

In Camera: The Developed Photographs of Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro

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*but they had their being once
and left a place to stand on*

—Al Purdy, "Roblin Mills (2)"

Margaret Laurence uses these final lines from Purdy's poem as the epigraph to *The Diviners*.[†] In the novel, Morag the writer may be defined as essentially "an interpreter of the past . . . as well as a diviner of the pattern of the world";¹ and the process of shaping and making involves her specifically with photographs. The final story of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girl and Women* also deals with the enterprise of shaping fictions; it is called "Epilogue: The Photographer," and Munro says she included it at the last minute because "I found eventually that the book didn't mean anything to me without it."² What is it about the photograph that has attracted these two very different writers? A further look at Purdy's poem and a consideration of some recent writing on the theory of photography may provide an angle of approach to Laurence and Munro that reveals the difference in their understanding of reality and of fiction-making.

In "Roblin's Mills (2)" there is a "black millpond" where fragments of past living are held and contained. The pond is a "weed-grown . . . water eye" which "look[s] into itself" and under which discarded moments of past activity are held still as "the substance of shadows." A strange eye, this, for it is "unreflecting": its blackness gives back no image, nor does some inward eye reflect upon what its outer counterpart receives—there is no judgement, no response to the past. But the importance of this "black crystal" is that, like a camera full of undeveloped film, it is the repository of inarticulate history, the "gear and tackle of living," which has, by its very demise, "left

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¹ Michel Fabre, "Words and the World: *The Diviners* as an Exploration of the Book of Life," *A Place to Stand on: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence*, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest, 1983) 267.

² 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.

a place to stand on." The millpond, then, has the value of a photographic negative: it holds what can no longer be seen but what provides the basis for the present. Laurence's reference to this poem attests to her concern through her writing to "come to terms with the past." In an article published in 1970 Laurence writes, "I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value."³ To reassess the substance of shadows, a writer must look into the black eye of the millpond and shed light on the images trapped in it: Morag Gunn, consciously setting out to put her life into some new perspective, stirs up her memories, the waters of her past, and takes out her photographs.

Like the millpond, a photograph holds on to things that have been discarded and forgotten. Like the millpond, a photograph is still and silent, containing the past moment without overt comment or judgment. But unlike the millpond, a photo is not an unreflecting eye. Rather, by virtue of its being a highly specific reflection, a physical emanation of the referent, it cannot be sterile, like the unseen images in the black pool turned inwards only on their dark selves. As soon as an image has an audience to whom it is revealed, it becomes fertile with the imaginations of its viewers. Susan Sontag describes it in this way: "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy." Furthermore, Sontag, who deplores the fact that the camera has promoted the value of appearances, sees this suggestiveness of the photograph as its saving grace: "The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way."⁴ She privileges narrative as the means of understanding, because narrative escapes appearances and explains the temporality of function. Here she differs markedly from Roland Barthes, her one-time mentor, who valorises appearance rather than function and is fascinated by photographs as surfaces which magically attest to an intransigent reality and resist interpretation into anything other than their own "pure contingency."⁵ These two attitudes to photography spring from different epistemologies, the one based on function and the other on appearance; they are illustrated by the writings of Laurence

³ Margaret Laurence, "A Place to Stand On," *A Place to Stand On*, 18.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, 1973) 23.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill, 1981) 28.

and Munro in the approach each takes to describing photographs.

If photographs are a product of both the realm of physical reality and the realm of artifice, their status is ambiguous; as physical emanations of a past referent, they are endowed with an uneasy authority. Photographs appear to offer assurances of identity and clarity; at the same time they undermine the very attempt to control experience by demonstrating that to freeze time and space is to render them obsolete. Thus the photograph can be seen as a metaphor for the life-giving and death-dealing enterprise of writing fictions. Moreover, the referential nature of the photographic subject intensifies the dialectic between artist and artifact: a subject may pose, taking an active part in the creation of the photograph. Laurence and Munro are both interested in the implications of the photo's participation in past and present, nature and culture, continuity and discontinuity, activity and passivity; but the expression of their interest clarifies the distinctions between them, not least in their choice of form.

Munro is unashamedly a short-story writer, not a novelist. "What on earth," she asks, "is this feeling that somehow things have to connect or they have to be part of a larger whole?"⁶ For her, life is not to be seen in terms of progress; rather,

There are just flashes of things we know and find out. . . . I like looking at people's lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. . . . I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time. (Hancock 89)

And so the stories people relate about themselves will change over time, as people make different "editions" of their lives, and "none of these stories will seem to connect" (Hancock 94)—all of them are realities. Munro's conviction that life can be best understood as a series of flashes is paralleled by Laurence's assertion that one way life is perceived is "in short sharp visual images which leap away from us even as we look at them."⁷ In *The Diviners* this perception is symbolised in photographs. But unlike Munro, Laurence is concerned with continuity and pattern over time, so that the photographs are there to be ordered into a meaningful relationship with past and future. The book is the

⁶ Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Alice Munro," *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 43 (1983): 98.

⁷ Margaret Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel," *A Place to Stand On*, 88.

story of Morag's attempt to gain control over her life by making connections with the past, and her dealings with the "short sharp visual images" that are her photographic totems represent, in miniature, her dealings with life as a whole. Clearly this need to create temporal patterns predisposes Laurence toward novelistic rather than short-story format. "Life," writes Sontag, "is not about significant details, illuminated a flash [sic], fixed forever. Photographs are" (81). This dichotomy would be recognised by Laurence; Munro's understanding of life, by contrast, is centred upon just such "significant details."

Munro has several times in interviews expressed great personal interest in photography. When he interviewed her for *Canadian Fiction Magazine* on the eve of the publication of *The Moons of Jupiter*, Geoff Hancock suggested to her that "the formal technical processes of using a camera are remarkably similar to the way you use your prose," and he asked whether she tries to "render a scene as a photograph might." Munro replied, "Well, I see the scene. I see it awfully clearly. And I want the reader to see it the way I see it" (Hancock 107). She has described her most common initial impetus to write a story as a pictorial one: a preliminary picture will "generate some other images and attract them like a magnet. Things stick to it. Anecdotes and details" (Hancock 104). Laurence, on the other hand, has said that her short stories have mainly been triggered by events she has experienced or read about, and her novels are the outgrowth from individual characters: it is they who come first, and then "they grow slowly in the imagination until I seem to know them well."⁸ Already the distinction between a fascination with appearances and an absorption by patterns of behaviour is evident in these comments from each writer on her particular type of creative germ. By focusing on *The Diviners* and on two of Munro's stories in which photography figures prominently, we may investigate this distinction more precisely and may discover that it is exactly because of the ambiguity of the photograph—present pastness, unrevealed yet manifest, as Barthes put it—that it is of value to both writers, though in different ways.

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Laurence introduces the first series of photographs in *The Diviners* - the pictures of Morag Gunn and her parents during the period up to Morag's sixth year—by saying that they "never

⁸ Barbara Hehner, "River of Now and Then: Margaret Laurence's Narratives," *Canadian Literature* 74 (1977): 45.

agreed to get lost."⁹ The memories, both accurate and invented, that they evoke are not yet sufficiently a part of Morag for her to let them become shadows in the millpond: "Perhaps they're my totems, or contain a portion of my spirit" (6). The photos, "jammed any-old-how" into a decrepit envelope Christie had found for Morag at the town dump, could have been thrown out even in her childhood because "her skull would prove an envelope quite sturdy enough to retain them" (6), but Morag has not wanted or dared to discard them. More than mere images is at stake: "I keep the snapshots," she says, "not for what they show but for what is hidden in them." They invite imaginative extension: Ian Jeffrey argues that "photographs constantly refer to far more than they show," and that "even as arbitrary fragments taken from time and place they evoke the greater whole from which they are abstracted."¹⁰ In the first of Morag's photographs, the concealment is a physical presence: here she is "concealed in her mother's flesh, invisible," just as surely as "the future weather of sky [and] spirit" is hidden in the look of hope on her parents' faces. As the sequence of snapshots progresses, there is a decreasing amount of time spent on the description of the scene and an increasing emphasis on what "one would not guess from the picture." Words like "presumably," "perhaps," "possibly," and "appears to be," stress the extent to which a reading of these photos is a matter of interpretation, so that the pictures "tell what is behind them" through a continuation of that process of imaginative extension which even a cursory viewing requires.

The third photograph in the series illustrates very clearly how this process of extension works. There are a few lines describing the child behind the gate, play-acting for the photographer, and then, "What is not recorded in the picture is that after Morag's father has taken this picture, he asks her if she'd like to have him help her climb the gate. . . . Morag's father lifts her down from the gate, and they go into their house" (8). There is a move from presenting the still image of the photograph to reconstructing the action of the past: Morag climbs the gate and walks away. But what she walks into is, very specifically, a world of the imagination: "I recall looking at the pictures, these pictures, over and over again, each time imagining I remembered a little more." Her obsession with them is focused precisely upon the issue of imagining, for there is an imbalance for her between her vivid memories of her imaginary friends and her insubstantial memories of her parents. "I cannot really remember my

⁹ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland, New Canadian Library No. 146, 1984) 5.

¹⁰ Ian Jeffrey, "Photographic Time and 'The Real World'," in Jonathan Bayer, *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon, 1977) 86.

parents' faces at all. When I look now at that one snapshot of them, they aren't faces I can relate to anyone I ever knew" (11); but a picture of her spruce-tree playhouse conjures up immediate and lively remembrances of the imaginary characters she played with there—"I remember those imaginary characters better than I do my parents" (12). Morag is hurt by the sense that the imagination may be more real than reality; the story of the book is of her slow growth into a trust that imagined reality has emotional validity. At the beginning of the book, when Morag puts the snapshots into chronological order, she thinks:

As though there were really any chronological order, or any order at all, if it came to that. She was not certain whether the people in the snapshots were legends she had once dreamed only, or were as real as anyone she now knew. (6)

Michel Fabre has pointed out that this passage suggests a deep scepticism about one's power to establish meaning and order, and that the novel may be seen as the process of coming to terms with "the undefined, changing relationship between the real and the fictive" (Fabre 259). At the very end of the novel, the proposition that things both are and are not as the individual perceives them to be is symbolised in the "apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible," of the river flowing both ways; and Morag has come to accept that "everything is improbable. Nothing is more improbable than anything else" (431). The people in the snapshots are neither simply real nor simply legends, but both, in different degrees, at different moments of interpretation; the photographs attest to both the intransigence of their reality and the necessity of interpretative response.

In Alice Munro's story "The Turkey Season," the extension made by the imagination from the central photograph is not into the realm of the fictive in the same way. Rather, Munro stresses the ability to perceive reality through an imaginative awareness of the physical world. Munro's concern with the "thingness" of things is well known; she says in an interview, "Even totally commonplace things . . . are . . . endlessly interesting in their physical reality. . . . they seem to mean something way beyond themselves" (Hancock 101). Though Munro is reticent to specify in what this meaning might consist, she seems to suggest that objects are by nature symbolic, bathed with significance beyond mere functionality; no surface, then, is mere surface, because the more vividly a surface can be seen, the more light shines from it to irradiate, not only itself, but also itself in relation to the world around it. Lorraine McMullen writes that "the use of surface details to reveal the essential [is] a central aspect of

Munro's style."¹¹ In "The Turkey Season" this interest in surfaces focuses upon the impenetrability of a certain face. Within her stories the notion of an image, stilled and passive, is often to be held in tension with that of another image with which it seems to be in contradiction. This particular story centres on the tension between the photograph and the photographer, the image and the other side of the eye.

At Christmas time the barn workers gather to have their photograph taken by the foreman, Herb Abbot; at least, the narrator deduces that he must have been the photographer because he is not in the picture and "he was the one who could be trusted to know or to learn immediately how to manage anything new," like a flash camera. Describing this picture years later the narrator says:

We still wore our working clothes: overalls and shirts. . . . I am stout and cheerful and comradely in the picture, transformed into someone I don't even remember being or pretending to be. I look years older than fourteen. Irene . . . peers out from [her long red hair] with a meek, sluttish, inviting look, which would match her reputation but is not like any look of hers I remember. Yes, it must have been her camera; she is posing for it, with that look, more deliberately than anyone else is. Marjorie and Lily are smiling, true to form, but their smiles are sour and reckless. . . . We are all holding mugs or large, thick china cups, which contain not the usual tea but rye whiskey. . . . I don't need Herb in the picture to remember what he looked like. That is, if he looked like himself, as he did . . . all the times in my life when I saw him except one.¹²

The final pages of Munro's story consist of her narrator's puzzled, adult attempt to define "what was this different look?" which she remembers from that far-distant Christmas when Herb's friend Brian got shouted out of the barn. She rehearses the different stages of explanation through which she has passed: what she thought at the time; what she thought later "when [she] knew more, at least about sex"; and then what she thought later still, when she had "got to a stage of backing off from the things [she] couldn't really know" (74). It is tempting to

¹¹ Lorraine McMullen, "'Shameless, Marvellous, Shattering Absurdity': The Humour of Paradox in Alice Munro," *Probable Fictions* 147.

¹² Alice Munro, "The Turkey Season," in *The Moons of Jupiter* (Markham: Penguin, 1982) 72-73.

hear this last comment in Munro's own voice, so clearly does the concern with appearances echo her own concerns: in the final stage, the narrator of "The Turkey Season" says, "It's enough for me now just to think of Herb's face with that peculiar, stricken look." Herb comes to represent the impenetrable mystery of life which can be grasped only in so far as its appearance is clearly perceived.

As much, and as little, as may ever be known about Herb is present in his face. And the reason that the narrator can remember Herb's face is not that it is in the photograph, but rather that she "studied it hard at the time." The photograph preserves an essential image of everyone in the workplace except Herb, who takes the picture, and the older narrator, who sees herself in the picture "transformed into someone I don't ever remember being or pretending to be." She is stirred by the photo to a remembrance even of the conversations that took place over the mugs of whiskey; but actually for the two central characters in the story, Herb and herself, it is what is *not* in the picture, nor even directly suggested by it, that is most important. The photograph works as a negative to produce the image behind it, the context for it, the other side of the eye: these are more important than what is in it. Here again is evidence that photos "evoke the greater whole"; and yet in this case the importance of the photograph lies in its exclusion of a specific appearance which it therefore conjures up in the observer. "Herb Abbott must have been the one who took the picture": his absence from it speaks of his superior abilities. By acting as a spur to memory, the photo has also necessitated a stepping behind and out in front of itself, a remembering of its occasion as a moment when what may be known is essentially present in what may be perceived.

Faces are the focal point of another photograph in *The Diviners*, but they are used to tell a different story. When Christie Logan, looking for his longjohns, comes across the Battery Book of the 60th Canadian Field Artillery, the "very blurred photographs" show row after row of faraway faces which "all look the same, because no face is clear" (89): Christie can identify neither Morag's father nor himself. Then he tells Morag the story of how Colin Gunn carried him to safety. But much later Prin says, "That Colin . . . he never done that for my Christie. Saved him, like. Or maybe he done it, I dunno. . . . Poor lamb. He would cry, and Christie would hold him" (206). The face of reality is not clear—"It's all true and not true," as Christie remarks about his earlier philosophising (88). What distinguishes the people in the photograph, so far removed in time from the present, is not their recorded faces, which are now all the same, but the tissue of memories the viewer superimposes on the

photograph—and for different people the history will be told in different ways. After reading the “official” version of the Battle of Bourlon Wood, Christie says, “Well, d’you see, it was like the book says, but it wasn’t like that, also. That is the strangeness.” And either interpretation may be justified from the photograph, whose vagueness invites translation according to the point of view of the observer. The mystery of these soldiers’ faces is captured in the absence of physical definition, which necessitates the creation of reality by interpretation.

For Munro, mystery is found, rather, in inescapable physical presence. The last story of *Lives of Girls and Women*, “Epilogue: The Photographer,” deals explicitly with the relationship of mystery and presence. Here Del Jordan’s aspirations as a young novelist are brought into instructive juxtaposition with the real world. Initially she is an idealist whose novel can live only in her mind: “Soon I saw that it was a mistake to try and write anything down; what I wrote down might flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel in my mind.”¹³ She sees her novel as providing a magic antidote to the troubles of the real world by making them appear “unimportant even if true” (204). Her novel, inspired by gossip surrounding the photograph of a past girls’ athletics champion which hangs in the school hall, centres around a nameless photographer whose pictures are often “unusual, even frightening.” People depicted in them are faced with images of themselves prematurely aged or sick, and so “everybody was afraid of him” (205). The photographer is no mere recorder of life, but a sinister interpreter of it. The heroine is fatally attracted to his unsettling power, and her liaison with him causes her downfall and suicide. Del’s own interpretive powers are hardly less unsettling, for her novel is a celebration of decay and desolation; its magic consists not in any beauty or hope but, rather, in its impermeability and completeness within her mind—a vision so powerful that she feels “as if that [imaginary] town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day” (206). But the central revelation of the story is that reality is stranger—and more strangely touched with grace—than fiction. Del’s tea with the actual suicide’s supposedly deranged brother destroys her novel for her, because she can no longer believe in its truth nor keep it separate from the real world of ordinary strangeness. Her fictional heroine suddenly seems much less interesting than the real Marion Sherriff who lived in this house with brown-and-pink wallpaper and a grey painted porch.

Bobby Sherriff talked about rats and white flour.
His sister’s photographed face hung in the hall of

¹³ Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Signet, 1974) 203.

the high school, close to the persistent hiss of the drinking fountain. Her face was stubborn, unrevealing, lowered so that shadows had settled in her eyes. People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum. (210)

Munro is asserting that the photographer does not have the power to unmask mystery, but only to perpetuate it—and in this is art, for the mystery of the real world will only be diminished by the over-zealous desire of the artist to interpret it. When Del first describes Marion's photo, there is no description of the face:

In the picture Marion Sherriff was holding a tennis racquet and wearing a white pleated skirt and a white sweater with two dark stripes around the V of the neck. She had her hair parted in the middle, pinned unbecomingly back from the temples: she was stocky and unsmiling. (203)

For Del, the discovery of the real world is the discovery of the enigma of faces. In one sense, her photograph says "every last thing" about Marion; in another sense, it is "unfathomable." In the photograph, writes Barthes, nothing can be refused or transformed; it is impenetrable because of its "evidential power" (Barthes 91, 106). The only way in which reality can be "held still and held together—radiant, everlasting" is in that kind of art in which "as honest an attempt" as possible has been made "to get at what is really there," in all its mystery and dullness, its depth and its simplicity; and this is the kind of art that Munro most admires.¹⁴ Del, then, learns something about the distinction between good and bad art. The photo in the school hall may inspire a gothic fantasy or a suburban soap opera in the inferior artist, but the one who is true to "what is really there" must accept the shadows in the eyes—the stubbornness—as a veil of mystery, persistent as the hiss of the drinking fountain.

When Sontag refers to the primitive notion of images as partaking in the essence of the thing imaged, she is concerned not so much with the mystery of the image as with the vulnerability of the subject.

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns

¹⁴ Struthers 6.

people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (14)

Where Munro suggests that the reality of the photographed subject is retentive of itself and cannot be possessed by another, Laurence suggests that fear of such possession runs very deep. In *The Diviners* Jules reacts instinctively against Morag's request to take his photograph with Pique. When Morag asks for his reason,

Jules hands the camera back to her, and hitches his belt up around his hips. He tosses back the mane of hair from his forehead and eyes, and laughs a little, warning her. "Search me. Maybe I'm superstitious. Or maybe it's the same as I can't make up songs about myself. Maybe I don't want to see what I look like. I'm going on okay this way. Let's not get fancy about it." (343)

The force in Jules's life is his fierce independence, and he will protect it against the power of the image which suggests a vulnerability and an openness to be interpreted that he will not accept. Moreover, a photographed image of oneself creates awareness of self as other and therefore invites self-analysis: Jules does not want to see what he looks like. Of course it is precisely because Morag does want to see what she looks like, as a being composed from her own past, that she plays her snapshots to herself like tarot cards. "The child is laughing, acting up, play-acting goofily, playing to an audience of one, the picture-taker" (8); and later, "Her head is bent slightly, and she grins not in happiness but in embarrassment" (11). By making use of photographs as a structuring device, Laurence stresses the self-conscious, deliberate nature of Morag's self-examination, as though she herself is now the spectator for whom the child in the pictures is acting.¹⁵ Morag begins to understand and to appropriate the power of the photograph to "possess" its subject. The group of photos of Pique (the one that Jules takes is the last) stands in parallel to the group of photos of Morag as a child at the beginning of the novel. But Morag describes each photo of Pique much more confidently, as a kind of chapter heading to lead into a narration of the significant events surrounding each one (315-43). She is no longer questioning the validity of her imagination, but has come to understand that by describing—naming—the photos she is exerting the power of her own perceptions to order past events.

¹⁵ Rosemary Sullivan, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence," *A Place to Stand On* 76.

This is just that power which Roland Barthes disparages when he chooses to distinguish between "hallucination" and "illusion." For him, photographs have the hallucinatory power of "intractable reality," and the urge to subject them to a "civilised code" of interpretation renders them no more than comfortable illusion (Barthes 119). "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (Barthes 51). This reveals a highly subjective epistemology that stands aloof from public codes of understanding and challenges the individual to live on the edge of madness. Munro, though she shares something of Barthes' belief in intractable reality, sees this rather as a key to sanity. In her story "Simon's Luck" (in *Who Do You Think You Are?*) she suggests that an awareness of the solidity of things, thick and plain as cheap ice-cream dishes, gives to life "a little dry kernel of probity" which works as "a private balance spring" against the extremes of emotion.¹⁶ The otherness of things is, in the last analysis, a safety net which outlasts the rise and fall of individual interpretation and persists in its own mystery. And it is because, within their catholic boundaries, photographs capture the paradoxical nature of reality—the cave and the linoleum, the dullness and the extraordinariness—that Munro finds them so apt for her own vision. For her, reality is, inherently and physically, contradictory, and this is what causes her fascination with the "marvellous investigation of things as they really are" (Hancock 96). Naming, then, becomes a paradoxical activity which clarifies the existence of enigma rather than clearing it away.

This centrality of paradox is related to pictures in a particularly overt way in the story "Changes and Ceremonies" from *Lives of Girls and Women*. Very different pictures may be used to describe one person and all be equally true:

Miss Farris in her velvet skating costume, her jaunty fur hat bobbing among the skaters, always marking her out, Miss Farris "con brio," Miss Farris painting faces in the Council Chambers, Miss Farris floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash River, six days before she was found. Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together—if the last one is true then must it not alter the others?—they are going to have to stay together now.

The Pied Piper; The Gypsy Princess; The Stolen Crown; The Arabian Knight; The Kerry Dancers; The Woodcutter's Daughter.

¹⁶ Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978) 170.

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. (118)

Just as photographs fade but hold an image trapped, so do Miss Farris's operettas. And just as photographs may offer contradictory pictures, so do the images which must remain of Miss Farris. There is no plausible way to hang the images together, but the contradictory nature of reality necessitates living with the paradox of the coexistence of the strange and the familiar. For Munro, life seems best imagined as a series of bubbles, discrete, "shaped with . . . effort, then almost casually set free, to fade"; thus, too, perhaps, her stories themselves. She is finally less concerned with hanging the pictures together than with how honestly each one can hold reality "trapped forever."

Morag's story in *The Diviners*, on the other hand, is the story of how the hanging of pictures together creates a new picture in which one may see the "true value" of the past.¹⁷ In this model of fiction-making, the artist's power is stronger than that of the subject of art, and rightly so: naming creates a fiction of past truth and so "transmutes it into new truth" by which to live (Hegner 53). By the very end of *The Diviners*, after some months of self-examination and of looking at and ordering the images in her mind, Morag has found a new measure of peace. She stands looking into the river that runs both ways past her house:

How far could anyone see into the river? Not far. Near shore, in the shallows, the water was clear, and there were the clean and broken clamshells of creatures now dead, and the wavering of the underwater weed-forests, and the flicker of small live fishes, and the undulating lines of gold as the sand ripples received the sun. Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight.

Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title. (453)

The book suggests that all words are "private and fictional" because all words are an interpretation—this is what Barthes calls the "misfortune, but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure, of language" (Barthes 85). For Morag, an acceptance of this mysterious necessity for fiction makes possible a patterning of life that

¹⁷ Laurence, "A Place To Stand On" 18.

is legitimate and fruitful. She has looked "ahead into the past, and back into the future," like the river, and now the deeper water can be allowed to retain its mysterious darkness without threat. The living and the dead jostle in the shallows, exposed by the sunlight; Morag has reflected upon the jumble of her past and has given present substance to the shadows. Now the waters have been disturbed enough, and the essential ambivalence of the river that flows both ways symbolises the essential ambivalence of the truth that must be created by fiction.

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And so it is apparent that, while Laurence is concerned to decipher a pattern over time, Munro is interested in the unresolvable enigmas of each moment. Both authors are drawn to the analogy between the power of the camera to capture instantaneous images and the nature of perception, which works in short, sharp flashes. But where for Laurence the challenge is in presenting ambivalent reality as something constantly to be reshaped into a personal truth, for Munro reality is incorrigibly plural, and its plurality can most readily be apprehended through paradoxical physical appearances. Because the photograph both invites and defies interpretation, it holds out microcosmically to each of these writers the ground of her fiction-making. It may be that the pictures must be accepted as discrete mysteries, whose validity is to be experienced through a heightened appreciation of their otherness: Barthes' position is congruent with Munro's vision. Or it may be that the pictures must be fictionalised into a pattern that takes account of time: this emphasis on the necessity of narrative context points up the similarities between Sontag's epistemology and the concerns of Laurence. The photograph is the realised image from within the negative "black eye"; and yet, as Sontag asserts, "Photographs do not explain; they acknowledge" (Sontag 111). As a result, they make available to the writer a real past, framed and held out for her to respond to, without predetermining that response. The photograph "cannot say what it lets us see" (Barthes 100); it is the business of the writer to enable us to see more acutely, and to see beneath. Whether this is primarily a spatial or a temporal extension will depend upon the epistemological position of the artist.