The Fiction of Alice Munro
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Along with its counterparts in Europe and the United States, Canadian fiction during the past half century or so has been moving beyond the limits of literal realism, though this departure has not been as radical or as consistent as it has been elsewhere. Many prominent Canadian writers — Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Hugh Hood, and Rudy Wiebe among them — have been content to explore cautiously the edges of their realistic fictional worlds, and to move tentatively into that unlimited and somewhat amorphous world which lies "beyond realism." Others, like Robert Kroetsch or Audrey Thomas, have been more deliberate and far-reaching in their break from realism, and it may well be that they represent a vanguard of a movement that will accelerate as the intellectual and artistic climate of the nation moderates. Canada remains essentially a middle class nation, and a recognizable world, whether in the literal or the fictional sense, is still very much in demand, so to the extent that fiction pays some attention to the market place, realism will continue to hold its own.

Nevertheless, the fiction of the 1970s is not in texture the fiction of the twenties or the thirties, and the modulations that have been struck are more than mere grace notes to a recurring strain of realism. There is something substantial and significant here, both in form and content, and one of the more skilled of the contributors to these new tones has been Alice Munro, a writer who has quietly and firmly established herself over the past decade. In a very real sense, she occupies both fictional worlds: her fiction is rooted tangibly in the social realism of the rural and small town world of her own experience, but it insistently explores what lies beyond
the bounds of empirical reality. Though she has said that she is "very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life,"¹ the substance of her fiction to date suggests that this excitement must also derive in part from her intuitive feeling that there is something else of significance just below that literal surface. This may be one reason why to date she has been more attracted to the short story than to the novel, though as she has stated in an interview, "I don't feel that a novel is any step up from a short story."² Nevertheless, that more concentrated fictional form probably allows her to explore in a more imaginative and intense way the intangible aspects of her world: those shadowy and shifting areas between the rational and the irrational, between the familiar, comfortable world and sudden dimensions of terror, and between various facets of uncertainty and illusion.

These metaphysical concerns find their aesthetic and formal complements in the structures of her fiction, where a similar illusory balance operates between the conventional fictional elements of plot and character on the one hand, and on the other, a kind of psychological or even psychic verification or resolution of a particular dilemma. Though emanating from a recognizable sociological reality, the situations that are characteristically depicted in her fiction frequently transcend the literal bounds of our conscious realizations, and leave us with a residual uncertainty, puzzlement, or even despair. One of the "possessed" characters from her latest collection of short stories gives expression to this recurring concern in her fiction: "The world that we accept — you know, external reality, is nothing like so fixed as we have been led to believe. It responds to more methods of control than we are conditioned to accept."³

That statement comes from the story "Walking on Water" contained in her latest collection, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, which essentially picks up on the same themes and concerns as her two earlier works, *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women*. In most of
this fiction, Munro is the chronicler of a particular region, that of south-western Ontario, though some of her stories have a west coast setting, and in her regionalism she reflects a vision that shares much with such southern writers as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty. The comparison with O'Connor is perhaps particularly apt: both depict worlds that are on the surface orderly and uneventful, but which are suddenly violated by the intrusion of some unexpected force or event. There is more gratuitous violence in O'Connor than in Munro, but the inhabitants of their worlds are characteristically on the edge of some discovery about themselves or of some revelations about their world which threaten not only their day to day values, but in a sense the very cosmic order itself. "'Things are getting out of hand, anything may happen'" (Dance, p. 212) is the way the omniscient narrator of the title story from Munro's first collection expresses this revelation.

In an earlier article on that first collection of stories I argued that Alice Munro's fiction could profitably be examined in terms of the themes of isolation and rejection, which unfold in situations where human relationships are rarely cemented or consummated. The term "unconsummated relationships" comes from what is perhaps the best story in that collection, "The Peace of Utrecht," but it defines situations in many other stories as well, most notably "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Postcard," and "Thanks For the Ride." Even though in the latter two stories, there is a sexual consummation, there is a failure to attain a satisfactory or lasting human relationship, and the attempts to achieve this are characterized by undercurrents of desperation and hysteria. For the two sisters in "The Peace of Utrecht," neither life, nor childhood memories of Jubilee, nor the death of their mother is sufficient to create a bond between them. Home, the past, family ties — forces which are conventionally interpreted as positive forces — are here dramatized as disturbing elements, and the narrator even defines "home" as a "dim world of continuing disaster."
(Dance, p. 191). For her and Maddy, their mother was merely a force they had to "deal with," and they remember only the complex strain of living with her, the feelings of hysteria . . . [and] a great deal of brutal laughter" (Dance, p. 201). Now, even after the funeral, there is no possibility of reconciliation, and the narrator realizes that on parting, "we will have to look straight into the desert that is between us and acknowledge that we are not merely indifferent; at heart we reject each other" (Dance, p. 190).

The many "unconsummated relationships" in this story — between the sisters and their mother, between Maddy and Fred Powell, between the sisters themselves — are contemplated by an adult narrator who tries to understand them in terms of the past. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," this pattern is heightened by the use of a youthful first-person narrator who is both participant in, and commentator on, similar situations that are only dimly coming into her consciousness. Del Jordan (who will appear again in Lives of Girls and Women), is caught between the conflicting moral imperatives of her mother and her father, and unable to formulate clearly any viable sense of right and wrong, she comes to some incipient realization that a kind of moral chaos rules everything. She is witness to the "unconsummated relationship" between her father and Nora Cronin who, in being rejected by Ben Jordan, expresses in very human terms what that kind of relationship means: "I can drink alone, but I can't dance alone," she says. "Unless I am a whole lot crazier than I think I am" (Dance, p. 17). Neither Del — nor her counterparts in other stories — would know quite how to reply to that rejoinder, I suspect, for the line between sanity and various forms of insanity in Munro is both thin and shifting. The significance, however, of what Del has just been on the edge of is felt by her as they drive back toward the moral certainties represented by her mother:

I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar
while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kind of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (Dance, p.18)

This realization is akin to that experienced by the narrator of “Dance of the Happy Shades” where, as we saw above, she speculates that “things are falling apart.” Not the least of the force of this statement derives from the circumstances where it is made: the pathetically trivial annual music recital conducted by the aged Miss Marsalles. The ostensible order at that event — “everything was always as expected” (Dance, p.214) — becomes progressively more tenuous as the community’s women and their daughters subject themselves to the same routine:

Here they found themselves year after year — a group of busy, youngish women . . . who were drawn together by a rather implausible allegiance — not so much to Miss Marsalles as to the ceremonies of their childhood, to a more exacting pattern of life which had been breaking apart even then but which survived, and unaccountably still survived, in Miss Marsalles’ living room. (Dance, p.215)

But chaos — or at least a perversion of normality — follows upon this order, as a group of retarded children stream in to the room to take their turn in the recital. “Something has happened, something unforeseen, perhaps something disastrous,” muses the narrator, and senses that “there is an atmosphere in the room of some freakish inescapable dream” (Dance, pp.221,222).

There are two agents or forces which operate here to effect a union between the “normal” world and the “abnormal,” or between the rational and the irrational — the music and Miss Marsalles herself. Music and madness — these are common conjunctions throughout literature, as Shakespeare and Tennyson, amongst others, amply illustrate. In “The Dance of the Happy Shades,” the music played by Dolores Boyle emanates from the world of madness, but paradoxically it renders meaningless the label of madness:
it is something fragile, courtly and gay, that carries with it the freedom of a great unemotional happiness. And all that this girl does . . . is to play it so that it can be felt, all this can be felt, even in Miss Marsalles' living-room on Bala Street on a preposterous afternoon. (Dance, p. 222)

Miss Marsalles is the other operative force here, who, near the end of one long life, appears to be partially occupying another, from which vantage point she can impose a harmony over the two disparate worlds. She manifests no surprise or elation at Dolores' playing — "people who believe in miracles do not make much fuss when they actually encounter one" (Dance, p. 223) — but when the music stops the gap between the worlds is again realized. "To Miss Marsalles such a thing is acceptable, but to other people, people who live in the world, it is not" (Dance, p. 223). As these people depart for their homes, leaving "the no longer possible parties behind," they know they have lost their former superiority over Miss Marsalles, because of the music that has intruded upon their world, which they recognize as "that one communique from the other country where [Miss Marsalles] lives" (Dance, p. 224). This same realization comes to Del Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women as she witnesses the absurd quests undertaken by her Uncle Benny in his pursuit of his mail-order wife:

. . . lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world . . . luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see. (Lives, p. 25)

It is these intangible or irrational impulses between the protagonist and some other element — other characters, the past or childhood, a code of morality or behaviour — which give Munro's fiction its haunting and disturbing quality. In some cases, what is involved is simply the process of maturing and accumulating normal experiences, as in such stories as "An Ounce of Cure" or "Boys and Girls" from Dance of the Happy Shades, or "The Found Boat" from Something I've
**Been Meaning to Tell You.** In other cases the situation involves mature or elderly people suddenly confronted with disturbing circumstances, and here, as we saw in "The Peace of Utrecht" the dilemma is more poignant, because the protagonist is unable to make the right move. In Munro’s first two books, the emphasis was on the youthful protagonist trying to come to terms with the adult world, but in her latest collection it is frequently the other way around: grandmothers trying to understand granddaughters ("Marra-kesh"), elderly sisters trying to make sense out of their common past ("Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You"), a sensitive old man just failing to come to terms with the younger generation around him ("Walking on Water").

In this latter story, the elderly Mr. Lougheed is in a sense caught between the forces emanating from the younger generation, neither of which he can understand, and neither of which appears to explain his world to him. There is first of all the intellectual irrationality of Eugene who is so far beyond the logical aspects of his world that he chooses suicide as an alternative to his inability to control external reality — i.e., to walk on water. Lougheed’s reaction to him is bewilderment, sorrow, and eventually a capitulation to a kind of weariness that suddenly overtakes him in his isolation after Eugene’s disappearance. His response to the other form of irrationality that besets him — the selfish, solipsistic self-indulgence of the hippies who inhabit his boarding-house — is one of bitterness and anger. He had inadvertently caught two of them in the act of copulation in the hallway of the boarding house, but he was, by their laughter, and derision, the one who was made to feel guilty. “What he objected to, he had said to Eugene, what he objected to in this generation, if that was what it was, was that they could not do a thing without showing off. Why all this yawping about everything, he asked. They could not grow a carrot without congratulating themselves on it” (p.71).

This mote of bitterness, sounded first in “The Shining Houses” from her first collection, suggests the social protest
element that is occasionally part of Alice Munro’s realism. In that earlier story she was protesting the spectacle of creeping urbanization and its accompanying dehumanizing conformity. This situation centres on a somewhat disreputable Mrs. Fullerton, whose Tobacco-Road type of dwelling stands squarely in the path of suburban development. Munro dramatizes this conflict through Mary, a kind of moral reflector who, though a suburban dweller, is humanely and even perversely drawn to the side of Mrs. Fullerton. She ultimately recognizes that she has no chance against the real-estate logic of her neighbours and this realization gives rise to a blistering comment on the self-righteous advocates of orderly progress:

... it did not matter much what they said as long as they were full of self-assertion and anger. That was their strength, proof of their adulthood, of themselves and their seriousness. The spirit of anger rose among them, bearing up their young voices, sweeping them together as on a flood of intoxication, and they admired each other in this new beheaviour as property-owners as people admire each other for being drunk. (Dance, pp. 27-28)

That story probably represents the closest Munro gets to outright social protest in her fiction, and very much as with Malcolm Lowry and Margaret Atwood in Surfacing, it is more the attitude of the encroachers than the act of encroachment itself that upsets her. The story in a sense just succeeds, salvaged by the psychological dilemma of Mary rather than by the facile and “popular” attack on the real-estate world. This psychologically derived aspect of a protest situation is more thoroughly exploited in the fine west coast-based story “Material” from her latest collection. The attack here at the outset is against the falsities and sycophancy associated with the academic-literary world, and it is manifested in what is ostensibly a lingering sense of resentment felt by the narrator against her ex-husband Hugo:

Sometimes I see his name ... on the cover of some literary journal that I don’t open — I haven’t opened a literary journal in a dozen years, praise God. Or I read ... an announcement of a panel discussion at the University, with Hugo flown in to discuss the state
of the novel today. . . . Then I think, will people really go, will people who could be swimming or drinking or going for a walk . . . [go] . . . and sit in rows listening to those vain quarrelsome men? Bloated, opinionated, untidy men, that is how I see them, cosseted by the academic life, the literary life, by women. (Something, p.24)

As the story proceeds, however, it becomes clear that the narrator — one of three wives that Hugo has had — experiences very mixed feelings about him and his talent. She was not in the audience that strained to listen to him, for she was one of those wives who have "to get snow tires on and go to the bank and take back the beer bottles, because their husbands are such brilliant, such talented incapable men, who must be looked after for the sake of the words that will come from them" (Something, p.25). But in a sense she does protest too much, even though the facts she gives us about both Hugo and her current husband Gabriel spell out clearly the latter’s superiority. Some dozen or so years after their separation, her discovery of a story by Hugo that has captured honestly and without tricks the essence of a character in their life moves her to an appreciation of his talent that undercuts her earlier protests. "How honest this is and how lovely, I had to say as I read. . . . I was moved by Hugo’s story. . . . I did think I would write a letter to Hugo . . . [to] tell him how strange it was for me to realize that we shared, still shared, that same bank of memory. . . . Also I wanted to apologize . . . for not having believed he would be a writer. Acknowledgement, not apology; that was what I owed him. A few graceful, a few grateful, phrases" (Something, p.43).

A major point of this fascinating story is that she does not send such a letter; as she attempts to write it, her words are transformed into sharp, bitter outbursts against Hugo, as she is ultimately unable to forgive him for his double betrayal: in life, and in art. In his story, he had immortalized their former landlady’s daughter, whom they had privately nicknamed "the harlot-in-residence." "She has passed into Art," the narrator ironically reflects. "It doesn’t happen to everybody" (Something, p.43). There may be other reasons
why spouses of writers become bitter, Munro seems to suggest, but this kind of betrayal must surely be a major one. The implications of the title word suddenly confront the reader, and one is reminded of Brendan Tierney’s similar fictional exploitation of human “material” in Brian Moore’s *An Answer From Limbo*.

“We were strong on irony,” Hugo’s ex-wife ruefully recalls, and this recollection has of course its specific aptness within the context of that story. But it also points to an underlying element in Munro’s fiction in general, and here is an irony which both enlarges the possibilities of experience and helps define her characters’ specific attributes that operate within a given situation. In some cases, the irony is delightful and benign, as in “How I Met My Husband,” which is not without its touches of an O. Henry or Somerset Maugham ending: inevitably combined with moral relief. Edie, the fifteen-year old narrator creates a make-believe world of romantic possibilities out of the sudden intrusion into her real world of the barnstorming pilot Chris Watters, who brings her to the edge of, but not into, the realities of his world: sexual experiences, adult betrayals and infidelities, escape into the larger world. Paradoxically, Edie’s belief in the world of fantasy is kept alive for a time by her forays into the real world — her daily visits to the mail box to wait for the mailman to bring Chris’s long promised letter. Her sudden realization that no letter would ever come coincides with her acceptance of the mailman as a replacement for the romantic pilot, and hence the irony of the title. When she had said goodbye to Watters for the last time, just after a kind of adolescent petting session which threatened to get out of hand, she had an inking of the metamorphosis that was to overtake her: “I wasn’t at all sad,” she mused... “I was really glad I think to get away from him, it was like he was piling presents on me I couldn’t get the pleasure of till I considered them alone” (*Something*, p.60).

A more complex and essentially unresolved effect of irony and ambiguity is reflected in such stories as “Tell Me...
Yes or No’ from her latest collection, or ‘The Office’ from Dance of the Happy Shades. In this latter story, all the circumstantial evidence convicts the landlord right off: Mr. Malley is unpleasant, deceitful, dishonest, and perhaps even lecherous, in his dealings with the narrator, a writer who simply wished to use the office as a creative refuge away from her domestic demands. But there are many other layers of meaning here, and we are drawn into the basic dilemma about the nature of reality. The narrator, as a writer, re-arranges words to create her version of reality that takes its authority through the workings of imagination; the landlord, as a hostile commentator on the whole idea of a woman writing outside the home, re-arranges or manipulates facts to create another version of reality, one that to the outsider is as credible as any work of fiction. What we have in this story is the simultaneous creation of two imaginative worlds, and in this process, Mr. Malley manages to transform his outrageous distortions into some semblance of truth. “I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him,” (Dance, p.74), muses the narrator, but it is clear from the unresolved conclusion of this story that Mr. Malley’s violations of her version of reality cannot be easily dismissed.

Alice Munro’s most recent story, “Characters,” published elsewhere in this issue of Ploughshares, also turns on a note of irony and ambiguity not unlike that which informs the two stories discussed above. Its parenthetical enclosure, as it were, between two apparently discrete pronouncements or observations compels the readers — almost violently — to re-appraise the characters they have come to know in the intervening story by bringing back into play the beginning and the ending. Flo is thereby suddenly brought into focus as a ruthlessly efficient dispenser or organizer of the reality she perceives, and Rose is transformed (not unlike Lois in ‘Thanks For the Ride’”) from a hard, unfeeling character into a sensitive adolescent who is absolutely terrified of reality and who would as willingly be out of her world as in it. In this world of isolated and desperate individuals, Mr.
Cleaver's role as teacher undergoes a transformation as well: from despised pedant to remembered "character," cleansed of all the sins of his real days: "Mr. Cleaver finally gets his breath freshened up, his shrillness, pushiness, tiresomeness sanded down; he is polished and regretted."

At first, of course, Mr. Cleaver is a threat in general to the community, because of "his devotion to words and facts," because his geological and archaeological interests, if encouraged and understood, would compel the citizens to look below the surface of their own lives. He is also a threat specifically to Flo and Rose, who are in league against any force which might break down the defenses around their own terror, around their own self-righteous certainties. He brings them, as it were, to the edges of compassion and understanding, but so thwarted have their lives become in this inward turning community, that they have to dispatch him quickly. Flo, indeed "knew the best way to kill a chicken," and Rose's attraction to the grave- or womb-like dimensions of the drumlin must be seen, I think, as a response both to her step-mother's ruthlessness and to her own incipient humanity. The sadness of this story lies in a sense in the fact that nothing is essentially changed by Cleaver's presence in the town, in how quickly things come back to where they were; his immortalization as a "character" in the memory of the citizens comes only after he is no longer a threat. The irony is not lost upon the reader in the implicit contrast between that "character" who had the potential for illumination, and the "characters" like Flo who constitute the reality of the place.

What this story illustrates, in the larger sense, is what I see as a recurring pattern in Alice Munro's fiction: the dramatization of the conjunction of existential terror or desperation and existential possibility within a total vision that is much closer to faith than it is to despair. Worlds are always qualitatively changed at the conclusions of Munro's stories, and though the causal changes have contributed to the unsettling of her protagonists, they characteristically point to an enlargement of possibilities rather than a restric-
tion, or they imply a resolution already attained. (In "Characters," for example, Rose's attraction to the word "drumlin" is seen as a past proclivity, not a present one.) There is a strong sense of amazement at the human condition in Munro, a quality that seems to be born of a recognition that ordinary people have an intangible talent or gift: not necessarily for goodness or truth or beauty, though that happens, too, but more frequently for lucking it out, for intuiting a move or an action which will get them out of a present predicament. At times, her characters appear to drift into salvation rather than consciously elect it, and their emergence into new possibilities is frequently accompanied by the kind of amazement I referred to above, and not unlike that experienced by Brian Moore's Ginger Coffey when he realized that his worst fears did not bring about the catastrophes he had gloomily anticipated. This kind of realization constitutes what can be defined as an existentialist resolution, a phenomenon particularly relevant to the twentieth-century comic protagonist, to which category Munro's characters can essentially be said to belong. Cyrus Hoy, in his excellent study of comedy and tragedy, The Hyacinth Room, describes this kind of resolution succinctly: "The ultimate in comic sublimity is evident when the worst, which has long been taking shape in the affairs of men, is not realized. In such a case, the protagonist of comedy finds himself saved, as it were, in despite of himself."

It is within this kind of pattern that Del Jordan, the protagonist of Lives of Girls and Women, achieves her salvation, for throughout all the separate episodes of that novel, she never emerges as anyone who is consciously or willingly trying to save herself. It is true that she is from the outset in a state of incipient rebellion against the prevailing values of Jubilee, but she is also as susceptible to — and indeed desirous of — some of the sordid experiences that befall her companions who, as Del later recalled, "faded into jobs and motherhood" (Lives, p.196). It is her curiosity, perhaps, rather than merely a streak of prurience, that causes her to partici-
pate in the blunt and clumsy sexual overtures of the lecher-
ous Mr. Chamberlain, or to submit herself to the lifeless,
mechanical pawings of a local dance hall creep, "thin, foxy,
red faced and red haired . . . his head thrust forward, his
long body curved like a comma" (Lives, p.187). Her
progression from these moral perverts through the rational
and clinical sexual experiments of her high school companion
Jerry Storey, and to her final "baptism" into total sexual
consummation with the Baptist convert Garnet French, illus-
trates of course the fears, the delights, the confusions and the
contradictions that beset an ordinary adolescent, and Del did
achieve some measure of satisfaction in recognizing that she
was both "endangered and desired." It also is a manifes-
tation of the philosophy of life that she took unto herself in a
kind of intuitive way, more or less in response to her
mother's earnest stricture that it was up to women themselves
to bring about changes in the lives of girls and women:

I did not quite get the point of this, or if I did get the point I was
set up to resist it. I would have had to resist anything she told me
with such earnestness, such stubborn hopefulness. . . . I felt that it
was not so different from all the other advice handed out to
women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you
damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss
and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to
go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they
didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about
it, I had decided to do the same. (Lives, p.177)

In retrospect, it can clearly be seen that Del's
experiences all along contributed to this code, from the
horrors blazoned forth in Uncle Benny's tabloids, which
made her "bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its
versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness"
(Lives, p.5), to her final shucking off of the potential
destruction she saw in her relationship with Garnet French.
Paradoxically, this final affirmation of her own authority and
self derives not so much from the experiences she had accum-
ulated, but from the vestige of innocence or ignorance that
still resides in her: "We had seen in each other what we
could not bear, and we had no idea that people do see that, and go on, and hate and fight and try to kill each other, various ways, then love some more” (Lives, p.240). In a very real way, then, she was saved “in despite of herself,” and picking up again from Cyrus Hoy, we can see that Del Jordan’s chronicle aptly illustrates what he sees as central to the kind of resolution characteristic of the comic mode:

Comedy ends with the restoration of the individual to himself, and to all that, in the widest sense, can be said to give him his identity. He will have lost it, if he ever had it, through sundry transgressions, follies, and inconsistencies; also through the force of the sundry delusions which he has entertained, and which keep him from knowing himself or his proper good. But his proper good is defined for him at last, if he has the wit to see it for what it is, and it is still — wonderful to relate — within his grasp, which is not the least of the marvels which comedy celebrates.6

The total evidence in Alice Munro’s fiction ultimately dictates that she cannot easily be categorized, and to say that she writes essentially in the comic mode, or that she is moving consistently beyond realism, reveals only part of the complexity of her art and vision. Her accomplishments offer gratifying evidence that fiction of significant substance, of careful craftsmanship, and of sympathetic treatment of the complexities of human relationships, is very much alive in Canada. All this is of course very much in the tradition of the realism of George Eliot or D. H. Lawrence or Robertson Davies, and as I indicated at the outset, Munro’s fiction is strongly rooted in the realism of region and time. But in the Epilogue to Lives, Del, by now an aspiring novelist and recorder of Jubilee’s stories, recognizes the problems that she faces, as she visits Bobby Sherriff, out temporarily from the Asylum, and the last person she sees in Jubilee. “‘No list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together — radiant, everlasting’” (Lives, p.253). But Bobby from the Asylum reminds her — and us — that there is another world that is not so decipherable, as
he suddenly rises in a graceful-grotesque manner and looks at Del in such a way that she construes his action "to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know" (Lives, p.254). In a very real way, this unknown or irrational world has been as much a concern of Alice Munro as have any of the things she can list, and her very substantial contribution to our fiction lies in the successful way she has addressed herself to this dilemma, with the authority of the artist and the astonishment of the seer.

NOTES
2 Ibid., p.258.
6 Ibid., p.312.