Distant Parts of the Self: Narrative Fracture and the Critique of the Feminine Subject in Selected Stories from Alice Munro's *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*

by

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the short stories "A Wilderness Station," "The Love of A Good Woman," "Open Secrets," "Carried Away" and "My Mother's Dream" by Alice Munro in order to demonstrate how their subversion of linear narrative is related to the challenge of constructing the possibilities of a feminine subjectivity. In these stories, fragmented narrative structures represent the self as dual, both culturally defined and as different from the cultural prescription. An introductory chapter places these ideas in the context of W.H. New's fragmentation theory of the short story form as a "system of fracture" and Julia Kristeva's theory of a signifying practice that posits a "questionable subject in process/on trial," as well as Linda Hutcheon's theories of postmodernist fiction. Subsequent chapters relate the fragmented and disrupted forms to the critical concepts of the epistolary narrative, the gaze, and Freud's concept of the uncanny.

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For Nina,

my forever friend

1956 - 2003

Introduction

Munro Writing the Subject

Alice Munro's fiction demonstrates an awareness of the self as both culturally defined and as *different* from the cultural prescription. Munro's fiction is firmly grounded in the subject of women's experience as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives and lovers yet her characters experience a part of themselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other in a paralysis about their own identity. Munro encapsulates this feeling in "Miles City, Montana," where the narrator wants to "hide" from her domestic responsibilities so that she can get busy with her "real" work, "a sort of wooing of the distant parts of myself" (Munro SS 311). In the stories I will concentrate on in this thesis, this duality of experience, as both defined by and outside cultural prescription, is particularly evident in Munro's fragmented narrative structures. These structures represent the feminine subject as a "subject in process/on trial."[1] These fragmented and disrupted forms can be understood by reading these stories in relation to the critical concepts of the epistolary narrative, the gaze, and Freud's concept of the uncanny. My intention is to explore Munro's subversion of conventional linear narrative in relationship to the specific challenge of constructing the *possibilities* of a feminine subjectivity.

While it is essential to clarify that Munro is a writer, not a philosopher, or feminist, or linguist, nevertheless, she expresses the concerns of her time. Although it is not known whether Munro has been influenced by reading theorists, it is my intention to explore her narrative strategies as theory in process. Both W.H. New's

fragmentation theory of the short story form as a "system of fracture" and Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory of a signifying practice that posits a "*questionable* subject-in-process" inform my critical vision. My approach draws on Linda Hutcheon's theories of postmodernist fiction and its relation to language, meaning, and representation. Structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language offer a theoretical framework to meet the needs of this study. In addition to some reference to Munro's past work, I will focus on her more recent fiction, *Open Secrets* (1994) and *The Love of A Good Woman* (1998), in keeping with the notion that her work is generative and evolving. The stories I have chosen for discussion are "A Wilderness Station" (OS), "The Love of A Good Woman" (LGW), "Open Secrets" (OS), "Carried Away" (OS) and "My Mother's Dream" (LGW).

Munro has written seven previous collections of short fiction and one novel, *Lives of Girls and Women.* In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Women* the themes are vintage Munro. "My Mother's Dream" explores the complicated relationship of mother and daughter, territory Munro has laid claim to in earlier work. Here, however, the story is told from an infant's point of view, a variation that suggests the kind of risks these new stories take. Likewise, the sense of mystery and random violence just below the surface of everyday life, a hallmark of Munro's previous fiction, is present in several stories, notably "Open Secrets," a character-based piece in which a woman making custard stumbles upon the truth about the murder of a young girl. The themes are the same, but these stories are longer, darker, more convoluted. These stories take technical risks, ignoring, or working variations upon, the conventions of short fiction. Plots, for instance, consist of clusters of incidents, joined by association, rather than a

chronological sequence of events linked through cause and effect. The title story, "The Love of A Good Woman," is perhaps the best example, a meandering narrative of a murder plot that achieves an extraordinary depth and range. *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman* stand out from Munro's previous works for the way they represent the feminine subject. The particular stories chosen demonstrate what she is doing very well. In addition, they all contain reference to an actual or implied murder, and so they explicitly evoke the "mystery story" genre. Murder mystery, by its very nature, has an intimate relationship with the dead body—there must be a corpse or corpses. In the selected stories under discussion, Munro obliges the reader with both real and imagined corpses, soliciting the reader's attention and desire to solve the "whodunit." Why was the person killed? Who was responsible? These two questions are at the center of our fear of death as something mysterious and random and terrible—the answering of them is also at the center of any good mystery story. Although Munro utilizes some of the conventions of the murder mystery, this results in a series of narrative deferrals or gaps that Munro is not particularly interested in resolving. The participation of the reader is solicited as an attempt is made to understand or solve the mystery. The act of reading becomes active: a production.

In an interview with Graeme Gibson in 1973, Munro describes her writing as "the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something...I suppose I experience things finally when I get them into words" (Munro, "Alice Munro" 243-44). Munro's desire to reproduce her experience as text suggests a process of identity as constructed in language, whether that writing is closely autobiographical, as in Munro's earlier

fiction, or shape-shifted into subjects of the fictive imagination. As reiterated in several interviews, Munro writes almost exclusively about Huron County and the lives of women of her generation as a way of processing her experience—"I write about what I know well"—and demonstrates her awareness of culture as circumscribed and personal. For Munro, however, writing can never simply be an unquestioned means of getting at "real" life.

Much of the criticism that has been published on Alice Munro's fiction has sought to situate her work within a realist tradition. In the first book-length collection on Munro's writing, *Probable Fictions* (1983), Louis MacKendrick describes the "credibility and reality" of Munro's stories as "an exactitude of human feeling and situation [to] which many readers have attested" (MacKendrick 1). However, more recent critics have recognized that while Munro grounds the reader in the knowable world that presents itself as real and true, that world, as Ajay Heble suggests in *The Tumble of Reason*, "reveals itself to be maintaining and undoing reality at one and the same time, operating as both an instance and a criticism of fictional representation" (Heble 4). In her writing, Munro moves away from the conventions of realistic fiction as a straightforward process of mimetic identification and comparison—"things as they are"—to a doubled perspective at once subject/object, surface and depth, ordinary and mysterious.

In Munro's autobiographical novel (or, some would argue, linked short stories) *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) the narrator Del Jordan tells the story of growing up in a small town, struggling to become a writer, an outsider, yet completely enmeshed in the social conventions of her time and place. As Munro "tells her story" in *Lives of*

Girls and Women she engages in a kind of writing that subverts conventions of realism in a metafictional mode of deferral and self-referentiality. As the narrator Del observes, "It's a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come and find it still there" (GW 251). By calling attention to the fact that the reader is reading a text, as she does in many of her stories by foregrounding writers and writing, Munro directs the reader to recognize that the world of materiality is also textual. What emerges from a text is not a fixed meaning, but rather a dialogue of writer and reader, text and context.

Experience never comes into being without representation, as Munro is well aware. If, as structuralism has argued, one is born into a pre-existing network of sign-systems and constituted in and by them, then "identity," either social or sexual, cannot be taken as a self-evident starting point. There is no simple confrontation of human subject and world. Munro appeals to the order of fiction rather than facts in her attempt to construct the "reality" of the feminine perspective. Munro uses the power of language to break open old certainties and generate new ways of speaking/writing that give life to previously unimagined possibilities. What Heble takes to be the most compelling feature of her work is the tension between her interest in delineating a surface reality—a world "out there" which we are invited to recognize as real and true—and her fascination with the very limits of representation, especially in language: "On the surface, these details adhere to a "reality effect"—to borrow Roland Barthes's phrase. By listing trivial details, Munro grounds the reader in a surface reality, in a safe, recognizable world which represents itself as real and true. ...By adhering to the "reality effect," in other words, Munro appears to construct a world which we, as

readers, accept as intelligible. ...It is only by first grounding the reader in a seemingly knowable world that Munro can deconstruct the intelligibility of that world" (Heble 4). In effect, Munro's narrative strategies lead the reader to question *how* one comes to apprehend experience, and therefore puts that experience into question.

Munro's construction of a "knowable" world adheres to what Roland Barthes terms the "reality effect" in that a versimilitude of experience—the "details"—in her narratives assert the reality of recognizable social and cultural structures, specific to a particular time and place. Roland Barthes maintains that reality, to which realism appeals, is an ideological construction. In his first published works, Barthes was concerned with how ideologies or value-systems become encoded in language and in social usages, and thus appear "natural." He called these assumptions "mythologies." In his essay "The Reality Effect,"[2] Barthes describes the "real" as a "fragmented, interstitial descriptive *notation*" (Barthes, "The Reality Effect"15). Barthes argues:

> realist narrative is narrative, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, restricted to "details," and because the most realistic narrative imaginable unfolds in an unrealistic manner...It is the category of the "real," and not its various contents, which is being signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent, standing alone, becomes the true signifier of realism. An "effet de reel," (a reality effect) is produced. (Barthes, "Reality" 16)

For Barthes, not unlike Munro, language is never transparent; it partly creates and gives structure to the world which the individual encounters. It is my assertion that the unresolvable gap between Munro's writing and the reality she attempts to re-present

not only demonstrates that all representation is mediated by language, "where paths of several meanings intersect" (Barthes, "Theory"37), but that, in fact, what mediates Munro's fiction in particular is the notion of a feminine subjectivity.

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon argues convincingly for the historical existence of two differently en-gendered modes of subjectivity: "subjectivity in the Western liberal humanist tradition has been defined in terms of rationality, individuality, and power; in other words, it is defined in terms of those terms traditionally denied women, who are relegated instead to the realms of intuition, familial collectivity, and submission" (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 5). Hutcheon claims, "women must define their subjectivity before they can question it; they must first assert the selfhood they have been denied by the dominant culture" (6). Following Hutcheon's view, in writing of women's experience, Munro initiates an exploration and assertion of the feminine subjective as a realm outside the dominant hegemony. Thematically, Munro's stories overtly align the feminine with notions of "intuition, familial collectivity, and submission," yet Munro deploys narrative strategies and fragmented narrative structures to construct a new kind of feminine subject in which identity, as Jane Gallop advocates, is "continually assumed and called into question."[3]

A Question of Subjectivity

The psychoanalysis of Lacan, influenced as it has been by structuralism, offers a view of the problem of subjectivity by questioning the integrity of the "I." In *Ecrits*, Lacan questions the Cartesian subject's conscious control of the "I," that is, the concept of the autonomous self confronting the outer world. For Lacan, there is no

natural unitary subject: fragmentation is a universal fact of the human subject as demonstrated by his notion of the "mirror stage":

> The *mirror stage*...manufactures for the subject, caught up in the allure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image...to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity. (Lacan, original ellipsis, *Ecrits* 128-9)

The mirror stage involves two recognitions, as Karl Jirgens explains:

> First, the subject as child recognizes its own physical unity in the mirror...The mirror encounter serves as a catalytic function which initiates the development of the ego and a sense of self–awareness. Second, the subject mis-identifies the spectral 'Other' in the mirror as the object of *desire*. This *méconnaisance* or misunderstanding of the mirror image further contributes to the split in the subject's psyche. (Jirgens, *Contemporary Literary Theory* 397)

For Lacan, the mirror stage marks "the imaginary" in which human identity is endlessly fragmented: "It is the nature of desire to be radically torn. The very image of man brings in here a mediation which is always imaginary, always problematic, and that is therefore never completed" (Lacan, *Seminar Book ll* 166). Misrecognition constitutes the ego; unity and autonomy are illusion, fiction.

Simultaneous with the mirror stage is the subject's acquisition of language. Lacan maintains that the subject defines itself on the level of discourse. Lacan revises Freud by contending the conscious and unconscious are not prior to language making, but rather are constructed by language and thereby exhibit all the characteristics of language. Lacan's concept of language is defined "as a metonymic function that is

analogous to the mirror image insofar as words (signifiers) stand in for things (signified), but are not the things themselves...it is through an endless metonymic chain of language that the subject pursues the ever elusive object of desire" (Jirgens 398). In Lacan's view, there is no center of one's self, only a constantly displaced signifier in search of a signified. Language (a system of signs) is our only access to self-construction and through language we are constantly moving away from fusion, from our existence as an extension of our mother's body, toward separation, a state of consciousness that we construct in imitation of the mirror's (the language's) seemingly cohesive image of ourselves. Thus human development is a condition of *lack* or loss; for Lacan it is a "castration," which the human child seeks to correct by identifying with the father.

Lacan's symbolic order, to which the human being has to submit in order to become a speaking subject, is acquired when the child abandons the Imaginary mother-child relationship through the acceptance of the "Law of the Father." The "law" in the Name-of-the-Father is a linguistic phenomenon which serves to socialize the subject. The symbolic is the meaning-centered aspect of language that exists after the child grasps the principle of signification, the Oedipal period when, according to Lacan, the child's realization of sexual difference appears. The acquisition of language based on a system of differences, as the Law-of-the-Father, is constructed on the privileging of the phallus[4] and fails to account for the formation of the female psyche and feminine desire. Female identification with the father can, by this reading of identity, never be as full as the male's, since she cannot take on the power of the phallus. Thus, women's *lack* in language is greater than men's.[5] In *Ecrits*, Lacan has

raised the important issue of subjectivity and language but he has done so from a phallocentric perspective.

Julia Kristeva's theory of the subject as a "subject in process/on trial"[6] (*Desire* 125) offers a new understanding of the dynamics of the Lacanian maternal or the pre-Oedipal term. Kristeva flips over Lacan's axiom that the unconscious is structured like a language to suggest that the text is structured like a psyche. Adopting the term "semiotic" to signify the pre-Oedipal, she argues that language always engages with both the semiotic and the symbolic. According to Kristeva, subjectivity is a constant process of the dialectic between these heterogeneous modalities, a subject in process/on trial between the semiotic and the symbolic.

Kristeva has adapted the Lacanian concept of the symbolic as the realm of signification and law to her theory of semiotics as a "domain of position and judgment" (*Desire* 19). The semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes that displace and condense both energies of the symbolic and the semiotic with their inscription. Kristeva's theory of semiotics considers unconscious patterns of language, the *chora*, in regard to the destabilzation of the *thetic* subject in literature. The semiotic is the rhythmic dimension of language that exists prior to and outside a system of signification, in the pre-Oedipal period of the child's desire for the maternal body (*Desire* 133). For Kristeva, the thetic phase "marks the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic" (*Desire* 240) which allows the dialectic between these two realms. Kristeva's symbolic (like Lacan's own) is founded on repression, on the splitting of the subject into conscious and unconscious, signifier and signified.

Kristeva's "split subject" is divided between conscious and unconscious motivations, that is, "between psychological processes and social constraints" (*Desire* 6).

The condition of possibility of feminine writing is the alteration between the formation of the thetic subject and regression to the pre-Oedipal stage, to the *jouissance* of an as yet undissociated mother (*Desire* 247-48). For Kristeva, femininity is a psychical position, not an essence, an archaic experience that remains available as a *possibility* rather than a substantive identity specific to women. The archaic psychical site of the semiotic is not feminine, for it is situated in the pre-Oedipal phase, i.e. before sexual difference appears.

In her essay "Women Can Never Be Defined," Kristeva writes, "In 'women,' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain 'men' who are familiar with this phenomenon; it is what some modern texts never stop signifying" (Kristeva, *New French Feminism* 137-38). In a later interview, Kristeva identifies Joyce,[7] Mallarmé and Artaud as examples of male writers whose style, the actual dynamics of language, inscribes the archaic relation to the mother. For Kristeva, this recourse to the semiotic for the writer becomes "a question of subjectivity:"

> In aesthetic creation we occupy several positions. Any creator necessarily moves through an identification with the maternal, which is why the resurgence of the semiotic dynamic is important to the act of creation. The question is: do men and women identify in the same way with the archaic mother? (Kristeva, "A Question of Subjectivity—an Interview" *Women's Review* 22)

The difference between men and women, Kristeva claims, is that women identify with the archaic mother differently. The implication for the woman writer is that she writes from a position of risk and vulnerability.

> Psychologically, I would say it's more difficult for women, because a woman is confronted by something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same. Because we are two women. Whereas, for a man, she's an other. For men this identification with the maternal involves a perverse pleasure, whilst for women there are psychotic risks attached. I might lose myself, my identity. (Kristeva, *Women's Review* 22)

Part of the solution to what Kristeva terms the "feminine problematic" is the "desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written" (Kristeva, *Desire* 165), a desire shared by Munro as demonstrated by her fiction. Kristeva refers to what she calls "poetic language"[8] to inscribe this desire.

Kristeva's concept of "poetic language" (first introduced by the Russian formalists) is "distinct from language as used by ordinary communication—but not because it may involve a so-called departure from a norm; it is almost an otherness of language. It is a language of materiality as opposed to transparency...a language in which the writer's effort is less to deal rationally with those objects or concepts words seem to encase than to work, consciously or not, with the sounds and rhythms of transrational fashion" (*Desire* 5). In her essay "The Ethics of Linguistics" Kristeva makes claim that *poetic language* (in which the dialectics of the subject are inscribed) is "the object of linguistics' attention in its pursuit of truth in language...what is implied is that language, and thus sociability, are defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval,

dissolution, and transformation" (Kristeva *Desire* 25). The importance of this aspect of language, and important to this study of Munro's fiction, is that here the social code is destroyed and renewed. This arena is the "semiotic disposition" or "signifying practice."

> I shall call signifying practice the establishment and countervailing of a sign system. Establishing a sign system calls for the identity of the speaking subject within a social framework, which he recognizes as a basis for that identity. Countervailing the sign system is done by having the subject undergo an unsettling, questionable process; this indirectly challenges the social framework with which he had previously identified, and it thus coincides with times of abrupt changes, renewal or revolution in society. (Kristeva, in *La Traversee des signes*, qtd. in Introduction, *Desire and Language* 18)

Kristeva's theory suggests that subjectivity is a process rather than a fixed identity, constituted by competing and often contradictory meanings,[9] for example, meanings of femininity, individuality and the family—key thematic subjects of Munro's fiction. Kristeva's theory of a signifying practice that posits a "*questionable* subject-in-process" demonstrates for this study a link between narrative form and subjectivity as well as the possibility of alternate forms of storytelling, or, to borrow a phrase from Barthes, the possibility for "demythologizing."

Munro's fictive narrative strategies not only demonstrate a signifying practice in which subjectivity is constructed in language, socially and historically produced, but also create a paradigm of feminine subjectivity that is at once experientially "real" *and* uncertain, disturbing and contradictory. Munro's fragmented narrative strategies

represent a process of identity that attempts to evade any essential notion of "self," creating what Linda Hutcheon describes in *The Canadian Postmodern* as a "doubled act of (literally) 'inscribing' and challenging subjectivity" (Hutcheon 6). In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman* the paradox of rupture and continuity is variously represented in stories that inscribe the feminine subject's discontinuity within the status quo.

Munro and the Story of Genre

Alice Munro is known almost exclusively as a short story writer, and as a result, her reputation as a writer and notions of the short story form constitute a subject often debated by critics. In Frank Davey's essay "Genre Subversion in the English-Canadian Short Story" he identifies the stories of Alice Munro as an "interesting case in point" (331) to describe the resistance of readers to "mixed genre code," a concept he describes as "mixed, blended, blurred, or interplaying genre signals" (Davey 331). Davey cites a review of *Lives of Girls and Women* by James Polk, in which Polk claims, the book consists of "basically unpruned short stories," and nostalgically recalls what he [Polk] considers the "conventional" stories of her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Davey 331-332). Polk's review not only identifies the short story as a "conventional" genre, but also suggests Alice Munro writes as a "conventional" storyteller. Davey describes the conventional, or canonical, model of the short story in terms of an "implicit short-story contract" (325):

> the text will produce a recognizable but independent world, include a single recognizable character, be brief, or at least entail only a single reading session,

> and that it will display some structural unity or logic, show its character in a situation about which the reader can experience concern, and resolve this situation in a manner which instructs the reader in how to interpret the preceding text, yet also leave a ponderable residue of resolution. (Davey 325)

Davey echoes Edgar Allen Poe's dictum that a short story should strive for a "single effect." Munro's later short stories are counter to the presumed expectations of closure and coherence described by Davey. Munro engages in an open form that defers story and meaning, making re-invention possible.

In her essay "What is Real" Munro links her writing process to the variousness of life, and demonstrates an open challenge to conventions of linear narrative: "I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat divisions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth; and settle here and there, stay in it for awhile" (Munro, "What Is Real" 332). As Nathalie Foy observes, in her later work Munro is "reproducing her sense of fiction making" (Foy, *ECW* 149). As Foy describes it, discontinuity threatens to unravel the narrative thread of stories in *Open Secrets*, stories that "splinter, unravel, proliferate," yet, as demonstrated in "Vandals" (OS), "the story does not collapse when the thread unravels; it just diverges and then continues in parallel lines" (Foy, *ECW* 149). In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*, Munro's narrative strategies of discontinuity threaten to rupture the conventions of the short story form, opening up new potentialities in genre. A complete discussion of Munro's short fiction requires a corresponding examination of the Canadian short story.

In *Dreams of Speech and Violence,* W.H. New examines the short story form in Canadian literature as a "system of fracture." A basic assumption of New's fragmentation theory is that "conventional theories of short fiction impose a dominant set of expectations (of 'wholeness,' 'unity,' 'nation') on literary form" (New x). According to New, characteristic in the development of the short story in Canadian literature from the nineteenth century to the present are breaks from "conventional" theories in a "move away from the dominance of received cultural forms...that consequently allowed speech through forms of fracture" (New x). Situating Canada and New Zealand on the "margins" of a British imperial center and dominant cultural forces (United States and Australia), New questions how marginality affects language and observes:

> Repeatedly, writers in Canada and New Zealand have declared their desire to tell "real" stories. While this notion begins in documentary, it changes its impulse as the societies also change. Characteristically, writers in these two societies tell their stories by indirect means...The open, broken forms of the short story constitute a generic opportunity for authentic speech.
>
> (New, *Dreams* x)

New's post-colonial view of the fragmentation theory points to the challenge of having to use the existing language, of having to disrupt or do "violence" to "the codes and forms of the dominant language in order to reclaim speech for oneself" (New, x).

New describes the "cultural flux" of the 1960s and 1970s—the time when Munro was becoming a recognized writer—as a time when "the art of fragmentation came into its own:"

> There were some who denied the existence of Canadian culture; there were others who claimed it existed only to so narrowly define it as to leave out most Canadians or so widely define it as to include everyone else. But the multiplicity was the common denominator: multiculturalism, bilingualism, regionalism—all isms (even separatism) were asserting the need to accept variation....And the fiction that took the culture as at least one level of its subject...sought a generic method for expressing the shifting multiple set. (New, *Dreams* 96)

An "ism" not directly referred to in the above quote, and one that had a profound effect on women during this time of "cultural flux," is feminism. While New's definition of the Canadian art of fragmentation emphasizes the simultaneity of the "shifting multiple sets," it is obviously important to include feminism in order to fully describe the tensions between these multiple sets in constructions of the gendered individual. Adopting a form that emphasizes multiplicity, fragmentation and discontinuity—"a system of fracture"—women write from a position of marginality within a dominant set of expectations, thus simultaneously accommodating and subverting traditional paradigms of genre and gender in narratives that implicate the feminine subject. As New suggests, and as Munro's short fiction demonstrates, "the story turns marginality to its own purpose. Obliqueness and discontinuity sound verbal alternatives to the closed values of the status quo" (New x).

Linda Hutcheon echoes W.H. New in *The Canadian Postmodern* where she advances the notion that English-Canadian writing reflects Canada's status as a "borderline case"[10] whereby the facts of its social and cultural marginality have seemingly engendered a postmodern point-of-view. Thus, Canadian writers "may be

primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their history," which she calls the "ex-centric" (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 4). She further argues the ex-centric aligns Canadian with feminism: "I know I am not alone in suggesting a parallel analogy here between the position of women writers (anywhere) and Canadian writers [both men and women] working in English. In both cases there is a necessary self-defining challenging of the dominant traditions (male; British/American)" (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 5). In making a strong analogy between women's political position and the Canadian, Hutcheon quotes Lorna Irvine, who believes that the female voice "politically and culturally personifies Canada" (Irvine, qtd. in *The Canadian Postmodern* 5). According to W.H. New, women's writing in Canada, using modes of expression current with historical context, has rebelled "against ignorance, against limitations on the structures of language as well as against those on women's options in life" (New, *Dreams* 87).

Like any other text, Munro's fiction is produced within and determined by its social context. The political resonance of Munro's fiction is strongly felt in stories that reproduce, subvert, and otherwise engage with the dominant and marginalized cultural scripts of the social order. In a 1995 interview, Munro's comments possibly belie a political agenda when she defends the generic discontinuities in *Open Secrets:* "As long as the stories disturb people or point to the ways in which they should be dissatisfied with the status quo, then I assume I've done my job" ("A National Treasure" *Meanjin* 230). Munro's fiction is political, but is politically ambivalent, doubly encoded as both critique and complicity, undermining any fixed position.[11]

Reading Munro

Munro's narrative strategies render the power of words visible, and the struggle with them and against them is also made visible in a metafictional mode of self-referentiality, an engagement that implicates a reader imagined by the text. Munro's early stories (particularly "Home" and "The Ottawa Valley"[12]), as J.R. (Tim) Struthers writes, "are not just complex psychological fiction but fiction that investigates itself, self-referring fiction, stories about storytelling—metafiction" (Struthers, "Alice Munro's Fictive Imagination" 103). Struthers identifies the use of epilogue—most obviously in "Epilogue: The Photographer" in *Lives of Girls and Women*—as a common device in Munro's handling of narrative time and structure, a strategy that "resembles two levels of plot" (Struthers, "Alice Munro's Fictive Imagination" 108). Struthers identifies the most consistent and effective use of this device in the stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* where, notably, the disrupted chronology is emphasized by structural breaks in the actual spacing on the page. Here, Munro introduces the metaphor of space as literal whereby the medium of production (material look, graphic signs on the page) is put into play with the story. The result, as Linda M. Leitch also argues, "is Munro's closest approximation to a completely integrated, free, open, pure, or total form" (Struthers 109).

Munro's early stories increasingly give way to the stories in *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman* that thematize and actualize the very processes undertaken by both writer and reader. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon writes, "reading and writing are both active, creative exercises and always have been; it is perhaps merely the degree of self-consciousness regarding their quasi-parallel natures that has

increased. In metaficiton the reader or the act of reading itself often becomes a thematized part of the narrative situation, *acknowledged* as having a co-producing function" (Hutcheon, original ellipses, *Narcissistic* 37). Hutcheon explains the "life-art connection" in metafiction: "this 'vital' link is re-forged on a new level—on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told). And it is the new role of the reader that this is a vehicle of change" (3). In Hutcheon's analysis of "a textual self-consciousness" (4), explicit demands are made upon the reader, as a co-creator, in which process is made visible; however, no two readers will form images or fill in the blanks in precisely the same way. The paradox of the reader is the two-way pull between the demands of engagement in co-creation, and the fact that this world must be acknowledged as fictional artifice. The text's own paradox is that it is "both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader"—in effect, a reader imagined by the text (Hutcheon 7).[13]

In *Narcissistic Narrative,* Hutcheon further describes metafiction as "bringing the formal language issue into the foreground, into the thematized content itself," (88) and emphasizes the close connection in metafiction between detective plots and language: "Detective plots...function as self-reflexive paradigms, making the act of reading into one of active 'production,' of imagining, interpreting, decoding, ordering, in short constructing the literary universe through the fictive referents of the words. Reader and writer share the process of fiction-making in *language*" (86; original emphasis). In both *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*, Munro chooses the familiarity of the detective plot, adopting a story form that compels its readers to participate in the narrative's interpretative and re-interpretative process. Literary conventions act as tacit

agreements between readers and authors to accept certain givens while reading. Genres are not just classificatory devices; they also enable the reader to orient herself and to understand the context in which she must interpret the work. The generic conventions of mystery reading—the process of picking out clues, and using them to fill in the narrative gaps and blanks—incite the reader to participate, "to accept responsibility for the act of decoding, the act of reading" (Hutcheon *Narcissistic* 39). The appeal of detective fiction is in the reader's attempt to order experiences, to transform a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more complete understanding. Munro's narrative strategies rupture the strong conventions the reader expects "in order to read the work, to participate in the case" (72). Munro reworks the conventions of mystery reading, based on the reader's expectations of the genre, by deploying a series of narrative deferrals, or gaps, accessible by implication yet never "solvable." As Mark Levene acknowledges, Munro has no interest in reconciling "the gaps, the secrets, the parallels, the possibilities...they inhabit altered spaces within the narrative to which we accord our own sense of alternatives" (Levene 855). Detection becomes both a search for a perpetrator and a metaphor for the process of interpretation associated with the act of reading within the instability of language. Munro uses the conventions of detective fiction in such a way that the act of reading becomes one of active participation, of "production."[14]

In order to comprehend the language of fiction, the reader must share with the writer certain recognizable codes—social, literary, linguistic. Kristeva provides a model of reading that emphasizes historical and intertextual resonances as recognizable codes. Kristeva advocates a reading of what she calls the

"translinguistic," by which she means the text's dialogue along horizontal and vertical axes with its readers, writers and contexts (*Desire* 69). The horizontal axis is a transaction between the writer and the reader and involves the linear movement of narrative through the coordinates of textual time and space. The vertical axis involves the space and time that the reader and writer occupy as they inscribe and interpret what Kristeva calls the "subject in process" constituted through the "signifying practice" of the text and its dialogues with literary, social and historical intertexts. For Kristeva, a spatialized strategy of reading narrative allows for the visualization of the text-in-process, the text as a dynamic "productivity," an "operation" (*Desire* 36-37). What emerges from a text is not "a *point* (a fixed meaning)" but rather a dialogue of writer and reader, text and context (65).

Kristeva offers one model of reading important to this study. Munro offers yet another. In "What is Real?" Munro describes her approach to writing short stories as a process analogous to reading: "I won't try to explain what fiction is, and what short stories are...but what short stories are to me, and how I write them...I will start by explaining how I read stories written by other people. For one thing, I can start reading them anywhere; from beginning to end, from end to beginning, from any point in between and in either direction" (Munro "What is Real"332). Munro's comments on the disruption and discontinuity of her writing as being co-extensive with her reading process resonate with Hutcheon's view of the book as a material object: "The book is a material object; it can be opened and closed at will. It can be read in bits, violating its temporality; it can be *re*read in part or whole, violating its linearity. It moves with the reader and is still when he abandons it. This material freedom has its analogue in

the imaginative realm" (Hutcheon *Narcissistic* 152). Both Munro and Hutcheon address the dimensions of reading as a process parallel to writing as an imaginative creative act. When confronted with a violation of temporality and linearity the "unsettled reader" is invoked. In Hutcheon's view,

> the unsettled reader is forced to scrutinize his concepts of art as well as life values. Often he must revise his understanding of what he reads so frequently that he comes to question the very possibility of understanding. In doing so he might be freed from enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set patterns of thought and imagination. (Hutcheon *Narcissistic* 139)

In a 1995 interview, Munro comments on *Open Secrets*: "I want these stories to be open. I want to challenge what people know. Or expect to know. Or anticipate knowing. And, as profoundly, what I think I know" ("A National Treasure" *Meanjin* 227). It is particularly through her narrative strategies that violate temporality and linearity, what Lawrence Mathews calls her "art of disarrangement,"[15] and especially through an unsettling resistance to closure, that Munro disturbs the reader's equilibrium. Munro identifies "an imagined ideal reader" when she addresses the negative reception to the generic challenges of *Open Secrets*: "The stories in *Open Secrets* aren't about what they seem to be about. Clearly some people find this quite disconcerting....Certainly I'm grateful for readers, but my response to her [the reader] was that we never had a contract. When I write there is a reader there for me, an imagined ideal reader, someone I'm definitely talking to, but no writer can be handcuffed by reader expectations" ("A National Treasure" 225). In the same interview, Munro makes the assertion that "form is never stationary or static," and

continues, "Much of the material might appear to be familiar but the security that familiarity offers the reader is illusory. For some first-time readers of my work, these stories must appear quite strange or fragmented indeed. Quite disjointed" ("A National Treasure" *227).*

Terrible acts of willed or accidental violence are thematically central to the stories in *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman,* a narrative strategy comparable to Kristeva's "signifying practice" in which the subject undergoes "an unsettling, questionable process" (Kristeva *Desire* 18). New's challenge of having to disrupt or do "violence" to "the codes and forms of the dominant language in order to reclaim speech for oneself'(New x) is literally realized in Munro's fiction. In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman,* Munro invites the reader to move freely in dangerous places they have not been before, to know life as volatile, and capable of movement in multiple directions.

Summary

The stories in *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman* take flight from Munro's earlier fiction as she creates in her writing a new potentiality and narrative space between the "real" and the invented world to construct a new kind of feminine subject—a movement into different linkages or new alignments that subvert dominant structures of genre and gender. Munro's fiction evokes certainty, the already known, and the unexpected, an element of vulnerability and threat that is unsettling and undecidable. Munro sees openness to risk, to movement, as indissociable from the discontinuous experience of the feminine subject. Hers is a language of space, an

implicit structure that exists as an opportunity to explore the subjective.[16] In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman,* Munro's narrative strategies are complex and demonstrate an increasing fascination with the spatial as the central element in her fiction. Munro presents the multiplicity in language and self through ruptures, holes, spaces in the text,[17] what Louisa in "Carried Away" senses as "sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations" (OS 50). The conspicuousness of parallel or multiple lives, that is, narratives presented as particular sections with their layered stories, "provide a territory, a space, in which figures appear, disappear and re-form in different shapes" (Levene 854). Rather than showing a narrative unravel, Munro often focuses on what holds a story together. Her writing calls attention to itself not to underscore disruption or narrative excess, but to note the narrative strategies—the conditions and contingencies—that allow the pieces to come together. This is not to suggest that Munro's fictional space reproduces the modern/modernist image of fragmented wholes and its adherence to patterns of unity. Munro's narrative strategies and primarily fragmented narrative structures, or "art of disarrangement," ally the seemingly endless possibilities of intersecting or parallel stories with the activity of reading in general, a stance of communicability and legibility that creates a new level of possibility in form and its experience. Munro's short fiction is in keeping with New's emphasis on fragmentation rather than connectedness; a definition of the Canadian short story's art of fragmentation that emphasizes the simultaniety of "shifting multiple sets" as a vehicle for the representation of both complicity with and criticism of the status quo.

In the first chapter I examine the theoretical implications of the epistolary form in constructing the feminine subject in "A Wilderness Station" (OS). "A Wilderness Station" begins with the collecting of material remote in time, letters that span over one hundred years, a historical method of gathering fragmentary evidence that does not have to smooth contradictions and ambiguity into conventional narrative, but instead leaves much of the work to the readers, denying them an authoritative voice; ultimately the complete story is left unknown. Munro uses the imprecision of history to create a narrative of uncertainty in which the author refuses to assure "what really happened" in the death and probable murder of Simon Herron. In "A Wilderness Station" Munro figures a feminine subject with a shifting, ephemeral nature, a "nomad" rather than an overcoded and fixed subject, in Kristeva's terms, a *questionable* subject in process/on trial. As epistolary, "A Wilderness Station" acts as a metonymic narrative that does not impose a fixed interpretation but rather invites the reader to an endless process of interpretation. As an epistolary construction, Annie Herron, the protagonist, exists as a verb—fundamentally moving—rather than a noun, and cannot be fixed by the controlling gaze of others, in effect, a subject in process/on trial. Janet Gurkin Altman's *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form* provides a theoretical framework to meet the needs of this study.

My second chapter examines the theoretical implications of the critical concept of the gaze in constructing the feminine subject in "The Love of A Good Woman" (LGW). "The Love of A Good Woman" is a murder mystery written as two seemingly different stories that focus, finally, on the principal relationship between a dying woman, Mrs. Quinn, and her nurse, Enid. In addition to Foucault's notion of the

medical gaze examined in this second chapter, Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze provides critical insight into the relationship between the viewer and the viewed in the representation of the feminine subject as a subject in process. In film, the "gaze," as Mulvey's work suggests, posits a male viewing position of the female as object. This voyeuristic dynamic exposes the way in which the viewer's gaze may be constructed to enforce hidden assumptions or authorize conclusions that appear natural. In the second situation of the story, narrated from the Enid's consciousness, "The Love of A Good Woman" raises theoretical questions about how the dynamics of the gaze are implicated in the construction of feminine identity, in a relationship that serves to naturalize assumptions about the dying body and the embodied subject. This chapter also introduces Kristeva's theory of the abject. Materiality and corporeality emerge in Kristeva's work as necessary conditions of subjectivity that the subject must nonetheless disavow in order to preserve the illusion of stability, unity and wholeness. The threat that the dying Mrs. Quinn poses to Enid can be framed, in Kristeva's terms, as the threat of the abject, of "death infecting life" (Kristeva, *Horror* 4).

In the third and last chapter I consider the theoretical implications of the relationship between the subversive elements of Freud's theory of the uncanny and the representation of the feminine subject. I look at the ways in which the feminine subject, as a subject in process/on trial, is constructed through the uncanny sense of experience Munro provides in "Open Secrets"(OS) "Carried Away"(OS) and "My Mother's Dream"(LGW). Hélène Cixous's critique of Freud's essay provides critical insight into the subversive function of the uncanny. The uncanny, as Cixous acknowledges, exists only in relation to the familiar and normal. For Cixous, however,

the uncanny is defined by its *relationality* in that it subverts any representation of a unified reality. It is "a relational signifier...for the uncanny is in effect *composite*, it infiltrates itself in between things, in the interstices, it asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity" (Cixous, quoted in Jackson, 68). Adopting a form of fragmentation, Munro's narrative strategies subvert unities of time, place and character, linking thematic qualities and formal qualities to dissolve closed structures. The uncanny sense of experience Munro provides asserts a gap in the "real" lives of the feminine subjects who must negotiate a world of willed or accidental violence. The gaps expose what Shari Benstock calls the "cracks and crevices of the female psyche" (Benstock 29). This chapter introduces Benstock's theory of the site of the *seam* between the unconscious and the conscious to make it yield fissures of discontinuity, "the gap (the 'crack') of the unconscious...a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity" (Benstock 29). This division, Benstock asserts, "cannot be healed; identity itself rests in this division" (Benstock 31). In addition to the theoretical implications of the uncanny, Benstock's "site of the seam" provides a model to explore the subject in process/on trial.

Part of my argument throughout the thesis is that while Munro's stories use the mystery genre, these same stories challenge the key mystery conventions. Munro re-works the conventions of mystery reading, based on the reader's expectation of genre, by deploying a series of narrative deferrals, or gaps, accessible by implication but never "solvable." What becomes clear in this discussion is that the reader must, as Hutcheon insists, "accept responsibility for the act of decoding, of reading" (*Narcissistic* 39).

Notes to Introduction

[1] Feminist critics have written variously on the issue of feminine subjectivity in Munro's fiction, and in doing so have raised critical issues of gender and genre that inform this study. Barbara Godard sets the agenda for feminist criticism of Munro in "Heirs of The Living Body" (1984), which explores a female aesthetic. Godard raises issues of female subjectivity and women's desire when she asks, "How to write as a woman?" For Godard, in women's fiction, "the linguistic body is traversed by the solid body of the writer." Godard asserts, "Munro is in quest of a body experienced by women as subject of their desires not as object of men's desires, and of the words and literary forms appropriate to this body" (Godard 43). Godard terms women's experience of language as "double talk," as lived experience plus the conventions of language and literature, a "difference" that challenges meaning. Godard supplies a new context for reading Munro in which difference and identity are explored simultaneously (Godard 44), an endeavour continued in this study.

In *Dance of the Sexes* (1990), Beverly Rasporich addresses the "feminist possibilities" of Munro's art (viii), but fails to get close to the subtleties of Munro's recent work. Rasporich examines the female romance fantasy, women's quest for independence, and a version of "writing the body." In *A-Mazing Space,* Smaro Kamboureli provides a more theorized and exploratory reading of the female body as "audience and performance" in which she claims a space for Canadian women writers "writing in the feminine person which presents the feminine body as sign" (Kamboureli 31). Kamboureli focuses on Munro's work to illustrate her concern with feminine language and the body: "Specifically, I want to propose that the feminine body and the ways in which it is inscribed exemplify, perhaps more than anything else, the semiotic nature of women's writing" (Kamboureli 32).

Helen Hoy, in "Unforgettable, Indigestible Messages" (1991) analyzes with greater precision Munro's scrutiny of female romantic fantasies within her representations of everyday reality, where reality proves more various than the human constructs to contain it. In *Mothers and Other Clowns* (1992), Magdalene Redekop emphasizes repetitions and transformations of themes common throughout Munro's writing. Redekop investigates the genre of women's fictive autobiography and the importance of carnivalesque and comedy as new ways of thinking about autobiographical form. Writing becomes a kind of circus performance that makes space for figuring female subjectivity.

The general stance toward Munro criticism is not that one is necessarily replacing what has been said, but multiplying the forces at work in the field of interpretation. It is my intention to contribute to this field as part of a dialogue of Munro's fiction, and to the specific discussion of feminine subjectivity in her work.

[2] Originally published as "L'effet du réel," in *Communications*, 11 (Seuil, Paris, 1968), pp.84-89.

[3] Jane Gallop holds the Lacanian view "that any identity will necessarily be alien and constraining. I do not believe in some 'new identity' which would be adequate and authentic. But I do not seek some form of liberation from identity. That would lead only to another form of paralysis—the oceanic passivity of identification. Identity must be continually assumed and called into question" (Gallop *Reading Lacan* xii).

[4] See Lacan, "The signification of the phallus," in *Ecrits*, pp.281-91.

[5] Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan* is a reading of Lacan's *Ecrits* that facilitates feminist considerations of a number of Freudian/Lacanian theories; see also Grosz's *Lacan.*

[6] See Kristeva, "From One Identity to Another" *Desire* pp. 124-47; also "Motherhood According to Bellini" *Desire* pp. 237-70.

[7] In his essay "James Joyce and Alice Munro," W.R. Martin provides evidence for "Joycean influence" in the early works of Alice Munro. In a comparison of *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *The Dubliners*, Martin remarks on "similarities in intention, theme, feeling and imagery"" and claims that, "it is remarkable that most of the stories in *Dance of The Happy Shades* deal with lives that are mean, or barren, or—because circumscribed by poverty, provincialism or other circumstances—unfulilled"

(120). Dublin, Joyce's "centre of paralysis," is aligned with Munro's Jubilee. Martin goes on to examine the obvious between Munro's first novel *Lives of Girls and Women,* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "both novels are particularly revealing—each perhaps breaking new ground in fiction—about the adolescence and the coming to sexual awareness and maturity of the individual who is an artist in a society not especially sympathetic to artists. The difference is that one is about coming to manhood, and the other about coming to womanhood. Obvious points, but important" (125). Although both Joyce and Munro write a *bildungsroman,* their protagonists are thinking out their place in the scheme of things from a differing gender perspective. While Joyce goes on to write the more radical *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake,* Munro continues to write of women's experience as being both defined by and outside cultural prescription.

Common to Munro's writing and the writing of the male writers Joyce, Mallarmé and Artaud, is the ability to defamiliarize things, to show them in a new, unexpected way—on the level of language, on the level of content, challenging accepted concepts and ideas, and on the level of literary forms.

[8] For a full discussion of "poetic language" see Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language,* pp. 13-106.

[9] E.D. Blodgett, commenting on a key story, "The Moons of Jupiter (1978), describes Munro's fiction making as the "art of accommodating contradictions" (Blodgett *Alice Munro* 126). Blodgett astutely observes: "Her question as an artist is: How is the world to be understood, and is it possible, finally, to do so [understand the world]" (6).

[10] Marshall McLuhan once called Canada a "border line case"—"Canada: The Border Line Case," in *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, ed. David Staines. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972 pp.226-48.

[11] Hutcheon's definition of the postmodern in "Coda. Incredulity toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms" (266) in Mezei, 262-267.

[12] "Home" was published separately in 1974. Punctuated by italicized passages which comment on what she has just written, Munro visibly challenges genre, convention, and any knowable version of "truth,"

[13] The implied reader is a term developed by Wolfgang Iser to describe the interaction between text and reader, and designates the active participation of the reader in the reading process. In *Narcissistic Narrative,* Hutcheon draws on Iser's methodology to provide a vocabulary in which to discuss the functions of the reader who "concretizes" the text and whose role is also "thematized" and "actualized" within the text itself (6). For further discussion of the implied reader, see Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser*, 1972. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1972.

[14] E.D. Blodgett claims that Munro's fiction is "a burden" for the reader. In discussing *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Blodgett identifies Munro's narration as a "problem" in that "it assumes the shape of exploration, and the burden of the reader is knowing how to access the discovery" (16).

[15]Lawrence Matthews describes Munro's fiction as "the art of disarrangement" in his essay that focuses on *Who Do You Think You Are?*, showing how in that collection "art not only bears false witness to life, but we tend (or at least Rose does) to impose equally mendacious aesthetic patterns on our own experience" (Mathews 184). Matthews quotes a passage at the end of "Simon's Luck" from a suicide scene Rose is acting, in a television series: "People watching trusted they would be protected from predictable disasters, also from those shifts of emphasis that throw the story line open to question, the disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions" (Munro, WDY 173). Rose's life has many such "disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions," reminding us that, as Matthews describes the art of disarrangement, "any significant truth that literature delivers is a partial and provisional one" (Mathews 192). Mathews's essay, to which I am indebted, identifies a new direction in Munro's writing toward what Rose senses in her own acting ability as "always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't and wouldn't get" (WDY 205). "The value of the art of disarrangement," as Mathews claims, "lies in its continual commentary on its own tentativeness, in the

face of life's complexity and mystery" (Mathews 193). *Open* Secrets and *The Love of A Good Woman* continue Munro's engagement in this endeavour, and, as Mathews also predicts, "will prove to be of enduring interest in her work" (Mathews 193). Mathew's essay attests to Munro's fiction making as an open and on-going process of *potentiality* in both subject and structure—a continuity of both focus and purpose.

[16] In a 1982 interview with Munro, Geoff Hancock describes fictional space as "the opposite of texture...it's the kind of floating quality in a story that gives it drama. It's something that just makes a story hang there in perfect control," and identifies Munro's fiction as "that extraordinary balance between texture and space" (Hancock, "An Interview with Alice Munro" 96-97).

[17] In 1972, Munro expresses to John Metcalf her appreciation of his technique of "leaving spaces. . .of letting things float a bit" (Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro" 58). For Katherine Mayberry, these disjunctions serve as moments of "narrative failure" in Munro's fiction: instabilities that disrupt narration (Mayberry 532).

CHAPTER ONE

"Annie the Nomad": The Epistolary Construction of the Ideal Poststructuralist Subject in "A Wilderness Station"

"A Wilderness Station" is an epistolary story that spans a hundred years, during which time letters are sent, unsent, intercepted and returned, revealing not only gaps in time and space and between individuals, but also between "what is known" and "not known" about a death in the mid-nineteenth-century Ontario wilderness.[1] While the epistolary form offers the possibilities of the conventional short story "unity of impression," with its reliance on first person narration and emotional revelation, it is also structurally fragmented by the constantly shifting point of view represented by diverse writers and readers of letters. In "A Wilderness Station" this effect is exaggerated by reference in the story to letters that have been omitted from the series, in addition to reference to intercepted letters that did not reach their intended recipients. While all the letters refer to a single incident—the death of Simon Herron—they offer multiple versions of the events that lead up to the death, diffusing whatever unity the subject might have offered to a conventional story. Instead, the focus of the story is on Simon's widow, Annie Herron, whose role in the death of her husband is the enigma that that solicits the reader's attention and desire. None of the textual versions of Annie is commensurate with another; the multiple versions of Annie's personality and her actions represented in the letters are radically contradictory, and none has authority. Annie is truly a subject in process, whose textual selves refuse to resolve themselves into a single unified entity. Interestingly,

there is a desire on the part of the reader to assume that Annie, the unreliable narrator of multiple versions of Simon's death, will ultimately offer the clues that will solve the "whodunit." Annie is given "authority" by being the primary subject in every letter, as well as the primary suspect. The reader looks to Annie for the "truth" in her capacity as an eyewitness to Simon's murder. In Annie's story, the subject is truly "on trial," as the reader struggles to determine whether she herself is guilty of her husband's death. By choosing the epistolary form, Munro is able to complicate the narrative process as each version of Simon's death is replaced by another, equally probable, version. Each version also suggests not only a different murderer but also a different perception of Annie, the protagonist. Was Simon's death really an accident, as his brother George claims, or did George or Annie, Simon's wife of two months, murder him? Munro creates the quintessential mystery plot by writing letters that inform, defer, contradict and support the "real" story.

The series of letters and a newspaper account of the death of Simon Herron are assembled as a text by an unknown third-person researcher/narrator. Coral Ann Howells identifies this researcher/narrator as the recipient of the last letter, a "Mr. Leopold Henry" of Queens University, Kingston (Howells, *Alice Munro* 125). However, with no explicit editorial framing device the letters are "received" by the reader as an unmediated physical past consisting of "authentic voices." There is no privileged witness; no one unifying perspective orders the point-of-view. Munro's narrative technique approximates that of omniscient third-person narration but, as epistolary, lacks the central organizing authority a narrator provides. With no governing subjectivities, each section is a separate fragment colored by character. The

murder mystery, with its emphasis on various subject positions, is constructed entirely around incompatible descriptions of the same phenomenon that is Annie.

In "A Wilderness Station" Munro creates a feminine subject with a shifting, ephemeral nature, a "nomad" rather than a fixed subject. Munro presents Annie through a prism of subjectivity in letters that provide a multiplicity of readings—a narrative of "flux and process."[2] Annie derives her identity metonymically as the subject in a long line of writing that she is moving away from, from an uncertain beginning to an unforeseeable end. No real boundaries can be drawn around her: even as the writers of the letters attempt to describe her, Annie is slipping metonymically away. Paradoxically, Annie's character expresses a desire to "tack on," a desire to follow multiple narrative tacks, analogous to the function of the supplement.[3] This desire to supplement does not allow the narrative to center on any one identity for Annie because it denies that such a thing exists. Ultimately, Annie demonstrates the extent of the constitutive force of discourse, and the capacity to move against and beyond the very forces that shape her. Within this context, Munro's narrative exhibits affinities with the work of several poststructuralist and postmodern theorists.

Epistolary narrative is by definition a fragmented narrative. Discontinuity is inherent in the epistolary form, and affords interesting possibilities for elliptical, allusive writing, the creation of suspense, and the juxtaposition of contrasting points-of-view or episodes. In structuring "A Wilderness Station" as an epistolary narrative, Munro exploits both continuity and discontinuity, asking her readers to perceive both coherence and fragmentation simultaneously. "A Wilderness Station" is divided into four untitled sections of dated letters that draw attention to lapses in time and

reversals, yet their sequencing effects an illusion of continuity that engenders and maintains narrative. The more fragmented and disconnected that narrative appears, the more actively the outside reader seeks to discover the connections in order to "solve the plot." The reader is called upon to act as detective-collator.

In epistolary narrative the letter serves simultaneously as a text within itself, and as a context informing the letter contiguous to it, a metonymic relationship based on association, connection, and proximity. Although "A Wilderness Station" is unified by a single plot effecting an illusion of a continuous line, the disruption of the temporal line and multiple correspondents create lacunae so that the units[4] punctuate the story rather than constitute the entire action. It is the blank spaces, ellipses (unnarrated time), or what Gérard Genette refers to as "dead time,"[5] that are responsible for shaping the narrative. The space of structural interplay between letters, that is, its spatialization, is the "trace" of the editor/writer who is responsible for narrated time. It is here where authorship is claimed and where epistolary narrative is revealed as a footprint rather than a path, a footprint the reader as detective-collator follows in an attempt to solve the mystery.

"A Wilderness Station" is divided into four untitled sections, the first letter comprising the first section. In the first letter, Munro establishes a social context (race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and religion) from which the narrative unfolds, analogous to Kristeva's "signifying practice" of "establishing of a sign system." The letter, dated 15 January 1852, introduces us to Annie McKillop through the authoritative voice of "Miss Margaret Cresswell, Matron, House of Industry, Toronto." The letter is addressed to Mr. Simon Herron in response to his apparent

inquiry concerning the possibility of his securing a wife from the orphanage. Because his request is sanctioned by an endorsement from a minister, it is taken seriously and Simon is given a "sales pitch" in favour of Annie McKillop, who, we learn, is of "a durable constitution though leaner of frame...a hardy girl...suited to such a life as you can offer, being also free from the silly timidness we often see in girls her age." The Matron assures Simon that Annie was legitimate—"born legitimately of Christian parents and placed in the Home due to parental deaths"—moral—"Drunkenness or immorality were not a factor"—skilled—"She has a waywardness about one eye but it does not interfere with her vision and her sewing is excellent"—and culturally "pure"—"The darkness of her eyes and hair and brown tinge of her skin is not indication of mixed blood, as both parents were from Fife" (191). Annie is presented to Simon and the reader as a commodity. The reader projects, anachronistically, contemporary norms on the past and, as a result, is alerted to the formation of Annie's identity as culturally historical, and is made aware of Munro's authorial challenge to both colonial and gender construction. The recognition of historical context forces the reader to resist absolute judgement: judgement remains conditional and partial, a critical distancing from events.

The first letter initiates a circulation of information that demonstrates the letter's open-endedness as a segment within a chain of narrative. Intrinsic to the epistolary form is the notion of "temporal relativity" in which "the letter writer is writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted" (Altman 122). As demonstrated by this first letter, the past is relative to the present yet preoccupied with the future. Miss Cresswell is responding to a letter never presented to the reader

(although we know Simon was alive at the time of the first letter and later dies, he never "appears" except through his brother George and Annie's conflicting stories); Miss Cresswell ends her letter with "I await your letter." Simon's reply can only be assumed to have reached its destination, Simon and Annie do marry, but this response is never presented. Miss Cresswell's letter demonstrates the time gap between writer and addressee, a formal quality of the epistolary, in a structure of temporal relativity that generates numerous ambiguities and ironies. For example, Simon is only made present by his absence in an approximation of a "ghost." The first letter identifies the fundamental parameters of the epistolary as an open form and demonstrates the boundaries of Miss Cresswell's letter to arrest Annie in a present condition of exile whose future is unknown.

The second section consists of male voices that inscribe the discrepancies between dominant codes and women's experience. This section begins with the "Recollections of George Herron," published in 1907 in the Carstairs *Argus*, Fiftieth Edition, over fifty years after the first letter. This account gives in detail the hardships of nineteenth-century pioneering and the story of the death of George's elder brother Simon in a logging accident. Although it has close formal affinities with the letter or epistolary genre as a verbal medium, George's memoir, as a chronicle of deeds or *res gestae*, has a documentary, evidentiary purpose. The memoir, as an authoritative text, embodies a public discourse structured by class, code and convention. In effect, the memoir presumably functions as a guarantee of historical objectivity with biographical and historical fields of reference. George Herron's personal narrative, his attempt to claim a history, introduces the concept of an autobiographical self that is individuated

and unified. Such a view of subjectivity assumes that the self can be known, a traditional view of autobiography as a self-actualizing process.[6] George's "Recollections" initiate how "A Wilderness Station" dramatizes the way versions of a story are driven by the needs of the storyteller. Whether George is an actor in or witness to the narrated events is not openly disclosed, however, it can be assumed that George is very much aware of his public audience in that his story is published in an anniversary edition of the Carstair's *Argus*.

In the "Recollections of George Herron" Simon is described as a stubborn and hard-working man who makes all the decisions, who prides himself on "going it alone" without help from outsiders. George, and later Annie, are part of his domain and defer to him in silent obedience. George's version of Simon suggests a domineering and potentially cruel paternal figure whose murder may have been justifiable. George verifies both Simon's letter to the Home ("written with the help of Mr. McBain"), and a returned letter to Simon "that came back that there was a girl that might fit the bill" (195), details the reader is given in the first section which help to validate George's story. George goes on to tell of his marriage into the Treece family and of a difficult but comfortable life. He ends his narrative speaking about the changes that have taken place since his days in the bush ("gravel roads in all directions...a railway not a half mile from my farm") and how he "often thinks of the trees I have cut down" (197). Although the reader is not aware of Annie's version of Simon's death at this point in the story, it can be later inferred that the "tree" George cut down was in fact Simon. This is one example of how in "A Wilderness Station" Munro incites the reader to trace back through the details of the story in a process of

reading and re-reading to find the continuity of the story and "solve" the mystery. Of Annie, George writes incidentally, "My brother's wife did not continue in this place but went her own way to Walley" (197). Whereas George's narrative emphasizes the pioneer "ground" in an authorative text, Annie represents the special nature of her "figure" in that ground—the figuration of a feminine subject that both complies with and critiques the paternal metaphor of language and culture.

Annie "walks" out of George's narrative and reappears primarily in a series of letters between the authority figures of "Reverend Walter McBain, Minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of North Huron" and "Mr. James Mullen, Clerk of the Peace, Walley, United Counties of Huron and Bruce," shortly after Simon's death fifty years earlier. In the first letter, dated September 10, 1852, Reverend McBain warns Mr. Mullen of Annie's imminent arrival in Walley and writes that it is his "duty to tell you who and what she is and her history here since I've known her" (197). McBain considers Annie as "a soul in my charge" (199), an alliance seemingly Annie rejects: "She stopped appearing at services" (198). In McBain's version of Annie, he describes a distraught and willful widow who has lost her faith and alienates herself from her community to live like an animal in the wilderness: "When I visited her the door was open and it was evident animals came and went in her house. If she was there she hid herself, to mock me." McBain attributes Annie's "wildness" to there not being a patriarchal figure in her life after Simon's death: "Her brother-in-law being removed, there was no order imposed on her days" (199). McBain's assumptions about Annie and about women in general reveal a paternalistic view that a woman's proper place is in submission to her husband. After careful deliberation and "questioning of the

Divinity" (203), McBain suggests that Annie confesses to Simon's murder because of the guilt she feels following her husband's death: "It may well be that so early in the marriage her submission to her husband was not complete and there would be carelessness about his comfort, and naughty words, and quarrelsome behaviour...His death occurring before any of this was put right, she would feel a natural and harrowing remorse" (203).

The Reverend recalls that he was still puzzling how he might find a way to protect her body through the winter, and more importantly, her soul, when there comes word she has vanished after inscribing on the shanty floor with a burnt stick the two words: "Walley, Gaol." Reverend McBain, echoing Miss Cresswell, describes her to Mr. Mullen as "dark-haired and tall, meager in body, not comely but not ill-favoured except one eye that goes to the side" (199).

Mullen confirms Annie's arrival at the Walley Gaol and gives details of her confession to the murder of her husband. Under Mullen's questioning, Annie changes the details of her story repeatedly, insisting she murdered Simon with a rock. Mullen concludes that "she is lying, or self-deluded," but admits her to the Gaol that also serves as a place of detention for the Insane, "where inmates are kept warm and dry" (210). Mullen suggests that Annie is looking for shelter, a fact Annie concurs with in her letter to Sadie: "I am safe from George here is the main thing" (215). In a strategy typical of the epistolary narrative, Mullen encloses a letter for George Herron to be delivered by McBain.

The circulation of information about Annie takes on the hurried and more aggressive tone of gossip between the two men. McBain: "I carried your letter at once

to Mr. George Herron and believe that he has replied" (202). Mullen: "Her brother-in-law has written me a very decent letter affirming there is no truth to her story, so I am satisfied on that" (205). In the same letter Mullen relates the doctor's version of Annie as suffering from a "delusion peculiar to females" associated with the act of reading:

> They may imagine themselves to be possessed by the forces of evil, to have committed various and hideous crimes....Sometimes they report they have taken numerous lovers, but these lovers will all be imaginary.... For all this he—the doctor—lays the blame on the sort of reading..... whether it is of ghosts or demons or of love escapades with Lords and Dukes and suchlike. For some these tales are a passing taste....For others they are indulged in...as if they were sweets or sherry wine, but for some there is a complete surrender and living within them just as in an opium-dream. (205)

The doctor cannot get an account of Annie's "sort of reading" and believes she may have forgotten or "conceals the matter out of slyness," a version of Mullen's "self-styled murderess" (205). Mullen encloses in his letter to McBain the contents of the first letter Annie writes to her friend from the Home, Sadie Johnstone. Annie's letter is cordial and invites Sadie to visit her. The letter is intercepted, read, resealed, and sent on to come back marked "Unknown" before being inscribed in Mullen's letter to McBain.

Altman suggests that epistolary language, which is the language of absence, makes present by make-believe. "The particular *you* whose constant appearance distinguishes

letter discourse from other written discourse (memoir, diary, rhetoric) is an image of the addressee who is elsewhere [in time and space]. Memory and expectation keep the addressee present to the imagination of the writer whose narrative (*erzählte Zeit*) and narration (*Erzälzeit*), through a frequent oscillation between past and future, likewise seize the present through illusion" (Altman 140). Annie's letter writing evokes for her the one person she trusts, the person who has known her from childhood at the Home where both she and Sadie grew up. The letter is a fragile link to her past, and understates her desperate need to communicate her story in its invitation. The appropriation of the "lost" letter, and its placement as an intratextual document between the two men, implies transgression, disruption and dislocation for Annie. As an element of epistolary discontinuity, the "lost" letter reinforces the blank space of non-narrated action between letters, "producing a shock" (Altman 171) comparable to the shock Annie has had in its interval—the discovery that her letters are being intercepted—"a dislocation," Altman argues, that is accomplished by "a switch in addressee that emphasizes a narrative lacunae" (171). From the bounds of her prison, Annie attempts to reach out in a letter only to discover how strong are the walls of her confinement.

The multiplication of temporal levels in an epistolary context creates an ironic gap between writer and reader that makes more apparent a play of Derridean *différance* (difference, deferring, postponement).[7] In "A Wilderness Station," discontinuity of space and time is demonstrated in the discontinuity of the exchange. For example, near the end of section two, Mullen has sent a second letter to McBain assuming him to be able to receive it. Mullen receives no reply and sends another short letter to McBain.

Mullen's reply eventually arrives from "Edward Hoy, Landlord, Carstairs Inn" to inform Mullen of McBain's death. Hoy's letter is the last letter in section two and is two lines in length: "Your letter to Mr. McBain sent back to you, he died here at the inn February 25. There is some books here, nobody wants them" (208). If reality is textual as Munro's narratives suggest, Edward Hoy's letter makes the ironic suggestion that not only is McBain absent through death, but that the readers of reality, of books, are absent from the text, yet paradoxically present as "nobody."

Mullen's letter to McBain has an enigmatic message from Annie to Sadie enclosed: *I don't get any answer from you, Sadie. I don't think they sent on my letter. Today is the First of April, 1853* [the first-year anniversary of Simon's death]. *But not April Fool like we used to fool each other. Please come and see me if you can. I am in Walley Gaol but safe and well* (207). The second section ends with significant absences and alternate versions that collapse between the "real" and the invented with Annie's enigmatic message. Within Annie's message to Sadie, the connection between April Fool's Day and Simon's death is seemingly coded as something different than "April Fool like we used to fool each other." One could speculate that it is the seriousness of Simon's murder that eclipses the playful antics of children on this day, although the reader is never given a clear indication of the connection. The message alludes to Annie's involvement in Simon's death in an oblique way that demands the reader's attention to make a possible connection, a contrast to the litany of "facts" provided by the authority of male voices.

The first two sections reveal Annie as an emergent rather than an absolute entity, a reality discursively constructed. The reader is challenged to reflect upon the various

refractions of Annie's identity contained in each letter in order to solve the mystery of Simon's death. In the final message of Annie's letter to Sadie in section two, the stable, intelligible discourse of male authority between McBain and Mullen is inscribed with a female presence. Collectively, the letters that comprise the first two sections of "A Wilderness Station" stress a de-centered feminine subject—a subject in process/on trial—as they inscribe the discrepancies between dominant codes and women's experience.

Munro gives Annie a voice in the third section that contains a finely detailed account of Simon's death in an undated letter addressed "Annie Herron, Walley Gaol, to Sadie Johnson, Toronto, Finder Please Post." Annie writes her female friend, Sadie, ensuring a female audience in her effort to shape the story of her life. Annie's letter conveys a different message in tone and style from the previous letters, and is written as a point of tension in the narrative. Annie writes that, to elude her jailers, she will put the letter in the curtains she is making for the Opera House. Her letter is undated and therefore the reader, as detective-collator, must do some sleuthing to situate the time of her "presence" in the story. Her work on the sewing project for the Opera House is mentioned in her first letter to Sadie in December 1852, around the same time that Mullen writes to McBain of a distraught woman who was raped and kept at the Gaol on the other side of the wall from her rapists. "I would like for all that screaming to stop," declares Annie near the end of her current letter (215)—a clue to the reader that Annie has been placed in the Insane ward with the injured woman and writes this letter at that time.

Annie insists on her sanity to Sadie, " I knew the difference always between my dreams and when I was awake" (214)—"If they think I am crazy and I know the difference then I am safe" (215). As Annie's comment suggests, her view of what is real isn't "crazy," it represents a view of what is real that is discontinuous with a symbolic whole, exposing a gap in the unity of reality. She doesn't mistake her dreams for reality, and, as later demonstrated in her "fanciful storytelling," neither does she mistake anything else for reality, yet "knowing the difference" keeps her safe within the prison walls of language,[8] and of the Walley jail. Although she is physically confined, Annie fails to stay within the boundaries that society has chosen for her. Annie is complicit in her own containment in the Foucaultian sense of self-discipline. The disciplinary structure of the private sphere, what Foucault calls "technologies of the self" are techniques or disciplines, through which human beings come to know who they are and what they should do. Although Annie chooses to be confined—"Sometimes Annie called the Gaol the Home" (217)—Annie has no simple desire for confinement. According to Foucault, power is not separable from social relations in which it manifests itself and through which it achieves its end.[9] Annie uses the specificity of the site of the Walley jail to challenge the politics of truth in her society—she operates both inside and outside her marked space.

In Annie's letter, events are enacted, or dramatized, rather than reported. Annie's account of Simon's death is filmic in detail, where voices are heard and dreams figure prominently. In dreams, what the experience means, and even if it really happened, are questions that can never be definitively answered. By invoking dreams, in which meaning must be interpreted, Munro underlines the equivocal nature of Annie's story.

In Annie's letter, drama is intensified by the use of repetition, for example, when Annie directs the reader's gaze toward the gash on Simon's head: "And then I saw, I saw where the axe had cut"(209). The repetition of "I saw, I saw" effectively holds the reader's gaze a second longer, making it difficult to look away. In effect, Munro encourages the voyeuristic function of the external reader. The external reader, as a reader of confidences, is voyeuristic, and for the reader of epistolary confession, potential disclosures become a source of suspense. The wound, inflicted by a rock or tree limb in earlier versions of the event, is now an axe wound. Interestingly, it is the details of Annie's first-person confession, the eyewitness account, that make the truth of Simon's murder by George with an axe more probable to the reader.

Annie enacts a dramatic performance as she voices in detail the events of that day, "I have to wash him off, I said. Help me"(208). Annie's resounding cry for help is evocative and reaches beyond the page in an emotional plea to the reader. Annie instills a sense of foreboding when she invokes the dream as an omen, "Dreams are sent to warn us" (214), creating an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. The external reader of the text, as voyeur, becomes a witness to Simon's probable murder, as close to events as Annie herself. What the reader seeks to decipher is whether Annie's account is a portrait of a soul, a confession, or a mask to defend herself against accusations of murder. In Mullen's words, the reader must decide "whether or not she is a conscious liar" (206). Annie's letter is no less duplicitous and mutable in character than Annie.

In her account Annie describes how George drags Simon's dead body across the snow and into the cabin. Annie conducts the arrangements for Simon's burial by the

woodpile. In a ritual re-enactment of the scene of Simon's burial, Annie washes the body and proceeds to sew Simon in a shroud until he vanishes: "I sewed his head in first folding the sheet over it because I had to look in his eyes and mouth....I sewed on, and every bit of him I lost sight of I would say even out loud, there goes, there goes. I had got the fold neat over his head but down at the feet I didn't have material enough to cover him, so I sewed on my eyelet petticoat I made at the Home to learn the stitch and that way I got him all sewed in" (209). Annie's practical solution of using her petticoat effectively emasculates Simon and makes use of her commodified skills. Annie's ritual re-enactment is dramatic in its realistic detail, producing, in Barthes' terms, a "effet de réel." Is it an exaggeration? A tall tale? The detail and ritualistic nature of the telling suggests otherwise. Culturally, ritual's purpose is to restore communal values, a concept that is clearly represented in her decision to keep a lock of Simon's hair. She tells Sadie, "I cut off the one little piece of his hair because I remembered when Lila died in the Home they did that" (209). Munro's use of ritualistic detail heightens the reality of Annie's experience, giving it veracity, and also asks us to question that experience. Is Annie's burial ritual a confession of guilt? A cathartic act that restores communal value?

Annie's story opens secrets of murder and abuse as she describes the physical markings of injury on her own body: "I could see the black and blue marks on my arms. I pulled up my skirt to see if they were still there high on my legs, and they were. The back of my hand was dark too and sore still where I bit it" (213). Annie helps validate her story, and advances the narrative for the reader, when she offers a defense of her reluctance to be helped by the Treece family: "I wouldn't go because

somebody might see my black and blue, also they would be watching for me to cry" (214). In Annie's letter, Munro openly scripts the "open secrets" of murder and abuse. Annie may be elusive in her telling of her own abuse and the rape of the other woman, yet she becomes the voice to state the unsaid about the past. In "A Wilderness Station," Munro inscribes both the perceived threat of female transgression in the nineteenth century, and the reality of transgression against women in a historical context. To write a body in pain, a particular historical body that has suffered particularly damaging abuse, is to articulate what, for Annie, are "unspeakable" acts of violence.

Annie does not directly accuse Simon of rape or George of murder, but instead inscribes a dynamically charged dramatized narrative of events that is open to interpretation. In Annie's letter, what is <u>not</u> said could be interpreted as an appeasement to the dominant class and gender of male authority; for example, a woman could not accuse her husband of rape, because under male authority marital rape did not exist. Annie's narrative insists on a truth that exists outside of the available cultural forms of its expression. In her letter, Annie attempts to understand her experience by going through it again, and only language allows this review. Annie articulates her experience in an "otherness of language" (Kristeva, *Desire* 5). Kristeva makes claim that *poetic language* is "the object of linguistic's attention in the pursuit of truth in language. . .what is implied is that language, and thus sociability, are defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution, and transformation" (Kristeva *Desire* 25). Truth, in other words, exists within Annie's creation of a narrative itself, as a contingent, uneasy harmony. Annie's letter inscribes traces of

socially defined identity as well as disruptive processes of change and crisis, effecting a "*questionable* subject-in-process/on trial." In an interview with Susan Sellers, Kristeva defines her notion of the "subject in process/on trial" as a legal proceeding: "'Process' in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled" ("A Question of Subjectivity 19). Analogous to Kristeva's notion of the "subject in process/on trial," in "A Wilderness Station" Annie's identity is constantly called into question, brought to trial, as the "legal proceedings" against her unfold.

Far more significant than past or future events are the emotions of the writer herself; the memory is less important than the experience of remembering. The event is the writing, the tension created at the level of *Erzählzeit* (narration), the action so exclusively psychological that it becomes difficult to speak of an independent *erzählte Zeit* (narrative). Did Annie murder Simon after being raped? Did George murder Simon as Annie suggests in her new claim? Or was Simon's death an accident? Annie's story is a frightened and confused drama, but not a definitive account of Simon's death, perhaps constructed to hold her own horror at a safe distance, a "psychic scene making"—once removed by storytelling, twice removed by letter, and then buried in the folds of the curtain. It is unlikely Sadie Johnstone received the "dead letter;" more likely it went unmailed, unsent, under the auspices of Mullen in a return to male inquiry.

Annie's story is suspended and continually postponed, leaving only traces spatially and temporally deferred into the final letter in the fourth section which is addressed

"Miss Christena Mullen, Walley, to Mr. Leopold Henry, Department of History, Queen's University, Kingston, July 8, 1959," one hundred years later. Annie is transfigured into Old Annie, the sewing-woman, a real "character" whose domain was on the top floor of James Mullen's house, an image of the black widow spider "at the top of the third-floor stairs brandishing her measuring stick and wearing a black dress with long fuzzy black arms like a spider. She had one eye that slid off to the side and gave her the air of taking in more information than the ordinary person" (217). Christena Mullen is the granddaughter of James Mullen and is an old woman herself in 1959 when she recounts an event in 1907. Christena takes "Old Annie," who has become a family servant, to find George Herron at the Treece family farm. Christena's letter, the final section of the story, is a reply to a request from Mr. Leopold Henry, who is writing a biography of Treece Herron, a popular politician and grandson of George Herron.

Unlike the conventional short story's feature of a single consciousness that directs the narrative eye, in "A Wilderness Station" there is no reified voice assuming responsibility for the narrative as a whole. Treece Herron's proposed biography indicates the presence of a reader-editor figure, biographer Mr. Leopold Henry, whose collecting of letters is part of the action of the narrative. Treece Herron's biography poses as a real life document, and as biography it suggests time and narrative order are sustained by a logical, unified subjectivity, whereas the epistolary framework of "A Wilderness Story" constructs a textual life that gives Annie's story an open shape. The open-endedness of the epistolary form denies uniqueness and definability. "A Wilderness Station" is a selection of letters presented by its fictitious editor, or implied

author,[10] in an ongoing process of textual creation, a metonymic narrative where possibilities of inversions and forces of instability do not impose a fixed interpretation, but rather invite the reader to an endless process of creating meaning. Gittings remarks that although Annie appears to be "a marginal and incidental figure in the authoritative biography of Treece Herron written by Henry Leopold, Munro's history pushes Treece to the periphery; he becomes an incidental figure in the life of Annie Herron"(Gittings 35).

Christena Mullen's letter is nostalgic and she returns to her past as a way of establishing a narrative that allows her to create a personal history. Her narrative is rambling and digressive, punctuated by time gaps. Christena's memory of Annie is a storybook version and refigures Annie Herron into a spider-like weaver of fairy-tales: "Don't get Annie going...And don't believe a word she says" (218). Old Annie tells conflicting tales of Simon's death: "a bear killed her husband, in the woods, and my grandfather had killed the bear, and wrapped her in its skin and taken her home from the Gaol" (218); in another version a man who was rich came to the Home in a carriage and chose her, but she refused to go with him—"Rather like Cinderella but with a different ending" (217). The reader's attention is shifted away from the event and focuses instead on Annie's fanciful storytelling. What is true is untrue, what is untrue is true. Annie's story never stays still long enough to mean just one thing: the only recognizable truth is the impossibility of absolute meaning.

At the end of Christina's letter it is revealed that Annie returns to Carstairs and meets with George Herron who has suffered a stroke, shortly after the publication of his "Recollections" in the Carstairs *Argus*. It is presumed Annie has read his article

and has come to confront George, who can no longer speak. The notion of temporal relativity, first introduced in Miss Cresswell's letter, is again demonstrated in the last letter by a structure of temporal relativity that generates numerous ambiguities and ironies. Munro not only delays the "climax" of the story by disrupting the chronology of events—the potential "moment of truth" is deferred into the last letter decades later—she denies the reader a revelatory conclusion. This is Annie's moment as she rides out of Walley in Christena's motorcar dressed regally in plum-colored silk trailing a plume of steam—"The Steamer [motorcar] covered the miles like an angel" (219). However, George and Annie's meeting takes place outside the story and is only revealed by snippets of a conversation between Christena and Annie. Annie is gratified by her visit to George even though he is unable to talk to her. As she observes with understated satisfaction, "Well, I could talk to him" (225).

Interpretations of this meeting tend to vary widely. Howells perceives Annie as reaching "the Promised Land," finally being able to reconcile her story without contradiction, "the sight of the two old people who have fallen asleep in each other's company suggests a moment of reconciliation at the end of a lifetime" (Howells, AM 128); whereas Carrington insists "Annie's monologue [was] delivered to a mute and indifferent audience" (Carrington, DTD 88). Carrington is unequivocal about Simon's death being an accident and describes Annie's "gloating" as either "malicious" (she rejects his newspaper as a lie), or "solipsistic" in the recognition of her misjudgment of George's guilt. Carrington perceives Annie as a diabolical figure—"a self-styled murderess"—who speaks in tongues, who "repeatedly misquotes the Bible, wrenching verses out of context...deluding and torturing herself in the wilderness of her own

mind" (Carrington, DTD 82,88). Gittings perceives Annie as a powerful agent of historical and cultural change. George, the murderer, is silenced and "cannot challenge her narrating voice" (Gittings 35). As Altman claims, "epistolary narrative thrives in an atmosphere of contrary possibilities" (Altman 188). As demonstrated in the above divergent perceptions, Munro has constructed a narrative of potential or absent levels of meaning that articulate in the epistolary framework of w*hat is possible*—where possible meanings are paradoxically present and absent.

Commodity? Wild Woman? Self-styled murderess? Actress? Fairytale?—all versions of Annie are presented through a series of circulating letters that document, gossip upon, dramatize and imagine a feminine subject held in the narrative frame of a short story. Within the frame, Annie is never together in one place, always in transit. Annie is an oddly itinerant figure who appears, disappears and re-appears transformed *out of one wilderness station unto another* (OS 204). The spectral power derives both from the writer's inability to capture thought with precision and the chance that the reader may misinterpret the words; communication becomes infinitely deferred. The letters in "A Wilderness Station" circulate around, through and past the beginning and end of Annie's historical life span, whose arc of experience is never completed. Annie survives her own death in the final letter, and transgresses the border of the story frame to re-appear in the future biography of Treece Herron, carried beyond the "limits of truth." This is evident at the end of the story when Annie finds it difficult to keep herself "within the bounds of fact." Old Annie tells the story of the baby who, born from a boil as a dead rat is cooked in the oven like a gingerbread man, "puffed right up to a good size and baked to a good color and started to kick its legs" (OS

225). Christena tells her that that isn't possible, "it must have been a dream." Annie's reply is equivocal, "Maybe so....I did used to have the terriblest dreams" (OS 225).

Annie is not a chimera of female anonymity as constructed by the intersubjectivity of letters and readers; nor is she self-actualized, a subject position implied by the official biography of Treece Herron. What Munro is engaged in is the making of a new feminine subject as a "subject in process/on trial"—the feminine subject historically and culturally situated, whose identity is part patriarchal culture and language, part protean adaptability. Munro's writing gives voice to the specificity of a feminine subject who is outside any principle of identity-to-self, a feminine subject who can identify with multiple scenes without fully integrating herself into them.[11] In place of a unified whole, Annie is discursively constructed by a chain of narratives and cannot be contained, only held in contingent, momentary arrangements. By using the epistolary form (a convergence of the elusive, de-centered subject Annie and the fixed subject positions inherent in the letter form), Munro scripts the conditions of the female life in language, a site in which a narrative of ambiguity, indeterminacy and transgression becomes the story of its own functioning, in Kristeva's terms, "a process without subject."[12]

By choosing the epistolary form, which is itself a system of fragmentation, Munro stages a struggle between two temporal ideals in which the attempt to reach a stable synthesis (solve the mystery) is consistently subverted. The effort to reach a closed metaphorical form is ultimately subverted by the metonymical forces of the letter form, creating mysteries and lacunae in the text—boundaries of the work disappear; coherent vision is subverted to another level: the solving of the mystery is provisional.

Epistolary narratives can never be closed off, never solved as a text; their real or fictional status uncertain. The letters that structure and transform Annie are never resolved, never completed. The letter poses the possibility of deception even as it affirms the principle of design of our unsaid experiences. As autobiography, the letter inscribes a subjectivity trying to be present to itself in the very writing that makes its (self) absence. As an epistolary story, "A Wilderness Station" reveals the relation between storytelling and intersubjective communication and questions the way in which epistolary reflects, betrays, or constitutes the relations between self, other, and experience.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] "Menesteung" (*Friend of My Youth*) is also a story in which Munro deals with material remote in time. The unnamed narrator claims to be an historian, and yet she tells the story of the nineteenth-century poet Almeda Roth's life as if it were a drama. Munro's use of nineteenth-century women's writing can be interpreted as a gesture at recuperation, of putting back into circulation that which has lost its currency. Like the writer/narrator of "Meneseteung," Munro is curious, "driven to find things out, even trivial things. [Such people] will put things together. You see them going around with notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading microfilm, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish" (FMY 73).

[2] Lorna Irvine describes Munro's fiction as being filled with "flux and process." "Changing Is the Word I Want," in MacKendrick, p. 99.

[3] "Supplementarity" is a term Jacques Derrida uses to describe the peculiar logic of all discursive signifying structures. Derrida focuses on the contradiction of the term "supplement." The word itself is potentially paradoxical for it can mean either something added to complete a thing or something added to a thing already complete. In Derrida's view, the supplementarity that belongs to a chain of substitutions—writing—is always already there; it is that which gives birth to the desire of presence. The movement of supplementarity is evidence of the de-centered "play" of signification upon which any discourse depends. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), also *Writing and Difference* (1978).

[4] Janet Altman maintains that any analysis of the epistolary form takes as its underlying principle "the letter's dual status as unity and narrative unit"(Altman 167).

[5] See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris:Seuil, 1972), pp. 139-41, for a clear summary of this position.

[6] The theory of subjectivity, as expressed in autobiographical writing, was first represented by critics such as Georges Gusdorf. Gusdorf attempts to set the "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" finding that the autobiographer occurs in a society with a concept of the unique individual, a "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" (29). For Gusdorf, there is the belief that for the self-defining individual "writing adds the virtue of permanence" against the transience of the spoken word, making the autobiographical project a necessary one for a very select group of males in the European tradition ("Scripture of Self" 114).

[7] Derrida's *différance* is the operation of writing in language, which is a system of differences, with no originary presence. Derrida defines *différance* as " a structure which encompasses the freeplay of differences in a network of meaning." See Jacques Derrida, "Structure and Play." *Of Grammatology* 264.

[8] In the Lacanian view, all our desires are metonymic, and we are all prisoners of metonymic displacements. Since all metonymic displacements are signifiers, our imprisonment by them is also an imprisonment in language.

[9] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, I: An Introduction.* Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

[10] E.D.Blodgett, in an early critical review of Munro's fiction, identifies "the complex relationship between Munro as author, implied author, and narrator" (Blodgett 11) as central to understanding her narrative process.

[11] The metonymic construction of Annie complies with and critiques Gallop's notion that metonymy's reliance on its context has associated it with servitude and dependency. According to Gallop, metaphor

assumes an independence while metonymy assumes a dependency, and with the dependency an incompleteness in itself, an absence or a lack. Metonymy's servitude and its incompleteness have caused it to be associated with phallic lack, and therefore with the feminine. Metonymy is latent, and this "...latency, the hiddenness of metonymy, that lack of female genitalia, lends it an appearance of naturalness or passivity" (Gallop *Reading Lacan* 127).

[12] Kristeva strives to undermine identity in favour of a subject always in process, on trial, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, what she calls "a process without subject" (489).

CHAPTER TWO

This book is about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze.

Foucault, *The Birth of The Clinic*

"Somebody They Thought They Could Know": The Construction of Feminine Identity in "The Love of A Good Woman"

"The Love of A Good Woman" invites analysis in relation to the critical concept of the gaze. In "The Love of A Good Woman," the question of identity is brought into focus and examined with opthamalogical scrutiny. Opening with a minutely detailed description of optometrist's instruments that describes "a dark sort of mirror" (4), Munro introduces concepts of sight and positioning, of perceiving and knowing. The red box of optometrist instruments is the enigma that solicits the reader's attention and initiates the desire to solve the mystery of how the body of D.M. Willens, the optometrist, came to be in a car at the bottom of a millpond. As the murder mystery unfolds, the story shows that looking and being looked at not only reflect, but also constitute identity, as both a culturally prescribed experience, and more intimately, as the experience of the dying body, or, in Kristeva's terms, the experience of abjection. Completely ignoring the conventional short story "unity of impression," in "The Love of A Good Woman" Munro permits herself the latitude of a novelist. It isn't until midway through the story that Enid, the protagonist, enters in what appears to be two separate, lengthy, tenuously connected stories. The murder mystery evolves through a multiplicity of characters as they drift through events in seemingly divergent narratives.

Munro's emphasis upon looking and being looked at points to one of the central thematic concerns of her fiction: a preoccupation with vision and visibility. Enid is a nurse whose medical gaze acts as a mirror that reflects a doubled perspective at once subject/ object in facing the abject. In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro presents Mrs. Quinn's character as a fragmented body threatening to drift towards something "other," as a subject in process/on trial. Enid's writing makes visible the invisible, as she records the details of the failing body of the dying Mrs. Quinn. Layered within Enid's narrative is Mrs. Quinn's confession to the murder of Mr. Willens. In Mrs. Quinn's story, like Annie's story, the subject is truly "on trial," as the reader struggles to determine whether Mrs. Quinn is lying. Ultimately, it is Enid's identity that is brought into question, as she struggles to become "somebody they thought they could know" (48). Munro writes a feminine subject that escapes scrutiny and being pinned down, a subject in process/on trial, as she calls identity into question. In the end, it is Enid's writing that is a way of experiencing life, and also it is a way of fighting against death and abjection.

In *Birth of the Clinic* Foucault explains the historical significance of the medical gaze and its relationship to knowledge. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, doctors described what for centuries had been invisible, "the relationship between the visible and the invisible—which is necessary to all concrete knowledge—changed its structure…the eye became the source of clarity" (xii-xiii). Foucault argues that knowledge, comprehension, and reason, are established through the power of the *look*, or the *gaze*, through the "eye" and the "I" of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision. In Munro's fiction, objects are not

readily appropriated through the look: things slide away from the powerful eye/I which seeks to possess them, thus becoming distorted and partial. In Munro's fiction, the parameters of the field of vision tend toward indeterminacy, like the shifting edges of "A Wilderness Station"; The narrative thread (murder mystery) is subordinate to the multiple versions of Annie's reality that Munro creates by refracting her character through the eyes of different observers. Annie's own wayward eye wanders throughout the narrative as a recurring image, seemingly functioning as synechdoche, as the only "unifying" characteristic of her identity, the material object of her eye tending to slide away from coherent structures. In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro's narrative strategies are of notable complexity,[1] and demonstrate the power of the gaze to undo limits between gender and genre in a metafictional mode of self-reflexivity, a form that encapsulates impermanence and ambiguity.

The story of "The Love of A Good Woman" is told within a complicated four-part flashback to the spring and summer of 1951, which foregrounds two major situations: the discovery of Mr. Willens's corpse in the river,[2] and the solution to the mystery of how and why it got there. Presented as a key object in the murder mystery is the opening display of optometrist's instruments that belonged to Mr. D.M. Willens, "who drowned in the Peregrine River, 1951" (3). Over a third of the story is taken up with the account of the day three boys discover the body, and although the discovery of the body itself is given brief attention, the quotidian details of the boys' lives are accorded meticulous importance. With the shift from the first to the second situation of the story, Cece Ferns, Bud Salter, and Jimmy Box seemingly disappear from the narrative. Parts two through four of the flashback develop the second situation, the mystery of

how Mr. Willens died, and are narrated from the consciousness of Enid, "a good woman," who cares for the dying, rancorous Mrs. Quinn. Embedded within Enid's narrative is Mrs. Quinn's confession, a revelation of adultery and murder, "detailed and diabolical" (74) in its telling—and re-telling. Enid creates her own divergent narrative possibilities for herself and Rupert, the surviving husband. The parallel mystery to the murder mystery in "The Love of A Good Woman" is voiced by Enid as she thinks of the adult Rupert, and the boy she knew in school: "And whatever troubled him and showed on his face might have been just the same old trouble—the problem of occupying space in the world and having a name that people could call you by, being somebody they thought they could know" (*Love* 47-48). Enid takes great care to present herself as somebody they thought they could know, however, Enid refuses to be known. The outcome of Enid's personal conflicts remains as a possibility that threatens her role as "the good woman."

The story begins from an historical perspective, a retrospective look by an unidentified narrator at a box in the Walley museum. The opening functions as a centralized gesture—a presentational space—on which the reader's gaze focuses in a heavily bordered scene. The attention focused on the opening display of optometrist's instruments is through the eyes of an observer on the edge/ or in the center of the narrative. In the absence of a named identity the reader has no clue, no access to that most specific of reality effects—the name. A "note" identifies the box as "having belonged to Mr. D. M. Willens, who drowned in the Peregrine River, 1951. It escaped the catastrophe and was found, presumably by the anonymous donor, who dispatched it to be a feature of our collection" (3). As Carrington notes, the cautious

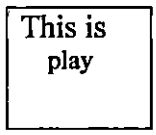
"presumably," the donor's anonymity, and the triple question of how the personified box "escaped," how the mysterious donor or somebody else "found" it, and why the donor "dispatched" it to the museum "all combine to undermine the reliability of the central piece of evidence in the mystery" (Carrington, "Don't Tell"160). The specific object of the red box, and its contents, is to be read against the flow of ongoing narration. It is the enigma that all mysteries start with, the something that needs to be explained. Its connection to the dead body provides the formal cue for the reader to invoke the conventions of mystery reading—the processes of picking out clues, and using them to fill in the narrative gaps and blanks, to participate in the creation of the story. The information cues the reader to look for things that might re-appear, creating a mystery about the future. The precise noting of evidence familiar to readers of the crime and mystery genres evokes the familiar realm of the mystery genre where things seem like things they are not.

Although a central theme of the story is one of exposure—initiated by the description of optometrist's instruments—the references to a "snowman" and "elf" are also intended to act as signs.

> The ophthalmoscope could make you think of a snowman...the retinoscope looks more complicated. Underneath the round forehead clamp is something like an elf's head, with a round flat face and a pointed metal cap...The flat face is made of glass and is a dark sort of mirror. (3-4)

The description of the red box also signals the way the narrative will consist of "play."

One might read in this framed section



The sense of play in Munro's fiction is not to be confused with the elaboration and delay that constitute the masculine mode of the pleasure of the text.[3] The sense of play in Munro's fiction often has material value, such as wordplay—overt language that cues the reader's attention to text as being made up of words, as when Enid asks Rupert how to spell cassava: "Cassava? That's a double s? Cassava?" (49). This kind of linguistic play challenges traditional genre, passing beyond the boundaries of the story as a sort of textual mirror. By calling attention to the fact that the reader is revealing a text, Munro directs the reader to recognize the material, familiar and recognizable world presented in the story is in fact not real, but textual.

Munro also demonstrates Kristeva's semiotic *chora* in wordplay that emphasizes the sound of words, as when Mrs. Quinn tries to imitate Enid's "reserved" tone: "Bee-you-tif-ly" (50). Kristeva considers the semiotic chora as "the source of all stylistic effort, the modifying of banal, logical order by linguistic distortions such as metaphor, metonymy, musicality,"

> At this point, we witness the possibility of creation....I think that every type of creation, even if it's scientific, is due to this possibility of opening the norms, towards pleasure, which refers to an archaic experience with the maternal pre-object. (Kristeva *Women's Review* 20)

As Kristeva suggests, the semiotic not only makes possible a feminine mode; there is also pleasure in semantic chaos, in "creation," as an archaic experience with the

maternal pre-object. Thematically, the images of the "snowman" and "elf" evoke a world of childhood, a parallel world of play in which imagination defines fact.

The associations between play and narrative abound in the second titled section—"Jutland"—devoted to the boys' outing and the discovery of Mr. Willens's body. In Jutland, where enclosure and training are emphasized, Munro implies both men and women are caught up in cultural determinations that suggest in some sense we construct ourselves. Jutland functions symbolically, not only as the physical "space" where the narration takes place, but as the historical/cultural "space" the characters "occupy" and must negotiate. Munro creates a de-familiarized terrain against which figures move and are read, exposing a gap in the unity of reality between the "real" and the invented.

The boys' exploration of the wilderness is a rehearsal and testing of their social boundaries: an exaggerated play of gain and loss, of delay and urgency as the would-be narrators repeatedly postpone their narration of the discovery of Mr. Willens's body. The revelatory stories of their own lives express much more than the story they wish to tell, and are prioritized by the unnamed narrator who "appears" outside the boundaries of the story in an address to the reader: "Did this explain why Jimmy kept his mouth shut that Saturday at dinnertime? They all kept their mouths shut, all three of them" (21). The boys cannot tell their families about the dead body: "It was just that their houses seemed too full. Too much was going on already"(21-22). Munro's focus is on the accommodations people effect on their difficult lives as they play out "the same old trouble—the problem of occupying space in the world" (47-48). The boys are caught up, sometimes frozen, within their historical/ cultural limits. Munro's

narrative suggests that their identities co-exist with their historical scene to such a degree that it seems impossible and difficult for them to think or even imagine something else. For example, "a new nickname—Deadman—was found and settled on each of them. Jimmy and Bud bore it till they left town, and Cece—who married young and went to work in the elevator—saw it passed on to his two sons. By that time nobody thought of what it referred to" (30-31).

The dark disorder of Jutland's landscape, where apple trees are "deformed by black knot" and ditches "fill up with millrace every summer" (4), suggests a dangerous and de-familiarized terrain. Jutland's landscape suggests dark possibilities, a parallel of the retinscope's symbolic "dark sort of mirror" described in the red box; there are spaces behind the visible, behind the image, introducing dark areas where anything can emerge. The Peregrine River, a harmless detail in much of Munro's fiction, takes on a dimension of demonic proportion: "[it] looked like butterscotch pudding on the boil. But if you fell into it, it would freeze your blood and fling you out into the lake, if it didn't brain you against the buttresses first" (8). Social spaces are mapped with clear borders and authority in contrast to the boys' perceived freedom in the wilderness: "[the boys'] differences dropped away as soon as they were out of sight of the county jail and the grain elevator...and out of range of the courthouse clock...they were free—or almost free—agents" (10-11). The boys' imaginative play expresses a desire for freedom and reveals, as Kristeva advocates, "the desire to know, but to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written" (Kristeva, *Desire* 165). In "Jutland," Munro suggests freedom is a possibility outside social boundaries within a

de-familiarized terrain that exposes a gap in reality, a space between the "real" and the imagined.

The boys' viewing of Mr. Willens's corpse estranges them from their known world: "something close in front in them, a picture in front of their eyes that came between them and the world...the pond, the car, the arm, the hand" (11). The list, a cataloging of sorts initiated in the opening of the story by the red box, is common to the detective story. Munro, typically, takes time fully to *see* the car and the dead body inside. The compression of details of what the boys see, "pond," "car," "arm," "hand," offers clues for the reader to interpret, and creates possibility in their implication of a possible murder. The boys' description of Mr. Willens's body focuses on his hand and the "neat little faces" of his fingernails, a personification that echoes the playful description of "elves" and "snowmen" in the contents of the red box in the first section.

> But all they got to see was that arm and his pale hand...the fingernails were all like neat little faces, with their intelligent everyday look of greeting, their sensible disowning of their circumstance. (7)

In the final view, the boys' rambling or "disowning of their circumstance" is cut off by the comic inset of the "clownish white hand" of Captain Tervitt: "he held up his gloved hand, his noble and clownish white hand, with his usual benevolent composure. He gave consent. *Proceed*" (31). The hand protrudes into the text by its singularity, as if arrested in its signal to "*Proceed*" with the narration. The hand acts as a textual mirror that brings reversals out into the open and incites the reader to read the ongoing narrative slightly askance. The world of play, at its close, turns toward its

past and tradition (Captain Tervitt), so that at the end of the section the frame of Captain Tervitt's hand speaks of an open act of closure.

In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro explores the significance of looking and being looked at in a multiplicity of ways. Paradigmatic of Munro's approach, the mirror metaphor illustrates the multiplicity of the feminine subject in process/on trial. In Lacanian terms of the "mirror stage," the mirror manifests a mysterious and duplicitous "other" as the "Ideal-I," an enforced cultural option disguised as natural truth: "this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction (Lacan, *Ecrits* 127). According to Lacan, a subject's encounter with its idealized self-image in the mirror is fundamentally narcissistic. In Jutland, a woman is persuaded to survey herself with a skill implied to be crucially important to her identity. In the Salters' home, the mirror acts as a vehicle for gender performance. In keeping with Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage," the mirror on the wall of the Salters' house seemingly acts as both a social control and an image of the feminine subject in process/on trial. Bud Salter's older sister, most likely indoctrinated at an early age into the narcissism of the mirror,

> would stand in front of a mirror for twenty minutes or so, checking herself from various angles, inspecting her teeth and pulling her hair back then shaking it forward. Then she would walk away apparently satisfied—or at least finished—but only as far as the next room, the next mirror, where she would begin all over again just as if she had been delivered a new head. (17-18)

The feminine pose suggests a sense of passivity, however, Munro's description of the sister being "delivered a new head" decapitates, estranges and does violence to the

idealism of the female quest for perfection. In the context of Lacan's mirror stage, the narrator seeks to fix the identity of a single specular image only to find a radical process of splintering (fragmentation) and fission begin. The subject's instability afflicts the object too; an apparently harmless metaphor shows a dangerous tendency to metamorphose its subject into a headless monster. The feminine subject's desire for coherence is never achieved, only a reflection of a self that is fragmentary, constantly shifting, and dependent upon images of other equally fragmentary selves. The mirror in the Salters' house, Munro suggests, expresses an imprisonment of feminine subjectivity, within a possible frame within a frame of infinite regression or *mise en abyme*.

Munro's deployment of the mirror image not only acts as a metaphor to frame the multiplicity of the feminine subject, but also suggests that looking is a different experience for the male subject. In contrast to the Salter sisters who watch themselves being watched in the mirror (seemingly endlessly), when Jimmy Box sees his mother in "full view" (25) in one of the windows of Honeker's, the scene is one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust, a mirroring of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, whereby "for men this identification with the maternal involves a perverse pleasure, whilst for women there are psychotic risks attached" (Kristeva *Women's Review* 22).

> When she stretched you saw the back of her knee through the slit in her skirt. Above that was a wide but shapely behind and the line of her panties or girdle...he could smell the stockings that she sometimes took off as soon as she

got home...a faint, private smell that was both appealing and disgusting. (25)

Jimmy's ocular eroticism of his mother replaces the "delight" he once felt by looking at himself in Honekar's "big mirrors at the top of the staircase, in which he could see himself climbing up to Ladies' Wear, on the second floor" (26)—suggesting a maturation, of sorts, of the power of the male "gaze."

In "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" (1978), Laura Mulvey initiated a dialogue about the function of the "gaze" and the power dynamics that result from that construction. The erotic identity of the viewing subject is clearly separated from the object (usually a woman) on the screen; the viewer derives pleasure from objectifying the screen persona and subjecting that persona to the power of the controlling gaze. This voyeuristic dynamic exposes the way in which the viewer's gaze may be constructed to enforce hidden assumptions or authorize conclusions that appear natural. In critical analysis, the need to unveil the way the gaze is constructed serves to deconstruct the dynamics of objectification that Mulvey associated with the fetishization of women in the cinema. In the second situation of the story, narrated from Enid's consciousness, "The Love of A Good Woman" raises theoretical questions about how the dynamics of the gaze are implicated in the construction of feminine identity, in a relationship that serves to naturalize assumptions about the dying body and the embodied subject. In the process of the deathwatch,[4] a narrative unfolds that blurs the boundaries between seer and seen, subject and object, eye and body, to allow for the possibility of a gaze that establishes a connection, not to refute or replace gendered notions of the gaze based on theories of sexual difference (Mulvey), but instead to establish a connection between the feminine subject and the

theme of mortality—a "writing of the body" that addresses feminine identity as "the problem of occupying space in the world...being somebody they thought they could know" (48).

Enid, the self-ordained onlooker, is unalterably good and uncomplaining, except in her unspoken inner language of dreams and fantasy, coeval with her unspoken thoughts on the dying Mrs. Quinn. The idealism of her perfection as "the good woman" is indifferent to the "who" that is Enid, and no one is more complicit in her objectification than Enid herself. The "good woman" projects herself as a denizen of do-goodery, mid-wife to morality, and tireless saint: "Her hope was to be good, and do good, and not necessarily in the orderly, customary, wifely way" (42). Enid takes on her gender in a subtle, strategic project identifiable with the notion of "gender choice" Butler describes as "a laborious and covert process of interpreting a cultural identity laden with sanctions, taboos and prescriptions" (Butler 148). In Jutland, nursing is an occupational gap-stop between the needs of the family and marriage, or "something poor girls did [as] a way out for girls whose parents couldn't keep them or send them to college" (40). The implication of nursing is that it imparts a sense of dislocation for the feminine subject, in a new, often short-lived autonomy, before marriage and children. The terms of Enid's subjection provide interesting tensions. By becoming a career practical nurse,[5] Enid struggles for autonomy on the very site she occupies in a social network that both contains and pervades her new knowledge of gender—"nursing makes a woman coarse" (39)—and particularly its threat to a male-dominated order.

Her mother said that the part of nursing her father objected to was the

> familiarity nurses had with men's bodies. Her father thought—he had decided—that such familiarity would change a girl, and furthermore would change the way men thought about that girl... "I suppose it's all mixed up with wanting you to get married," her mother said. (40)

Enid makes "the deathbed promise" to her father and drops out of nursing school, only to later become a practical nurse in response to circumstance. Enid's decision to nurse as her "object in life" and "do good, and not in the orderly, customary, wifely way" (41-42) accords her the potential space of autonomy to disguise, alter and reconstruct a circumscribed set of conventions, in Kristeva's terms, to engage in the signifying practice of "the establishment and countervailing of a sign-system"(*Desire* 18). Enid's stance is not naïve; unlike the Salter sisters whose quest for perfection fragments endlessly—although, like the Salter sisters, there is a capacity for estrangement. In effect, Enid's decision to identify herself as a nurse becomes her solution of "how to occupy space in the world...having a name that people could call you by, being somebody they thought they could know" (47-48)—"a disowning of her circumstance" similar to the freedom of the boys' rambling in the wilderness of Jutland.

"'GLOMERULONEPHRITIS,' Enid wrote in her notebook. It was the first case she had ever seen. The fact was that Mrs. Quinn was dying and nothing could be done about it" (31). The opening to Enid's narrative continues with a scrutinizing, symptomatic list of Mrs. Quinn's failing, tortured body, a cataloguing, of sorts, reminiscent of the first section's description of the contents of the red box in the Walley museum. The "deathwatch" takes place in the heavily curtained sick room, a

mise en scene of isolation and persecution, which acts as a transitional space that must be negotiated before resolution can occur. The dynamics of Enid's "medical gaze" (Foucault, *Clinic* 9) reduces the embodied presence of Mrs. Quinn to an objectified body. In Enid's narrative the objectifying power of the gaze translates Mrs. Quinn as an object, as the subject's losses are recorded in Enid's notebook one after another—her body, her reality, and, finally, her life. In Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, which he describes as a book "about the act of seeing, the gaze" (xi), he raises questions about how the gaze is constructed in medicine. According to Foucault, the medical gaze must factor out the person with illness; the patient as an embodied subject emerges as not only inconsequential but counterproductive:

> Hence the strange character of the medical gaze...it is directed upon that which is visible in the disease—but on the basis of the patient, who hides this visible element even as he shows it....(9)

The person with illness becomes the white space in the picture, the absence that allows the illness to be seen. Illness becomes increasingly visible, therefore the ill person may feel abandoned, for the medical gaze, as Foucault observes, sees its logical extension in the absolute obliteration of the person by the disease, "in death" (9). Mrs. Quinn's illness threatens to obscure her subjective presence; her desire to be "seen" becomes a struggle to sustain life. The gaze of Enid, the medical detective, locates the subject Mrs. Quinn in a body that seems to announce her identity as a process of her own destruction: "She [Enid] could not conquer her dislike for this doomed, miserable woman" (38). The medical gaze extends and exaggerates a dynamics of looking that forces Mrs. Quinn to see the self rendered visible only in her impending absence. In

illness the body is denaturalized, its object status exaggerated; the self is experienced as a stranger in the mirror.

Enid's visual confrontation with Mrs. Quinn's dying body also affects the dynamics of looking for the healthy viewer. The threat that Mrs. Quinn poses to Enid can be framed, in Kristeva's terms, as the threat of the abject, of "death infecting life" (Kristeva, *Horror* 4). Materiality and corporeality emerge in Kristeva's work as necessary conditions of subjectivity that the subject must nonetheless disavow in order the preserve the illusion of stability, unity and wholeness. There is a desire for separation from the abject, for becoming autonomous. The healthy gaze that risks intimacy with the person with the disease sacrifices the seeming mastery of distance. Enid, whose vocation as a nurse keeps her in close proximity to the sick and dying, cannot distance and separate herself from the abject. The resulting instability undermines the objectivity of the gaze. Just as the mirror in the Salter home shows a tendency to metamorphose its subject into a headless monster, Mrs. Quinn constitutes a very real threat to Enid's ability to sustain the illusion of stability. Although Kristeva defines the corpse as "the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva, *Horror* 4), the body of the person with terminal illness may function as more of a threat; "such a person often exhibits the bodily signs of impending death while yet resisting the inanimate coldness that helps to classify the corpse as Other" (Kristeva *Horror* 4). Mrs. Quinn's ill body assaults the healthy gaze of Enid, who "disliked this body she had to wash and powder and placate with ice and alcohol rubs" (38), by threatening to unveil the vulnerability of the viewing subject, a vulnerability that stems from mortality itself.

Enid attempts to move herself outside the parameters of Mrs. Quinn's sick body by establishing a way of viewing that destroys the link between viewer and viewed through her notebooks. Mrs. Quinn resists such easy manipulation, and seems to move over her boundaries into the viewing subject's own. Mrs. Quinn displays herself for the gaze that she is incapable of resisting as she collapses into matter.

> "Swole up like some kind of pig," Mrs. Quinn said. "Except for my tits, and they always were kinda useless. I never had no big udders on me, like you. Don't you get sick of the sight of me? Won't you be glad when I'm dead?" (36)

Mrs. Quinn knows the look that renders her material—"And Mrs. Quinn made knowing it her triumph" (39). This knowledge of her own objectification emerges as one of the signs of Mrs. Quinn's subjective presence, the knowledge of the look as a gaze inscribed on her body. The object of the gaze, "tits," announces not only difference, but also sameness and recognition of a shared bodily inscription. Enid correspondingly describes Mrs. Quinn breasts as "shrunk to tiny pouches with dried-currant nipples" (35). In this "writing of the body" the power dynamics of looking that depend upon the distance between subject/object begin to dissolve and open up the possibility of the gaze as a means of forging connections rather than asserting differences.

Mrs. Quinn is caught between the definition of herself as subject and as diseased body. Under the tyranny of the body that moves toward self-destruction, Mrs. Quinn is forced to renegotiate the construction of her identity—"somebody they thought they could know"—and its connection to disease. This renegotiation with her alienating body emerges in Mrs. Quinn's seeming complicity in her own objectification—"good

riddance to bad rubbish" (39)—as a fully conscious yet objectified self. Enid confirms the process of her objectification, a process that implicates Enid's gaze as a force in constructing Mrs. Quinn. Enid's "medical gaze" exaggerates her role in turning human into matter, and perpetuates an objectifying dynamic, until Mrs. Quinn tells her story of adultery and murder. The gaze then becomes the extension of a subjective presence, and unsettles the strict definition of subject and object within the dynamics of vision. Mrs. Quinn ensures her survival in the narrative by seeming to commandeer the story, unsettling subject and object definitions in part by exposing the terminal aspect of every human life—particularly hers and Mr. Willens's.

In her discussion of the abject, Kristeva comments on the threat posed by the collapsing of boundaries between life and death, illness and health, the dying body and its apparently healthy counterpart.

> No, as in true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.... (3; original emphasis)

Mrs. Quinn "thrusts aside" the very experience of her own mortality when she renders herself visible, in her impending absence, by creating the crisis of a murder (and its far reaching consequences for Enid) from the "true theatre" of the sick room. Mrs. Quinn's "lies" (62) safeguard her disembodied status. Through eroticized language she narrates the difficulty of first adulterously connecting with—"it was the same game every time" (62)—and then extricating her body from the murdered "corpse" of Mr.

Willens, a parallel experience to the boys' viewing of Mr. Willens's corpse that estranges their relationship with their known world ("a picture in front of their eyes that came between them and the world" [11]). The incident "was the whole beginning of making her sick" (61), a suggestion that her bloody encounter with the murdered body of Mr. Willens, or the abject, collapsed the border between health and illness. Kristeva defines the eroticization of abjection as "an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage: a threshold before death, a halt or a respite" (*Horror* 55). In keeping with Kristeva's notion of the eroticization of abjection, Mrs. Quinn's erotic pleasure emerges as a symbolic response to the uncontainable threat of mortality, as an attempt to sustain life in the face of death.

As Mrs. Quinn's body asserts itself in a state of illness, she becomes increasingly abrupt, fitful and intense; her senses dominate in a self that is pluralized, unsuppressed by "I." Language suddenly reveals its normally repressed materiality. Mrs. Quinn erupts again and again in the text, both bodily and as the embodied eruption of her "lies." Mrs. Quinn's "detailed and diabolical" narrative (74) recounts four different versions of what Mr. Willens did to her. Her narratives' escalating pornographic details advance from the first version, when Mr. Willens was examining her eyes and had one hand on her bare "leg to keep his balance...but that was all there was to it and she couldn't do a thing about it" (57) and Rupert "got the wrong idea" (59), to another scene, where she describes Rupert driving off with the corpse, and details how greedily the optometrist used to kiss her, "sucking away...and chewing away...and pushing himself up at her...(60). The third scene, an explanation of how she secretly hid the incriminating evidence—Mr. Willens's red box—is a lurid flashback to

foreplay: "the dirty cuss puffing away getting his fingers slicked in" (62). The final scene compares Willens to an "old billy goat" who, she says, "knock[ed] her up and down and [tried] to bash her into pieces. Dingey on him like a blowtorch"(62). Mrs. Quinn perversely asks Enid, "How'd you've liked that?" (62). Initially, Enid is not only convinced but also shattered by Mrs. Quinn's "terrible talk" (67): "it was an effort for her to move, or even make a cup of tea or go to the bathroom. Moving her body shook up the information that she was trying to arrange in her head and get used to" (63). Mrs. Quinn's story isolates and ruptures Enid's sense of herself as "the good woman," her project of constructing her identity, invoking once again "the same old trouble—the problem of occupying space in the world" (48). Mrs. Quinn suffers a dispersal of the self of pathological proportions that suggests she exists in the locus of feminine space, that non-symbolizable "other," or semiotic position, outside patriarchal Law. In illness the policeman's off duty.

As Mrs. Quinn's illness progresses, she commands Enid's gaze as she displays her dying body in line of her vision.

> Mrs. Quinn was often now too tired or weak to talk. Sometimes she lay in a stupor, with her breathing so faint and her pulse so lost and wandering that a person less experienced than Enid would have taken her for dead. But at other times she rallied, wanted the radio on, then wanted it off. She knew perfectly well who she was still, and who Enid was, and she sometimes seemed to be watching Enid with a speculative or inquiring look in her eye...Enid tried to answer the look that was bent on her. (54)

Enid and Mrs. Quinn are not alone in their ocular possession of one another, since the reader also looks and keeps on looking. In commanding Enid's gaze, Mrs. Quinn cultivates Enid's look as a means of negotiating the gap she experiences between her presence as body and embodied subject. Mrs. Quinn can no longer construct herself as subject without apprehending herself as object. Her desire to look at herself, and to be looked at, is a mark of the separation that she feels from her material being and of her desire to know herself as that being. Mrs. Quinn eventually loses all control of the interpretative system that allows others to read her through her body, and relies on Enid's vision to reclaim her status as subject of the gaze, as well as its object. Enid calls Lois and Sylvie from their games to come and see their mother "looking pretty" (36). Mrs. Quinn is freshly bathed and in a "clean nightgown, with her fine, sparse, fair hair brushed and held back by a blue ribbon. (Enid took a supply of these ribbons with her when she went to nurse a female patient...)" (36). Mrs. Quinn becomes a spectacle, framed as an object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator.

As Mrs. Quinn lay dying, Enid's gaze becomes increasingly intrusive, rather than distancing. Eventually denied any language but an inarticulate "mewing sound" (64), Mrs. Quinn is unable to present or obscure herself as she becomes the object not only of the medical gaze, but of Enid's own penetrating stare. At her death, Mrs. Quinn is unable to arrange herself before the look: "The sheet was pulled out and Mrs. Quinn's head was hanging over the side of the bed, a fact that Enid did not record or mention to anybody" (67). The manipulative dynamics of Enid's gaze become literalized in her ability to arrange and rearrange the lifeless form before her: "She had the body

straightened out and cleaned and the bed put to rights before the doctor came" (67). Mrs. Quinn becomes an object she manipulates, and as "the good woman" she has earned the right to do so. The body that Enid rearranges as text in her narrative is one that she owns, one in which she has located herself.

Is Enid's reified consciousness capable of perceiving the historical nature of her reality? Is her utopian impulse an attempt at an aesthetic ideal? Perhaps Enid's consciousness and freedom are only so many permutations of a repressed and reposed sexuality, as suggested by her erotic dreams "as she slept on the couch in Mrs. Quinn's room" (50).

> In the dreams that came to her now she would be copulating or trying to copulate...with utterly forbidden and unthinkable partners. With fat squirmy babies or patients in bandages or her own mother. She would be slick with lust, hollow and groaning with it, and she would set to work with an evil pragmatism...this coldness of heart, this matter-of-fact depravity, simply drove her lust along. She woke up unrepentant, sweaty and exhausted, and lay like a carcass until her own self, her shame and disbelief, came pouring back into her...And the sick woman's breath grating and scolding and then almost disappearing. (51)

Enid dismisses her dreams as "rubbishy drama...the mind's garbage" (51); however, a process of bewilderment and discovery is encoded in the dissident images that erupt in her dreams as transgressive urges. Following the dream, Enid confronts abjection and death as she contemplates life as "the slaughterhouse" (52): "Animal horrors, all worse than you can imagine beforehand. The comforts of bed and the cows' breath, the

pattern of the stars at night—all that can get turned on its head in an instant. And here she was, here was Enid, working her life away pretending it wasn't so" (52). Enid's vision has given her a choice to stop pretending, but the pervasiveness of "the good woman," a seemingly intentional nature of consciousness, wins out and she sets to work "very quietly but steadily through the night...establishing order where there was none before" (52).

Enid's transgressive urges continue, however, characterized by her conflicting thoughts and emotions toward Rupert. Her inconsistency manifests itself in narratives of erotic anxiety and romantic fantasies. Enid inserts herself into an imagined canvas to watch herself in scenarios with Rupert, as she persuades him to confess to Mr. Willens's murder—"*You cannot live in this world with such a burden*" (72)—and sees herself visiting him in the Walley jail everyday.[6] Enid confesses that "when she feels that these pictures of devotion, of a bond that is like love but beyond love, are becoming indecent" the "shadow" is there to "sober her up" (72). The shadow is the murder of Mr Willens, romanticized by Enid as a "crime of passion" (72). Enid's fantasies justify her self-aggrandizement by the construction of a more heroic canvas, in narratives that implicate a textual consciousness as a deceiving frame, more "lies." Enid's arrangements of appearance are seemingly impermeable to feeling, and serve to reveal an underlying callousness. On the day Mrs. Quinn dies,[7] Enid corrupts her promise of "trying to be good...an angel of mercy" (52). Mrs. Quinn is dying as the children lunch on a celebratory menu of "cookies sprinkled with coloured sugar and glasses of milk into which she [Enid] had stirred chocolate syrup" (65). The play initiated in the first section takes on a sinister aspect. Images in this section, such as

Enid making bubbles while the horror of Mrs. Quinn's dying comes unadulterated, underscore the irony of human cruelty that cram the stressed scenes, like the Jell-O "crammed with fruit" Enid makes that becomes menacing in its implication of clear order and its arrangement of primary colours (64).[8]

After the funeral, Enid returns to the Quinn's home with the intention of playing out her romantic/heroic fantasy with Rupert. She is costumed, "wearing a dark-green silk-crepe dress and suede shoes to match...her hair up in a French braid and [she had] powdered her face (70). Enid is dressed for her own "true theatre" (Kristeva *Horror* 3) in confronting the abject, as she contemplates the possibility of Rupert murdering her, a chance she will give him in her plan to confront him in the boat on the river: "this might be the last time she will dress herself and the last clothes she will ever wear" (70). Enid faces the sick room and sees all traces of the sickroom gone; the heavy quilts off the window, transformed from a space of dark concealment to one of daylight. Mrs. Quinn has vanished, replaced by "a bouquet of blue delphiniums" (74).. Enid makes a new plan, a more dangerous plan, to keep silent, and as long as she keeps silent "this room, and this house and her life held a different possibility...She would make this house into a place that had no secrets from her and where all order was as she decreed" (76-77). Enid suggests she means to find the red box, the secret, Mrs. Quinn insists is there—"you had to get everything in right or the top wouldn't go down" (58). Enid takes on the role of detective-housewife as she hovers over Rupert like a hunter over her prey and smells his "deeply sweat-soaked skin" (77). Enid makes a conscious decision to open herself to risk, to be vulnerable, as she observes,

"there is something new and invasive about the smell of a body so distinctly not in her power or under her care" (77).

The key object to implementing her plan to lure Rupert into a confession is her camera, a ruse to lure him to the river to take a picture. Enid gives Rupert the "advantage" (72) of having the camera as evidence of her accidental drowning in the event that he murders her after she confronts him: "Even the camera if found would make it more plausible" (72). In effect, the object of the camera acts as both accomplice and eyewitness to the events. Cameras and photographs figure prominently in Munro's work, most notably The Photographer of the epilogue in *Lives of Girls and Women,* who is full of "fluid energy" as he "fixes the big eye" of his camera on the townspeople of Jubilee (LGW 246). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes claims the photograph, as witness, testifies authoritatively to the existence of what it displays: "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (Barthes, *Camera* 87). Munro's narrative strategy of the camera, or photograph, suggests a reversal of Barthes's notion of the photograph as an authoritative referent. For Munro, the photograph exists in an open field of reference, full of "fluid energy;" its role as witness, as evidentiary, is open to interpretation.

In the final scene of "The Love of A Good Woman," Enid stands still as a photograph, her boots held by the mud on the water's edge where "she could still hear Rupert's movement in the bushes...But if she concentrated on the motion of the boat, a slight and secretive motion, she could feel as if everything for a long way round had gone quiet" (77). There is a curious calm and alertness, an animal sensitivity, to her condition. The image invokes stillness and silence as collaborators in waiting, but

waiting without knowing what she is waiting for, waiting without a clear object in view. At the end of "The Love of A Good Woman," the final judgement is left open in the stillness of its frame, distancing prevails over involvement ("for a long way round"), and the final event has a seemingly noneffect, however, Enid's silent framed stance is one of vulnerability.

Photographs can be disturbing in their inability to tell, but they can also seduce. The photograph's seeming passivity and silence are irresistible, they invite transgression—Rupert's "movement in the bushes" poses a real threat. The boat that had spoke to her earlier of Rupert's guilt—"It said something gentle and final. *You know. You know*" (64)— is "waiting, riding in the shadows, just the same" (78). Neither Enid's narrative, nor her will for order can hold up against death, as the watcher becomes the watched. Enid's vocation as "the good woman" refuses the empowerment of extrication, and she is forced to acknowledge her own mortality. In "The Love of A Good Woman" the feminine subject is ultimately defined by the relationship between the erotic and the abject in the issues of mortality. Enid, finally, rests on the edge of something else, between the "real" and the imagined, that is, the non-representational aspect of death—as what cannot possibly be known, only imagined. Enid's project of being "the good woman," in its final image, demonstrates a feminine subject in process/on trial as "something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (Kristeva, "Women Can Never Be Defined" 137-138).

To paraphrase Foucault, "The Love of A Good Woman" is about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze. Mrs. Quinn's bodily

distortions and exaggerated behaviour fixed in Enid's gaze introduce the actualities of decay, disease, and the pain of the female body occupying space in the narrative. Enid's gaze is not eroticized or romanticized, but presents a material, bodily aesthetic for the imagination—a language of materiality that inscribes the body as an archaic experience. Furthermore, Enid's medical gaze destabilizes both subject and object in her rendering of Mrs. Quinn, subverting and evading any notion of an essential self. Mrs. Quinn suffers a dispersal of the self of pathological proportions that suggest she exists in the feminine space, that is, the non-symbolizable "other." Munro stakes out a feminine space that is nevertheless symbolic in her marking through Enid's writing.[9] Enid's writing does not replicate experience, but instead conforms to the postmodern view that holds that it is the writing that constructs experience. The marking, the stroke of the symbolic pen, is the making of the feminine subject, a way of knowing and imagining, in a space of narration.

Foucault writes, "the gaze is an open field, and its essential activity is of the successive order of reading...it spreads out over a world that is already the world of language" (*Birth of the Clinic* 121). In "The Love of A Good Woman," conventional linear narrative is subverted and the gaze becomes the open field from which the narrative can be read. In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro engages in an open form that defers meaning, counter to the presumed expectations of closure and coherence of the conventional short story. The displacements of perspective from which the reader must constantly view what is to be looked at in solving the murder mystery parallels the mirror metaphor in an infinitely worked doubling of concepts between the "two" stories, in a narrative space, or "territory,"[10] where narrative shifts

are occasioned by the reading process itself. Explicit demands are made upon the reader, as co-creator, in which process is made visible. In effect, Munro's appeal is to a reader imagined by the text.

In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro's fragmented narrative structures represent a process of identity that attempts to evade any essential notion of "self," a process of identity doubly encoded as critique and complicity of the norms inscribed by the social order—analogous to Kristeva's "establishing and countervailing of a sign- system"—undermining any fixed position. In "The Love of A Good Woman," the feminine subject can never be fully defined, but instead represents the tenuous subject position of "somebody they thought they could know," a subject in process/on trial. "The Love of a Good Woman" is a living structure of its particular historical moment, a structure that appears as if it might crack, as when Enid asks Rupert, "Where, where exactly is the Tyrrhenian Sea?" (47), thus creating a space of opening and an unexpected abundance in the narrative, and therefore, possibility and change. In "The Love of A Good Woman," Munro creates a de-familiarized terrain that accommodates complex, mobile, open beings, as she blurs boundaries, and undoes limits between genre and gender.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Ildikó de Papp Carrington echoes Hutcheon when she describes "The Love of A Good Woman" as "metafictional, [a] many-voiced narrative about narration, a story that not only tells how and why stories are told and not told—or retold and interpreted—but also compels its readers to participate in the narrative, interpretative and re-interpretative—process" (Carrington, "Don't Tell" 160). Carrington's essay investigates the narrative complexity of the story by scrutinizing the many layers of narration that take place between an interlocking set of "character-narrators" and "character-narratees" who "withhold, postpone, or reveal information" (161). The process of the narrative process itself, Carrington asserts, forces the reader to question her interpretation of the narrative as well.

[2] Death by drowning, and its associated images and metaphors, is a frequent theme in Munro's fiction and also occurs in "Baptizing" (*Lives of Girls and Women*), "Walking on Water" (*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*), and "Miles City Montana" (*Progress of Love*), a motif more fully discussed by Ildiko de Papp Carrington (see *Controlling the Uncontrollable* 211-213; and "Don't Tell Daddy").

[3] The linked and, for the most part, opposed terms pleasure and bliss (*jouissance*) are offered for discussion, though never entirely defined by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. 1973. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

[4] I am endebted to Laura E. Tanner's essay "Death-Watch: Terminal Illness and the Gaze in Sharon Old's *The Father*." By establishing a connection between Sharon Olds and her father through the "gaze," Tanner redefines the dynamics of the gaze as described by Mulvey.

[5] The "nurse" figure recurs throughout Munro's work and often functions as surrogate mother. Audrey Atkinson, an officious nurse who looks after Ellis in "Friend of My Youth" is reminiscent of Mary McQuade in "Images" and anticipates both Enid in "The Love of A Good Woman" and Iona in "My Mother's Dream," the final story in *The Love of A Good Woman*.

[6] The same jail in which Annie is incarcerated in "A Wilderness Story" (OS)—one hundred years earlier.

[7] Jeanette Quinn dies of heart failure on Alice Munro's birthday (July 10th).

[8] The image echoes what in "Material" (SIB) Munro calls "the marvelous clear jelly" writers spend their lives "learning how to make." In the words of Munro's narrator, it is "an act of magic...an act of unsentimental love," (43) a sentiment clearly de-natured by the "love" of a "good" woman. Robert Thacker's much quoted essay, "'Clear Jelly': Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics" (in Mackendrick 37-60) is a consideration of Munro's narrative perspective.

[9] Kristeva writes, "I think that for women, generally speaking, the loss of identity in jouissance demands of her that she experience the phallus that she simply is; but this phallus must immediately be established somewhere; in narcissism, for instance, in children, in a denial and/or hypostasis of the other woman, in narrow-minded mastery, or in fetishism of one's work...otherwise, we have an underwater, undermaternal dive...[one must] pierce the paternal wall...to reemerge still uneasy, split apart, asymmetrical, overwhelmed with a desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written" (*Desire* 164-165).

[10] Mark Levene refers to Munro's fictional space as a "territory, a space, in which figures appear, disappear and re-form in different shapes" (Levene 854).

CHAPTER THREE

"Feminine Identity and the 'Uncanny:'" Subversion at Work in Alice Munro's "Open Secrets," "Carried Away" and "My Mother's Dream"

To introduce the uncanny is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich,* with estrangement and unease. It is to introduce dark areas, something completely other and unseen, it is to invite transgression. The stories selected for this chapter demonstrate the uncanny realm of the feminine subject in process/on trial, suggesting possibilities of other selves, of different histories, different bodies. Conventional linear narrative, and its presumed expectations of unity of time, space and character, is radically subverted. Chapter three explores the fragmented arrangements of narrative that leave gaps and residual "ghosts" of absence. This sense of apparition is the disturbing element and is imaged in Munro's fiction as ghosts, shadows, darkness and approaches to temporality—gaps in time, stillness and silence.

The inevitability of death hovers over much of Munro's fiction. More specifically, all three of these stories include an actual or implied murder, providing the formal cue for the reader to invoke the conventions of mystery reading—the processes of picking out clues, and using them to fill in the narrative gaps and blanks, to participate in the creation of the story. This sense of fatality, however, intensifies the struggles of the living characters. Ildikó de Papp Carrington aptly describes Munro's art of fiction-making as "controlling the uncontrollable," a description she links to violence in Munro's stories:

> The common element is the eruption of either deliberate or accidental violence that, like an underground stream that splits the earth, suddenly bursts through

> the seemly surface of everyday behavior. These frightening eruptions make the characters lose control of themselves or the events in their lives, but then they struggle to regain it somehow. (Carrington, *Controlling* 39)

These "frightening eruptions" that make the characters lose control are often associated with ruptures in the text, that is, temporal gaps in which Munro's characters often stumble upon accidental clarity through leaps in time that require the reader to actively connect and interpret divergent material. These vertiginous moments abound in the three stories under discussion, as fissures of discontinuity that expose a gap in the unity of reality.

In *Mothers and Other Clowns: Stories of Alice Munro*, Magdelene Redekop notes that in Munro territory "familiar, domestic actions are elevated to serve as a powerful means of resistance." In her stories, Redekop observes, Munro "opts for a domestication so radical that we move from the homely to the *unheimlich* or uncanny" (Redekop 12). In *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, editor Elizabeth Wright gives an overview of Freud's seminal essay "The uncanny (1919)":

> Freud regards the uncanny as that class of frightening which arouses "dread and horror" in the old and long familiar. Aspects of "the uncanny" come from its etymological origin *unheimlich*, which implies the term *heimlich*, thus having the double semantic capacity to mean its opposite. Besides having the power to signify antithetical meaning, the uncanny also has the power to signify the development of meaning in the direction of ambivalence, from that which was familiar and homely to that which has become unfamiliar, estranging. (Wright 436)

The uncanny produces a feeling of estrangement, of being "not at home" in the world, a strange, alien and uncomfortable relation to the real. In these stories, Munro provides an uncanny sense of experience that imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived, not as they are known. Munro's use of the uncanny challenges accepted concepts and ideas, by distorting them and showing them from a different perspective: events are altered to challenge perceptions that have become habitual and automatic. As this chapter will demonstrate, in Munro's fiction the uncanny becomes a subversive element, a powerful means of resistance that serves to expose gaps in the unity of reality, gaps in which feminine identity is exposed and explored.

Freud's paradigm of the uncanny in literature is E.T.A. Hoffmann's narrative "The Sand-Man"(Freud, "The Uncanny" 227-233). The hero cannot separate real from apparently unreal events and falls in love with a wooden doll. Hélène Cixous notes Freud's overlooking of the doll, whose animation uncannily subverts the familiar border which divides life and death, as "exposing a gap in the unity of reality where death enters into the picture as what cannot be directly represented, as what life is not, its repressed Other, the latent condition of our being: undoing of structures of difference on which social order depends" (Cixous, qtd in Wright 437). These stories demonstrate the feminine subject in process who, like Enid at the end of "The Love of A Good Woman," rests on the edge of something else, between the "real" and the imagined, that is, the non-representational aspect of death—as what cannot possibly be known, only imagined. "Open Secrets," "Carried Away," and "My Mother's Dream" demonstrate Cixous's description of the uncanny as the "repressed Other" by exposing

what Shari Benstock describes as the "cracks and crevices of the female psyche" (Benstock 29).

Benstock explores the site of the "seam" between the unconscious and the conscious to make it yield fissures of female discontinuity that allow for possible variations from male styles and models of writing. She offers an imaginative revision of Lacan's mirror image by proposing to view the place where the conscious and the unconscious join as a *seam* between the inner "je"(I) of the unconscious and the "moi" (me) of the conscious, whose construction begins in the mirror stage. Benstock asserts that the female has a very different reaction from the male in encountering the seam between the two possible selves: "Hers is not a shock of recognition in the mirror but rather a linguistic space (a 'scene') that conceals—and tries to seal itself against—the gap (the 'crack') of the unconscious...a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity" (Benstock 29). As Benstock notably observes, "this division cannot be healed; identity itself rests in this division, the effects of the working of the unconscious" (Benstock 31). Benstock's site of the seam between the conscious and unconscious provides a model to explore both psychically and metaphorically the possibility of a feminine identity that resides in the imaginative space of the uncanny.[1]

"Open Secrets"

"Open Secrets" is a story of the disappearance and probable murder of a young girl named Heather Bell, in the summer of 1965. In "Open Secrets," Munro inscribes the feminine subject in a narrative that is at once elliptical and multidimensional. Many of

the details of the story are never entirely clear, yet the larger issues come across as significant and resonant through the "uncanny" sense of experience that Munro provides. "Open Secrets" is a drama of consciousness, and an acute social commentary, played out in the imagination of its heroine, Maureen Stephens. Maureen acts as a sort of psychic detective who has an extraordinary way of keeping clues. Maureen's knowledge, the knowledge that belongs to her as an individual, is specific to her consciousness of herself as "the Jewel," a name given to her by her husband, Lawyer Stephens, who named her "the Jewel" because she was "intelligent and dependable, in fact quite able to draw up documents and write letters on her own." The narrator observes, "Maureen could still enjoy being the Jewel. Or at least she found it comfortable. Part of her thoughts could slip off on their own" (138).

When Maureen's thoughts slip off on their own, "she might catch herself sitting on stone steps eating cherries and watching a man coming up the steps carrying a parcel. She has never seen those steps or that man, but for an instant they seem to be part of another life that she is leading, a life just as long and complicated and strange and dull as this one"(158). In her world of whiffs and glimpses, Maureen experiences "that state of feeling" that Freud calls the uncanny (Freud 220). The signification of the uncanny lies precisely in this dualism. It uncovers what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. Maureen, however, "isn't surprised" (158) by this opening or split in her consciousness. Maureen claims the man with the parcel is "just a fluke, a speedily corrected error...so ordinary, she thinks afterward. The cherries. The parcel" (158). The "cherries" and the "parcel" are initially presented as objects in an objective world, establishing a mimetic

or material reality, but then move into another mode, one in which Maureen perceives as "just a fluke, a speedily corrected error." Part of Maureen's "uncanny" power lies in this radical shift of vision from objects and fixities, to the intervals between them, attempting to see as things the spaces between things. When Maureen's thoughts "slip off on their own" they impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are commonly known. Maureen's thoughts open up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, onto that which is outside dominant value systems, to challenge accepted concepts and ideas, to show them in a new unexpected way.

Maureen next sees something that she claims "isn't in any life of her own" (158), exposing a gap in the unity of reality where the death of Heather Bell enters into the picture. The "uncanny," writes Hélène Cixous, "presents its unfamiliarity not as merely displaced sexual anxiety, but as an encounter with death, which is pure absence" (Cixous 213). Maureen's new vision brings together three layers of the story, but she is seemingly unaware of its significance. Her husband demeans her with his sexual demands, and "right through her husband's rampage she thought of the fingers moving in the feathers, the wife's hand laid on top of the husband's, pressing down" (153). The hands are those of Marian and Theo Hubbert, who have just been to see Lawyer Stephens with information about the disappearance of Heather Bell. Immediately after her husband's "rampage," Maureen's anxieties about Heather's murder are read into images external to her conscious self.

> She sees one of those thick-fingered hands that pressed into her tablecloth and that had worked among the feathers, and it is pressed down, unresistingly, but by somebody else's will—it is pressed down on the open burner of the stove

> where she is stirring the custard in the double boiler, and held there for just a second or two, just long enough to scorch the flesh on the red coil, to scorch but not to maim. In silence this done, and by agreement—a brief and barbaric and necessary act. So it seems. (158-159)

In Maureen's vision, time and space collapse as three layers of the story are brought together, resulting in a split, but oddly augmented identity. Maureen's uncanny revelation unfolds in a deviant space of gaps and distortions, however, the immediacy and intensification of her vision has the power to close the gaps, to "solve" the mystery. Carrington interprets this scene as "an image of Marian punishing Theo for doing something to Heather ("Talking Dirty" 603). As Nathalie Foy observes, "this is a moment of intersecting layers in which *she* [Maureen] is pushing down Theo's hand because she links her husband's rampage with Theo's. She is punishing both men. She is unaware that this is the significance of her vision" (Foy, *ECW* 154). Much later in life, when Maureen stands stirring custard, she again experiences her self on the subconscious level of the uncanny—a relation not quite remembered. Time and narrative seem to have folded over on themselves.

> In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it. (160)

What boils to the top of the custard pot is her past, and the sense that she has been visited by her own double. The two realities co-exist yet exclude each other. Significantly, the impression is not one of diminishment but abundance.

The story of Heather Bell could have "been a whole other story...had it rained that day"(129), but, in fact, Heather vanishes: "Heather Bell will not be found. No body. No trace. She has blown away like ashes" (159). Heather Bell becomes "old news," a "story that can't be rehashed forever" (160). Heather Bell vanishes from her own story. In a parallel to the absence of Heather Bell, Maureen "could imagine vanishing" (139). Maureen's desire to vanish is not displaced into an alternate reality, or fantasy, but is directed towards an absent area of her life, transforming it into something "other" than the familiar, comfortable one. Maureen's desire to vanish is a desire to disrupt the status quo, to efface "the Jewel," to "be careless, dauntless, to create havoc—that was the lost hope of girls"(139-140).

The narrative of Heather's disappearance is layered by a poem written by Maureen's cousin Frances, a poem "already made up and written down...good enough to be put to music" (156-157). Frances's poem is a ballad, an elegy to the hope of lost girls like Heather, an uncanny "voice of the dead." The stanzas of the ballad comment self-reflexively on the mystery plot in which the ballad is embedded. Like the story, the ballad is an attempt to solve the mystery by classifying various possibilities of what might have happened to Heather. Although the ballad is presented as ambiguous in origin, layered between the telling of the story, I don't agree with Carrington that it is anonymously composed ("Talking Dirty" 597). The ballad is layered in sections juxtaposed to the consciousness and character of Frances, who demonstrates a propensity for gossip, information that she shares with Maureen who participates with her in an exchange of information, talking about "this and that...gossip, rumor, the thrill of catastrophe" (137). Together they become interpreters of the story's mystery

hiring and proposing" (139). She becomes "the Jewel" whose "thoughts could slip off on their own" (138), who encounters the seam between two possible selves as a space "that conceals—and tries to seal itself against—the gap (the 'crack') of the unconscious" (Benstock 29). Maureen's process of simultaneous "sealing and splitting" becomes a doubled act of "vanishing" and re-appearing, a process that explores the site of the "seam" between the unconscious and the conscious to make it yield "fissures of discontinuity" (Benstock 29). It is this *opening* activity that is disturbing in that it denies the solidity of what had been taken to be real.

Freud considers the phenomenon of the "double" as the most prominent theme of uncanniness, a phenomenon "which appears in every shape and every degree of development" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 234). In a parallel story to the story of the disappearance of Heather Bell, Maureen functions as a double in that her story traces the unsaid and the unseen of her circumscribed life: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent. "Open Secrets" is imbued with a sense of loss, of absence, and with the increasingly complex intricacies of the connections between the real and the imagined.

"Carried Away"

In "Carried Away," Louisa meets the ghost of a lover whose face she has never seen. Louisa's epistolary love affair with Jack Agnew comprises the first section—"Letters"—of four titled sections in which, as Robert Lecker notes, "there is no self beyond story, no way of living outside the constraints associated with a literary consciousness formed out of reading practices...in this world, to read is to lose

oneself. Or to lose one's head. Or to die" (Lecker 105-106). In "Carried Away" the characters confront a plethora of texts: letters, book covers, library books, marriage notices, newspaper accounts, factory regulations, notes, inscriptions, paintings, popular magazines. By foregrounding reading and writing in such a way, Munro suggests that a textual consciousness pervades the story, providing both a material reality and the possibility of an imaginary world. At the end of "Carried Away," Louisa has what seems like a real encounter with Jack Agnew, but it can only be fantasy "because he is dead" (48). Jack Agnew's life is led parallel but invisible to Louisa's own, an unstable form, whose identity is never definitively established. For Louisa, gaps in perception are initially troubling: "She could not remember shaking out her hair, as he said she had done, or smiling at any young man when the raindrops fell on the radiator" (10). After the accident in which Jack Agnew is decapitated, these gaps, these "sudden holes" (50) become a source of anguish: what Mark Levene describes as "an absence compounded by Jack Agnew's space in the library and in her memory, never being open to definition" (Levene 855).

For Louisa, Jack's never-observed proximity in the story is present as an absence, a negation analogous to death—"I never saw him. I never saw him to know who he was" (37). After the accident, Arthur could only imperfectly fit the head to the body, "not of course fitted with exactness, not as if a seam could be closed" (34). Arthur later describes Louisa as "one of those people full of mended cracks that you could only see up close" (37). These fractured images of open seams and visible cracks enact the story's thematic uncertainties, and suggest the possible site of the "seam" between the unconscious and the conscious, as described by Benstock. Louisa's "mended

cracks" suggest a process of splitting and sealing, whereas Jack's head, which is "more or less in place" (34), suggests an open site, unable to close against the "otherness" of death. The order that creates and constitutes a whole self, a total body, is undone.

Jack Agnew's decapitation violates that definition of the self as a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole, and arouses "dread and horror" in the imagination of Louise. Freud claims, "dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist...have something peculiarly uncanny about them:"

> the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression...as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light...Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts...Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist...have something peculiarly uncanny about them...an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us. (Freud, "The Uncanny" 241, 244)

The uncanny, according to Freud, has the effect of projecting unconscious desires and fears into the environment and onto other people. Louisa's unconscious desire to see Jack manifests early when she sometimes "saw a shadow that she mistook for a man...It was at this time she entirely gave up on reading. The covers of books looked like coffins to her...what was inside them might as well have been dust" (17). In a

remarkable twist of the story, Munro creates a divergent narrative for Louisa that provides her with an alternate history, one that she experiences in an uncanny realm outside her presumed reality. In the final narrative of "Carried Away," Munro refuses to observe unities of time, space and character, conflating past, present and future, and allowing a dialogue with the dead.

At the end of "Carried Away" when Louisa has her encounter with the "ghost" of a fully bodied Jack Agnew, it happens at a time in her life when her own mortality is under question, on the day she travels to Carstairs to see the heart specialist: "The doctor, the heart specialist, said that her heart was a little wonky and her pulse inclined to be jumpy"(41). What plays on Louisa's failing heart is a desire for love. Louisa makes claim on life as it recedes from her, and retreats to an "other" spectral region. Jack's spectral presence is neither dead nor alive when he pronounces, "Love never dies." Louisa initially responds: "Love dies all the time, or at any rate it becomes distracted, overlaid—it might as well be dead" (48). Her unsentimental concept of love is exposed only in terms of desires that have been lost, given up on, or banished, an echo of her earlier concept of love as "all hocus-pocus, a deception"(10). Love risks collapsing, but is recuperated with the "flare-up of old cells, of old intentions" (49), and Louisa exclaims, "*Oh, love never dies*" (49). Louisa feels a "giddiness taking over" and rejects her "normal life" (48) for a brief time. From "the cracks and crevices of the female psyche," Louisa attempts to make visible that which is written out as negation and as death.

Louisa attempts to introduce this "thing" called death, which Cixous terms "signifier without signified...absolute secret, absolute newness, which should stay

hidden, for if it is manifested to me, it means I am dead: only the dead know the secret of death" (Cixous 231). As Cixous describes, death cannot be portrayed directly but is materialized as a ghost: "the immediate figure of strangeness is the ghost. The ghost is the fiction of our relation to life made concrete...'Death' has no shape in our life. Our unconscious has no room for a representation of our mortality" (Cixous 213). Louisa's fantasy of meeting with Jack Agnew replaces familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny. It introduces dark areas, of something "other" and unseen, the spaces outside the limiting frame of the "real." Afterward, Louisa describes herself as "going under a wave."

> She had gone under and through it and was left with a cold sheen on her skin, a beating in her ears, a cavity in her chest, and a revolt in her stomach. It was anarchy she was up against—a devouring muddle. Sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations. (50)

Within the main narrative of Louisa's "real" life there exists another—concealed but present. This inner text of "sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations" reveals itself at a moment of tension when Louisa threatens to collapse under the weight of her own repression. Louisa experiences an uneasy assimilation of the splitting and sealing between the conscious and unconscious: "it was anarchy she was up against." This moment of disintegration, of incoherence, "a devouring muddle," is recuperated with difficulty. The section ends with Louisa asking, "What place is this?" The narrative shifts to "the day of Miss Tamblyn's death" (50), many years before when Louisa had first arrived in Carstairs, a temporal sliding that, at the close of the story, takes the reader back to the beginning. The last image is of horses

"somewhere out in the country [where] they would lose the sound of each other's bells" (51), a dispersal of sound and image leading either to pure absence, or what can be filled by the imaginative desire of the reader—a "radiant vanishing consolation."

As Munro has said, in "Carried Away," there is "a ghost that is not exactly a ghost, there is the social history of a piano factory in a small town" (interview with Gzowski). That readers do not quite know what happens in the story should, she feels, be catalytic in that its shifting dimensions suggest that sense of alternate lives—that we inhabit fantasy as much as fact.

"My Mother's Dream"

In "My Mother's Dream" Munro inscribes what Freud defines in his essay on the uncanny as "the omnipotence of thoughts," a principle associated with "the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead" (Freud 247). In "My Mother's Dream" Munro gives voice to a storm goddess, the infant daughter of Jill born on the day of her father's funeral. The infant's storms of fury, claimed as "a birthright rage free of love and pity, ready to crush your brains inside your skull" ("My Mother's Dream" 322), occupy the house and the lives of everyone in it. Here Munro counterpoints the eerie, layered dream which suggests the death of the child—"it would be dead, shriveled and brown, its head like a nut"(294)—with the comedic daily life surrounding a lively infant. Remarkably, Munro creates, as Mark Levene notes, "an absolute equation between retrospective and immediate or simultaneous narration...the wrathful infant and the nuanced adult are entirely the same, occupy the identical space within the narrative; neither vanishes

for an instant" (Levene 858). In "My Mother's Dream," Munro's "art of estrangement"[2] resists closure, opening structures that categorize experience in the name of "reality." Munro's narrative strategies subvert and interrogate nominal unities of time, space and character, as well as question the very possibility of fictional representation of those unities, as Heble also notes.[3]

"My Mother's Dream" crosses thresholds and stumbles into very strange dimensions. Jill's infant daughter, the omniscient first person narrator of the story, narrates the story from an all-knowing and powerfully unrepressed point-of-view. The distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced when a fully articulate infant appears before us—producing an uncanny, or *unheimlich*, effect for the reader, whose expectations of a protagonist are grounded in a familiar and recognizable world. The infant narrator represents something that cannot be possibly known, only imagined. The effect becomes increasingly monstrous when the other members of the family leave for an overnight stay, and Jill becomes the lone victim of an infant who presents herself as a potential murderess: "Before the coffee was perked I sent a meat cleaver cry down on her head (322)....my crying is a knife to cut out of her life all that isn't useful. To me"(319). In a key passage narrated by a seemingly outside observer, Munro clearly demarcates the reality of potential violence in the mother and infant relationship—controlling the uncontrollable—when the narrator asks, "What is it about an infant's crying that makes it so powerful, able to break down the order you depend on, inside and outside of yourself?" (322). It is here that Munro steps outside the parameters of the imaginary story with a narrator whose associative observation disrupts the narrative and implies a reader's response, making visible a reality of

motherhood—a recognizable reality inherent in an infant's cry that is capable of breaking down "the order you depend on, inside and outside of yourself" (322).

When Jill is left alone with her infant daughter, eruptions of willed or accidental violence in her daughter's cries threaten to break down all sense of order. For Jill, even her beloved violin "hates her...it gives her back a stubborn distortion of everything she intends" (324). The centrality of the mirror image is a frequent motif in Munro's fiction as a metaphor for the production of other selves. In a parallel to "The Love of A Good Woman," in "My Mother's Dream" Munro deploys a mirror image to depict the multiplicity and estrangement of feminine identity: "Nothing could be worse than this—it's worse than if she looked in the mirror and saw her reliable face caved in, sick and leering. A trick played on her that she couldn't believe, and would try to disprove by looking away and looking back, away and back, over and over again"(324). The chaos and tension become unbearable for Jill in the house that is "shut up like a box" (323) and she resorts to putting a few grains of prescription painkiller in the baby's bottle, drugging the infant in an attempt to stop her crying. The violent eruptions of the baby's cry are finally silenced and both mother and infant fall exhausted into a deep, drug-induced sleep.

In "My Mother's Dream" Jill is accused of murder by Iona, the self-appointed surrogate mother: "*Dead. Dead. Murderer...Baby. Love my. Darling. Ooh. Get the. Suffocated. Blanket. Baby. Police*" (328-29). What follows is an absurdly comedic scene of detecting a murder and of planning the murder cover-up. The connection between evidence and conclusion is accomplished with lightening speed by Ailsa, the controlling older sister, who plans "a sad quiet little funeral" (331) for the baby and a

return to Morrisville, the Hospital for the Insane, for Iona. In these stories, Munro makes it impossible for the reader to arrive at any definitive version of the truth. In "My Mother's Dream," any accurate account of events, or reliable interpretation, recedes further and further into the distance; or, rather, it is an equivocal truth which is foregrounded as the very matter of the story. In most detective fiction the reader's involvement is often complicated and complicit, whereas in "My Mother's Dream" the entire crime plot has gone through Ailsa's mind "in an instant" (331), in a parody of detective fiction. Munro creates an ambience of play in which the corpse becomes the prize in a game of hide and seek. The crime scene is dispelled when Jill finds the baby under the sofa and "a flash of joy sets her life going again" (333). It is at this moment when Jill "took on loving me" (338) that the narrator surrenders to a quiet resolution—"I stayed still—not yet being able to turn over—and I stayed quiet"—of the preference for the mother, for "coming back." "I don't believe that I was dead, or that I came back from the dead, but I do think I was at a distance, from which I might or might not have come back" (337). Relinquishing the battle against her mother, the narrator takes on her "female nature" (337), choosing "survival over victory" (337).

"My Mother's Dream" is explicitly about the formation of the feminine subject clearly voiced by the narrator:

> To me it seems that it was only then that I became female. I know that the matter was decided long before I was born and was plain to everybody else since the beginning of my life, but I believe that it was only at that moment when I decided to come back, when I gave up the fight against my mother (which must have been a fight for something like her total surrender) and when

> in fact I chose survival over victory (death would have been a victory), that I took on my female nature. And to some extent Jill took on hers…she took on loving me, because the alternative to loving was disaster. (337-338)

The nature of feminine identity, according to the story, is the bond between mother and daughter. Munro suggests that it is in this continuity between mothers and daughters that "disaster" can be avoided and "survival" ensured. Through the opening scene of Jill's dream, Munro resolves the conflict between mother and daughter at the outset of the story on the subconscious level of the uncanny as "something old and long familiar." The story opens with Jill's dream where "something was wrong…a mistake…snow had settled overnight on the luxury of summer" (293). In the dream, Jill's "sorrow" is finally dispelled when she finds her baby "perfectly safe" and "herself forgiven" (295). This happens "in the real world" in July 1945. In the real world, Jill is an outsider, whose music made her "an odd choice, as did her clothes and her way of living and her wild hair" (317). Jill, an orphan, "knew nothing about living in a family" (310), however, on the subconscious level, through the fractured and disturbing images of her dream, Jill's recognition of her role as a mother becomes perfectly clear. "Distances" are negotiated and both mother and daughter choose survival.

In Kristeva's terms, there are risks attached when a woman identifies with the archaic mother because she is "confronted by something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same…there are psychotic risks attached. I might lose myself, my identity" (Kristeva, *Women's Review* 22). Mother and infant potentially become "monsters to each other" ("My Mother's Dream" 321). In "My Mother's Dream,"

survival comes from the child's desire for the maternal body she once rejected as a "non-Iona"—"The big stiff breast might just as well have been a snouted beast rummaging in my face"(314-315). The infant's choice to identify with Jill, to choose survival over victory, moves her away from the undifferentiated being she was with the "smothering" Iona, to the consciousness of a self-sufficient "I" who can identify with loss, no longer demanding Jill's "total surrender." In effect, by making a choice to identify with Jill, the infant is given agency to "take on her female nature."

"My Mother's Dream" reads like a fable or dreamland inhabited by ghosts and a monstrous dead baby, in a place where objects (violins and mirrors) and the innocence of an infant are animated and capable of violence. In one passage, Munro overtly appeals to the creative freedoms of a fairy tale in describing the reality of Jill's repressed anger: "In a fairy tale she would have risen off the bed with the strength of a young giantess and gone through the house breaking furniture and necks" (320). The last image of the story is the narrator at the age of twelve, back for a visit to her aunt's home, wanting to get the attention of the teenage girls next door from her hiding place in the bushes: "I would have liked for one of them to see my pale pajamas moving in the dark, and to scream out in earnest, thinking that I was a ghost" (340). In "My Mother's Dream" a sense of apparition, of fatality, or "otherness," intensifies the struggle of survival. The site of the struggle is "female nature" and the "taking on" of identity. The final image of the narrator's desire to be perceived as a ghost to the teenage girls keeps this site open to definition. She remains an outsider, isolated in the bushes from the others. There is confusion in this position, for what is outside is viewed by some as corrupt and corrupting, yet there is also power in her position

outside—a victory of sorts—to resist a given social order and implied value system of gender. Part of the solution to what Kristeva terms the "feminine problematic" is the "desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written" (Kristeva, *Desire* 165). As an outsider, as a ghost, she can change the angle, seeing, revealing, that which is on the other side.

Conclusion

The uncanny has the power to signify the development of meaning in the direction of ambivalence, from that which was familiar and homely to that which has become unfamiliar, estranging. Munro's storytelling as the "art of estrangement" is an offering that both creates and displaces subjectivity, an ambiguous act that resists closure, always open to transitions and alternatives. In "Open Secrets," "Carried Away" and "My Mother's Dream" the reader is artfully made aware of the pervasive theme of ambiguity through the "uncanny" sense of experience that Munro provides. These stories are allied in their shifting dimensions, in the power of their absences, and suggest a sense of alternate lives, that our familiar lives are accompanied by phantom existences. What is encountered in this uncanny realm of the "Other," whether it is ghosts or monsters, is the effect of projecting unconscious desires. In "The Uncanny," Freud describes the uncanny experience as one of concealed desire, nothing new or alien, but something that is familiar and old that becomes alienated through the process of repression. Freud, like Kristeva, relates this desire to the repression of cultural order, invoking, what is for Kristeva, the "semiotic disposition" or "signifying practice" where the subject undergoes "an unsettling, questionable process; this

indirectly challenges the social framework" (Kristeva, *Desire* 18). In "Open Secrets, "Carried Away" and "My Mother's Dream," the uncanny asserts a gap in the unity of reality to expose "fissures of female discontinuity"—a movement into different linkages or new alignments that subvert dominant unifying structures of genre and gender, making visible that which is culturally invisible. As this chapter demonstrates, in Munro's fiction the uncanny becomes a subversive element, a powerful means of resistance that serves to expose gaps in the unity of reality, gaps in which feminine identity is exposed and explored.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] Benstock's "site of the seam" is analogous to Kristeva's concept of the "split subject," a concept of subjectivity that is viewed as a constant process of the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic. Both theorists argue that subjectivity is a process rather than a fixed identity.

[2] See Lawrence Mathews on the topic of Munro's fiction as "the art of disarrangement." "The value of the art of disarrangement," as Mathews claims, "lies in its continual commentary on its own tentativeness, in the face of life's complexities and mystery" (Mathews 193).

[3] As Heble suggests in *The Tumble of Reason*, while Munro grounds the reader in the knowable world that presents itself as real and true, that world, "reveals itself to be maintaining and undoing reality at one and the same time, operating as both an instance and a criticism of fictional representation" (Heble 4).

Conclusion

After reading the short story collections *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*, I began my enquiry into the work of Alice Munro with one simple question: *How did she do that?* How did Munro engage me as a reader so thoroughly in stories that are so obviously discontinuous with generic convention and form?

In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*, Munro's use of fragmented and disrupted narrative forms functions to subvert conventional linear narrative and make space for new possibilities of genre and of the representation of the feminine subject. Munro's short fiction allies with W.H. New's theory of fragmentation that theorizes that the Canadian short story form is itself a system of fragmentation. Obliqueness and discontinuity, as New suggests, "sound verbal alternatives to the closed values of the status quo" (New x). In many of the stories, however, Munro utilizes the conventions of the murder mystery. This results in a series of narrative deferrals and gaps that Munro is not particularly interested in reconciling. As a result, the more fragmented and disconnected the narrative appears, the more actively the reader seeks to discover the connections in order to "solve the plot." Central to these murder mysteries are the female characters whose lives are experienced as discontinuous with the status quo, whose divergent narratives are not easily accessible to the reader in stories that are discontinuous with conventions of the mystery genre. Mysteries are narratives about the difficulties of knowing the world and the way such knowing is indirect and tries to get at the unperceivable truth in an oblique way. Munro's use of the mystery story genre, and use of fragmented and disrupted narrative forms, articulate the feminine subject through form by tapping into the basic processes of perception and

interpretation. In effect, Munro's narrative strategies lead the reader to question *how* one comes to apprehend experience, and therefore puts that experience into question.

A story can have any number of contexts. In choosing the theoretical contexts for this study, my intention was not to close or fix any one interpretation, but to explore these stories in terms of the specific critical concepts of the epistolary form, the gaze and the uncanny. These critical approaches provided a framework from which to approach the selected stories in which the feminine subject is variously represented as a subject in process/on trial. Kristeva's theory of semiotics essentially argues that the disruption of the subject, the subject in process, prefigures or parallels disruptions of society. Munro's specific narrative strategies and fragmented narrative structures represent a process of identity that attempts to evade any essential notion of "self," creating a "doubled act of (literally) inscribing and challenging subjectivity" (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 6). Munro's short fiction is allied with postmodernism as it inscribes social norms only to undermine them. In effect, in these stories Munro makes visible that which is culturally invisible in representing the feminine subject in process/on trial.

By choosing the epistolary form in "A Wilderness Station," Munro constructs the ideal poststructuralist subject as a subject in process/on trial. Annie's subject position signifies on the level of Derridean *différance*. Difference, as Jacques Derrida argues, is not a concept of fixed meaning. Meaning is achieved through the "free play of the signifier." Differences always take us elsewhere, in an endless proliferating network of displacement and meaning. An analysis of the theoretical implications of the epistolary form in the construction of the feminine subject in "A Wilderness Station"

demonstrates meaning as being produced by the interplay between presence and absence in a continuous process of *deferral*: Annie is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other absent signifiers in a long line of writing, a process analogous to Kristeva's theory of the subject in process/on trial.

As may be now clear, in "The Love of A Good Woman" Munro derives drama not only from the spectacle of violence, but also from the circumvention of expectations and deliberate misuse of narrative conventions. Suspense is generated not only from the anticipation of a crime, but also from uncertainty about the source of narration and the status of information which in turn unsettles the reader's attempts to define events as real, imagined or remembered. The murder mystery is made most apparent and most ambiguous in the second situation of "The Love of A Good Woman," in which Mrs. Quinn's story is narrated through Enid's retrospective eye. Enid is represented as a heroine whose medical gaze is not just lucid but empowering. Enid's gaze, as well as her visibility in the text, are sources of power that enable her to view Mrs. Quinn from a Foucauldian perspective as the object of panoptic surveillance. By the end of the story, however, Enid's subjective experience of her own bodily feelings removes her entirely from the ranks of the objectified heroine as "the good woman," or "somebody they thought they could know." In "The Love of A Good Woman," the feminine subject in process/on trial is ultimately defined by the relationship between the erotic and the abject in the issues of mortality.

The echoes and fragments of narrative that are written into the three stories in the third chapter alter ordinary relationships, and shift the value of familiar things into the

shadowy regions of the uncanny. What characterizes these stories is their reference to the temporality of the imagination, the vagueness of memory, the sinking into amnesia, the disappearance and the distortion of what is "real." The uncanny constitutes, as Freud describes, 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.' The uncanny effect does not introduce something new, so much as uncover all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably known. In these stories, however, Munro describes and creates unease. In the raising of the dead, Munro creates an event beyond what is known of the "real" world. The disappearance of Heather Bell in "Open Secrets," the presence of the ghost of Jack Agnew in "Carried Away," and the retrospective view of the narrator as an infant in "My Mother's Dream" all function as culture's "unseen" to incite the reader to look elsewhere and differently. What is visible is the depiction of subjects in process, suggesting possibilities of "other" lives outside culturally prescribed experiences. In evoking the uncanny with her use of disrupting narrative strategies, Munro refuses categories of the "real" and its unities in favour of the creative freedom of the imaginary to define the experience of the feminine subject in process/on trial.

In *Open Secrets* and *The Love of A Good Woman*, Munro's short fiction takes a stance toward its own communicability and legibility as well as to the activity of reading in general. Munro's fiction accommodates some—but not all—reading conventions; it lends itself to certain interpretative strategies while defeating others, illuminating the play of its intelligibility. And it is in this play that, as a reader, I take great pleasure.

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