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## MIRIAM MARTY CLARK

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uch has already been said about the relation—"intimate and profound" (Blodgett 1)—of Alice Munro's art to life. In finely layered, minutely observed stories which she herself calls "autobiographical in form" (*Lives* n. pag.), Munro tracks a long, recursive passage out of girlhood in small towns along the Ottawa Valley of Canada. Marking at every turn the tangled connection between past and present, she plots the bitterness and satisfactions of family love, the inscrutability of private lives, and the stubborn calculus of social relations not only in fictional towns like Jubilee and Hanratty but later in Toronto and Vancouver, in affluent suburbs and middle-class marriages.

Hers is a fiction, as Ajay Heble points out, that continues both to invite and to sustain reading within a realist tradition. In the last decade, however, a growing body of critical work has focused attention on the ways in which Munro's stories problematize the very mode they inhabit, undoing the illusion of transparency and advancing in reflexive, opaque, often difficult ways on the unstable worlds of narrative, memory, and writing itself. Ildikó de Papp Carington's extensive tracking of Munro's allusions and metaphors, James Carscallen's elaboration of patterns (of names, of symbols, of tropes) across volumes, Magdalene Redekop's identification of suppressed maternal imagery, E. D. Blodgett's reasoning about narrative strategies and narrative selves, Heble's own persuasive argument for language's dual nature as "a form of representation" in Munro's work but also as a "system of signs" (5)—all emphasize in

new ways the multiplicity and complexity of the stories. At the same time, most of these accounts acknowledge as both the first and the final pleasure of Munro's fiction what Redekop calls simply "a pleasure of recognition" (3), the undiminished if not uncomplicated presence of life in art.

In this essay, however, I want to trace a different and neglected relation, of books to books, considering how Munro's fiction is "linked," in Foucault's productive terms, "to the vast world of print and develops within the recognizable institution of writing" (91). The stories in *Friend of My Youth* (1990) and *Open Secrets* (1994) dismantle—not for the first time in Munro's career but more extensively than before—the foundations of realist narrative, figuring or disclosing the many texts in the one and so refiguring the linked practices of writing and reading. The terms of these later stories shift markedly from work to text, from memory and expressive evocation to language, from readerliness toward writerliness. In this essay I want to describe that shift more fully, turning finally to one story, "Carried Away," which addresses allegorically the politics of the library and the ethics of reading.

The vast world of print, the lively and troubling presence of the library, is manifest in Munro's fiction from early on: nowhere is the irreducible plurality of narrative fully suppressed or long hidden from view. Carrington has established Munro's recurrent allusiveness to Homer, the Bible, Shakespeare, Hardy, and others, arguing finally that these references serve to dramatize and master fundamental ambivalences within the stories (*Controlling*). But "allusion" does not adequately describe these stories' lodgings at the intersection of many texts or their abundant furnishings in books, letters, scandalous doggerel, and best-loved verses. All of Munro's towns have libraries, "Walls of printed pages, evidence of so many created worlds" (99), Del Jordan thinks in *Lives of Girls and Women*; they have newspapers, Great Books groups, and encyclopedia salesmen marketing Knowledge to wartime farmers flush with cash.

And the stories are often *about* readers. They are the young protagonists of Munro's female bildungsromans—Del of *Lives of Girls and Women*, Rose of *The Beggar Maid*—reading everything in the library, intuiting the future in girls' magazines and old medical texts, in Brontë novels and lines by Tennyson. Later, they are Rose and

her friend Jocelyn on the maternity ward in "Mischief" (*Beggar*), reading Gide and Santayana to distinguish themselves from the gabbling housewives around them. They are middle-aged women on the verge of feminist awakening, taking courses, opening bookstores, growing fat on dusty Russian novels, on "skimpy-looking books by Czechs or Japanese or Rumanians" (*Friend* 112), and on rows of Penguin paperbacks.

But if books are accorded a central place in Munro's towns—in the library, the schoolroom, and the church—the place of reading is nevertheless marginal. Reading occupies a space normally taken up in adults by sexual passion, domestic responsibility, and economic productivity. "She . . . had outgrown the habit," Del says of her friend Naomi; "This was the normal thing in Jubilee; reading books was something like chewing gum, a habit to be abandoned when the seriousness and satisfactions of adult life took over. It persisted mostly in unmarried ladies, would have been shameful in a man" (*Lives* 99). The habit hangs on in librarians and teachers, like "dry and wooden and innocent" Miss Farris (*Lives* 102) and ineffectual Arthur Comer, living vicariously through histories and mysteries in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" (*Something*). It persists in eccentrics like Rose's father, who repairs furniture and has a shed full of books, and Del's mother, for whom the Great Books discussion group is one way of reckoning her own lost possibilities. For women who take up reading in the course of self-awakening, the practice gives way soon enough, of necessity, to real work, editing or teaching or producing television.

Even for the young, reading never has the pure purposefulness of silence, exile, and cunning. It isn't only that it smacks of peculiarity, uselessness, memory work. To read seriously is to stand both within and outside culture, at the center and at the margins. To take to heart the texts taught in school, to advance in earnest on the shelves of books in the Town Hall library, is to enter into a complicated and sometimes oppositional relation to the community that has established those institutions and authorizes reading. And the books that offer a way out of the ungrammatical, unilluminated world of home always threaten to turn with unwelcome irony or incomprehension on the familiar. Reading Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" for a school assignment, for example, Rose

becomes as enraged by Mansfield's uncomprehending treatment of the poor as she is irritated by her stepmother's stupidity about literature.

Furthermore, other texts come into characters' lives and into the stories themselves with less than epiphanic clarity. Like all allusions, these carry their own libidinal energies, their own troubling imperatives and interrogations; they trail multiple hermeneutic possibilities and unrestricted powers of foretelling and explaining. A performance of *The Pied Piper* in "Changes and Ceremonies" (*Lives*) is no mere fairy tale but provides occasion for an upwelling of adolescent sexual fervor, the transformation of childish boy-girl hostility into the "anarchy" and "mystery" of sexual feeling. At the same time, the operetta based on Browning's poem carries a darker plot of money and social class, only barely glimpsed by the narrator and never smoothly folded into the "meaning" of the story. The unresolved, unaddressed, almost unacknowledged tale of exploited labor and its fearful consequences (the piper, unpaid by the mayor and the corporation of Hamlin, leads the children of the town away forever) stands as a troubling remainder, a lingering disequilibrium.

For readers of, as well as readers in, these stories, other texts have increasingly this kind of anarchic force, a power to create gaps and uncertainties, to proliferate meanings and unravel the very processes of meaning-making and realist representation. In some early stories Munro's impulse seems to be to circumscribe closely the symbolic operations of other texts, their convergences, their inscription and thematization as acts of reading. They are ritualized as ceremony, drama, rhyme; they are enshrined in fancy bindings or housed in libraries where they operate under special regulations. "PENALTY FOR IMPROPER USE \$100" the sign in the Jubilee public library warns (*Lives* 98), not far from the table where Del Jordan and her friend linger over suggestive passages in a favorite historical romance. Other texts are preemptively interpreted, or moved, with all their polyvalences and hermeneutic possibilities, outside the plot, so that what happens to people "in stories" is distinct from, even if it bears an ironic or illuminating resemblance to, what happens to people in the "real world" Munro defines. Even so, the

boundaries prove illusory, easily breached as the energies of other texts flow relentlessly back across them into the stories.

But Munro's more recent fiction foregrounds and thematizes its own plurality, addressing itself directly to prior texts and other discourses. Her mode of address is by turns archaeological and allegorical: in the one, prior texts are excavated and considered—as fossils, as fragments—at the site of the story; in the other, the act of reading becomes itself the subject of narration. In the stories of *Friend of My Youth*, Munro strips away some of the thick description of character and community that marked her earlier work and makes an archaeological exploration of the discursive and textual character of her narratives and of the multiple acts of narration within them. In other texts—Hardy novels, forgotten letters, small-town papers—she locates the unstable, discursive, and infinitely regressive infrastructures of her stories, denaturalizing realist representation and deconstructing its premises from within. “Meneseung,” a writer's story, and a reader's, is only one such exploration and figuration. The story moves away from, rather than toward, a coherent narrative of the life of Almeda Joynt Roth, a nineteenth-century “poetess” and madwoman. Prowling in what are simultaneously the foundations and the ruins of the realist text, her narrator—a would-be biographer—sifts through the documents, both actual and imaginary, out of which such a story might be made. These include the newspaper (an insinuating weekly, the *Vidette*), a book of poems, an autobiographical preface, a photograph, a note, a tombstone. Almeda Roth appears first, last, and only as text; the story begins when the narrator comes upon the book of poems and ends as she clears the overgrown tombstone marked simply “Meda.”

Working from reports in the *Vidette*, the narrator recuperates and parodies the language of the nineteenth century and the small frontier town; she draws on the language of the poetess with its high tones and its barely repressed sexual yearnings. Out of these she writes the story of Almeda, her brief courtship in middle age by Jarvis Poulter, a salt producer, and her descent into madness. Hers is a madness of textuality, a breakdown into words and the pure inescapableness of words:

Almeda in her observations cannot escape words. She may think she can, but she can't. Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her. Poems, even. Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn't that the idea—one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems, the poems she has written, inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags? Stars and flowers and birds and trees and angels in the snow and dead children at twilight—that is not the half of it. You have to get in the obscene racket of Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower. Almeda is a long way now from human sympathies or fears or cozy household considerations.

Almeda does not, the narrator concludes, mistake this flux for reality, "and neither does she mistake anything else for reality, and that is how she knows that she is sane" (*Friend* 70).

By showing a character constructed out of the discourses of the past and particularly the discourses of gender, Munro moves representation, if not subjectivity itself, out of the realm of nature and experience and into the realm of discursive practice. Nowhere is the language of gender construction more forcefully at work than in the obituaries of Almeda Roth and Jarvis Poulter, which the narrator places side by side near the end of the story. Almeda's emphasizes her qualities of sensitivity, eloquence, "pride," "daintiness," "decorum," duty, womanliness, charity, and "unfailing . . . faith" (71). Jarvis's, on the other hand, emphasizes his "industry," "productivity," and "employment to our town" (72). Here, as elsewhere, the effect is political as the narrator excavates from the realist text buried narratives of gender, class struggle, and economic violence.

In "Carried Away," Munro turns from the archaeological to the allegorical in her exploration of the politics of reading and the practices of realist writing. At the outset a brief synopsis of the story's fairly complicated plot may be helpful. Set in Carstairs, Ontario, at the height of industrial capitalism, between 1917 and the mid-1950s, "Carried Away" begins when Louisa, once a traveling saleswoman but now the town librarian, starts receiving romantic letters from Jack Agnew, a soldier off to war. Jack identifies himself to her as a reader—first of Zane Grey, later of what he calls "History and Travel" books—and he tells Louisa that he has watched and ad-

mired her in the library, that he daydreams about her at her work. “*I think of you up on a stool at the Library reaching to put a book away,*” he writes, “*and I come up and put my hands on your waist and lift you down, and you turning around inside my arms as if we agreed about everything*” (*Open* 11). Though she can’t remember or picture him, Louisa responds to his letters, sends him the photograph he asks for, and waits hopefully for his return.

In the story’s second section, Louisa tells a salesman named Jim Frarey about the letters. We learn from her account that when Jack came home after the war he married someone else, saying nothing to Louisa but leaving on her desk at the library a scrap of paper on which he had written the words, “*I was engaged before I went overseas.*” “No name,” Munro notes, “not his or hers” (18). Jim offers his own affable interpretation—that, thinking he might never return from the war, Jack Agnew “got a little carried away” (18)—and then he takes Louisa upstairs to bed, where she gives up her virginity.

The third section of the story recounts Jack’s death in a grisly accident in the sawmilling operation at Doud’s organ and piano factory where he worked. The section is told from the point of view of Arthur Doud, owner of the factory and son of the man who founded not only Doud’s but the Carstairs public library. It is Arthur who takes charge after Jack is decapitated. He picks up the severed head, carrying it back to the body and calling (irrationally, he later thinks) for the doctor. Later he visits the widow, who asks him to return Jack’s library books—borrowed but not checked out. In the library Arthur meets Louisa, whose unresolved interest in Jack (only ever known to her as text—letter and newspaper) is revealed in the questions she asks Arthur about the circumstances surrounding the accident. Never a reader himself, Arthur begins coming to the library many evenings after Jack’s death, adopting Jack’s faintly voyeuristic attitude toward the librarian. Eventually, almost inexplicably, Arthur and Louisa marry. Together they raise a son and run the factory through the depression into the prosperous mid-century.

At this point the story takes a remarkable turn. Many years later, after Arthur’s death, Louisa encounters Jack Agnew—alive and well!—at a city park where a union rally is being held. They give radically divergent accounts of the past: in hers (which is also, at

this point, ours) he dies spectacularly; in his, he has become a prominent labor organizer and a public figure. Munro herself has commented on this divergence, noting that initially she “had a pretty realistic story going about World War I, small-town industry, the kind of accidents they had, the boss, the workers. But all the time I felt a parallel story going in which the accident never happened and another reality developed” (“Contributors” 371).

I want to argue that what this story generates is not parallel realities but two simultaneous and ultimately irreconcilable allegories of reading. In one, Jack Agnew is the figure of the reader. His borrowing is unauthorized, his gaze illicit, his use of the library both politically and erotically charged. Under the beneficent portrait of old Mr. Doud, he finds not the cultural legacy that the Douds—like their Carnegie counterparts—had envisioned but the language of class struggle and the seeds of revolution in books like H. G. Wells’s *Man-kind in the Making*, Bertrand Russell’s *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, and G. K. Chesterton’s *What’s Wrong with the World*, which ends with an unflinchingly revolutionary proposition. “Because there should be a redistribution of property,” Chesterton writes, “there shall be a revolution” (214).

Jack’s origins are not working class but precapitalist. His father is a fisherman and a gardener, a “lone wolf” (5) uninvolved in the accelerating production (of organs and pianos, then of player pianos, then bowling alley lanes and radar cases, too) and consumption (of washing machines and new cars and kitchen appliances) in which the town is caught up between the wars. He lives by agricultural time and his own rhythms and so stands in striking contrast to those who, like his son, are governed by the posted rules (the story lists them) and the factory whistle, which blows at six “for many to get up,” then again “for work to start at seven and at twelve for dinnertime and at one in the afternoon for work to recommence, and then at five-thirty for the men to lay down their tools and go home” (25).

For all his reading, Jack Agnew lives by the factory whistle and dies by the machine. His decapitation literalizes the fragmentation and alienation of life under a rationalized labor process, the mutilation of the laborer into a fragment of a man. It figures the estrangement of intellectual life—the life of the reader and the revo-

lutionary—from the life of the body, its labor and its wages. When his blood pours mightily onto the sawdust floor of the factory, the names and dark energies of the revolutionary texts seem to pour with it.

After Jack's death, Arthur Doud becomes a reader himself—"almost accidentally," he remarks, as if by contact with the dead man's head and his unreturned library books. In Arthur, however, reading is a bourgeois practice; it soothes and confirms rather than incites. He spends his evenings in the library reading the same magazines that come to his home, satisfied and peaceful beneath his father's gaze. "*A Believer*," the inscription below the portrait notes without irony, "*in Progress, Culture, and Education*" (28).

In the end, Jack's spilled blood forms an underground tide, a narrative energy which cannot be stemmed but wells up with a force that literally ruptures the story with Jack's reappearance. The repressed and appropriated energies of revolution return to compel the narrative out of linear time, to reverse its irreversible premise, to force a rereading and a rewriting of the past. These energies are powerful enough to disrupt both realist practice and the practices that have governed reading and interpretation into the twentieth century.

At the same time, a second allegory unfolds under the sign of the book. Its governing metaphor is not the decapitation (with its significant echo in Louisa's loss of maidenhead) but the library, which functions to organize and reproduce culture and to authorize reading. "*My name is Jack Agnew*," the first letter from overseas reads, "*and my card is in the drawer*" (4).

For Louisa, books are commodities before they are a library. "*There is no interesting story*," she tells Jack. "*My parents are both dead. My father worked for Eaton's in Toronto in the Furniture Department, and after his death my mother worked there too in Linens. And I also worked there for a while in Books. Perhaps you could say Eaton's was our Douds*" (5). Jim Frarey, who after Jack's seductions and betrayals is the one to take Louisa to bed, also deals in books as commodities. He "sold typewriters and office equipment and books," Munro writes, "and all sorts of stationery supplies" (13).

As commodities, books take their place wholly within capitalist modes of production and consumption. They anticipate—as the

piano factory does, metaphorically—the incorporation of aesthetic production into commodity production generally, which Fredric Jameson takes as the tendency of modernism and the settled circumstance of postmodernism. Arthur Doud's first romantic considerations of Louisa (which contrast strikingly with Jack Agnew's fantasy of intellectual and erotic union in the library) turn in part on hiring and wages. For Arthur, attractiveness is also construed as commodity; "style" and "looking well" can be bought by a shrewd consumer, even one on a librarian's wage. "She was not a young woman anymore," he thinks, "but she maintained an eye-catching style. He remembered that years ago when they had hired her, he had thought that she got herself up very soberly. Her hair was not bobbed in those days. . . . He tried to think how much she was paid. Not much, certainly. She kept herself looking well on it. And where did she live? In one of the boarding houses—the one with the schoolteachers? No, not there. She lived in the Commercial Hotel" (35).

If books, as commodities, find their quarter in the Commercial Hotel, the library has its proper lodging in the Town Hall, where capitalism and civic duty conspire to create a place in which reading is authorized and writing—even writing about revolution and the redistribution of property—is rendered harmless under headings of Fiction and Non Fiction, History and Travel. Beneath the pink-cheeked portrait of the library's founder, the great civilizing influence of capital is extended and class struggle is transformed into True Friendship with the Working Man.

With Jack's death, Arthur Doud assumes the mantle of the reader. He reauthorizes reading, returning the stolen books and establishing a presence of his own, "genial," he thinks, "reassuring, and, above all, natural" (31). At the same time he domesticates into bourgeois marriage with Louisa the erotic energies circulating at the library. The surplus—the erotic, the revolutionary, the hidden and spilled—funds a renegotiation of patriarchal power for postwar capitalism. If his father operated with a kind of heroic paternalism, by "whims and decrees" (31), Arthur comes during those evenings at the library to see himself not as the impostor he once feared being but as a new kind of man, a public servant: dignified, fair, and philanthropic. He also becomes, not coincidentally, an exemplary consumer. After thinking about the town's demands—for

hockey uniforms and war memorials, road maintenance and Sunday School buildings—Arthur notes:

Expectations at home were not lacking either. Bea [Arthur's daughter] was agitating to go away to private school and Mrs. Feare had her eye on some new mixing apparatus for the kitchen, also a new washing machine. All the trim on the house was due to be painted this year. All that wedding-cake decoration that consumed paint by the gallon. And in the midst of this what had Arthur done but order himself a new car—a Chrysler sedan.

It was necessary—he had to drive a new car. He had to drive a new car, Bea had to go away to school, Mrs. Feare had to have the latest, and the trim had to be as fresh as Christmas snow. Else they would lose respect, they would lose confidence, they would start to wonder if things were going downhill. And it could be managed, with luck it could all be managed.

(32)

The same surplus reads out quite differently, and more dramatically, as female hysteria. The unauthorized and the anarchic, read under the sign of the feminine as erotic desire—evoked by Jack's letters and frustrated by his death, then repressed, domesticated—emerge with dizzying force twice in Louisa's life, once just after her encounter with Jim Frearey and a second time, many years later. The first time, Munro writes that Louisa "felt herself whirling around in an irresistible way, as if the mattress had turned into a child's top and was carrying her off" (20).

The second time, the experience begins with anxiety, "a faintly sickening, familiar agitation" (43) after a visit to a doctor in the city. Soon Louisa is disoriented, confused. Jack Agnew appears, not dead at all but white-haired and wrinkled, a union man (martyrdom being modulated into trade unionism in this gesture) and famous, to make a puzzling pronouncement: "Love never dies" (48). Jim Frearey appears too, from the back, in a crowd of Mennonites. "Oh, what kind of a trick was being played on her, or what kind of trick was she playing on herself!" Munro writes.

She was dizzy and humiliated. She would not have it. . . .

No wonder she was feeling clammy. She had gone under a wave, which nobody else had noticed. You could say anything you liked about what had happened—but what it amounted to was 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 revolt in her stomach. It was anarchy she was up against—a devouring muddle. Sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations.

(49–50)

Carrington has recently made a convincing case for this scene as a hallucination, the “psychological aftermath” of the factory accident (“What’s in a Title?” 555). I want to go further, to suggest again that this is only one of the two stories unfolding in Munro’s text. This one marks as female and symptomatic—and so appropriates, explains, and contains—the anarchic force which both drives and violently ruptures narrative in that other, simultaneous, allegory of reading.

Finally, nothing more fully activates the plurality of these readings of reading than this, that while one of the two allegories splits the narrative irretrievably open—and not into epiphanic clarity but into a devouring muddle several paragraphs before the end of the story—the other continues, acknowledging reading’s powers and subverting its dangers by renaming them. It preserves the linear integrity of the narrative and pushes toward closure under a Hardy-esque rubric (invoked early in the story and late) of accident or fate. “She believed,” Munro writes of Louisa at the end, “in the swift decision, the unforeseen intervention, the uniqueness of her fate” (51).

Closure is a less interesting matter here, it seems to me, than reading’s end. To be the reader in this text is to occupy the space where repression and anarchy contend. Once the narrative is no longer suspended between allegories of reading, it vacates its ethical premises and recedes in the final paragraphs of the story toward one-dimensionality. Hysteria subsides into nostalgia as Louisa envisions the solid houses and mature trees of long ago, the blinkered horses pulling sleighs out from the city into the blankness of the country. Fate moves forward, unresisted, toward death.

“There is no document of civilization,” Walter Benjamin contends in a well-known formulation, “which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256);<sup>1</sup> cultural treasures—borne forward

1. This statement appears in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), as cited. Benjamin makes the same observation in his essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937), published in *One-Way Street*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979) 349–86.

from generation to generation, whether in martial triumph or enlightened philanthropy—are inevitably, often invisibly, tainted by oppression and anonymous toil. For a sustained moment in “Carried Away,” Munro brings both civilization and the barbarism that is its dark other, its necessary condition, fully into view. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, she preserves from earlier stories a sense of the liberatory and subversive power of books and reading. In a crucial instant the continuum of history and its expression as narrative are briefly, lavishly ruptured, laying bare the nature of the library and all the acts of reading it shelters and signifies.

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