliable structure" (251). Such is the piquancy of the contrast between the Sherriffs' apparent mediocrity and their spectacular mental histories that Del abandons her allegiance, not just to one novel, but to the vocation of writing fiction. The mysteries of reality, rather than the contrived magic of art, compel attention: "And what happened, I asked myself, to Marion? Not to Caroline. *What happened to Marion*?" (251). A reader may be tempted to give unreflecting assent to Del's newly awakened fascination. Atfer all, Caroline was unreal, as well as not real, and the enigma of Marion's suicide seems doubly tantalizing amidst such mundane surroundings. It soon becomes evident, however, that the peculiarities of the Sherriffs act as a catalyst to broaden theoretical reflections: "Such questions persist, in spite of novels. It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there." In spite of novels, Del says, not in spite of one fictional attempt. The succeeding image is of an apparently triumphant conquest over some force, obstacle, or enemy that is then seen to withstand all that one has done to master it. In its stubborn multiplicity, reality mocks the artist's efforts to shape it according to desire.

Del allows Bobby Sherriff, formerly designated in her mind as a lunatic, to explain his banal, deferentially stated theories about increasing prosperity and the perils of poor nutrition. Though she regards his humility ironically, he still possesses a secret which grants him importance in her eyes. In the face of his divided nature, the artist's imagination in her admits defeat: "There must be some secret to madness, some *gift* about it, something I didn't know" (252).

A few lines later, the mystery broadens to envelop Marion once again. Del still does not know what happened to Marion ("her face was stubborn, unrevealing"), but, in the famous, fol-

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[8] Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) 257.

lowing sentence, the riddle of the Sherriffs is suddenly made into a universal psychological principle:

> People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum. (253)

Attractive as this statement may be, either as a perceptive, post-Romantic insight into the human condition or as the foundation for speculation about Munro's fictional practices, it does have a more immediate and vital context—Del's re-evaluation of herself as a writer. The paradox reinforces the sense of bafflement, of being overwhelmed by reality, that we have observed earlier in the scene. After all, Del does not tell us that she will write many sensitive short stories based on magic realism or some such theory. She says that people are unfathomable, a truth that many others, most of them in a despairing spirit, have grasped.

The comment does mark a transition, nevertheless, between Del's speculations and her actions. If we are not told anywhere in the epilogue that she will go on to artistic glory, we are informed that she will go on to make literary lists. We have already seen, in the drafts, that this activity is characterized as a futile trick. It is not labelled so precisely in the final text, but the impression is still strongly communicated that reality is too complex and, therefore, too powerful for its imitator, who is doomed to both distortion and bitter disappointment: "The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heart-breaking. And no list could hold what I wanted."

Del's objective is linked, startlingly, with Uncle Craig's motives as an historian. Both are "voracious and misguided." Needless to say, there is some irony, some humorous self-disparagement, in Del's choice of a fellow spirit. Yet, if Del's comparison is not to be taken too literally, neither should it be totally disregarded. If the collapse of Del's fantasy indicates the dangers of ignoring reality altogether, the mere mention of Uncle Craig's name is a powerful reminder that absorption with commonplace reality can produce its own sterility.

Del returns to being an observer once again in witnessing the final action of the book, Bobby Sherriff's gesture. His spontaneous motion is artist-like: "He rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina." He has whimsically elevated a humble activity, the clearing of plates, to the level of an art within life. Yet Del is not swept away: she assents "naturally, a bit distractedly." Perhaps Del's ability to make some response ("'Yes,' I said") to this exemplification of the deep caves/kitchen linoleum

principle indicates that she may go on to master the artist's alphabet. At present, however, she regards it as a code she cannot break: "a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know." Potential revelation and present bafflement are as delicately balanced as Bobby Sherriff's toes in this enigmatic, double-edged ending.[9]

The cryptic quality of the ending needs to be taken into account when contemplating the relationship between structure and meaning in the epilogue as a whole. It cannot be denied that the two-part structure, viewed from one perspective, suggests Del's movement away from a discredited artistic strategy toward ideas of human conduct that appear more satisfactory. Bobby Sherriff offering cake is a more plausible character than Caroline Halloway offering her body. Yet, in another light, the rejected method is at least coherent, fully-formulated, and a source of self-confidence; its replacement is elusive, incomplete, and (in its subordination of imagination to reality) demoralizing.

It is suggestive, if not conclusive, that *Lives of Girls and Women* as a whole is not limited to working out the principles of fiction to be deduced from Del's final rumination. I have already tried to show that Uncle Craig and Miss Farris are complementary characters, each given an episode to reveal the limitations of opposing theories of art. There are lists (of houses along the Flats Road, of churches in Jubilee) in the book, and also characters with a bland surface and treacherous depths, like Mr. Chamberlain, sanctimonious on Sundays and lecherous the rest of the week. But there are also plenty of spectacular people and events that do not conform to Del's formula: they are by no means commonplace at first sight. In a relatively brief novel, there are two drownings, four unattractively retarded people, one hermetic eccentric, one case of voodoo, one case of severe child abuse, one community associated with perpetual violence, two cases of neurotic religious zeal, one case of possible incest, rumours of bestiality, and one albino. With the exception of Marion Sherriff's drowning, this list extends only to page 124; things are somewhat tamer after that. Each of these unusual personalities wears his or her rue with a visible difference. Munro told Graeme Gibson shortly after completing the book: "The part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic."[10] In the depiction of such a setting, romance and realism may be able to lie down together without quarreling with each other. It follows,

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[9] A positive interpretation of Bobby's gesture is offered in L.M. Eldridge's article, "A Sense of Ending in *Lives of Girls and Women*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 9.1 (1984): 110-15.

[10] Gibson 248.

however, that such a world can be accurately reflected without abandoning romance.

Munro herself feels that she has not, in fact, abandoned romance. She spoke to me about the epilogue:

> People have taken this to mean more of a siding with realistic writing than I would take it to mean. I'm not making judgments there. It's something [the "black fable"] perhaps the girl no longer has the capacity to write, or has not the capacity to imagine. But it's not a direct plumping in favour of a certain kind of writing because that dark stuff keeps coming back to me even now. You see, it hasn't gone.

Romance features can be found, not only in early stories Munro regards as immature, but also in works she values, like "Images." Moreover, the romance she drafted as an adolescent, a "very dark" fiction entitled *Charlotte Muir*, still haunted her in the summer of 1984:

> The novel that I had all planned in my teens, I still think about. I can now see some significance in it. . . . I can see what was going on. I can see that those were the twin choices of my life, which were marriage and motherhood, or the black life of the artist.

Munro recounted the details of this plot with a lively sense of irony that did not undercut its seriousness. The same complexity might well be inherent in the black fable of the epilogue.

Of the epilogue's final section, Munro said, "She's getting an idea that art is impossible." If this privileged view is accepted, the epilogue and indeed the whole work is enriched by its release from the dogmatism so often ascribed to it. Realism, after all, goes back to the 1850s in its kitchen-linoleum form, and, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, its deep caves were being explored, particularly in France and Russia. If Munro's novel ends with struggle and defeat and faint glimmers of hope rather than with a pat formula, it is much more a fiction of our time than it has been taken to be.

III

It remains to give some account of three other stories which explore the artificialities and limitations of art in its attempt to deal with reality. Two of these stories, the well-known "The Ot-

tawa Valley" and the less familiar "Home," are similar to each other in their direct confrontation of this issue; the third story, "Material," is more oblique in its approach to the subject.

Like *Lives of Girls and Women*, "The Ottawa Valley" draws attention to the act of story-telling in a kind of epilogue. The narrator announces her continuing attachment to her mother's memory in the opening paragraph of the story, and it becomes evident in the narrative that the narrator's changing impressions of her mother are basic to the story. The painful literary effort requisite for her present act of reconstruction is not, however, made evident until the final paragraph. The narrator's dissatisfaction with her own ending blends with her consciousness of another responsibility:

> If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose, because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could.[11]

Though the narrator's art, in this instance, grows out of creative memory, its requirements must be sacrificed to the other functions within life that memory can serve. These other purposes go beyond and even oppose filial piety, as is evident later in the paragraph, when the narrator confesses a sense of both artistic and personal failure:

> The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. (246)

The artist's return journey (corresponding to her mother's physical return journey within the narrative) has its literary reasons, but they are not given the most prominent place in the list of motivations. The complex, burdensome attachments of real life have had as their by-product a sense of artistic defeat (I phrase it in this way because the reader is not likely to find the portrait of the mother unsatisfactory). From the narrator's point of view, however, it has not been possible to depict reality through

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[11] Alice Munro, "The Ottawa Valley," *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974) 246. All further references to this story will appear in the text.

art—the same difficulty, though not for exactly the same reasons—that overwhelms Del Jordan. At the end of "The Ottawa Valley," the idea of being doomed to perpetual inadequacy enters the narrator's thoughts—the same reflection as had occurred to Del. The concept of art as a trick, dropped from the final version of *Lives of Girls and Women*, re-emerges in this story: "and I could go on and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same" (246). The effect of this final paragraph, viewed as a whole, is to modify the entire character of the story, making it less of a recollection and more of a confession. Ostensibly still speaking of her mother, the narrator finally gives us her self-portrait.

The grave reservations about her fiction the narrator expresses apparently had their counterpart in Munro's own feelings. She told me:

> "The Ottawa Valley" sounds like a farewell to fiction. I often feel recurrent feelings that I want to get away from fiction into something else that is not quite fiction. Then I seem to go back and quite happily write fiction stories again. When I wrote "The Ottawa Valley," it felt pretty permanent.

A story that seems to contain even more self-criticism by the narrator and more suspicion of the artifice of fiction is "Home," a work published only in the Oberon Press anthology *74: New Canadian Stories.* In this fine story, there are three interjections within the narrative calling attention to the artistic and emotional problems inherent in the narrator's own "complicated and unresolved"[12] attitudes towards her father, her mother, her step-mother, and the entire community to which she reluctantly returns. As in "The Ottawa Valley," the narrator's dissatisfaction startles the reader, who has no reason to find the previous scenes unconvincing. By bringing the narrative rhythms of the story to a temporary halt, the interjections call attention to the artificiality of story-telling itself; at the same time, as in the following passage, the narrator reveals that her own emotional difficulties, apparent in the action of the story, are inseparable from the artistic problems she faces as a consequence:

> A problem of the voices, the way people talk, how can it be handled? . . . It is not love I would compel for them, but respect. I would like you to

[12] Alice Munro, "Home," in *74: New Canadian Stories* eds. David Helwig and Joan Harcourt (Ottawa: Oberon, 1974) 142. All further references to this story will appear in the text.

> see through this parody, self-parody, to something that is not lovable, not delightful. I can't get it, I can't quite bring it out. An underground stream that surfaces in the murderous driving and the misshapen language and some blank and cunning looks. And I am not easy with myself, saying *them.* I feel a bit treacherous and artificial, describing *them.* But it would be worse falsity to say *us*, to say *we.* (142)

In the next interjection, the narrator expresses in a telling phrase her unease about the presentation of Irmla, her warm-hearted but vulgar step-mother: "Is this vengeful reporting in spite of accuracy?" (149). We have the lists quandary again: even the most faithful literalness may produce distortion. Following more soul-searching about Irmla, the narrator chooses to surprise the reader again by telling a previously self-censored part of the story within the interjection: "something happened which I did not put in the story" (150). The narrative itself comes to seem even more contrived as the commentary on the narrative offers to tell secrets.

From this point, the story is allowed to continue for only a page and a half before it is supplanted by a lengthy concluding commentary. The story proper, if these distinctions are still meaningful, ends, not with a final word on the father's illness (his heart condition had formerly seemed to be a major subject of the story), but with the narrator's fear that the country life of her childhood may yet swallow her up. Then—more action within the commentary—another character is introduced, but against the narrator's better judgment. A tentative concluding sentence is put forward and immediately rejected:

> I don't think I like that now, it makes me seem to condemn myself more than I really do, and to value what I am doing now less than I must really value it. It is only the hard voice of my upbringing telling me it is always better to dig potatoes, and feed sheep. (152)

The spirit of self-questioning and contradiction, felt strongly throughout the story, now grows even more urgent and dominant. The rejection of country values just quoted is followed by a vivid recollection of a country scene as glimpsed in early childhood. But that vignette is itself repudiated, as the artist who had, in the passage just cited, endorsed her craft, now ends the work of art with a bitter condemnation both of herself and of the contrivance inherent in art:

> You can see this scene, can't you, you can see it quietly made, that magic and prosaic safety briefly held for us, the camera moving out and out, that spot shrinking, darkness. Yes. That is effective.
>
> I don't want any more effects, I tell you, lying. I don't know what I want. I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can. (153)

The drama of this passage co-exists with some carefully weighed subtleties: it is artful in its deprecation of art. The revulsion against artifice is signalled by the modulation from "effective" (i.e. a satisfying literary presentation) to effect (i.e. a literary trick). "Lying" is cunningly positioned to suggest both that fictional effects are a kind of lying, and that the protestation the narrator makes is itself perhaps a lie. "Honour" suggests both the desire for a literary result that is creditable, and, perhaps more strongly, the responsibility to the living, who must be presented with justice and (to use the term the story itself invokes) respect. As in the other stories, the distrust of fictionalizing and the subordination of art to life come to define the narrator's puzzled view of herself. An impression of sincerity, of truth that goes beyond and, therefore, modifies the narrative's kind of truth, is created, but by the complicated and artful means the narrator seems determined, at least with part of her nature, to disavow. The story as a whole, combining the narrative and the narrator's repudiation of it, shows the creation of art to be itself a painful reality, an honourable responsibility that is, at the same time, an agonizing burden.

The final story, "Material," has as its narrator a woman who, though not an artist herself, is compelled to ponder the inter-relations of art and life. Her ex-husband has written a story based upon a person he treated insensitively in the past. The volume which contains the story has a blurb which the narrator mercilessly dissects, exposing the lies that are part of Hugo's self-myth:

> *He has been sporadically affiliated with various academic communities.* What does that mean? If it means that he has taught for years, most of his adult life, at universities, that teaching at universities is the only steady well-paid job he has ever had, why doesn't he say so? You would think that he came out of the bush now and then to fling them scraps of wisdom, to give them a demonstration of what a real male *writer*, a creative

> *artist*, is like; you would never think he was a practising *academic*.[13]

Since Hugo makes his life into fiction in this instance, it does not surprise the narrator that he combines invention with recollection in his portrait of Dotty, the woman they termed the harlot-in-residence. The narrator is impressed, however, that Hugo has captured Dotty's physical and psychological reality:

> But the lamp is there, and the pink chenille dressing gown. And something about Dotty that I had forgotten: When you were talking, she would listen with her mouth slightly open, nodding, then she would chime in on the last word of your sentence with you. A touching and irritating habit. (42)

The narrator's critical analysis then goes on to praise, not the authenticity of Hugo's story, but its skilful artifice:

> I was moved by Hugo's story; I was, I am, glad of it, and I am not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks. There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. (43)

Like the "deep caves" phrase, this is a justly celebrated passage which it would be tempting to regard as evidence of Munro's own aesthetic. Yet, in interpreting the paradox of the words "honest tricks," we must not forget the noun in our enthusiasm for the adjective. The narrator has first claimed to be immune to trickery of any sort; then, in acknowledging her susceptibility, she pays tribute to Hugo's art which, nevertheless, lifts Dotty "out of life." In life, of course, Dotty was betrayed by Hugo's selfishness, though Hugo does not find room for this detail in his story. Dotty was "lucky," the narrator first concludes, to have "passed into Art." This is not, however, a judgment to be taken at face value—it is an "ironical objection" which reflects the narrator's continuing awareness of Dotty's ill fortune in her real-life encounter with Hugo. More influenced, apparently, by her own sense of inadequacy than by the memory of Dotty's plight, the narrator eventually deserts irony for more straightforward anger: "This is not enough, Hugo" (44).

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[13] Alice Munro, "Material," *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974) 29-30. All further references to this story will appear in the text.

Is it enough for us? The question is, I believe, a legitimate one because this story, unlike the others previously examined, seems as much concerned with the aura of the writer and the reception of his or her work as with the creative process itself. The narrator defiantly proclaims in the second sentence of the story that she hasn't "opened a literary journal in a dozen years, praise God;" yet, when she was married to Hugo, she believed that "writers were calm, sad people knowing too much" (35). Hugo, she then felt, did not measure up to these high romantic standards. As a disillusioned ex-believer in the power of art and in the artist, she comprehends yet mocks the middle-aged women who attend writers' panel discussions (24) and expresses a very reserved sympathy for "people who understand and value" (43) Hugo's accomplishment in creating his portrait of Dotty.

To value this extraordinary story at its true worth, we must respond to its intricate balances. Hugo's art seems genuine, since it impresses his ex-wife, a shrewd critic not very anxious to be overwhelmed. At the same time, the story does not excuse his massive human frailties: its presentation of the gap between the flawed character of the artist and his success as a creator is ironic and anti-Romantic. There is another kind of art within the story, the narrator's own account of her life with Hugo. Her marriage to Hugo is her "material," as Dotty is Hugo's material. Yet the effect of her narration is to draw attention to sincerity as a higher value than artfulness (the same pattern as in "The Ottawa Valley" and "Home"), whereas Hugo's artistic virtue is his knowledge of his craft. The narrator's present husband, Gabriel, further complicates matters by offering, in the story's final paragraph, tactful sympathy to the narrator where Hugo would have been nervous and egotistical. If the claims of art are advanced with less ambivalence in "Material" than in the other texts, the artist is viewed with a greater degree of skepticism.

Personal conviction and pressure from editors (at *The New Yorker*, they apparently do not fancy stories about artists) have prompted Munro for the past decade to turn away from the problems of the artist as a subject for fiction. She explained her present view of the issue to me partly in terms of an altered conception of herself as a writer:

> I suppose I've established myself as a writer to the point that I don't think much about being a writer any more. I no longer worry so much about the position of the writer and his material, or at least I think it's terribly boring to keep on fussing about it, so the stories tend to be more

> about the human experience of a person who might indeed be an artist.

This statement suggests that Munro continues, at least covertly, to write about artists, not about their views of their craft. Perhaps her dormant interest may revive. Even if it does not, even if her Muse never again bids her, "Look in thy art, and write!", she has already disproved her own suspicion that artists constitute a "special case": Alice Munro has written about crises of creativity in ways that make us all deeply aware of the abyss that divides the worlds we imagine from the worlds in which we exist.

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