

## The Rhetoric of Fictional Realism in the Stories of Alice Munro

In "Epilogue: the Photographer," a story from *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator tells us that as a young girl she wrote a novel, mostly in her head, about a local family that numbered among its members a suicide, an alcoholic and a mild lunatic. "I picked on the Sherriff family to write it about; what had happened to them isolated them, splendidly, doomed them to fiction."<sup>1</sup> In her imaginary novel, the narrator transformed the characters, who are real to her within Munro's fictional world, just as Greek writers had transformed the reality of the unfortunate houses of Atreus and Thebes into an imaginatively satisfying, well-wrought drama. Like the young narrator and the Greek dramatists, Munro has no choice but to work within the compelling force-field of melodrama, romance, legend, and adventure, but at the same time, like all realists, she must persuade her audience that her fictions are made in opposition to that same force. There are numerous ways of doing this. For example, Cervantes in *Don Quixote* and Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* are realists in portraying characters deceived by the popular fiction of their day and by including details that would be excluded from romance or heroic drama. Zola is a realist because he writes about characters driven by low motives and because he amasses "facts" to support his "scientific" analysis of their actions. *Death of a Salesman* is "realistic" insofar as we learn that Willy Loman insists on American cheese; in contrast, we will never learn what Oedipus's food preferences were. In all these cases the presumption is that the realist writer resists the temptations of mere storytelling. Cervantes will not write another romance like *Amadis de Gaul*,

Flaubert will not write a pathetic tale of adulterous love, Zola will not indulge his readers with that staple of nineteenth-century popular fiction, the saga of a lady and a gentleman on the road to matrimony, and Miller will not pretend that his hero does not get upset when he doesn't get his favorite kind of cheese. But "[w]hat seems natural in one period or to one school seems artificial to another period or to another school" (Booth 42). Consequently, while Alice Munro as a contemporary realist employs certain still viable techniques—the most obvious being the rambling nature of her telling, and the suppression of overt moralizing or thematizing, a mark of the realistic short story since Chekhov—she must also find new methods of creating verisimilitude. Munro escapes dooming her characters to fiction through a variety of subtle strategies which she uses to build our faith in her reality and to strengthen our own opposition to the potent mythologizer in us all.<sup>2</sup> By this means, her stories take their place in this tradition of fiction which resists the temptations of the imagination.

However, while she resists the fictionality of fiction, Munro does not assume the role of a mere reporter documenting everyday reality, as one critic implies in claiming that Munro's stories "are translations into the next-door language of fiction of all those documentary details, those dazzling textures and surfaces, of remembered experience" (Ross 112). While Munro is certainly a realist, she is not naive; she does not simply oppose the semblance of reportage to the legend-making of the story-teller. Munro recognizes, and also makes us aware, that her own works are fictions as well, and that awareness dictates that she cannot simply rely on including more realistic detail and letting her stories mirror the confusions that we often take to be a mark of reality. That Munro believes the documentary manner to be no longer sufficient to create stories is indicated by the irony with which she treats one of her characters who portrays himself as merely reporting, which is the pose of the naive realist. After Albert in "Visitors" has given his fragmented and unshaped account of the man who disappeared into the swamp when Albert was young, another character wonders what makes the incident significant for Albert and why he had recounted the story; but when asked, Albert replies defensively, "It's not a story. It's something that happened."<sup>3</sup> For him, and for other naive realists, the randomness and inconclusiveness of the account are both a function and an indication of its authenticity, whereas for Munro, such merely truthful but unarranged telling is clearly unsatisfactory. She rejects this documentary style and instead adopts a

number of sophisticated rhetorical strategies as she tries, once again, to tell fictional stories that present themselves as truer than other fictions.

Sometimes Munro's strategies appear conventional enough. First of all, hardly any of her stories are what would usually be called "tales," narratives with a good plot at the centre. A typical Munro story is a ramble that includes sudden shifts of time and place and subject, the reasons for which are often not immediately clear. Sometimes Munro announces the shift by saying, for example, "To change the subject . . ." or "I have forgotten to say what the foxes were fed" (*Dance* 118), but most of the time she shifts without warning. While it might be thought that this technique insists that we recognize that our reality simply is like that, the shifts actually force us to work out where we are and why we are being told what we are being told. We tend to label as "mere stories" those narratives which do all the work for us, for they, we have learned, are moving along the well-worn grooves of myths and legend, the archetypal narratives. What lets us drift easily is unreal; what resists us is real. Such, we would argue, is the audience's unconscious reasoning that Munro's rhetorical, rather than mimetic, ramblings are addressed to. It is not that the looseness of construction mirrors the real world, but that as readers we are forced to work for our meaning, and we reward ourselves for the effort with the belief that we have penetrated a resistant reality.

Another way in which Munro creates the impression of realism paradoxically is to give a significant place to improbability and contingency, elements that are opposed to the conventionally well-constructed realist narrative. However, Munro avoids mere bad story-telling by explicitly acknowledging the existence of the improbable and the contingent, thereby anticipating the objection that her stories are fantastic or pointless, even as the improbable and the contingent become part of her meaning. Thus, she manages to have her cake and eat it too. For example, in "Epilogue: The Photographer," the narrator says that in her imaginary novel she "got rid of the older brother, the alcoholic; three tragic destinies were too much even for a book, and certainly more than I could handle" (*Lives* 241). In other words, the narrator, unthinkingly accepting some of the conventions of contemporary realist fiction, sacrificed "truth" to probability, but in *Munro's* story, of course, the family does have three tragic members. Munro's story thus gains the appearance of truth precisely because it is *not* probable and because the improbability is acknowledged; here Munro turns to her advantage the adage that truth is stranger than fiction.

Similarly, the acknowledgement of contingency occurs in a story whose title, "The Accident," clearly signals the importance of contingency. In this story, the affair between a married man named Ted and a woman named Frances is about to end when the death of Ted's son in a car accident precipitates Ted's divorce. Frances marries him, they have children, and her whole life changes. When Frances eventually happens to meet the man who ran the boy over and killed him, she reflects on the far-reaching consequences of the accident, for others as well as herself, concluding with the thought that she "would not live in Ottawa now, she would not have her two children" (*Moons* 109). Thus, there is no necessity to a major portion of her life; it does not flow from her character, as it would in the classical formulation in which character is fate and fate is character; her life would have been very different, and, therefore, so would she. The acknowledgement of contingency by both character and author, and not its mere imitation, intensifies the impression of realism.

**M**unro also emphasizes the realism of her stories by portraying the conventionality of her characters' inventions. In "Epilogue: The Photographer," for example, the young narrator tells us about another change she had made in the lives of the Sheriffs, other than the number of tragic fates. She had changed the father from a storekeeper to a judge, and now comments on the alteration: "I knew from my reading that in the families of judges, as of great landowners, degeneracy and madness were things to be counted on" (*Lives* 240). Tales are about the humble and the proud, the shepherd and the king, and not about shopkeepers (though in the modern world a judge will have to do), and the proud are routinely brought low, perhaps punished. Here we are in the fiction factory, the assembly line of setting, character and action that structuralist analyses try to diagram. In her young narrator's story, Munro shows us the machinery of fiction-making, and we are invited to recognize the narrator's naive endeavours while becoming engaged in Munro's own fiction.

While letting her narrators unselfconsciously use such strategies, Munro can also indirectly comment on the artifice of such little tricks by having the narrators consciously employ them for the very purpose of fictioneering. In "Tell Me Yes or No," the narrator addresses a former lover in her imagination:

Would you like to know how I am informed of your death? I go into the faculty kitchen, to make myself a cup of coffee before my ten o'clock class. Dodie

Charles who is always baking something has brought a cherry pound cake. (The thing we old pros know about, in these fantasies is the importance of detail, solidity; yes, a cherry pound cake.)<sup>5</sup>

Here the narrator takes a step back from her story, with the result that we see the story at three removes. By having the narrator admit to the use of this realist device, with which the narrator self-consciously tries to enhance the verisimilitude of her tale, Munro also exposes the possibility of its use in her own story-telling and thus rejects simple documentary illusion.

However, even though the narrator's comment on her purposeful use of such detail should alert the reader to Munro's use of the same device, this self-reflexive gesture actually has the opposite effect: by undermining her narrator Munro actually deepens our trust in her truth.

A very clear example of Munro's effort to resist the telling of tales occurs in the conclusion to "The Stone in the Field" from *The Moons of Jupiter*. In this story Mr. Black, a man with an unknown past, had built a hut in the corner of a field owned by the narrator's family, which consisted mostly of "maiden ladies" (*Moons* 1). He died there and was buried under a stone. That is all we know. The narrator concludes the story by drawing attention to, and explicitly resisting, the potential for fiction-making that the enigma of Mr. Black's life and death presents:

If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story. I would have insisted on Mr. Black's being in love with one of my aunts, and on one of them—not necessarily the one he was in love with—being in love with him. I would have wished him to confide in them, in one of them, his secret, his reason for living in a shack in Huron County, far from home. Later, I might have believed that he wanted to, but hadn't confided this, or his love either. I would have made a horrible, plausible connection between that silence of his, and the manner of his death. Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. I don't believe so. Now, I can only say, my father's sisters scrubbed the floor with lye, they stooked the oats and milked the cows by hand. (35)

The narrator tells us what "a story," as she now calls it, would have been like. This story is contrasted with the unknowable and no doubt more banal "reality," and the contrast serves to make us feel the "truth" of the brief memoir that we read. Munro's story is made out of the refusal to tell the "natural," that is, romantic, story of buried and unrequited love which we might expect in sentimental fiction. Mystery and surmise are pushed aside in favour of the knowable reality of the ordinary world, what—in "The Peace of Utrecht"—is called "the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality" (*Dance* 197).

One of the most important ways in which Munro prejudices us in favour of her alleged realism is to portray unfavourably both legend-making and those who engage in it, and this strategy encourages us not to doubt that *her* stories, in contrast, are real. She shows how characters in her stories use others as material for tales with which they implicitly glorify themselves, and by a sleight of hand she uses our moral disapproval of those who legendize to bolster our allegiance to her concept of what is real. But it is not only story-tellers who, as Munro repeatedly implies, should resist the enchantments of tales and legends, for we often make use of other people as material for tales of implicit self-glorification. Our assent to Munro's moral position is transferred to her concept of realism.

She employs this technique in a number of stories, including part one of "Chaddeleys and Flemings," the opening story of *The Moons of Jupiter*. The narrator's mother frequently refers to her hometown of Fork Mills in the Ottawa Valley, thereby trying to distance herself from her present home in Dalgleish and to assert her own superior background and status. However, the mother's four Chaddeley cousins take this process one step further: at home in larger towns and cities, they cast their sights beyond national boundaries and further up the social ladder, deriving their status in part from a rumoured family connection with the English aristocracy, possibly even with a family whose founder may have "come to England with William the Conqueror" (*Moons* 7). Later, these social ambitions are rudely exposed by the narrator's uncharitable husband, who by making the narrator see the gap between reality and Cousin Iris's pretensions both robs the narrator of her half hoped-for family background and further undermines her self-confidence and her already vulnerable position within the failing marriage. While Munro shows the emotional brutality of the husband's exposure of these social ambitions and thus obviously has some sympathy for the impulse to try to rise above a humdrum reality, she also leads her audience to feel the moral weakness of the pat aggrandizing tale, thereby increasing our allegiance to her own realism.

Legend-making as a means of self-glorification is also a theme in "Day of the Butterfly," where the narrator remembers her former classmate Myra. Myra is poor, a relative newcomer and outsider who remains on the fringes of school life. When Myra falls ill with leukemia (though the other children don't know how sick she is), she becomes for a moment the center of concern for her class, who visit her in the hospital and bring gifts. "We began to

talk of her as if she were something we owned, and her party became a cause,” says the narrator (*Dance* 107-08). At the end of the visit, Myra calls the narrator back to her bed and offers her one of the gifts she had received. She does this because the narrator had once given her the prize from a Cracker Jack box, and Myra now suggests that when she returns to school, she and the narrator will be friends. The narrator recoils at the idea (her earlier generosity was only a momentary impulse) and thinks to herself that she will let her little brother take the gift apart. Later, as an adult, she reflects on her last glimpse of Myra:

She sat in her high bed, her delicate brown neck, rising out of a hospital gown too big for her, her brown carved face immune to treachery, her offering perhaps already forgotten, prepared to be set apart for legendary uses, as she was even in the back porch at school. (*Dance* 110)

Once Myra was the occasion for fun, before she became the occasion of a pathetic legend that shed a flattering light on the good feelings of the children who visited her. Of course, the person who had no significant place in this legend was Myra—the “actual” Myra in contrast to the Myra transformed into a saint-like figure by illness, martyrdom, and fashionable charity. As an adult, the narrator looks back upon this childhood self-indulgence with chagrin, and it is her self-critical resistance to the legend-making of her youth to which moral virtue is attached. Legend-making is thus shown to come easily; what is difficult is the hard-won attitude reflected in Munro’s own oblique telling. And—so we are to deduce—what comes hard is what is real.

**M**any brief passages in Munro’s stories quietly create the “reality effect” (to use Barthes’ derogatory term) she seeks. In “The Peace of Utrecht” the narrator returns to her hometown with her young daughter, and on seeing the mother’s old home the daughter asks, “Mother, is that your house?” This question gives rise to the following reflections:

And I felt my daughter’s voice expressed a complex disappointment . . . ; it contained the whole flatness and strangeness of the moment in which is revealed the source of legends, the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality. (*Dance* 197)

In this passage a disappointment that in a sentimental tale would have to be overcome by some happy resolution is here itself a climax. The narrator in “Peace of Utrecht” has a moment of recognition, when she locates the common human impulse to invent illusory wonders in the banality of the quotidien. As she thus turns disappointment into a small victory, we accord

Munro's own fictions the reality which is her and our reward for acknowledging these deflationary occasions.

An episode in "Friend of My Youth" also brings moral approval to the support of realism by portraying the consequences that legendizing has on personal relationships. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator tells us that her mother

often spoke of the Ottawa Valley . . . in a dogmatic, mystified way, emphasizing things about it that distinguished it from any other place on earth. Houses turn black, maple syrup has a taste no maple syrup produced elsewhere can equal, bears amble within sight of farmhouses. Of course I was disappointed when I finally got to see this place. It was not a valley at all, if by that you mean a cleft between hills; it was a mixture of flat fields and low rocks and heavy bush and little lakes—a scrambled, disarranged sort of country with no easy harmony about it, not yielding readily to any description.<sup>6</sup>

The narrator here begins the process of demythologizing which at first divides mother and daughter, but which, when the process is turned against her own inventions, will allow the narrator to come to terms with her embattled relationship with her mother, which would not have been possible had she remained inside her mother's or her own legend.

Not only can legend-making be destructive through self-aggrandizing, but it can also operate as a means for the story-teller to portray himself as a victim, thereby disparaging and victimizing others. A sinister instance of succumbing to this kind of legend-making is the central concern of "The Office." In this story a woman writer rents an office and finds herself having to deal with the landlord's insistent attempts to befriend her. But it soon becomes clear that he is setting himself up to be rejected, for he pushes his friendship beyond what they both know to be appropriate. When she finally does reject him, she realizes that she has taken her place in the long line of imagined betrayals, which is the basis of his identity, and she imagines him "arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust" (*Dance* 74). Here the roles are reversed, and it is not the writer but the landlord who creates a story about the previous tenant in magnifying and so mythologizing his history of repeated betrayal, thus dooming this and other former tenants to fiction.

In two stories in *Friend of My Youth*, the title story and "Meneseteung," what had been a thread running through a number of stories becomes the very substance of the stories themselves; here, the fictionality of story-telling becomes the main theme.



In “Friend of My Youth,” the relationship between the narrator and her mother is defined by, and explored through, the different stories they tell, and the daughter comes to accept the broken relationship with her mother by understanding the essential kinship between her mother’s legendizing and her own. In this story, the barrier between a mother and daughter is expressed primarily through their very different ways of imagining the life of Flora Grieves, a woman whom the mother had known as a young school-teacher. “Friend of My Youth” begins with an account of one of the commonest forms of false tales, a dream:

I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dream stopped, I suppose because it was too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness. (*Friend 3*)

As the conventional comparison of the impossibly happy story to a dream implies, despite our immediate need for the happy ending, such stories are not finally satisfying, for they conform too obviously to need rather than reality. The dream, in this instance, brings about a reconciliation that did not occur in life, and the rest of “Friend of My Youth” is the story of the “bugbear” (*Friend 4*) that had alienated the narrator from her mother. The bugbear was the difference in their values that was expressed in their very different ways of imagining Flora’s life.

Of course, given such a dramatic series of events including deaths, betrayals, miscarriages, and stillbirths, the narrator and her mother were not the first to make a story of the lives of Robert and the Grieves sisters:

The story of Flora and Ellie and Robert had been told—or all that people knew of it—in various versions. My mother did not feel that she was listening to gossip, because she was always on the alert for any disparaging remarks about Flora—she would not put up with that. But indeed nobody offered any. Everybody said that Flora had behaved like a saint. Even when she went to extremes, as in dividing up the house—that was like a saint. (*Friend 8*)

The narrator rebels against this hagiographic impulse, for the mother’s noble tale masks the puritanical fear of sexuality which is the real impulse behind her version of Flora’s story. And this fear expresses itself also in the religious cast of her story, with Ellie as the sinner punished:

God dealt out punishment for hurry-up marriages—not just Presbyterians but almost everybody else believed that. God rewarded lust with dead babies, idiots, harelips, and withered limbs and clubfeet. (*Friend 11*)

The story of saintly Flora is rooted in the crude sexual morality of the

Cameronians, though the narrator's mother distances herself from the "monstrous old religion" which Flora's family followed (*Friend* 12).

**M**unro calls on our moral approbation to support her realism in the account of the effect which the mother's story of Flora had on the daughter. When the narrator was a teenager, her mother told her, "If I could have been a writer . . . then I would have written the story of Flora's life. And do you know what I would have called it? 'The Maiden Lady'" (*Friend* 19), and the narrator recalls her own dismissive response:

*The Maiden Lady.* She said these words in a solemn and sentimental tone of voice that I had no use for. I knew, or thought I knew, exactly the value she found in them. The stateliness and mystery. The hint of derision turning to reverence. I was fifteen or sixteen years old by that time, and I believed that I could see into my mother's mind. I could see what she would do with Flora, what she had already done. She would make her into a noble figure, one who accepts defecation, treachery, who forgives and stands aside, not once but twice. Never a moment of complaint. Flora goes about her cheerful labors, she cleans the house and shovels out the cow byre, she removes some bloody mess from her sister's bed, and when at last the future seems to open up for her—Ellie will die and Robert will beg forgiveness and Flora will silence him with the proud gift of herself—it is time for Audrey Atkinson to drive into the yard and shut Flora out again, more inexplicably and thoroughly the second time than the first. . . . The wicked flourish. But it is all right. It is all right—the elect are veiled in patience and humility and lighted by a certainty that events cannot disturb. (19-20)

And after telling us that she "felt a great fog of platitudes and pieties lurking, an incontestable crippled-mother power, which could capture and choke me" (*Friend* 20), the narrator provides an outline of her own version, an almost spiteful counter-story which portrays Flora's saintliness as well-disguised malice and hypocrisy, used to gain control over her sister and brother-in-law and finally subdued only by the triumph of "the power of sex and ordinary greed" in the person of Nurse Atkinson (*Friend* 21). Here we have a feud carried on through legend and counter-legend, and the implication is that avoiding legendizing of any kind is a moral good that is encouraged by Munro's own kind of telling.

When the narrator eventually realizes that the absent figure in the mother's story is Robert, she takes this striking absence as a sign of the sexual repression shared by her mother and Flora, and of their shared belief in refined and virtuous female fragility, and groping, inarticulate male brutishness. Only when the narrator recognizes this gap in the mother's story of Flora

can she begin to dismantle the mother's myth, and thus she no longer needs to oppose it with an anti-myth of her own. Unlike her mother, the narrator reaches the awareness that her story is a legend that serves her, just as her mother's version met her needs, and this recognition ultimately permits her to draw closer to her mother in her mind and feelings.

The narrator of "Friend of My Youth" has managed a difficult mental feat. She has distanced herself from the legend she invented to oppose her mother's, and by de-mythologizing her own tale she is able to overcome her anger and accept her mother; it is now up to the reader to accept the unsentimental, undramatic final passages in which the story trails off without providing the posthumous but emotionally gratifying reconciliation which could be expected in conventional fiction. The narrator's stepping back from her own legend makes us feel that Munro's fiction itself is, at least to some degree, free of legend-making. As a result, our admiration for the emotional gain of the narrator's de-mythologizing is inevitably transferred to Munro's realism, which is defined, in part, by its own resistance to myth-making.

In "Meneseteung," a story in which a contemporary historian tries to recapture the life of a nineteenth-century "poetess," there is a constant tension between the compelling story which the historian-narrator engages in and the recognition that the story she weaves is predicated upon, and deeply imbued with, her own social and sexual attitudes. This is, as one critic says of another of Munro's stories, "fiction that questions its own truth and mocks its own telling" (Struthers 106). But this is not an end in itself, for it too has a rhetorical purpose. Here there is no question of praise or blame in regard to the effects of legendizing, but the narrator's final recognition of her tendency to fictionalize persuades us of Munro's own realism.

"Meneseteung" is the story of Almeda Roth, a "poetess" whom the narrator gradually "reconstructs." At the beginning the narrator tells us of the collection of poems that Almeda Roth wrote, describes the book itself, describes her picture which appears as the frontispiece, and quotes extensively from Almeda's autobiographical Preface—Almeda's own story of herself; then the narrator describes and paraphrases the poems. Juxtaposed to this are a view of the town and glimpses of the townspeople's attitude towards Almeda, culled from the narrator's reading of old newspapers. These disparate pieces of evidence are presented as historical materials, distant and more or less opaque. Soon, however, and almost before we know it, we are involved in the narrator's direct telling, having slipped from distanced

pseudo-history to imaginatively engaging story-telling. But then Munro brings us up short by having her narrator say, "I read about that life in the *Vidette*," the local paper (*Friend* 54). We are jolted out of unthinking involvement in a fiction, only of course to find ourselves in another one, *but it does not feel that way*. It feels as if we had "really" awakened, but we are immediately ready to be led back into the imagined world. The narrator makes up a very modern tale of repressed desire, of symptoms and symbols that have resonance for the sexually liberated. In the narrator's story, the "poetess" is both victim and abettor of Victorian sexual attitudes, and she can only fantasize about a poem, "Meneseteung," that will include all that has been excluded from her life.

**T**his "modern," "liberated" kind of story, however, is only one possible reading of the raw materials with which the narrator presents us. In themselves, the poems amount to a series of deeply sentimental sketches of Almeda's psyche, the Preface offers a pathetic account of a life marked by death in the family, and the newspaper provides a string of rather smart-alecky observations on a failed romance between the heroine and a suitor. Rather than balance moral claims, as is common in almost all narrative, we are here asked not only to question inherited and perhaps outmoded ways, but to assess the validity and viability of certain ways of telling; and this effort generates the sense that Munro is grappling with reality and not merely succumbing to legend.

As is so often the case in realism, "Meneseteung" deals with a character's submission to unreality of her own making—Don Quixote as provincial Victorian lady-poet. Having fled the ugly, mundane, and merely ordinary aspects of reality, the heroine rejects the possibility of a relationship with a man, because of her fear of sex, mercantile aggressiveness, and interpersonal conflict. But when we are once again comfortably settled in our favourite narrative armchair, Munro gives us a parting jolt. In the final paragraph the historian-narrator says of others who might look at the life of Almeda Roth: "And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" (*Friend* 73). All that we have been imaginatively engaged in has been (fictionally!) taken from us. Our pleasure in the thematic coherence within the disjointed structure is undermined by the reminder that this was a construction after all, one that fits nicely with our

current preoccupations and prejudices, but which cannot claim to be authoritative. Indeed, just as the story which the sexually liberated narrator constructs around Almeda Roth grows out of and satisfies our preconceptions regarding the repressiveness of Victorian society, so the inconclusive ending questions and undermines these prejudices. At the end, we feel displaced, but we have to acknowledge the rightness of the reminder.

Munro cannot or in the end does not want to escape from being a storyteller. These are stories after all, and the sense of reality we get from them does not depend only, or even primarily, on her concern with story-telling. We may get some sense of Munro's goal from a passage at the beginning of "The Shining Houses." On her way to a child's birthday party, Mary, the main character, stops to talk with the old woman from whom she buys eggs:

And Mary found herself exploring her neighbour's life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts—by pretending to know less than she did, asking for some story she had heard before; this way, remembered episodes emerged each time with slight differences of content, meaning, colour, yet with a pure reality that usually attaches to things which are at least part legend. She had almost forgotten that there are people whose lives can be seen like this. . . . Most of the people she knew had lives like her own, in which things were not sorted out yet, and it is not certain if this thing, or that, should be taken seriously. (*Dance* 19)

Munro's stories take place somewhere between the certainty and "pure reality" of legend and the unsorted life we usually feel in the midst of.

Thus, Munro's stories, with their uncertainties and contingencies, resist our imagination. They are like models of what a story that is true to fact might be like. In a sophisticated manner, her stories create the appearance of being as truthful as the narrative in "Visitors" to which Albert refuses the appellation of "a story"; they appear to be more what he calls just "something that happened" (*Moons* 215). The actual life of a person might be just as impenetrable as the imagined life of Flora in "Friend of My Youth," and it might be as crucially determined by coincidence as the life of Frances in "The Accident." We expect stories to offer us patterns of knowledge based on Aristotelian probability rather than to expose gaping holes of ignorance, and we expect purpose and design, not chance events; the story teller is expected to make sense of things and not to present us with disorder and ignorance. But Munro's stories resist this expectation, and perhaps for this reason Munro (like others) writes fictions that lack the finality of certainty and seem closer to "unsorted life" than the legendary nature of most tale-telling, whether of people or nations.

In exploring the ways in which her stories portray and enact the dialectic between legend-making and de-mythologizing, we have discussed a number of techniques which Munro uses to adapt the Cervantean opposition between fiction and reality to the expectations and ethical beliefs of her audience. If they succeed, it will not be because they reproduce reality, but because they, like the best stories in the realist tradition, alert us as readers to the presence of fantasy in our narratives about ourselves and others, and, hence, enable us to become more tolerant of the doubts, uncertainties, and blanknesses that legends obliterate.

## NOTES

- 1 *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), 240. Subsequent references will be given as short title and page number.
- 2 James Carscallen, in his recent book *The Other Country*, teases out the mythical and typological (mainly biblical) patterns that lie just beneath the surface of Munro's realist manner and rhetoric, "resonat[ing] in the background" of various stories and recalling an "exotic other place" (2-4). These patterns constitute, he argues, "a paradigm World, one of patterns distinguished from reality as such" (4). We differ from Carscallen in thinking that the "unsatisfactory, apologetic, persistent reality" (*Dance* 197) of many of Munro's stories is not a reproduction of mythical patterns in the imagined world of the stories, but a rhetorical construction demanded by a real world which wavers between the powerful impulse to create its own legends and the refusal to submit to them. We agree with Ajay Heble, who argues in his book *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*, that Munro's disruptions of the traditional discourse of realism serve to thematize the fictionality of her fictions. Unfortunately, Heble's book appeared too late for us to consider it in this paper.
- 3 *The Moons of Jupiter* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 215.
- 4 *Dance of the Happy Shades* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 196.
- 5 *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), 109.
- 6 *Friend of My Youth* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 4-5.

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