

POSSIBILITY-SPACE AND ITS IMAGINATIVE VARIATIONS IN ALICE
MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES

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Cover photograph: Edith Maybin. Courtesy of *The New Yorker*.

To the memory of my father
who showed me the pleasures
of reading.

Abstract

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With its perennial interest in the seemingly ordinary lives of small-town people, Alice Munro's fiction displays a deceptively simple surface reality that on closer scrutiny reveals intricate levels of unexpected complexity about the fundamentals of human experience: love, choice, mortality, faith and the force of language. This study takes as its main purpose the exploration of Munro's stories in terms of the intricacy of emotions in the face of commonplace events of life and their emerging possibilities. I argue that the ontological levels of fiction and reality remain in the realm of the real; these levels exist and merge as the possibilities of each other. Munro's realism is explored in terms of its connection to possibilities that arise out of a particular type of fatality.

The phenomenon of possibility permeates Munro's stories. An investigation of this phenomenon shows a curious paradox between possibility and necessity. In order to discuss the complexity of this paradox I introduce the temporal/spatial concept of possibility-space and notions of the fatal. I describe the space that materializes in the phenomenal field between text and reader, and where the constitution of possibility becomes visible. This is typically seen in the rupture that is the event, where the event in itself offers a moment of release and epistemic certainty to the characters. I argue that through this release and certainty the characters obtain a radical, audacious sense of freedom and intensity of life.

The stories examined have been grouped in a conceptual order that brings into view the central qualities of Munro's fiction such as lightness, newness and sameness. These qualities are related to the act of recognition; they are elaborated through readings of a large number of stories from all the collections, including three stories published recently in *The New Yorker*. The dissertation concludes by highlighting these qualities in the *tour de force* "Post and Beam." I argue finally that Alice Munro's fiction recognizes life as possibility in a moment when it shows itself in its own remarkable sameness.

Keywords: Alice Munro, fate, possibility-space, compellation, phenomenology, Canadian literature, short story, realism, Alain Badiou, Maurice Natanson

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Abbreviations

<i>DHS</i>	<i>Dance of the Happy Shades</i>
<i>FY</i>	<i>Friend of My Youth</i>
<i>HFC</i>	<i>Hateship, friendship, courtship, loveship, marriage</i>
<i>LGW</i>	<i>Lives of Girls and Women</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>The Love of a Good Woman</i>
<i>MJ</i>	<i>The Moons of Jupiter</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>Open Secrets</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>The Progress of Love</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>Runaway</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Selected Stories</i>
<i>SMT</i>	<i>Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You</i>
<i>WDY</i>	<i>Who Do You Think You Are?</i>
<i>VCR</i>	<i>The View from Castle Rock</i>

1 Introduction: “Things within Things”: Alice Munro as a Short Story Writer

You know, we always have the idea that there is this reason or that reason and we keep trying to find out reasons. And I could tell you plenty about what I've done wrong. But I think the reason may be something not so easily dug out.

—Alice Munro, “Chance”

Entering the landscape of Alice Munro's writing is an intense experience of the consanguinity between the fictional and the real. In her stories she displays the possibility for reality to be transformed into fictive art, but more astoundingly she reveals how the setting of the real appears affectively meaningful to us. More than drawing attention to the artifice and limitations of fiction-making, her narratives uncover layers of the quite shocking business of real life. This is what I understand by “the shock of recognition” that Melville experienced in his profound awareness of Hawthorne's genius. That is, an appearance of something that we have been unaware of so far, but that still lies hidden or dormant in us; it is something that we re-cognize in the act of discovering it. “Images,” one of the most striking stories from Munro's first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*, features a full-blown example of the uncovering of a hidden awareness that includes not only a character and a narrator, but also invites the reader.

People say that they have been paralyzed by fear, but I was transfixed, as if struck by lightning, and what hit me did not feel like fear so much as recognition. I was not surprised. This is the sight that does not surprise you, the thing you have always known was there that comes so naturally, moving delicately and contentedly and in no hurry, as if it was made, in the first place, from a wish of yours, a hope of something final, terrifying. (*DHS* 38)

This affinity and dramatic accord between the course of events and a receptive mind is the crucial core of signification that finally also bears on the reader and the world she inhabits. The idea of signification as arising out of the close relationship between the artistry of the text and the aesthetic response of the reader is described in Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading. The claim that the constitution of meaning goes hand in hand with the aesthetic effect resulting from a restructuring of experience, posits the literary work of art somewhere between character, narrator and reader (20–21).

It will be with this effect of inbetweenness or “to-the-side-of”¹ quality in mind that I explore Munro’s stories. What I refer to is a phenomenal field between text and reality that is also dramatized within Munro’s stories.

In Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971),² the protagonist aspires to become an accomplished writer. All the stories in this volume follow the experiences of Del Jordan growing up in the small, southern Ontario town of Jubilee.³ The clichéd portrayal of the artist as something of an outsider, unsatisfied with small town life, seeking to expand her mind apart from the limited concerns of rural mentality, does not quite fit Del. Not only is she drawn to a certain spirituality of this rural surrounding, but in the people who inhabit this place she finds a heroic acceptance of life with all its startling circumstances. Del’s recognition/re-cognition of an infinite depth in people’s minds, and the secretive significance in their doings, is a well from which her story-telling springs. Even though she has an awareness of the unorthodoxy of her own family—her mother in particular wants to change the depressing life in Wawanash County—Del is amazed by the eccentric ways of the local citizens. In her attempts to write a novel, she revels in her own imagination, trying to stylize the lives of some of the townspeople. But as she transforms them into fictional characters, it is the circumstance of being brought back to reality which somehow is the occasion for a larger bewilderment. “It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there” (*LGW* 234). It is in this movement between fiction and reality that different ontological levels come to bear on each other. Through this presentation of Del, endowed with the perception of an artist, ordinary life is foregrounded as the potent source of infinite signification. “People’s lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (236). In the much later story “Passion” from *Runaway*, one finds the same emphasis on undiscovered or hidden possibilities in ordinary people and their lives, and the insight into this possibility maintained in poetic language. Mrs. Travers, worried over her oldest son’s unruly melancholy, finds some relief in the quite similar poetic line. “*Deep unfathomable caves of ocean bear—what am I talking about?*” (*R* 174). What she talks about is that

¹ It is with the awareness of the close connection but possible distinction between the work of art (the materialized accomplishment) and the aesthetic object (that which appears in the act of reconstituting the work of art) that I talk about that which is to the side of representation.

² The book’s pre-publication title, *Real Life*, points to Munro’s perception of a close relation between reality and fiction. The title was changed to *Lives of Girls and Women* some months before publication since W.W. Norton in New York had “announced a forthcoming novel by Deborah Pease titled *Real Life*” (Thacker 218).

³ Jubilee is a fictive town with affinities to Wingham where Alice Munro grew up and to Clinton where she later settled with her second husband. In *Who Do You Think You Are?* and in *Open Secrets* it is Hanratty and Carstairs that recapitulate this autobiographical rural town placed in the southern Ontario landscape.

which the 18th century poet Thomas Gray pondered over in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (53–56)

Gray’s lines speak about common men’s talents that might have passed unnoticed during their lives and that now rest forever in darkness as a never exposed or as an embryonic possibility. The complexity of emotion as exhilaration and stupefaction before supposedly commonplace scenes of life and their possibilities is typical in Munro’s stories. *Lives of Girls and Women* is dense with moments, or patterns, that are potentially meaningful and amazing. By the end of “Epilogue: The Photographer,” Del becomes part of such a signifying moment. As she happens one day to be invited to eat cake on the porch of the town loony, it is not the fact that he is acting quite reasonable that is remarkable, but the idea that Bobby Sherriff’s behavior is an entrance into a choreography of enigmatic meaning.

Then he did the only special thing he ever did for me. With those things in his hands, he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. (237)

Del clearly perceives a layer of meaning, but it seems as if the deciphering of its code lies tantalizingly beyond her grasp, not as something that can never be understood but as something that might possibly reveal itself.

Munro affirms in an interview with the Canadian critic Tim Struthers that fiction has always been a means for getting “at what is really there,” and that she has “never been an innovator or an experimental writer” (6, 9). This echoes what she had revealed to Graeme Gibson ten years earlier. She saw her “technique as being very traditional, very conventional,” but her excitement in “what you might call the surface of things” became a pivotal point in her life as a writer (256, 241). The recurrent form of her stories is a return to the emergence of a past event in order to understand its bearing on the present. At a temporal distance, significance seems to spring from a present lingering in memory where that which is remembered is allowed to reveal or retain meaning as it is embedded in the fleeting movement of what has passed. Munro has been occupied with the proximity or tension between a “reality you can see” and a “reality you can feel” (Struthers 7). The temporal detours are a quest for understanding the experience of the real as felt. The tension between a surface reality and the apprehension of the feeling of it

suggests that each perception contains a multiple set of its own possibilities and that reality is not just out there but always related to a consciousness perceiving it. Feelings and acts of cognition are in a correlation with the felt object. So, instead of a subjective,⁴ emotional coloration of the real, there is a focus on the real *as felt*. In her fiction affective reality often takes the shape of a possibility emerging out of a necessity, fatally⁵ orchestrated. Bewildering or improbable as it might seem, this central paradox between freedom and necessity often becomes a matter of a feeling of renewed hope for the character and the reader alike.

When Charles E. May discusses the basic epistemological and ontological differences between the short story and the novel, in “The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction,” he explores the view that our notion of existence is structured as alternative universes of reality, and that the short story and the novel focus on different levels of reality. May suggests that “the short story is mythic and spiritual,” and “the novel is primarily a social and public form” (329). Further, the short story is intuitive and lyrical. The novel exists to reaffirm the world of ‘everyday’ reality; the short story exists to ‘defamiliarize’ the everyday” (329). According to May, the question of length is tied to a difference of the experiences depicted and the mode of knowing of the two genres. He argues that short fiction, by its very length, demands “a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that derive from and establish the primacy of ‘an experience’ directly and emotionally created and encountered,” whereas the novel demands a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that derive from “and in turn establish the primacy of ‘experience’ conceptually created and considered” (328). Without investigating further the validity of May’s claims about the novel, I find his theoretical orientation to understanding the nature of the short story to be productive. Of primary importance to this study of Munro is May’s strong effort to address the reader’s sense of the real through questions of genre, not the absolute validity of his distinction between the short story and the novel. While exploring the phenomenologies of William James and Alfred Schutz, among others, May calls into question an assumed opposition between what can be taken as real existence and the fictional/imaginative sphere. The refreshing viewpoint that he postulates is a reality that consists of many sub-universes, each of which is real as long as one attends to it. Following James, May suggests that everything that excites and stimulates our minds is real, “whether

⁴ Implicit throughout this study of Munro is the argument that in the stories the nature of human behavior, the very nature of selfhood, is at a remove from conventional paradigms of psychological development and expectation. Possibility-space and compellation are entries into Munro’s reconfigured inner landscape of emotion and intellect, causality and purpose. Subjectivity in Munro requires locating her in an extended trajectory from Wordsworth and Whitman, to Joyce, to Woolf and to Beckett and beyond.

⁵ In my employment of the word “fatally,” I refer to that which occur as being inevitable, i. e. in the sense of “fate.” The events in Munro’s fiction are often felt to have been decided beforehand.

it be the world of the senses, the world of ideal relation, the world of madness, or the world of the supernatural” (331). The phenomenological approach of attending to things as they appear, without discarding them as merely queer productions of the mind, opens up a vast field of investigation, namely that which for Schutz becomes the examination of the unexamined, a description of the world that is taken for granted in everyday life. Schutz’s field of investigation matches May’s description of the mode of the short story: namely, the breaking up of “the familiar life-world of the everyday, that defamiliarizes our assumption that reality is simply the conceptual construct that we take it to be, and throws into doubt that our propositional and categorical mode of perceiving can be applied to human beings as well as to objects” (333). Our readiness to categorize distances us from the complexity of the immediate vision of things. Short fiction, May argues, gives life to that feeling or experience of finding oneself thrown into a world that is strange. These moments appear as “lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical” (333). They tear “us away to dangerous extremes,” make us lose “the well-tied context,” and leave “more questions than satisfactions behind them” (333). They shatter security—in short, these are “uncanny moments we can well dispense with” (333). It is within this kind of perspective on the short story that I would like to place Alice Munro as a writer of great audaciousness, not in terms of experimental innovations of short story techniques, but in terms of describing and penetrating those crucial moments when the significance of particular lives is at stake, and when these lives have been ripped of all pre-conceptions of before-hand known rational structures.

In connection to May’s strong desire to elevate the status of the story that is short by distinguishing its essential features from that of the novel, I would like to note that every attempt by Munro to produce a novel has ended up as a short story or short story collection. She says that she “can’t write a novel,” she “loses interest” (Struthers 15). Considering her status as an internationally acclaimed writer, this inability is obviously not to be taken as a drawback. *Lives of Girls and Women* is a collection answering the publisher’s wish for a novel (at that time McGraw-Hill Ryerson.) The sections of this book are linked by featuring the same characters and places. We see a similar surface unity of characters and setting in *Who Do You Think You Are?* and even in *Open Secrets*, but in these it is less prominent. In her interview with Struthers, Munro reveals how she started to write *Lives of Girls and Women* as a straight novel, but when she was a third of the way into it, she went back and started to tear it apart and put it into sections. She claims, she has to write in fragments in order to get at what interests her (Struthers 14–15). This artistic philosophy is quite far from Edgar Allan Poe’s famous conception of the unity of the literary work of art. He highlights the well-crafted plot organized in terms of causality to be of utmost importance for the unity of effect. “It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by mak-

ing the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (67). If Poe’s sense of unity has long loomed large as a prescription for the genre, perhaps because of his linking of shortness to unity, we are now in an era that favors disruption and calls into question the validity of a formal unity. One of the strands of the modern short story, as developed after Anton Chekhov’s ‘impressionism,’ is defined through a unity of mood or tone rather than plot. This single quality is supposed to give the story its particular significance and meaning. I acknowledge that Munro’s stories are akin to the Chekhovian. However, in her stories I also see different types of disruption, fragmentation and layering, but these effects are not inconsistent with meaning-constitution.

When Sandra Lee Kleppe refines the division of the genre into subgenres, she builds on the work of Rolf Lundén who has defined Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* as “a short story composite.” Kleppe highlights Lundén’s recognition of an earlier *faulty* privileging of unity, coherence and closure at the expense of discontinuity, fragmentation and openness (173). Lundén’s critique echoes Munro in an interview with the fiction-editor at *The New Yorker*, Deborah Treisman, on her story “Chance.”⁶ She explains how she sees life in pieces that do not fit together very well. In a recent review in a Swedish newspaper of the translation of Margaret Atwood’s latest collection, *Moral Disorders and Other Stories*, the idea is raised that the short story collection is an excellent reflector of life as something that cannot be summarized as a pattern of cause and effect (Ullgren 5). Atwood’s collection, like Munro’s writing, obviously sheers away from a form that might depict life as unitary and coherently progressing. However, I would like to argue that in breaking free from an over-arching ideology of unified causalities, the short story as a genre seems to have the capacity to capture something that is experienced in a passing moment of reflection, or in sudden moments of bafflement that somehow clear the opacity of a life wrapped up in its own familiarity. Nadine Gordimer knew this already in 1968 when she wrote “The Flash of Fireflies” with the attempt to argue why the short story is such a vigorous form of writing. She highlights the story’s flexibility as a reason for its suitability for showing the spirit of the experience of our complex contemporary world. However, more telling when one wishes to understand the possibilities that are unravelled in Munro’s story world, is Gordimer’s note on the short story’s aptness for shifts, layers and things within things in comparison to the novel’s demand for progression. “Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one” (264). Munro is exemplary in the exploration of the myriad of lives that one might covertly possess. She attests to seeing “people living in flashes” (Hancock 89). She does not “see that people develop and arrive somewhere” (Hancock 89).

⁶ This interview is no longer available at *The New Yorker* online.

In the introduction to her *Selected Stories* published in 1996, Munro gives an account of how she understands her shift from creating fiction out of purely invented material to perceiving a scene from real life as a promising narrative. She was standing by the library window in Wingham waiting for someone when a man and a team of horses pulling a sleigh passed. The scene was not framed or removed from her in any way. She “saw it alive and potent, and it gave [her] something like a blow to the chest. What does this mean, what can be discovered about it, what is the rest of the story? The man and the horses are not symbolic or picturesque, they are moving through a story which is hidden, and now, for a moment, carelessly revealed” (SS xvi). This vision never ended up as a completed published story, but is an example of how Munro is inspired to narrate; it discloses the immediate connection between fiction and reality. In the essay “The Colonel’s Hash Reset-tled,” Munro uses the word “remembering” in order to describe how she invents stories. She even remembers details that are not there to be remembered. In the end, she says, it becomes difficult to sort out the real memories “from those that are not ‘real’ at all” (182). What arises then is the question of the nature of the connection between the real and the imaginative. Judith Butler, summarizing Maurice Natanson’s outlook in her foreword to *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*, recognizes how the fictive relates to the real in the act of reading. She describes a viewpoint in which fiction is not to be placed in a realm of pure make-believe, but how it is a fleeting insight into the essence of the real. In the act of immersing into fiction, one is able to rediscover “the fictive as the essence of the world” (xv). Edmund Husserl has elucidated the concept of essence. He realized that knowledge and the possibility of knowledge are not at all the straight-forward, unproblematic process that the positivist conviction of science might take it to be. Knowledge would not be possible without an intuitive ability to grasp essences. However, if the intuition of an essence is directly given to consciousness, it is a matter of great effort to logically and linguistically recon-struct the act of grasping an essence. In phenomenology, essence does not point to anything transcendent beyond this world. Natanson emphasizes this already in one of his earliest books on the philosophy of phenomenology. “To be a phenomenologist is to see the world in its givenness as perpetually and repeatedly bearing the universal in its slightest, most ephemeral aspects. But the essential here does not turn out to be a divinely ordered realm” (*Literature, Philosophy* 24). Essence has to do with a sense of quality. It is not mystical but is at times difficult to pin-point. Natanson sees it as “a constant unity of characteristics which hold throughout a series of imaginative variations” (*The Erotic Bird* 20). As such a unity, it is not dependent on actuality, but is still as real as an actual object. Following Natanson, I suggest that one might think of literature as an entrance into different spheres of the real, as an exploration of the real released from its demand of actuality. We are concerned here with fiction not as something separated from reality, but as one of its essential possibilities.

In *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil creates a wonderful description of the difference between a person who is directed towards reality as actuality and one who is directed towards reality as possibility. He stresses the fact that possibility is grounded in reality. "It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it" (12). Musil's account of the man with a sense of possibility contains sharp distinctions between a banal understanding of possibility and one with evocative implications. He claims that it will always be the same possibilities that "go on repeating themselves until a man comes along who does not value the actuality above the idea. It is he who first gives the new possibilities their meaning, their direction, and he awakens them" (12). This person has the capability of envisioning "realities as yet unborn" (12). Musil does not refer to an escapist, but to someone who

too, naturally has a sense of reality; but it is a sense of possible reality, and arrives at its goal much more slowly than most people's sense of their real possibilities. He wants the forest, as it were, and the others the trees, and forest is hard to define, while trees represent so many cords of wood of a definable quality. (12)

Musil reminds us of the struggle, the detours, and the time involved in the encircling of a possibility. It is in no way a direct enterprise even if the apprehension of it might be received in the stroke of a moment. When we turn from Musil to Munro, we will see that being endowed with a sense of possibility is by no means an approach to life that one may adopt as one chooses, or for that matter is it a promise of an idealized existence. For all its excitement it includes great risks, and paradoxically also a sense of inevitability. When the eccentric Uncle Benny, in "The Flats Road," from *Lives of Girls and Women*, finally makes the decision to rescue the child from her molesting mother, his failure even to find the right house is disturbing from any commonsensical point of view. Meticulously and truthfully, Uncle Benny describes his efforts to orient himself in Toronto, and how he is constantly blocked from finding the right direction. Any rational argument about getting a map and tracing one's way by it falls short of covering the complexity of Uncle Benny's situation. It is paradoxically the acceptance of the impossibility for Uncle Benny to reach his intended goal that reveals an opening of the possible. Having spent the night in his car, Uncle Benny wakes up and intuitively "knew what [he] better do was just get out, any way [he] could get" (LGW 26, emphasis added). This is a truth that obviously cannot be argued.

My father sighed; he nodded. It was true. So alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; 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. (LGW 26)

There is no simple connection between map and reality.⁷ The rational logic of the map is inadequate in Uncle Benny's world. His is a world of possibilities of another order. What the narrator and her family are allowed to see is an essential difference, not a factual difference. The constitution of the possible or the impossible is somehow connected to the necessary or inevitable, to what it inevitably becomes. In this thesis I argue that an affinity between the inevitable and the possible is central to Munro's writing. I have called this the interplay between *compellation* and *possibility-space*, and in the following sections I will further elaborate this terminology.

Critical readings of Munro's work have been prolific, throughout her writing life, especially in the form of academic articles, and since the publication of *The Progress of Love* they have increased enormously. Already in the mid 1970s, articles on separate stories began to appear in academic journals. In the late 1980s the first book-length volume to deal comprehensively with the then whole of Munro's writing was published, W. R. Martin's *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel*. This study discusses Munro's fiction in terms of a development or progression of narrative techniques. Stating that Munro's narration "is filtered through the perception and consciousness of protagonists" Martin concludes that she is "fascinated by the movements and development of feelings and thoughts within the active mind of a character," and that she is a historian of "the working of the human imagination" (204). While not disagreeing with this, I would still like to argue that it is not the psychology of character that is in focus, but the circumstances of the event. In Magdalene Redekop's feminist reading of Munro's fiction, *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro*, there is a focus on the mother as clown in relation to what she defines as a meta-level of a "magic realism" (7). Redekop especially wants to emphasize the importance of the comic aspect of Munro's art. I see the comic as being related to a rudimentary mode of lightness that pervades the stories. Beverly Rasporich argues for a gender perspective on Munro's stories in *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. She claims that her writing proceeds from the female body and sees a chronology in the corpus of Munro's then six collected works "as constructed through the physical aging of herself and her heroines" (xvii). This has proven to be a too neat simplification. Just to name one example, Munro's latest story "Face" published in *The New Yorker* 8 September 2008 is mainly from the viewpoint of a young boy. The decon-

⁷ In *Alice Munro*, Coral Ann Howells makes an extended exploration of the theme of maps and mapmaking in Munro's fiction.

structive readings of Munro's work, E. D. Blodgett's *Alice Munro* and Ajay Heble's *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*, are apprehensive about categorizing her fiction as realist. They see her stories as concerned not so much with what is there, but with what is absent or delayed. Ildikó de Papp Carrington in *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro* sets out to explore key words in order to see how "they affect her handling of point of view" and how they express an "ambivalent attitude towards language," as well as how they define her view of the writer in general (5). James Carscallen, in *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*, has mapped out a thematic territory for Munro's stories by detailed concrete elements like for example names, figures, and characters, and Coral Ann Howells in *Alice Munro* strives to place her in a tradition of Canadian small-town fiction while at the same time charting thematic continuities. Robert Thacker's biography is a detailed and thorough description of Munro's professional life. Even though Heble discusses *possibility* and Blodgett *destiny*, no critic has explored the tension between possibility and fatality that I see at the heart of Munro's writing, and though my study tends towards the thematic, I am using a slightly different notion of this term. Carscallen exposes theme as a feature expanding over a surface; I am interested in the quality that holds a theme together. In my view, each new variation of the theme invites a deeper understanding of its essential peculiarities. In order to picture this difference, we might follow Munro's protagonist in "Images" walking along the Wawanash River:

which was high, running full, silver in the middle where the sun hit it and where it arrowed in to its swiftest motion. That is the current, I thought, and I pictured the current as something separate from water, just as the wind was separate from the air and had its own invading shape. (*DHS* 36–37)

As it is possible for the girl to separate the substance from its movement, it seems possible to separate meaning from the actual words, or rather the affective feel from the plot of the story. What is in focus then is not the substance of the theme, but its sensuous quality as perceivable alongside the theme.

Since the beginning of Munro's career critics have continued to be fascinated and puzzled by her particular twist of realism,⁸ but no one has exposed the realism as connected to her exploration of possibility as arising out of fatality. Possibility to me seems central to the way Munro is fascinated by the surface reality of how things are. Without rejecting a sense of patriarchal

⁸ See for example George Woodcock's, "The Plots of Life: The Realism of Alice Munro," *Queen's Quarterly* 93 (1986), and Canitz's and Seamon's "The Rhetoric of Fictional Realism in the Stories of Alice Munro," *Canadian literature: Littérature canadienne: a quarterly of criticism and review* 150 (1996).

oppression, or an awareness of linguistic abstraction inherent in her writing (as shown in the critical works mentioned above), I still want to take account of an intriguing shift between liberation and restraint and between contingency and fatality. When we see women depicted in gloomy circumstances caused by patriarchal systems of repression, there is still a recurring moment of a peculiar feeling of lightness or newness that does not fit directly or simply into the condition of their social realities. I do not wish to explain Munro's stories by way of a system of theories. Instead, I rely upon Maurice Natanson's view of analysis as an act not of conclusiveness "but of generation. With description, it helps to rebuild a world" (*The Journeying Self* 152). My phenomenological approach is spatially explorative rather than explanatory. I examine the story's possibility as a space that encloses rather than restricts. I see the story as a time-space where the narrative rhythm is foreign to the laws of causality that explanatory analyses usually seek to pin down. There is a difference in kind here between time seen as extension and time seen as intensity. The extensional, logical, objective time would not be able to capture the constant movements and changes of reality, a reality that becomes more enigmatic the further it is explored. The spatial organization that Munro's stories reveal is open to unsettling moments of sheer possibility. This is the realm that she also highlights as that of serious writing—a realm where a space immanent to the story's dynamics, but foreign to her agency as a writer, "takes over"—and does so as something fatal, "inescapable":

"The Peace of Utrecht" was the story where I first tackled personal material. It was the first story I absolutely had to write and wasn't writing to see if I could write that kind of a story. I think every young writer starts out this way, where at first the stories are exercises. They're necessary exercises, and I don't mean they aren't felt and imagined as well as you can do them. But when a story *takes over* the way that one did with me, then you see, then I saw that writing was about *something else altogether* than I had suspected it was, that it was going to be less in my control and more *inescapable* than I had thought. Up until that time, it was probably "I will be a writer" [laughter]; and after that, "Some things have to be written by me." (Struthers 21; emphasis added)

Munro describes a crucial turn in the development of her professional life. Her honest pretence has taken the shape of the inevitable. What she became was what she worked for, but it was not at all what she had imagined. The total surprise, occurring at the moment of the shift of control and the recognition of what has become inevitable circumstances, is analogous to what occurs in many of her stories where the willing of a destiny is overtaken by a fatality that is unnervingly spectacular. In "Providence" from Munro's fourth collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose tries to arrange an illicit

weekend romance with a man who lives in another town. When practicalities like a cancellation from the baby-sitter and a snow storm, stubbornly prevent the love-affair from becoming reality, the surprising circumstance of a broken pay phone becomes a moment of temporary and absurd happiness. At the bus depot where they sit and wait for a bus that will never show up, the pay phone starts spilling out coins when the girl fiddles with the coin return box. Rose “could see showers of coins coming down on them, or snowstorms,” and is thinking about the “elegant caprice” of the whole scene (*WDY* 160). Fatality here appears as a release and not as a destiny one cannot escape, as in classic tragedy. “Bounty where you’d never look for it; streaks of loss and luck. One of the few times, one of the few hours, when Rose could truly say she was not at the mercy of past or future, or love, or anybody” (160). Munro’s characters are lucky to perceive these contingent weavings that become epistemologically meaningful to them. Rose welcomes this moment as a lucky possibility instead of regretting what was obviously not meant to be.

Theoretical Departures

Anything was possible. Was that true—was anything possible?

—Alice Munro, “The Bear Came over the Mountain”

Maybe we’ve located ourselves beyond coincidence.

—Robert Stone, *A Flag for Sunrise*

During the course of exploring various selected stories, we shall see that the phenomenon of *fatality* is central to Munro’s fiction. The sense of the fatal is not restricted to texts featuring a drama of destiny. What is fatal occurs in gradations of explicitness and form as these shift with the writer’s changing poetic urges and aesthetic options. In all of the variations, the fatal is driven by something that I have called *compellation*,⁹ something the characters

⁹ I use the word *compellation* to draw attention to one of its archaic senses—as in “a calling vpon the Hearers, to a consideration of the thing spoken” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 599). However, this usage of the word still includes the notion of being compelled and unable to resist.

cannot resist because they are certain it includes them. Different modes of fatality take turns in holding the writer's and the reader's attention. Yet these variations show a core of sameness at the heart of Munro's persistent preoccupation with fatal realities.

My study focuses on specific stories seen in the context of the entire *œuvre* as it is today. This means that texts not directly explored here are nevertheless taken into account and any attempt to map Munro's entire body of work realizes that the appearance of a new story might modify the outcome. However, I have come to realize that such a modification only adds yet another variation to the set of key-concerns and key-modes already at work in her stories.¹⁰ One of her most recent stories, "Free Radicals," appeared in *The New Yorker*, 11 February 2008. Its title suggests an additional version of the operations of possibility-space and its constitution. These radicals are highly reactive, which makes them likely to take part in chemical reactions, but only in so far as they do it according to their own pre-coded set of possibilities. Being an atom with unpaired electrons, the radicals seek balance by stealing an electron from another atom that then becomes a free radical. A chain reaction is caused. As the metaphor for a story that features a woman visited by a dangerous murderer, there seems to be a chain reaction caused by a miserable childhood. However, it is suggested in the story that bad or good are not features so easily dug out, and as the metaphor suggests chemical reactions can be both bad and good. You just "never know" ("Free Radicals" 138). W. R. Martin's study explores Munro's earlier stories from the uncollected ones up to a few that would eventually become part of *The Progress of Love*. He explains how her earlier stories are not always successful but that they lay the basis for her mature work. While I agree that there is a progression of complexity in her stories, I do not judge her early stories unsuccessful, but see the remarkable poise of randomness and necessity already in them. Unlike most of the previous readers of Munro's work, I do not enter into a chronology to seek out a progression in narrative excellence, but I explore decisive factors in order to see how details illuminate a larger picture. I have chosen to focus on the stories that most strikingly demonstrate the phenomena that I see as crucial to her art, and here it is very likely that a later story may explain layers in a much earlier one. Even though Martin's chronological approach differs from my structure of grouping stories by distinctive elements, such as lightness and sameness for example, his conclusions—that they disclose "a comprehensive pattern, even if the pattern lies in the consistency of its inconsistencies," and that "all these surprises seem right and true"—are still valid for my thesis (11). Assured that the stories I have deliberately left out have a thematic kinship with the ones ana-

¹⁰ This view is shared with Magdalene Redekop who concludes that "as new stories come out they appear to me to be astonishing confirmations of my earlier readings" (*Mothers and Clowns* 235).

lyzed in this thesis, textual phenomena are reviewed in the context of the *œuvre*. By phenomena, I mean recurring features of the text, but more importantly the less obvious movements and states of affairs that make significant traits possible in the first place. A phenomenon is, from this latter viewpoint, a resonance or reverberation that keeps repeating itself; it belongs to the unconstituted, undecided vastness where things are still in the fluid process of being shaped. It is something caught between the lines. I would like to borrow a description from a sculptor commenting on his work, in order to visualize this predicament. The Swedish artist Arne Jones says the following of his *Room Without Appendix*:¹¹

What I want to stress by this title is that the sculpture is closed in itself. It certainly points in many directions, but it always suddenly returns and embraces its own earlier movements. Such compositions are often called 'space-time' as they are linked to the idea that by following an eternal coil with the eyes, one experiences a happening in time at the same time as the coil builds up a restricted space. The volume which we always demand in a sculpture is in this case more the air embraced by the coil than the material from which the coil is made. (Hesselgren 324)

Keeping Jones's description of eternity and closure in mind and connecting it to literature, one could imagine a scenario where a story is both unified by its own structure, and by way of its layering welcomes views from different perspectives. Munro's account of her own reading habits come to mind as something that corroborates to this conception of the work of art. She reveals how she reads in a spatial rather than linear way.

I can start reading them anywhere; from beginning to end, from end to beginning, from any point in between in either direction. So obviously I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way.¹²

¹¹ Arne Jones was a close friend to the Swedish writer Lars Ahlin and the work can be said to be a visual version of Ahlin's short story "Huset har ingen Filial" ("The House without Appendix").

¹² Alice Munro, "What is Real?" in *The Art of Short Fiction: an International Anthology*. Ed. by Gary Geddes, 825.

In a similar manner I read the complete collection of Munro's stories, as a space where we can move from late stories to earlier ones and see how they exhibit a sense of framing attentiveness. So enclosure as opposed to closure is not something negative, but the positive enterprise of making something new emerge in the movement of constitution.¹³ The writer and the reader find themselves in a realm where phenomena are not merely presented or represented, but are also in the process of a showing forth. They do not just appear or fail to appear, but stand on the threshold of appearing, drawing attention to the processes of constitution in which they are embedded and out of which they emerge.¹⁴ Meaning begins to form in the *given* that is intuitively grasped.¹⁵ Whenever the meaning-constitution is negative, as a falling-apart of orders, the fatal may be part of that too. In the story "Royal Beatings," this comes to the surface in Rose's fascination with the "tumble of reason" when she cannot escape from reciting a naughty piece of rhyme in opposition to her step-mother's threats about punishment. It is a different sort of logic that shapes in her mind and entices her, one based on "the spark and spit of craziness." Despite the peril, Rose cannot resist the possibility in the absurdity. She sees the paradox in "the dangerous moment, the delightful moment" (*WDY* 15).

Even if a collection of short stories seems to be a set of self-enclosed units that do not cohere in the manner of the parts of a novel, I would still contend that Munro's texts achieve a peculiar unification of tone and drift. In fact, a collection of brief texts may accentuate a set of factors that might not have been so persistently foregrounded had the writer chosen the novel form. The cumulative layering of story upon story can intensify an implicit but decisive element by allowing its *selfsameness* to materialize in a variety of highly different guises.¹⁶ In "The Hallucinatory Point," the New Zealand writer Maurice Shadbolt comments: "I've always been conscious of the limitations of any one of my stories seen in isolation (as happens in anthologies). Seen in isolation, a story seldom seems more than a performance; seen in context of other stories, it always has the possibility of being more" (270).

¹³ Per Winther makes an important division between narrative and hermeneutic closure in "Closure and Preclosure as Narrative Grid in Short Story Analysis: Some Methodological Suggestions," 63–64.

¹⁴ This means that the text is dynamic but not in the sense of an openness to a variety of interpretations grounded in subjective readings; rather in the sense of containing the energetic moment of the showing forth of its own current of existence.

¹⁵ For Bergson as for Husserl "intuition" is an effort to re-ascend the slope natural to the intellect and go from reality to concepts instead of vice versa. Through intuition, we are brought to a knowledge of the world of unorganized matter which, beneath the inert and static surface that science reveals to us, constantly moves, changes, and endures. Intuition, ultimately, is what attains the spirit, duration, pure change" (See Mark S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self and Meaning*, 74–75.)

¹⁶ Maurice Natanson has spoken of this occurrence of selfsameness as a knowing of "the quiddity of an imagined object, a constant unity of characteristics which hold throughout a series of imaginative variations" (*The Erotic Bird* 20).

Another short story writer, Andrew K. Kennedy, defines it as a “verbal score” that holds variations together, “not by absolute ‘unity,’ the famous criterion of Poe and his followers, but by what [he] would call a sense of direction” (29).

With regard to Munro’s collections, I see a return to moments of considerable similarity. So when a larger context of a story has been established, the concatenations of linked phenomena that thereby become discernible are seen to possess a light that is not reducible to explanations derived from the interactions between different parts within a given context.¹⁷ Phenomena, or clusters of phenomena per se, have light—and this is what I am after. Each story has the opportunity to resonate within the *œuvre* as a whole, but it also has the capacity to camouflage an intriguing set of constants that keep making the *œuvre* what it is: distinct, personal, and idiosyncratic. Heidegger refers to this set of constants as a “site” that needs to be “heeded” because the individual piece of writing derives its “light and sound” only from this site. Seen in the context of the totality of a writer’s fiction, the individual story becomes the manifestation of the site (*On the Way to Language* 159–160).

I begin my investigation by focusing on particular stories where specific traits keep recurring. I look at intriguing factors on the more or less open level of their thematization. Then I progress to less evident traits, or to those that initially are likely to go unnoticed. It is to be noted here that looking is not “a featureless mental look” that simply sees things that are out there (*The Idea of Phenomenology* 68). Husserl notes how

it makes no sense at all to speak of things as if they were simply there and need only to be seen. For this “simply being there” is a matter of certain experiences of a specific and changing structure, such as perception, imagination, memory, predication, etc.; and things are in them not as they might be in a case or container, rather, things *constitute themselves* in these experiences even though they are not to be found in them in the real [*reellen*] sense. For “things to be given” is for them to *present* themselves (to be represented) as such in these phenomena. (68)

The Husserlian phenomenological approach inspects the phenomenon as that which becomes known. In the act of becoming known, the thing cannot be separated from appearance. The phenomenon is to be seen in the context of the light it itself sheds, rather than as an effect of the cultural-historical pa-

¹⁷ As the application of “emergence theory” to phenomena such as board games like chess has shown, the complexity of the patterns of play cannot be anticipated by the construction of the simple rules of the game. John H. Holland remarks that it “took centuries of study to recognize certain patterns of play, such as the control of pawn formations” and that the “crucial step is to extract the regularities from incidental and irrelevant details” (4).

rameters that supposedly determine its reality.¹⁸ The difference between phenomenological context and deterministic context enables us to see the phenomenon as a self-actualizing reality. As we shall see, the fatal spaces that constitute themselves in Munro's stories are not inevitable in any scientifically deterministic fashion. Consider the photographic moment: what makes the photographed object discernible in the poignant moment of its appearing is the very special light of the transitory instant in which the photograph was taken. The quiddity of the illuminated object is the unique, momentary luminosity that can be seen seeping out from the photograph. Phenomenologically speaking, the light that is actualized as the object's own seepage is the phenomenon's two-foldedness. It is the correlation between the "appearing and that which appears" (68). The task is to explore *how* an object becomes known. There is a complexity in this phenomenality that is not obvious, positive, straightforward, unproblematic, as in explanatory procedures that see what is 'there' as caused by externals transcendent to the phenomenon. In this phenomenological approach externals are seen as immanent, as being part of the phenomenon's ongoing constitution as something that perpetually actualizes itself. Identifying the specific appearing of a phenomenon (or phenomenal configuration) as its idiosyncratic shining does not mean retrieving an idealized core of meaning, but being attuned to the site where the phenomenon's obscure intricacy is embedded. What is phenomenologically truthful and real is not a deep-lying core of meaning, but what is immanently given. There is nothing beyond, beneath, or below the immanent that we can get at through analysis. The viewer's gaze is most exact when it stays with the immanent and accepts its terrain as the site where complexity occurs.

In Munro's texts, certain characters actualize themselves as tilted to the side of the expected and conventional, and even to the side of subjectivity. As we shall see, much the same can be said of events, objects, actions, perceptions, and feelings, in the stories. Feelings are strangely unemotional at decisive moments, as in "Passion." Love is slanted in a direction away from the lovers absorbed in it, as in "What Is Remembered"; creativity to the side of the artists' powers as in "Material"; narrative outside narrative cohesion, as in "The Love of a Good Woman." Nevertheless, that which is to the side of something else does not make a case for itself as a unit *dislodged* from that which it is to the side of. It appears as a parallel obeying an intriguing fatality. I discuss such lateral directedness in terms of compellation. In this study, compellation denotes a force driving what is fatally significant. It is a fatal a priori. In the stories, compellation is anterior to phenomena that are

¹⁸ I share the belief described by Alan Paskow in *The Paradoxes of Art: A Phenomenological investigation*. "There is 'in us,' I believe, something that is not, in essence, reducible to and determined entirely by the explicit or tacit rules of our culture; we should not understand ourselves and the world we inhabit as wholly defined by historical 'conventions' or see it and ourselves solely as intelligible through 'social constructs.'" (17).

uncharged by the fatal. It appears as flashes or “communiqués”¹⁹ that can be distinguished from the temporal flow, but that is not dislodged from it. Within the complicated world of Munro’s realism, a space adjacent to the milieu of trite representations stealthily materializes.²⁰ We see this, for instance, in “Royal Beatings” from *Who Do You Think You Are?*. Rose’s experience of what she overhears from the shed where her father works to repair and restore furniture is something more than just a description of a father being embarrassed by the fact that he talks to himself.

From the shed came not only coughing, but speech, a continual muttering, reproachful or encouraging, usually just below the level at which separate words could be made out. Slowing down when her father was at a tricky piece of work, taking on a cheerful speed when he was doing something less demanding, sandpapering or painting. Now and then some words would break through and hang clear and nonsensical on the air. When he realized they were out, there would be a quick bit of cover-up coughing, a swallowing, an alert, unusual silence. “Macaroni, pepperoni, Botticelli, beans—.” (WDY 5–6)

Rose’s father does not merely display a moment of self-reflexivity, catching himself in a ridiculous act, but when words suddenly appear, seemingly without his interference, out of the stream of mumble, there is a simultaneous recognition of the weight and seriousness of the uttered words. Not only do they stand out as a message, meaningful or not, but they emerge in a realm of mysterious signification. They do not point to a world, but to meaning caught up in its own materialization. “The person who spoke these words and the person who spoke to her as her father were not the same, though they seemed to occupy the same space” (6). For Rose, this is disturbing but also expressive of a parallel universe that is incompatible with that of her ordinary life. She is both bewildered and fascinated by this bifurcation of reality. Her father and the person who utters the significant words are a pair that takes on different possibilities. The recognition of the doubling of her father as a link to a new realm of possibilities is tied to a compulsion of secrecy, as if this type of knowledge is somehow dangerous or suspect.

It would be the worst sort of taste to acknowledge the person who was not supposed to be there; it would not be forgiven. Just the same, she

¹⁹ In “Dance of the Happy Shades,” this word is used to describe a message that comes out of the event itself without addressing any particular person (DHS 224).

²⁰ In the foreword to Maurice Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*, Judith Butler describes this materialization in terms of a horizon. If one seeks to know the object in itself as an “insight into what makes the object possible” this means “that one must turn to the horizon in which it appears,” and “this is no easy task because a horizon is not the same as the objects that it makes possible” (xii).

loitered and listened. The cloud-capped towers, she heard him say once. “The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces.” That was like a hand clapped against Rose’s chest, not to hurt, but astonish her, to take her breath away. She had to run then, she had to get away. She knew that was enough to hear, and besides, what if he caught her? It would be terrible. (6)

The reality that Rose has just confronted does not reconcile with the world of everyday existence. Her way of coping with this is one of escape. In the subsequent chapters of the thesis, we will see other ways of dealing with the knowledge of the incompatibility of a world touched by both the fatal and the ordinary.

The workings of the compellation are not inferred (by reader or character), but are immediately and intuitively grasped in a beholding of fatality that corresponds to the immanent recognition of values in the aprioristic sphere of ethical seeing (Hartmann, *Moral Phenomena* 174; 219). In this sense, the fatal is not a subjective coloration of reality, but a presentation of a world where the fatal might occur. When Rose is punished for being cheeky, the quite ordinary event of reprimanding a child transforms into a “royal beating.” She knows that there is no way to prevent this drama from taking place. “Rose put aside her other knowledge that whatever Flo has said or done, whatever she herself has said or done, does not really matter at all. It is the struggle itself that counts, and that can’t be stopped, can never be stopped, short of where it has to go, now” (*WDY* 17). In Munro’s play with randomness a sort of gratitude or exhilaration appears in the recognition of the fatal. The fatal is expressive of something almost invisible that strangely decides the course of events. Fragility and even destitution lie in its unobtrusiveness, in the fact that the intricacy of small circumstances that momentarily connect or repel might be overlooked. It might pass unrecognized. The fact that some of the characters in Munro do come across it becomes a matter of pure gratitude for them, and the chance-like quality of the event is often simultaneous with a sense of lightness. It might be a releasing laughter, or it might be a sense of being unburdened. The feeling of lightness is complex because it also involves a shocking sense of serenity. For Rose it becomes a releasing moment of violent certainty. She plays the part of the child that has been unfairly punished. Her monologue is representative of a common experience of being unfairly treated. However, the narrative conveys a detachment from self-pity.

In this state events and possibilities take on a lovely simplicity. Choices are mercifully clear. The words that come to mind are not the quibbling, seldom the conditional. Never is a word to which the right is suddenly established. She will never speak to them, she will never look at them with anything but loathing, she will never forgive them. She will punish them; she will finish them. Encased in these finalities, and in her bodily

pain, she floats in curious comfort, beyond herself, beyond responsibility. (21)

For all its theatricality, the scene is startling for its honesty. This becomes even more explicit when the fatal fault-line ends in normality. Having returned to the normal workings of family life, Rose's refusals and threats have no foothold. They remain "encased" in the realm of the fatal. "Rose will understand that life has started up again, that they will all sit around the table eating again, listening to the radio news" (22). The compellation's workings do not always become knowable as common features of experience. It is not altogether factually discernible as an evidently presented datum, but is felt between the lines as a haunting allure. Its subtle energy governs the phenomenon of possibility.

The notion of possibility is not entirely new in Munro criticism. Mark Levene insightfully observes that some of Munro's most important stories deal with "the immensities of the possible," which he calls "dramas about knowing and possibilities" (849, 852). If by "immensity" he refers to an infinite set of opportunities, I would like to modify this by arguing that possibility in Munro is constituted in a space where chance and necessity are momentarily seen to intersect. The concept of possibility has also been slanted in the direction of linguistic differences in the school of Saussure and Jakobson. Ajay Heble discusses modal terms of possibility in Munro.

I will use the phrase paradigmatic discourse to describe a domain of language use in which, as Jonathan Culler explains, 'the meaning of an item depends on the difference between it and other items which *might have* filled the same slot in a given sentence' (13; emphasis added). The important words here are 'might have' because they suggest the emphasis on possibility, on the way things *might have been* as distinct from the way things necessarily are. (5)

The differences I have in mind are of another order, since they are not chiefly to be viewed as structural mechanisms automatically produced by systems of linguistic contrast. What is at stake in Munro is what Hartmann, in discussing valuational discernment, refers to as an elusive wealth of aprioristic contents that continue to surprise feeling through their sustained, invasive surge (*Moral Phenomena* 201). Uninvited, unexpected, and mysterious, the compellation's primal 'voice' sets up unsummoned reverberations that stand in opposition to the natural course of events. The characters' lives appear as something fatally trapped between randomness and necessity.²¹

²¹ Fate in Munro actually has some affinities with what Vladimir Nabokov terms 'chance' in his article on the wish to escape "the iron laws of tragic fatality." He suggests that what "even the greatest playwrights have never realized is that chance is not always stumbling and that the tragedies of real life are based on the beauty and horror of chance—not merely on its

What I am calling compulsion has to do with constitution. As Edmund Husserl points out, constitution's primal flow is a coursing marked by pre-verbal rather than by verbal determinants. This is how Mavis Gallant thinks of fiction-making. "The first flash of fiction arrives without words" (375). It is too elusively complex to be explained by linguistic factors. Our streams of awareness "sweep on to a large extent without bondage to appropriate words, set off by a flood of intuitive imagery [*anschaulicher Bilder*] or by their own associative interconnections" (*Logical Investigations II* 593). Such a flow is "pre-predicatively" immanent to our lives as the primal current of being. Its coursing is vaguely spatial in a pre-structural rather than structural sense. In *Lives of Girls and Women* the protagonist, Del, points precisely to this pre-linguistic experience. When fascinatingly observing the appearance of a dead cow, she "paid attention to its shape as I would sometimes pay attention to the shape of real continents or islands on real maps, as if the shape itself were a revelation beyond words, and I would be able to make sense of it, if I tried hard enough, and had time" (*LW* 51). Harry P. Reeder points out that the "structuralist view that meanings are simply structured contrasts is phenomenologically false... Finding a meaning is in some ways structurally similar to finding an object in space" (190). In the process of reading, the image is that bridge between linguistic markers and the thought where it turns into idea. This bridge is unconsciously passed, or in Husserlian terms, meaning is reached by passive syntheses.²² As Wolfgang Iser remarks, passive syntheses "are neither manifested in the printed text, nor produced solely by the reader's imagination, and the projections of which they consist are themselves of a dual nature: they emerge from the reader, but they are also guided by signals which 'project' themselves into him" (135). The arising of a reality of meaning is a complex process where the distinction between reading subject and read object is dissolved. Significance is the actualization of the image perceived as immanent knowing. Here, we might refer to Heidegger's explanation of the Greek word *têchne* denoting "a mode of knowing," where to "know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present, as such" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 57). As I explore the actualization of 'possibility' in Munro, and as I do so against the background of these theoretic considerations, it is clear that my aim is not Heble's negative quest for an "absent level of meaning" structurally resulting from *displaced* possibilities (4), but the positive enterprise of discerning the way in which forms of textual com-

ridiculousness. And it is this secret rhythm of chance that one would like to see pulsating in the veins of the tragic muse.... It would be absurd to suggest that accident and chance may be left to play havoc with life on the stage. But it is not absurd to say that a writer of genius may discover exactly the right harmony of such accidental occurrences, and that this harmony, without suggesting anything like the iron laws of tragic fatality, will express certain definite combinations that occur in life" (85).

²² Meaning here is not to be thought of as either predication or judgment.

pellation constitute the kind of affirmative clearing that I call a *possibility-space*. As a fatal a priori in Munro, such a possibility-space does not materialize through the parade of representations, or through a displacement of them, but emerges in progressive surrender to a fatal turn. I suggest that such surrender is a truth-process taking place in the individual story. The reader enters the possibility-space, and only in this way becomes someone who has knowledge of the text. In the texts, possibility's leeway opens turns of constitution that permit fate to actualize random configurations that in retrospect are emotionally discernible as its aprioristic contents. The narrators have a tendency to be passively intrigued by a constituting compellation that lacks any causal source other than its own coursing. There is often a reflectivity in the text, the meaning of which is its sheer surprise at its own actualization. It is "the whole twist of consequence" seeming "fantastical, but dull" that astounds character, narrator and reader (*HFC* 54).

Commenting on the punishing of Rose in "Royal Beatings" from *Who Do You Think You Are?*, W. R. Martin recognizes that the protagonist's "reactions bring her the surprises and puzzlements of the sort that atomic physicists have been faced with in the twentieth century: she is the passive victim that she would be in an ordinary stereotyped account of such an affair, but also an active participant, wanting and actually helping the beating of herself to take place" (11). Also, noting that the "event, the ritual, seems to have taken on a life of its own, to have established a script that they must act out," Martin initiates a correspondence with Munro's writing and quantum physics that he never elaborates (12). Henry P. Stapp elucidates the general significance of a quantum theory. Identifying the far-reaching need to get away from the trap of the dichotomy of "determinism" and "chance," concepts that both lead to a meaninglessness but in opposite directions, Stapp renders the highly specialized discoveries within quantum mechanics accessible to other areas of research beyond physics. "An examination of *the conditions under which quantum choices are made*, according to the 'orthodox' ideas of Heisenberg and Dirac, show that, even though these choices are not fixed by the quantum laws, nonetheless, each such choice is *intrinsically meaningful*: each quantum choice injects meaning, in the form of enduring structure, into the physical universe" (197). Stapp sees a profound deficiency of classical physics in its essentially reductionistic character of interpreting each thing as essentially nothing more than a sum of simple parts. But this limitation excludes the possibility of the existence, within the physical universe itself, of a faithful representation of a *comprehension* of anything; of a representation within the physical universe of anything that mirrors the essential attribute of a conscious thought, namely its existence as a fundamentally complex whole. Stapp argues that the "fundamental characteristic of a comprehension, or a thought, is precisely that it is *more* than the sum of its component parts: *it cannot be analyzed into nothing more than the sum of its components without eliminating its very essence*" (197–198). If we apply this to short stories, comprehension then lies in the complex whole of

the constitution of the dramatic narration of the story. Munro's stories can be seen as stretching the limits of what might be comprehended. They disclose the cognitive aspect in the act of narrating. Maureen in "Open Secrets" views something side-tracking the unresolved mystery of the story, and it seems as if this can only be got at through story-telling. It is "something not startling until you think of trying to tell it" (159).

In the course of investigating fatal apriority in Munro, I read each text as belonging simultaneously to the meanings set up by the story and to those set up by the *œuvre*. This simultaneity is reflected in the specific groupings of the fiction which of necessity then are non-chronological. The possibility/impossibility interface comes into view as something that traverses each story in a unique way. It cuts across character, place, situation, and act. What I focus on is not what E. D. Blodgett sees as deferred reconciliation between antagonizing opposites,²³ but exhilarations deriving from reality's freakish possibilities. What is important in this dissertation is not the production of a continuous mismatching between the possible and the impossible, but instants of fatal constitution that lift the story-line out of a progression that would have seemed natural and justifiable. The peculiar attraction exercised by the compellation becomes for the experienced Munro reader an anticipation with a primary feeling of being drawn towards everything genuinely aprioristic: the involuntary, the fatal, the impossible. What is unlikely, impossible or simply in the dark, becomes possible through a compellation gently nudging the common-sense world into one that is compelled. Realism and the fatal somehow share a common ground. The fatal is not separate from reality but might be distinguished from it as the current of reality itself as it appears in the stories.

In an attempt to distinguish Munro's realism from a mere "documentary style" (68) Canitz and Seamon argue that there is a continuous dialectical opposition between reality and fiction in Munro's narratives. According to these two critics, the purpose of this duality is rhetorical with the end to "alert us as readers to the presence of fantasy in our narratives about ourselves and others" (80). This "fantasy" is taken to be a dubious human activity that Munro resists and lays bare in her fiction. Hence, Canitz and Seamon suggest that in self-reflexive narrative acts, legend and fictionalization are down-played and banal reality is upgraded so that the readers will trust the truthfulness of the story. They write that mystery "and surmise are pushed aside in favor of the knowable reality of the ordinary world" (71). To

²³ Blodgett's quest for Munro's "primal way of seeing and articulating a world" signals the direction of my own study, but his emphasis on semantic structures entails opposite conclusions (8). In his final chapter "Fiction as Destiny" he concludes: "Freedom is precisely what is discovered as lost in these stories, and the discovery, as Munro delicately suggests, resides in how the separate fictions are shaped by the narrations of memory, fantasy, and imagination" (141). I submit that a radical freedom, far from being "lost," is exactly what Munro's characters are exposed to.

my mind, this is a simplification of story-telling, of the intricate effort to render the world anew. Instead of an opposition between mystery and ordinariness and between fiction and reality, I will argue that in Munro's art they are sides of the same coin. The artificiality of art contains an alluring possibility of revealing elusive aspects of our existence, not by explaining them but by drawing attention to them. When Rose, in "Spelling," visits her stepmother at the nursing home, she witnesses something essential of what it means to be human. The residents have declined into a state where they can no longer attend to their own most basic needs, but among them sits an old woman who for no obvious reason has retained the genius of knowing how to spell. This fact is rendered as a curiosity that for all its penurious state displays an intriguing correspondence between her capacity and the system of words that she cannot prevent or command.

Sometimes a long wait, a long wait between letters. It seemed she had only the thinnest thread to follow, meandering through that emptiness or confusion that nobody on this side can do more than guess at. But she didn't lose it, she followed it through to the end, however tricky the word might be, or cumbersome. Finished. Then she was sitting waiting; waiting, in the middle of her sightless eventless day, till up from somewhere popped another word. (*WDY* 196).

In this scene the whole mystery of how language appears is placed in the foreground. The old woman is about to lose language. She is helplessly withdrawn into a linguistic vacuum where words become the possible release from stasis. Here, the nature of language is positively discharged as an event. By "the thinnest thread" it saves the woman from chaos and non-existence. At this rudimentary level of being, words seem to float around in a space of possibility.

Rose wondered what the words were like, when she held them in her mind. Did they carry their usual meaning, or any meaning at all? Were they like words in dreams or in the minds of young children, each one marvelous and distinct and alive as a new animal? This one limp and clear, like a jellyfish, that one hard and mean and secretive, like a horned snail. They could be austere and comical as top hats, or smooth and lively and flattering as ribbons. A parade of private visitors, not over yet. (196)

Released from their structural place in a linguistic system of signifiers, the meanings of words are not seen to take off in unfettered directions, but the words themselves are contemplated in their immanent texture. As organic bodies, they inhabit an agency that consists in their spell and charm on the human mind.

The term *possibility-space* is used in mathematics to denote the amount of all possibilities within a given situation. From this viewpoint, a possibility-space is an artificial space that allows for the measurement of a specific amount of chance. Aesthetically speaking, the possibility-space first comes to view in a story when things for some reason (or none at all) turn aside into fatal side-paths. In Munro's fiction, there is typically a moment of suspense where power or decision is recognized as a somewhat external factor that gives life a new directedness, an inexplicable sense of undeserved renewal. As regeneration, the possibility-space is thus something temporal, a field that highlights process and change which would not have become visible without the text's particular dynamic time-structure. The fictional structuring of a realistically portrayed event makes necessity materialize as a possibility where it is to be understood as something else than mere opportunity. The force of the revitalizing moment when necessity is a fact may be its awesome or bizarre ungraspability. Nevertheless, its materialization may convey a sense of the certainty that follows in the wake of pure discovery. A set of paradoxes is at hand: just as the growth of a possibility-space may constitute a dwarfing, contraction, draining, or slowing of the world, the perplexity of the fatal rupture may introduce the tranquility of a reassuring certainty, as we will see in my conclusion on "Post and Beam."

In calling the space opened by possibility's self-making allure an *evental site*, Alain Badiou points out that "a site is not just any fragment of an effective multiplicity. One could say that there is a type of 'fragility' peculiar to the site, which disposes it to be in some sense 'wrested' from the situation" (*Theoretical Writings* 98).²⁴ Characters trapped in the parameters of the story (of the discursive destiny) in which they find themselves being told are cast into a rigorous but fatally intensified life. Compressed to a slender strip of strange destitution, their lives contain a surge that the natural world cannot know. In the stories, characters may become happy victims of a converting necessity. Without the benefit of the compellation's constricting force, the protagonist would not be part of the special intensity that is establishing the scenario as excitingly fatal. The exhilaration imposed by fatal captivity is made possible by the event's lack of subjective interference. The subject is in a state of surrender, being purely receptive. The fatal abides as unaffected by the beholding subject's presence. Yet the materialization of fatal courings as shudders external to subjective existence does not leave the elect²⁵

²⁴ The term *site* is also to be understood in the direction of Heidegger's use of it in *On the Way to Language*. "Originally the word 'site' suggests a place in which everything comes together, is concentrated. The site gathers unto itself, supremely and in the extreme. Its gathering power penetrates and pervades everything. The site, the gathering power, gathers in and preserves all it has gathered, not like an encapsulating shell but rather by penetrating with its light all it has gathered, and only thus releasing it into its own nature" (159–60).

²⁵ This term will be used for moments, persons and objects that are found to be in an exclusive or superior state in order to describe the specific fatal value that seem to spring from them.

individual out of harm's reach. The compellation is self-existent, and as such it can be both frightening and dangerous.

What is compelling is the compellation itself, not the world of 'human experiences' it touches. I do not read Munro's stories as a system of (realistic) 'representations,' some of which happen to be fatal, or view her stories as highlighting fatal phenomena in order to bring to view the limits of linguistic representation. Rather, the fictional aspect of her art, the interzone of the real and the imagined, is the site where the fictive is rediscovered "as the essence of the world" (*The Erotic Bird* xv). Early criticism on Munro tended to emphasize her photographic or documentary realism.²⁶ Later critics have hypothesized a quest for a hidden aspect of reality, highlighting the conflict between fiction and reality. Heble takes "the most compelling feature" of Munro's writing to be "the tension between her interest in delineating a surface reality—'a world out there' which we are invited to recognize as real and true—and her fascination with the very limits of representation, especially in language" (4). Magdalene Redekop defines her "magic realism" as a kind of "meta-realism" (*Mothers and Other Clowns* 7). Charles E. May states that "The Love of a Good Woman" is "more realistic" than any novel can possibly be ("Why Short Stories" 24). E. D. Blodgett sees realism in Munro as "a negative aspect of art, that against which her writing has struggled in the three and a half decades of her engagement with her craft." Munro introduces "a more illumined world, a world that no document can bear witness to" (6). However, I see no reason to place Munro outside the precincts of realism. It is simply the case that her overarching realism is not to be tied down to a pedestrian rationale of a naturalistic *vraisemblance* nor is it in opposition to fiction. James Carscallen quite rightly asserts that reality and truth are present in all her stories, and "as a pure realist" Munro "would not be a writer without truth" (8). He also notes that

this may not be obvious in the world of sensibility, where either reality or truth [...] can withdraw to the point of invisibility. When we are being aggressive about the term 'realism,' we usually have in mind the documentary kind that 'gets the facts' and 'tells it like it is'—in other words, tries to purvey reality without truth. Yet the truth that is invisible here is not simply absent but conspicuous by its absence: perhaps it is secretly present all the time" (7).

While I agree with Carscallen, I also want to emphasize that I not only see a truth that is absently conspicuous, but truths that are present, perhaps both secretly and not. The status of these truths will be discussed further on. Real-

²⁶ See e. g. W. J. Keith's *Canadian Literature in English* (London: Longman, 1985) 162.

ity in itself comprises an enigmatic factor, an invisible *je-ne-sais-quoi*²⁷ that serves to constitute specific instances of the real—and fiction has the potential to make this factor visible. In Munro, the realistically recognizable traits of everyday life are not momentarily compelling by being realistic, but by exhibiting the compellation's fleeting invasion. Established concepts such as magic realism, meta-realism, heightened realism, hyper-realism, and super-realism may not be all that helpful here, since they might set up the real as something that seems to be in need of prefixing supplements. The danger is that the real in its everyday reality is taken for granted as merely factual or that the prefix signals a distinction that is not there.²⁸

Artistic techniques of estrangement (*Ostranenie*, *Verfremdung*) transform the real into something strange and difficult in order to distance the audience from the artistic expression and to increase the length of perception.²⁹ The Russian formalists and later Bertolt Brecht used the technique in order to disrupt a human propensity for a routine conception of the world. But as the language-use of the formalists tends to verge on the unintelligible, striving to disconnect itself from semantic meaning, Munro keeps a balance between the familiar and the strange, between meaning and discontinuation of meaning. She never abandons one for the other, but lets them energize each other in what Helen Hoy has called a "poetic explosiveness" (102). Paradox, in Munro's fiction, works beyond being a stylistic tool for clarity. It strains to grapple with the complexity of human emotion as something immense and varied. In this sense, estrangement is a double process in Munro's dealings with the ordinary. Her art operates in both directions. Adapting the terms she herself used in the *Weekend Magazine* of 11 May 1974, one might say that she makes the "mysterious touchable," and the "touchable mysterious." In his study of Munro's fiction, W. R. Martin quotes Albert Einstein once having said that a sense of the mysterious is the most beautiful experience that a man can have." (1). Having noted this, I wish to refer to an even more baffling comment of Einstein's as pertinent to her writing. "The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility" (Guillemin 262). In this double movement of mystery and familiarity, her narratives lure the reader, with a deceptive simplicity, into complexities of the real itself. There is typi-

²⁷ See Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien: La manière et l'occasion*. Jankélévitch speaks of "l'immense presque-rien" in order to acknowledge the immensity of reality's fatal smallness (60).

²⁸ In "Alice Munro's Tilting Fields," Redekop draws further attention to the confusion created by "magic realism" and other established terms that have become nebulous through excessive use. *New Worlds: Discovering and Constructing the Unknown in Anglophone Literature* (Munich: Verlag Ernst Vogel, 2000) 346–347.

²⁹ The "term *defamiliarization* (*ostranenie*: 'making strange') is, of course, generally associated with Russian formalism and perhaps above all the name Viktor Shklovsky." See Gerd Bjøhovde, "When Foreignness and Familiarity Become One." In *The Art of Brevity*. Edited by Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei, pp 128–137. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004, 129.

cally a sudden jolt, drama, violence, intervention, or shift that introduces a fault line in personal existence. An unexpected event—even a small accident or chance encounter—establishes an impairment in the crust of someone’s existence. Along the surface of such a fault fracture, one side of life is reoriented with respect to the other. On each side of the fault line, things continue to be ordered in alignment with the familiar layout, for the reorientation’s momentum runs (as in a geological fault line) in a direction parallel to the fracture. The world is the same, but a seismic event (tiny or substantial) has reconfigured it into a possibility-space. The pronounced seismicity of the textual landscape (its degree of exposure to seismic instants and post-seismic possibilities) is governed by the fatally constituting a priori that I have called compellation. As the crust of personal existence gives way under seismic pressure, the moral parameters of standardized living may be reconfigured, for here morality derives not from a concept of ethics but from a sense of the compellation’s priority. The suddenly materialized fault line is likely to introduce impairments and imperfections that are experienced by those on the farther side of the fracture as failings or shortcomings that give offence to moral sensibilities of an ordinary kind. On the aesthetic level, the fatal illumination of elect perceptions diverts action and language into a fragile course of uncanny or whimsical poignancy, thus establishing a precarious unease that needs to be heeded if narrative lines of suggestion are to be comprehended at all. Concerned with the limits of meaning, Heble writes: “Like the other instances I have been considering, this example enables us to consider meanings which are not simply *present* at the moment of utterance. By telling us what she *would have done* had circumstances been other than they are at present, she engages in a discourse of absent and potential meanings” (125–126). What Heble speaks of amounts to extensive, quantitative “possibilities” and “alternative versions” (128). He argues that absence of connection becomes “both a theme and an important part of Munro’s narrative method” (130). I see other types of connections based on analogy and pure succession. The use of modality typical for Munro presents a quantum moment where each possibility is likely, but where the event itself distinguishes that which simply is from that which occurs.

Phenomenological Origins

Personal fate was not the point anyway.

—Alice Munro. “Chance”

The way to deal with the problem of ‘subjectivity,’ that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience—or so you think of it when still a child, ‘I am falling in love’, ‘I am feeling this or that emotion, or thinking that or the other thought’—into something much larger: growing up is after all only understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares. (13)

—Doris Lessing. *The Golden Notebook*

In this study, the choice of phenomenological method serves to exploit phenomenology as a philosophy that wishes to “understand how the object of experience constitutes itself in a continuum, and how the manner of this constitution is prescribed to it” (Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* 69). The object’s self-actualization is prior to the theoretically posited ‘opposition’ between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ between ‘consciousness’ and world.³⁰ The study is thus not a *psychology* of constitution. As Wolfgang Iser remarks, the “process” of aesthetic materializations is thus not to be viewed in terms of “interaction” but of “formation” as the insight not only of experience but also of the means whereby it develops (133–134). It involves reader and text as a shared awareness of a re-constitution of something always already there.³¹ Finding truth in the work of art is similar to acknowledging this insight as the opening of a possible meaning. Accordingly, aesthetic experience entails an immanent immersion in which the constitution (the self-actualization) of the work of art is re-constituted. Munro’s fiction is peculiarly susceptible to phenomenology and its interest in constitution on account of the sustained preoccupation with possibility. Constitution’s possibilities are *felt* in Munro’s stories.

Following Natanson, we can understand what is decisive in Munro as a “phenomenological structure,” if by that we mean something unique, work-specific and valuable engendered by the constituting thrust of the text, rather than a view furnished by what might be called a ‘phenomenological approach’ to literature or to a literary work. For Natanson, phenomenology is

³⁰ In *Phenomenology and Literature*, Robert R. Magliola explains Husserl’s basic view that “since Descartes, thought and world have been falsely dichotomized, and that such a dichotomy results from regarding consciousness as self-enclosed (that is, as thought knowing itself, not knowing the outside). Consciousness is wrongly considered a faculty for being conscious instead of an act of being conscious” (4).

³¹ In a description of this sense of reflectivity between the text and its reader, Magdalene Redekop speaks of the Munro reader as someone who tends to “catch” himself or herself in the “in the act of looking” (*Mothers and Other Clowns* 3).

not outside the text as a theory one applies to it. This is why phenomenology works best when understood not as an analytic tool or procedure transcendent to the text but as an unknown “X” that is immanent to a specific text as something not strictly separable from it. Just as there are phenomena in a text, there is a ‘phenomenology’ in it. This is the immanent outlook that Natanson attributes to Edmund Husserl’s revolutionary thinking:

If it is phenomenology *in* literature which concerns us, then we can bypass definitions of phenomenology with a clear conscience because the phenomenology which is in literature is not the same creature as the phenomenology which is properly understood in work on phenomenology of literature, a paradigmatic example of which is Roman Ingarden’s *The Literary Work of Art*. I am not in competition with Ingarden. Rather, my interest lies in the manner in which a literary work, in *some* instances, may reveal a phenomenological structure which has been formed or shaped by the literary work in which it has been confined or in which it has lain immanent. The revealing of the phenomenological character of the literary work does not bring into being a new phenomenology, to be distinguished from Husserl’s version. Quite to the contrary, phenomenology in literature presents a different perspective or profile (Husserl’s term was ‘Abschattung’) of classical phenomenology. There are not two different phenomenologies here, nor are there two different versions of phenomenology. What I have called phenomenology in literature is isomorphic with the phenomenology created by Edmund Husserl. (*The Erotic Bird* 8–9)

In her foreword to Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird*, Judith Butler speaks of “the literature that converges with phenomenology” (xiii). Phenomenological structures are often literary structures, and vice versa.³² In calling attention to *epoché*, the move used by Husserl to avoid reductive intellectualizations, Butler highlights constitution as the primal field shared by literature and phenomenology in their common quest for that which flickers within seemingly ordinary processes of experienced existence: “For Natanson, *the literature that converges with phenomenology* is precisely that which enters the familiar only to illuminate its constitutive reality. Literary works that compel us to suspend our belief in the familiar through examples drawn from familiarity enact an *epoché*” (xiii; emphasis added).

The *epoché* was developed one hundred years ago to prevent the humanities from being ruled by scientific reification. Yet this effort to reduce

³² In a phenomenological investigation of Wallace Stevens’ poetry, Daniel Andersson has reached the same conclusion. “Though not identical, there are clear affinities between the phenomenologist’s perception of the phenomena and the phenomenological critic’s attitude toward the literary work” *The Nothing that Is: The Structure of Consciousness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (diss., Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2006) 49.

the killing-power of naturalistic outlooks, and to save the living phenomenon from objectification, did not entail a rush in the opposite direction—as if subjectivism is good and objectivism bad. In fact, subjectivism and psychologism are the villains of the drama, being the very source-points of objectifying procedures. Hence phenomenology does not ask us to turn away from the object and focus on consciousness, on psychology, or on experience, but to see *the object* in a light untouched by undue objectification. As K. P. Moritz points out, the object of art has assimilated aesthetic consciousness into itself—but this making-object is not a reification, rather an expansion of the object that makes it self-existent. “In contemplating the beautiful object [...] I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something which is completed, not in me, but in itself”; the phenomenon is an immanently inclusive affair that “constitutes a whole in itself.”³³

A reading of Munro’s stories that gives priority to unobjectified phenomena is phenomenological in limiting the authority not only of consciousness and subjectivity, but also of language. The concept of an all-important medium (language) is as impoverishing as the concept of an all-important agent (creator, subject). Since a text—especially an imaginative one—is complexly related to prelinguistic strata of consciousness, and since these are poignantly aroused in writing, reading, or text, it is pointless to hypostatize ‘language’ as a factor that in itself will shed uniquely essential light on the specific workings of a particular literary work.³⁴ Admittedly, Munro’s texts also reflect a postmodern tendency to problematize naming, meaning, and truth as elements entangled in language and narration. But this tendency does not seem to throw light on what is special and challenging in this particular artist’s idiosyncratic artefacts. E. D. Blodgett’s conception of Munro’s fiction actually turns away from a deconstructive conclusion. The presumed apriority of deferred difference is not to be seen as foundational.

Not only does discontinuity reflect the unexpected turns of the narrating mind, but it also displays its hesitancy to be sure of the truth it seeks and to assume it once discovered. Here, I think, is where the moral level of Munro’s fiction takes its rise, and why both discontinuity and her developed sense of focalization are more than literary strategies. Thus *différance*, that act by which difference is discerned and delay adopted, is not the kind of metaphysical *divertissement* that it appears to be among such postmodernists as Robert Kroetsch and Hubert Aquin. It is, rather, that gesture that is part of the act of determination. (136–137)

³³ Wolfgang Wittkowski, “The Concept of Autonomous Art and Literature within their Historical Context.” In *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. 33, 1991, 10.

³⁴ Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern, and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, 169.

Blodgett distinguishes Munro from other postmodern writers in terms of their ontological perspective and rightly stresses difference as a gesture of determination. I argue, however that if there is a “moral level” in the texts, it is less fixed, its force deriving from something wild and primal that Munro enlightens, rather than from a relativization of truth through a belief in the limit of linguistic representation. In Munro, morality derives primarily from values immanent to lightness, newness, detachment, neutrality, sameness, predetermination, and other phenomena that are actually and fully encountered in their unscathed, undeferred presence. Such phenomena do not present themselves in the stories as mere facts but materialize as entities basic to all that is actual and to all that is possible. They appear as the constituting, indubitable materials that give perceptible life to what I have called the possibility-space. As Heidegger indicates, such a clearing is a condition of possibility for access to the unknown. This access precedes us, its astonishment establishing life as a gigantic being-overwhelmed that is quite opposite to any real or felt deferral.

And yet—beyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know. (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 51)

The possibility-space is not randomly structureless, a mere field of abstract possibilities. This is why Heidegger speaks of the clearing’s openness in terms of “veiled destiny” (51). The work of art brings us into the primal opening where the constituting allure cannot be “reached,” for it is “not away from ‘what is’ but before it” (51). The artefact functions as a momentary laying-bare of constitutive forces—and itself becomes constitutive whenever it touches events, things, or lives that have momentarily merged with aprioristic energies. In so far as a phenomenological mode of explication seeks to ‘uncover’ the phenomenon, it patiently reviews the uncovering of primal constitutions already highlighted by the literary work. When Natanson remarks that the “point of our analysis is to suggest that the relationship between philosophy and literature can be reapproached by way of phenomenology,” and that “method here is not a device but a modality of comprehension,” he is indicating that the appearing of what appears is not brought about by us but by the phenomenon itself as it trembles illuminatively in the constituting shudder of its becoming-apparent (*The Erotic Bird* 64).

In Munro’s stories, we will see that constitution is typically *an event*. My elucidations of these events follow Badiou’s understanding of event as a constitution of *truth*. Truth in Badiou’s sense is not something static that exists as ideal in a transcendent realm. There is “no heaven of truths” be-

cause “a truth proceeds *in* the situation” (*Ethics* 42–43). The constitution of truth is by the same token the constitution of a (new) subject. A human being is “convoked by certain circumstances to *become* a subject,” meaning that “at a given moment, everything he is—his body, his abilities—is called upon to enable the passing of a truth along its path” (40). Whatever “convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for” (41). The extra that Badiou refers to is the event. It is that which is lifted out of the normal existence of multiple-being and infinite differences. If endless multiplicity is that which *is*, the event is that which happens and “compels us to decide a *new* way of being” (41). As we will see, the power of the event obliterates the human being as a figure shaping her or his destiny by means of her or his complete freedom of choice. It is the event itself that chooses. This circumstance is usually not actualized as a sense of enslavement in Munro, but as the indication of a possibility. Heidegger describes it as that ‘something’ “that gives us room and allows us to do something” (*On the Way to Language* 92–93.) It gives us a possibility. It gives what enables us. “‘Possibility’ so understood, as what enables, means something else and something more than mere opportunity” (93). In Munro’s fiction, I shall argue, possibility does not point to a fatal life-line governed by determinism but to a fatal exhilaration promoted by a possibility beyond the mechanical laws of cause and effect. As we shall see, events and changes do not ultimately arise as an effect of a given cause.

The sense of the fatal in Munro is related to what Jean Baudrillard calls a fatal strategy: “it is something unaccountable for itself, inescapable, but also indecipherable, *an immanent type of fatality*. It is something at the heart of the system, at the strategic core of the system, something like its point of inertia, its blind spot” (*Revenge of the Crystal* 17; emphasis added). The “blind spot” cannot be known or defined; it has to remain secret. A fatal strategy is expressive of the “ironic deviation of things from the finalities always prescribed by the subject” (17). Grant in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” is susceptible to this end point of a system that turns into its hidden possibility of change. He is on the verge of being unfaithful to his wife Fiona who has Alzheimer’s disease. Marian, the woman he thinks of making love to is married to Aubrey, also in a state of dementia. Fiona and Aubrey have become seriously attached to one another when living at the same nursing home. However, Marian has decided to take her husband home for financial reasons. Losing her new found friend, Fiona is devastated. In order to persuade Marian to bring Aubrey back to the nursing home, if only for visits, Grant goes to see Marian. This turns out to be the potential start of a love-affair. As Marian seems very reluctant to meet Grant’s request, he starts to think that their becoming lovers might make her change her mind. “It would be a challenge. A challenge and a creditable feat. Also a joke that could never be confided to anybody—to think that by his bad behavior he’d be doing good for Fiona” (*HFC* 320). This might be read as his selfish wish

to justify is behavior, but the story suggests otherwise as it reaches beyond this cynical interpretation. There is a point at the end of comprehension that he still touches upon. "He was not really capable of thinking about it" (320). How things will turn out remains unknown to Grant as well as to the reader. However, the outcome hovers in the story as its possibility. "You never quite knew how such things would turn out. You almost knew, but you could never be sure" (321). Grant's scheming is at the mercy of the actualization of his plans as they are set in motion in the event itself. From this viewpoint, the fatal event is not the result of a set of conditioning factors such as those posited by scientific determinism. It is not causally determined by an unbroken chain of prior occurrences. It is in the object's own refusal to be caught up in definitions that the possibility of an escape and a renewal is to be found. For Baudrillard, therefore, meaning or authenticity is not impossible or always deferred through necessities imposed by linguistic determinism. The event's poetic singularity is actualized by a radical uncertainty that is immanent to its own inexplicable strangeness. The event's self-actualizing nature is analogous to the eccentricity observed by physicists in the "quantum event" (Stapp, *Mind, Matter* 19). In several Munro stories, the uncalled-for opening of an awesome possibility-space is a textual 'quantum event.' Henry P. Stapp points out that in Heisenberg's and Dirac's quantum system, an entity is able to immanently and meaningfully constitute itself "without any reference to any external criterion of meaning" (194). As the "sustainability" of a possibility-space, an event is immanently engineered. It lasts because of itself, and it is what lasts because of itself. As nothing less than a total surprise, these events eradicate any prior distribution of probability. Commenting on "Royal Beatings" from *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Martin connects the protagonist's quite puzzling observations with the quandaries within atomic physics of the latest century. He writes about the complexity of meaning of the beatings of Rose:

The quality of Rose's mind and imagination is shown by her perception of these paradoxes in her experience; she is left with the un-Aristotelian but Yeatsian realisation that some things both can and cannot be, and especially that she can feel and behave in two or more ways that are logically inconsistent. Her own reactions bring her the surprises and puzzlements of the sort that atomic physicists have been faced with in the twentieth century. (11)

Martin leaves this connection undeveloped, but the continuing publication of Munro's stories show how these issues are a fundamental thematic thread within the dramas of her protagonists. It is the preoccupation with possibility as fatally occurring that is the topic of this thesis and that is best exhibited by groupings of the fiction in spatial rather than linear terms and that focus on distinctive elements. In "Romancing Fate: The Possibility of Love," the interplay of the real and the fictive is discussed as a background against which

the fatal might appear. This is most prominent in the stories that feature parallel stories of realism and literary dramas. “Tricks” invokes the Shakespearean dramas of mix-up, “The Albanian Virgin” a story of a romance, and “The Children Stay” Jean Anouilh’s play *Eurydice* based on the tragic myth of Orpheus. In the intertwining of the real and the fictional, I investigate the implications of art as the possibility of life. The following chapter, “Jolted into Lightness: Epiphany without Transcendence,” is devoted to experiences of revelation. I argue that Munro’s particular type of epiphany is similar to the phenomenological reduction. A strange sense of lightness and newness as moments of reconciliation will be explored against the background of the phenomenological concept of *epoché*. In “Dividing Moments: The Event as Rupture and Release,” I consider processes of knowledge and the constitution of a truth. Seemingly appearing out of nowhere, certainty appears as an absolute knowledge stemming from the situation itself. I discuss this predicament in the light of Alain Badiou’s theories of the truth event and descriptions of the quantum event by the American physicist Henry P. Stapp, known for his ongoing work in the foundations of quantum mechanics, and with particular focus on explicating the role and nature of consciousness. In the final chapter, “Clearing a Space for Sameness,” a startling sense of correspondence is shown to be at the heart of the constitution of meaning. Ultimately, this study provides an enlarged understanding of the phenomenon of possibility in the fiction of Alice Munro. It argues that possibility is not a mere proliferation of opportunities but something grounded in the constitution of events that carry the deepest value of truth for the characters.

2 Romancing Fate: The Possibility of Love

A time came when all the books in the Library in the Town Hall were not enough for me, I had to have my own. I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel. I picked on the Sherriff family to write it about; what had happened to them isolated them, splendidly, doomed them to fiction.

—Alice Munro. “Epilogue: The Photographer”

She hated to hear the word “escape” used about fiction. She once might have argued, not just playfully, that it was real life that was the escape. But real life had become too important to argue about.

—Alice Munro. “Free Radicals”

I begin my exposition of possibility-space in Munro’s short stories by reviewing fatal mechanisms in “Tricks,” a story based on an elusive rapport between the distinct but interpenetrating worlds of theatrical drama and everyday existence. For Robin, the plays she goes to see in the theatre materialize in a sphere of heightened existence that is sharply distinguished from her ordinary life, yet the phenomenal details of her routine existence are given a fatal sheen by what has been perceived in the playhouse. The lustrous synthesis of theatrical and normal reality possesses a fatal glow that does not derive from either of these. (The luminous role of a specific green dress is a function of this sheen, as we shall see.) Mystical traces left by aesthetic showings have lifted Robin to a new life-plane, one that suddenly opens as a possibility-space. The hours at the theatre

filled her with an assurance that the life she was going back to, which seemed so makeshift and unsatisfactory, was only temporary and could easily be put up with. And there was a radiance behind it, behind that life, behind everything, expressed by the sunlight seen through the train windows. The sunlight and long shadows on the summer fields, like the remains of the play in her head. (*R* 239)

The protagonist is aware of a feeling of elect participation. This electness belongs to the plays, to a world where the fate of this or that character is already decided beforehand, prior to the individual performance. There are “remains” of this state of affairs in the ordinary, unaesthetic, extratheatrical world (239). On her way home on the train, Robin savors what she has witnessed. The fixed domain of aesthetic foreordinations furnishes an “assurance” that appears on the hither side of the moving train-windows (i.e. in feeling), but also “behind” them in a faraway world that is somehow transformed into a radiant newness by what has been given (239).

When Robin goes to Stratford to see the love tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, she loses her purse. She finds herself without money and without a train ticket to carry her home. She happens to encounter a man on his everyday walk with his dog. A possibility opens up akin to a fated love. Robin’s misfortune seems to turn into her lucky fate, into a course of events that she has somehow been vaguely expecting. The general configuration of matters seems to shift away from misfortune. When it becomes apparent that the gentleman will be of assistance to Robin, and perhaps even more than that, she does “not even feel surprised” (242). Her readiness to reconcile herself with contingency presents itself as a fatal turn. The event of meeting the man who helps her seems to be decided by fate. Almost preternaturally, the stranger shares certain emotions that are taken to be rare—such as an adult’s ability to find train journeys to be mystical in quality. He views this sensation “as being quite natural and necessary” (243). Love’s destiny is before Robin as an untroubled but somehow enigmatic trajectory. “She was not worried. Afterwards she wondered about that” (243). Having spent the evening together, they kiss good-bye at the station and decide to test fate by meeting in the same way exactly a year later. As a sign to confirm the pact’s realization, Robin will make sure to put on the same green dress that she is currently wearing. The encounter has been the emergence of something enthrallingly inscrutable. “How had this happened, or not happened? She did not know” (248). Despite the general sense of chance, what is accidental does not seem to be reducible to coincidence. Fate’s potential is enigmatic, out of the individual’s control, yet at the same time perfectly unquestionable. “Now of necessity she and this man walked fairly close to each other and if they met someone their arms might brush together” (249–250). Life has not simply taken a turn where *romance* makes the slightest touch thrilling, for what gently brushes Robin’s heart is the sense of what makes a story compelling, namely the sustained impression of the inevitability of another *world*. “This talk felt more and more like an agreed-upon subterfuge, like a conventional screen for what was becoming more inevitable all the time, more necessary between them” (250–251). The fateful certainty that something has happened, “that something has changed” (253), makes Robin feel “chosen to be connected” to a “strange part of the world” (254). The circumstance that the man is a foreigner gives Robin reason to study obscure maps and history books. Facts and details are suddenly infused with an intense significance

and a realness that highlight Robin's existence. "She had *something* now to carry around with her all the time. She was aware of a shine on herself, on her body, on her voice and all her doings. *It* made her walk differently and smile for no reason and treat the patients with uncommon tenderness" (255; emphasis added). The substantiation of the fatal forces somehow invites the characters to believe that they can negotiate destiny.

Having externalized the inner workings of fate to the superstitiously reductive concept of the obligatory green dress, Robin loses heart when she discovers that it is not ready at the cleaners for the occasion of the crucial meeting. Temporarily devastated by her externalistic faith in material identity, she is forced to put on a different green robe. All the year while she has been waiting for this moment of reunion, she has "felt as if she had been chosen to be connected to that strange part of the world, chosen for a different sort of fate. Those were the words she used to herself. *Fate. Lover. Not boyfriend. Lover*" (254–255). But as she puts on a different green robe, fate slips from her in a confusion worthy of a Shakespearian comedy. Not knowing that the man she thinks she recognizes is her "lover's" twin brother, she interprets his hostility as punishment for wearing the wrong dress. A door is slammed in her face. The man was obviously not what he had pretended to be. "And she stood there, frozen, as if there was a possibility still that this might be a joke, a game" (259). The change that Robin expects her life to go through is dashed into nothingness. Left is "a piece of folly," a set of "dreary virginal dreams," a fabrication of "silly plans" (260).

The story then skips many years, and when we meet Robin again, she is a middle-aged spinster. She now works in a psychiatric ward. Her existence has been traversed by an intriguing alteration somehow not entirely disconnected from her adventures in Stratford. "Sometime after she came back from Stratford, not having seen *As You Like It*, she had begun to be drawn to this work. Something—though not what she was expecting—*had* changed her life" (265). If there is a pattern or meaning in her existence, it is not a classical destiny but a deranged one, resembling her patients and their bizarre fantasies. The insane inmate who believes himself to be the discoverer of DNA inadvertently furnishes a fitting image of the principle of fatal rupture governing the protagonist's life. Robin "always loves the part of the story where he describes how the spiral unzips and the two strands float apart. He shows her how, with such grace, such appreciative hands. Each strand setting out on *its appointed journey* to double itself *according to its own instructions*" (266; emphasis added). Here doubling is not a perpetual deferral in some deconstruction of truth. Instead, truth itself arrives in its complete presence—but as the duplication of existence produced by the compellation that "unzips" the natural order. In nature, DNA takes itself apart to constitute more of itself; but in the text, the compellation tears the possibility-space away from plot order of tragedy or comedy in order to leave the character gazing at a clearing that she cannot belong to. Although Robin will never belong to the clearing, having once upon a time mistaken

the man who slammed a door in her face for his twin brother (the man she loved), she can fully enjoy *its truth*. It is the clearing's possibility that is its reality and marvel, not the personal benefit that is derivable from its actualization.³⁵

Even now she can yearn for her chance. She is not going to spare a moment's gratitude for the trick that has been played. But she'll come round to being grateful for the discovery of it. That, at least—the discovery which leaves everything whole, right up to the moment of frivolous intervention. Leaves you outraged, but warmed from a distance, clear of shame. (268–269)

Even though a real door was closed, the possibility of love's fatality, precisely as possibility, takes on a vastness of feeling. It might seem tragic, but its revelation as a completed romance that might have come true is absolutely treasured. As classical tragedy ends in the recognition of destiny, this story embodies fate as possibility. The moment of being allowed to discern an intricate pattern of existence as a fatal clearing, hidden behind contingency's system of incongruous irregularities is itself a source of lasting hope. Such a sense of promise runs through the text as a factor that does not necessarily have to intersect with regular life.³⁶

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In "The Children Stay" the sense of the fatal rises out of a collision between a similar heightened anticipation of a dramatized destiny and the overpowering drama of real life itself. The protagonist, Pauline, occasionally escapes her life as housewife and mother of two children. She has been invited to act in a play. During a summer, rehearsals of Anouilh's *Eurydice* give Pauline partial release from her own unsatisfactory life that seems tediously purposeless. To her annoyance, she rarely has a real conversation with her husband, Brian. His instinct to turn communication into a comic play of words wears Pauline out as this behavior drains not only language but also their relationship of meaning. Left between them is "absurdity" or a "rubble" of exterior and senseless connections (*LG* 192, 195). In contrast to this life, Pauline is

³⁵ The parallel to disguises and misunderstandings in *As You Like It* is obvious in the story, but Shakespeare's *Rosalind* gets to be the director of the comedy. Where all "the world's a stage" she can set things right at the end. Munro's protagonist is at the mercy of the chance-like discovery of a drama that she cannot orchestrate.

³⁶ Similarly in "Simon's Luck," a woman unexpectedly comes across information about the death of her awaited lover. There is an acknowledgement of disarrangements that "throw the windows open on inappropriate unforgettable scenery. Simon's dying struck Rose as that kind of disarrangement. It was preposterous, it was unfair, that such a chunk of information should have been left out, and that Rose even at this late date could have thought herself the only person who could seriously lack power" (*WDY* 185).

drawn to an intrinsic and rudimentary sense of order. She is sensitive to “the floor of a tunnel under fir and cedar trees” during her serene morning walks. Filled with a purposeful integrity, these walks contain the same sort of promise of an existence more “important,” (188) as the play does. The myth of Orpheus with his poetic powers holding sway even in the Underworld trickles through all ontological levels of the story. His charm strengthened by love is the power that conditions Eurydice’s return to life. Such powers seem to be at work in the story of Pauline too, but they will take a different turn, as we will see.

The archaic level of meaning of the myth is re-awakened in the elevated sense of the hours in the rehearsal room, with “the concentration, the sharp exchanges, the sweating and tension,” that spills over into ordinary life in much the same way as the Shakespeare plays in “Tricks.” What would normally be considered a quite unexciting walk to buy coffee for the crew is now remarkably enjoyable. Pauline “felt as if she had become an urban person, someone detached and solitary, who lived in the glare of an important dream” (188). To have been especially set apart, chosen for a role in a drama, seems to affect all levels of Pauline’s existence to a point where she is no longer connected to her past life but subject to foreign forces overtaking her reveries. The sense of electness that permeates Pauline’s thoughts is present even in “the taste of the coffee, its scalding bitterness, and the fact that it was chosen by nearly everybody in preference to a fresher-tasting and maybe more healthful drink out of the cooler seemed satisfying to her” (189). The senseless choice of a drink that does not tally with the environment is a promise of a meaningfulness that belongs to another order. This choice without an apparent grounding or reason has similarities to the way the director casts his crew. Pauline, not even an amateur actress, is chosen “out of the blue” (190). When the play is being organized, Jeffrey’s unconventional vision of how the characters fit into the play borders on being mystical, but Pauline is aware of a structure that formalizes itself in the presence of Jeffrey. What “he sees in” them “is something only he can see” (196). His way of looking deviates from the deadly gaze of Orpheus which sends Eurydice back into the underworld. Jeffrey’s look awakens possibilities not yet seen. The actors are ready to accept this, and especially Pauline is drawn to Jeffrey’s self-sustained world-view where things “could be, but might not be, a coincidence” (187). The indication that things do not just happen or fail to happen by chance-like motions but by intrinsic forces in the structure itself runs through the whole narrative, and the determinism that seems to surround certain characters’ choices, is infused with fragility. The fact that the attraction between Jeffrey and Pauline will culminate in love-making after each rehearsal is not grounded in an absolute certainty of the righteousness of their behavior.

Jeffrey crossed the room and bolted the door. Every time, this was like a *new* decision, which he had to make. Until it was done, she wouldn’t

look at him. The sound of the bolt being pushed into place, the ominous or fatalistic sound of the metal hitting metal, gave her a localized shock of capitulation. But she didn't make a move, she waited for him to come back to her with the whole story of the afternoon's labor draining out of his face, the expression of matter-of-fact and customary disappointment cleared away, replaced by the live energy she always found surprising. (190; emphasis added)

That Pauline leaves the actual choice-making to Jeffrey does not mean that she resigns herself to a male initiative, but rather that she awaits the vitality of the compellation that derives its force from a pure possibility. Their love-making is always preceded by a "new decision" that is unfettered by anything that has passed before. As the act takes place, its cause is nothing but the electrical charge of the eventual forces of their encounter. In Munro's stories, this physical charge is a sign of holiness. It can be clearly seen already in *Lives of Girls and Women*. When Del meets her lover Garnet in "Baptizing," sex is described as a "surrender—not the woman's to the man but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith" (*LGW* 204). The body no longer belongs to the self, but is subject to its own sensuousness. In opposition to this unanchored intimacy, Pauline's life with Brian is tied to a world of family relations where everything is predictable. Brian "wanted Pauline to be connected, he wanted the children to be connected, to his own childhood—he wanted these holidays to be linked to holidays of his childhood with their lucky or unlucky weather [...]. He wanted pictures from this summer to be taken, and fitted into his mother's album, a continuation of all the other pictures that he groaned at the mention of" (*LG* 195).³⁷ As repetitive copies of years, the photos are representative of a safeguarding of the past against life's disruptive moments. The monotony lulls them into a state of deadening familiarity. The life he guards and strives for is a tiresome replication of his parents' that utterly disappoints Pauline. At the annual family vacation, she is inclined to slide out of Brian's reach and to steal time to be by herself (183). The illicit possibility-space that opens itself for Pauline in the form of sanctioned moments to practice her lines is a wooing³⁸ of the parts of her life where she can feel that life-energizing current stirred by Jeffery.

³⁷ The same type of drift from familiar connections to connections in spheres that seem far away is at work in "The Moons of Jupiter" too where the protagonist feels an affinity to the movements of the solar system, and in "The Albanian Virgin" that will be discussed below. There, the characters feel a closeness to the lives of literary figures of the past.

³⁸ In "Miles City, Montana" this word is used to describe a distinction between a surface life and a heeding to the undercurrents of that life. The protagonist in this story often seemed to be "looking for a place to hide" from all regular duties that a housewife might have (*LG* 88). She "wanted to hide" so that she could get busy at what she calls her "real work," which "was a sort of wooing of distant parts of" herself (88).

For some time Pauline has been able to separate her family life from her existence with Jeffrey, but when these hitherto parallel worlds start to intrude upon each other, she will be forced to make choices. Having once declined Jeffrey's invitation to meet him outside of rehearsal hours, she wonders if she has made "a great mistake" since the invitation seemed "to mean something more," taking on larger, less material dimensions" (202). Even though Pauline somehow knows that Jeffrey is part of a possibility-space outgrowing everything that Pauline has ever felt before, she still tries to find external signs that will support her choice. When he calls her a second time at the holiday resort where she finds herself with her family, the bulletin board beside the telephone emphatically announces: "YOUR LIFE IS IN YOUR HANDS. PALMS AND CARDS READ. REASONABLE AND ACCURATE" (205). As signs seem to point in a certain direction, Pauline is unable to resist Jeffrey's invitation. Now, the decision to meet her lover is accompanied by a surprising ease and simplicity. Even Brian's reaction to the news is shockingly consenting. Considered to be "the strangest thing of all things that day" his controlled voice "seemed to draw on a supply of fatalism or foreknowledge that went far beyond that necessity" (205). In the wake of somehow realizing that this was what was anticipated of her, she connects her actions to human destiny. By placing herself in a line of famous adulteresses in the history of literature and simultaneously seeing it as something that can happen to anybody, Pauline stakes her particularity: "What she was doing would be what she had heard about and read about. It was what Anna Karenina had done and what Madame Bovary had wanted to do. It was what a teacher at Brian's school had done, with the school secretary" (207).³⁹ The infusion of fictive and real characters is neither a glorification nor a trivialisation of her deed; instead it places the character in a state of true existential agony. If adultery is a recurrent theme in the history of literature and the history of women, how is Pauline's life uniquely hers? In a narratological distancing from the mind of the character, the certainty and truth value of her affair is being scrutinized. "Different in kind. That was what Pauline must believe now—that there was this major difference in lives or in marriages or unions between people. That some of them had a necessity, a fatefulness, about them that others did not have" (208). Can she believe this? The protagonist herself is led to resort to a necessity and particularity that is shown to be nothing more spectacular than the spon-

³⁹ Struggling to answer the question of what art means existentially to us, Alan Paskow arrives at the conclusion that both real and fictional persons are not simply "out there," "quite independent of us and now and then impinging on our lives, any more than things exist in this way. Our relatedness to them is much more ontologically intimate than that" (94). He claims "that we see them as 'alternative selves,' characters in the drama of our lives who exhibit to and for us various ways of defining the purpose of human existence as well as our own individual existence" (94). In order to grasp what our being ultimately can mean to us we are touched by the fates of fictional persons. The beings of our attention "touch us not just once in a while and as figures in a passing adventure, but always, necessarily, and *essentially*" (94).

taneous circulation of autonomous systems. With Jeffrey, “there is a stripping away” and “feelings she doesn’t have to strive for but only give in to like breathing or dying” (210). Making love to Jeffrey comes naturally to her. At this moment, he is as essential to Pauline as her basic rhythm of inhaling and exhaling air. However, this naturalness clashes with the extensive implications of adultery that are brought to light by a severe narrative retrospection. “Pauline would not have known what she was talking about” (208). The nature of certain experiences can obviously not be anticipated.

In the existential trouble she is conscious of in warranting her affair and her choice to break with her family, she has not really counted on the specificity of her fate to strike her down, and the narrative indicates that the character is naively unaware. The seriousness and the implications of the “fluid choice, the choice of fantasy” that is poured out on the ground and instantly hardens,” “that takes its undeniable shape,” will recklessly pull everything into its merciless concreteness (212). Pauline, who has broken all “connection” with what would be considered her real life, and who has “cut herself off from all the large solid acquisitions” is left to nothing else but the workings of the event itself (206). When Jeffery starts making future plans for them, it dawns on Pauline—somehow against her own intentions—that there is no return for her. She looked

at him just in the blank way you’d look at somebody the moment that an earthquake started. She was ready to tell him all the reasons why this was not possible, she still thought she was going to tell him that, but her life was coming adrift in that moment. To go back would be like tying a sack over her head. (209)

As retreat is not an option for her, she starts to understand the dimensions of her actions. She can no longer reflect upon her life through anything else but “what she has done,” and it “would be enough, it would be the whole thing” (207). Exposed to what follows in the wake of her decision, she will be hit by the fatal forces of the event itself. “Something is coming now. A truck. But not just a truck—there’s a large bleak fact coming at her. And it has not arrived out of nowhere—it’s been waiting, cruelly nudging at her ever since she woke up, or even all night” (211). Realizing that everything in her former life, even the children, will somehow be left behind, Pauline will suffer the painful reality of not being able to split her life in two. The fact that the children will not be following her into the vitalizing possibility-space materialized as a life with Jeffery shockingly appears as an excruciating clash between love and reality. Undeniable “like a round cold stone in her gullet, like a cannonball” this fact “would remain there unless she changed her mind entirely. The children stay” (212). The momentary assurance of a love affair is contrasted with the permanent connection of caring for her children. Pauline suffers the acute pain of leaving her children behind. She is trapped by a choice she cannot really make, but she is no longer trapped in “married

complicity” nor will she be doomed to death like a mythological figure (210). Her realistic story deviates from a tragic drama where love is perfect somewhere “outside of ordinary life” (197). As the dramatic events of her real life overtake all romantic notions of love, the play becomes just a reflection against which she can measure the full-blown sensations of her own feelings. The compulsion has violently plunged Pauline back into the world where full measure is given to her agonies and sufferings, but also to her rebellions. As her life is redefined through the drama she is allowed to play a part in, she will redefine the play through her reality. The story is reflected through the light of Orphée’s “problem with love or reality” where he on purpose or by an act of fate sends Eurydice back to the underworld (197). Pauline refuses to let any man play that part. Sentenced or released to her own life, she will suffer or enjoy whatever it has in store for her. Many years later when her children are grown up, and she is talking to her daughter, Caitlin, she does not turn towards a “possible” present or future, but grieves for all past “possible” connections. The double negation in the answer to her daughter’s request about whom she ran away with places her in a zone of passed possibilities. “‘It was somebody else connected to the play. That I lived with for a while.’ ‘Not Orphée.’ ‘No. Never him.’” (214). There was no Orphée for Pauline, but this does not mean that there was no love. The sparseness of the ending turns the reader back into the story itself where nothing was perfect but moments of happiness still a possibility both in married life and in passion. Eurydice’s monologue from Anouilh’s play about the difficulty in accepting one’s “happiness” echoes through myth, drama and story as an encased wisdom difficult to unravel (199).⁴⁰

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The embedding of fictive worlds is even more poignant in the richly-layered narrative texture of “The Albanian Virgin.” The historical romance of Lottar, captured by mountain people in Albania, is until the end framed by the more realistic story of Claire, the bookstore owner in Victoria who has fled another part of the country and the turmoil of a love affair. Charlotte is an eccentric customer who comes every now and then to Claire’s bookstore. While recovering from an illness, she tells the story of Lottar. Each time Claire comes to visit at the hospital, Charlotte continues the shaping of a narrative into what she believes will make a good movie script. The overarching structure and theme recalls *One Thousand and One Nights* with the frame-story of Scheherazade who cheats time by infinite story-telling, and the frame-plot in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* where a group of young people escaping the

⁴⁰ For a full tracing of the intertextual ties to Anouilh’s *Eurydice* see “Recasting the Orpheus Myth: Alice Munro’s ‘The Children Stay’ and Jean Anouilh’s *Eurydice*” in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 66, 1998 (191-203).

plague in Florence spend their days telling each other stories.⁴¹ But Munro's incremental telling raises the never-resolved mystery of whether Charlotte and Lottar are in fact the same figure. Dislodging her miserable hospital sojourn by "putting the time to very good use," Charlotte transfigures time and space (*OS* 86). The "terrible place" of the sickroom that she feels one "must just try [one's] best to put up with" is altered into a marvelous fictive space within the fiction itself (86). However, instead of presenting a hierarchical structure of layers of narratives, the story invites us to attend the shading of one story into another and the shading of one character into another much in the same way as Claire organizes her books in the store. As books arrive, she sets them up

so that Political Science could shade into Philosophy and Philosophy into Religion without a harsh break, so that compatible poets could nestle together, the arrangement of the shelves of books—I believed—reflecting a more or less natural ambling of the mind, in which treasures new and forgotten might be continually surfacing. (105)

Claire's notion of a literary osmosis is descriptive of the correlation between the different narratives and also significant for the presentation of how different characters come to parallel each other.

What gives rise to both Lottar's and Claire's altered existences is a flight from predictable circumstances and from lives that threaten to be either "bleak and trivial" (111), or chokingly convenient. The "loathing" that Lottar feels towards the "middle-aged people" she is travelling with rises out of their paradoxical worry "about being in strange places" (84). Their reluctance to expose themselves to the country or the new place is, Lottar seems to feel, not truly travelling but only a switching of scenery for what is just a commodified version of their dull home lives. As opposed to these people's inability to see beyond convenience, Lottar is sensitive to the actuality of the climate, the rain and the chill. At the intense feeling of "disappointment" in the restricted environment of the organized journey where a 'suing' man might have "been summoned from England to meet her", Lottar's life diverges in two (84). The thought of getting back on the boat returning home without having really seen any of the historical sites that hold the stories of the country is not attractive to her.

In the morning she would have to get back on the boat with them or they would make a fuss. She would never take the road over the

⁴¹ Coral Ann Howells is also reminded of Scheherazade in her reading of Munro's "A Wilderness Station" from the same collection *Open Secrets*. She interprets the protagonist's madness "as a conscious policy of resistance to male authority and violence, where storytelling is her prime survival strategy. Annie becomes a Scheherazade figure [...]" (Howells 128).

mountains to Cetinge, Montenegro's capital city—they had been told that it was not wise. She would never see the bell tower where the heads of Turks used to hang, or the plane tree under which the Poet-Prince held audience with the people. (84)

Imagining an enticing scenario that she fears she would not become part of makes her decide on a little detour where she can still think “she must turn back soon. She would have breakfast with her companions” (85). The detour is doubly a romantic courting of fate and a risk-taking. Her anticipation of something more in her life opens up a space where something might actually happen. The irruption caused by an unanticipated blood feud, as her guide is shot, is a momentary clashing of two worlds where Lottar is somehow drawn into the other by necessity. The mountain people thought “she would turn her horse around and fly back down the mountain road, back to Bar” (83). However, the fragility of the situation steers things in another direction. As she falls off her horse and is wounded, “they had no choice but to carry her with them” (83). In the space between decisions, circumstances and necessities, Lottar's new existence shapes itself without subjective interference. Disconnected from anything that could position her in a world, she is left in a pure location of presence without any external ties to hold her identity. There is no passport to track her, and no family that would start searching for her. “Nobody back in Canada would think of investigating” (85). In that clearing of being close to death and being closed off from everything that under normal circumstances is attached to her life, following her destiny is the only thing she can do. “When she was being carried through the pine forest, she awoke and found herself suspended, lulled—in spite of the pain and perhaps because of the *raki*—into a disbelieving surrender” (85). She gives in to the only thing that will keep her alive, the possibility of the charity of these people and sharing a life with them.

Recalling “the strange place” that Lottar's travel partners feared and the compelling, somehow poetic, allure of the historical vistas felt by Lottar in Trieste, we oddly enter a similar precinct in Victoria. Claire, who's fighting to make a living out of her recently opened bookstore, is emotionally immune to the hardships of being poor. She is “underfed and shivering” but her feelings are at odds with her dreary reality (106). “But I was not despondent. I had made a desperate change in my life, and in spite of the regrets I suffered every day, I was proud of that, I felt as if I had finally come out into the world in a new, true skin” (106). The ontological difference that Claire feels has its source in a correspondence between her felt existence and the life nerve of that existence. Here she can hold sway without aiming for something else than just being, that which is the condition of possibility for her whole existence. While sitting in the store waiting for customers she reads “but without purpose or involvement” (106). The “peculiar state” that Claire gives herself up to while reading “stray sentences from the books that she had always meant to read” echoes Lottar's emotions when she wakes up

in her hotel room and listens to the rain outside and is drawn to nothing else but the beauty of the monuments themselves. Just as the monuments are exotically poetic, the sentences are so “elusive and lovely” that Claire detaches some of them from “all the surrounding words” and remains in their promising spell (106). Claire does not escape reality but enters into a zone of heightened reality where she “was alert and dreamy, closed off from all particular people but conscious all the time of the city itself—which seemed *a strange place*” (106; emphasis added). Closed off from a world where she would have to juggle ordinary relationships, she is attuned to the more basic movements of the city itself. In the somewhat reduced state that Claire finds herself in, she seems to be more alive. At a place where friendships could seem “both intimate and uncertain,” real possibilities may arise (85). For Claire “survival began to seem possible” (108). The message that the town gets across to her: “*Not much doing*” is in reverse to her vitality (107). As her business is not thriving, her life in its new freedom is. The usual market-oriented concept of a commercial enterprise that would eventually lead to not having to work at all is of no interest to Claire. She sees her occupation in the store as something much closer to her living and as an expression of her life. She imagines a “hope of being sheltered there” in a place that grows out of the sense of occupying a space in the world. In such a place her life could find a reason as nothing other than just plain living. She recognizes how shops for some people might be “what a cabin in the woods might be to somebody else—a refuge and a justification,” (107) a slender strip of a far reaching freedom. This brings us back to Lottar who in order to escape an arranged marriage with a man she has never met takes the vow to become a “Virgin.” Beyond “a beech wood,” Lottar goes to live in a “small stone shelter, a primitive place with no window, a low doorway and no door, a corner hearth without a chimney” (97).⁴² Although the place is restricted in physical space, the character’s sense of freedom is not. Seen to be one of the men,

⁴² In the June 25, 2008 issue of *The New York Times*, the long tradition of women taking an oath of virginity in order to take on the role of men, carry weapon, own property and move freely is described as dying off in a country that changes into a modern society of sexual equality. For centuries, in the closed-off and conservative society of rural northern Albania, swapping genders was considered a practical solution for a family with a shortage of men. The tradition of the sworn virgin can be traced to the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini, a code of conduct passed on orally among the clans of northern Albania for more than 500 years. Under the Kanun, the role of a woman is severely circumscribed: taking care of children and maintain the home. For some the choice of becoming virgin was a way for a woman to assert her autonomy or to avoid an arranged marriage. “Stripping off their sexuality by pledging to remain virgins was a way for these women in a male-dominated, segregated society to engage in public life,” says Linda Gusia, a professor of gender studies at the University of Pristina, in Kosovo. The virgins interviewed in the article indicate how living as a man has allowed them freedom denied other women.

Lottar's life is no longer occupied with the constant work and duties of women. She is left to come and go as she likes. The androgynous state that Lottar enters as a woman dressed in men's clothes allows her to sit with the men. She gets to listen to their talk and jokes that she could never have done had she remained a regular woman. She can now also resume a certain closeness to the Franciscan, the man she developed an intimacy with at the time of her healing. In this unstrained company of a somewhat impersonal sharing of anecdotes and pleasantries, Lottar thinks of happiness. She believes that the Franciscan "was happy. As they all were, as she, too, was permitted to be, in their presence and in his, though he paid no attention to her" (100). While not being in the centre of affection or affects, Lottar and the men can be free to be claimed by feeling. They do not search for happiness, it comes to them.

The affective freedom felt when feeling is not connected to an ego or a psyche that necessarily has to be a cause or have a cause for the feeling to arise is analogous to a closeness one might feel to a literary character or his or her inventor. There is an intimacy of a shared but impersonal feeling that might strike deeper because there is no personal bond that interrupts feeling's directed force. Alan Paskow earlier reminded us of how deeply we might be touched by the fate of such a person. The thesis that Claire has left behind, as she ran off to Victoria, "was supposed to be on Mary Shelley's later novels" (111). However, it is the life of Mary and Percy Shelley with all its intricate corruption of love affairs that interests Claire. One of the women who is connected to the couple and joins them on their honeymoon to chase after Byron is pointed out for the reason of being Claire's namesake. This somewhat banal circumstance adds to the sense that Claire in some ways occupies the same ontological level as these historical people, or even stranger that she is prior to them since the woman is pointed out as having taken Claire's own name (112).

In addition, Charlotte turns up in the bookstore and casually prattles about Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller. She feels she knows them all. "Not personally. Well—personally. Yes, personally. What other way is there to know them? I mean, I haven't met them, face-to-face. But in their books? Surely that's what they intend? I know them. I know them to the point where they bore me. Just like anybody you know" (116). In this crossover of fictive characters, historically real literary people, and intimate friendships, the word "personal" comes to imply a nonchalant but somehow serious *spending-time-with* as opposed to a type of serious psychological mapping. It is suggestive that this rather down to earth alliance would be worth more than a psychological prying. The anti-psychological stance is also the attitude Charlotte adopts in her friendship with Claire. Having been invited for dinner, Claire now hoped for "explanations" and "personal revelations" (120). She looked forward to an opportunity to tell her story about how she was married to Donald and cheated on him with Nelson so that they can wallow in possible interpretations. Charlotte, however, refrains from all such "exchange"

(121). She simply does not operate in this manner. Her character is “self-mocking, gently malicious,” and “unquenchable,” but more importantly her and her husband’s manners are mesmerizingly exotic and strangely out of character. Occupying space in much the same way as vagrants, without more discernible ambitions than to somehow earn a living, they are also repeatedly reinstated in an ambiance of make-believe. They “were both wearing things that might have been discards from a costume box,” (117) and Charlotte is draped in “a garment that looked as if it belonged, or had once belonged, on the stage” (115). Drawing attention to their fictive persona invites a reading of Charlotte and Gjurdhi as trans-figures moving freely between fictional worlds and paradoxically launching them as potentially real. As a name Lot-tar is not all that distinct from Charlotte, but what at first seems to be a play with the elusiveness of literary dimensions reveals upon further reflection a much more complex relation. The implicit connections between stories and characters seduce us by their possibility of revealing more and of meaning something personally. However, Claire warns against the danger of being “impeded by literature” (112). Her refraining from discussing the connections between her passionate affair with Nelson and literary legends of passion shows her reluctance to draw “some sort of comfort or inspiration from this mishmash of love and despair and treachery and self-dramatizing” (112). It seems as if it is real life that is at stake. Claire’s crucial question to Charlotte about the idea of the story of the Albanian virgin receives an indistinct but thought-provoking answer. The story originates from “life” (125). As the interplay between the fictive and the real denies ontological borders, the one showing a large influence on the other, the impact that fiction and fictional characters may have on anyone’s life, takes a double turn in Munro’s fiction where real life presents a drama as powerful as the fictions it reflects and measures itself against.⁴³ Claire experiences precisely this in her passion for Nelson. “There was no bleakness or triviality about it, only ruthlessness and clarity of desire, and sparkling deception” (111). The eventual tide of love in which they are momentarily captured might be fragile, but it is certainly present and therefore to be seen as possible. “Nelson seemed gloomy but relieved, and if I felt that short shrift had been given to the notion of love as a capturing tide, a glorious and harrowing event, I knew better than to show

⁴³ The same confluence of drama and real life can be seen in “Carried Away,” where a painful break with a lover drives the protagonist to take a travelling job. “Her last letter had been firm and stoical, and some consciousness of herself as a heroine of love’s tragedy went with her around the country as she hauled her display cases up and down the stairs of small hotels and talked about Paris styles and said that her sample hats were bewitching, and drank her solitary glass of wine. If she’d had anybody to tell, though, she would have laughed at just that notion. She would have said love was all hocus-pocus, a deception, and she believed that. But at the prospect she still felt a hush, a flutter along the nerves, a bowing down of sense, a flagrant prostration” (*OS* 9-10). Though determinedly sober and realistic about love and its impact, Louisa cannot refrain from feeling the pull of the possibility of destined love. She has in fact already given in to it.

it” (113). Since Nelson seems insensitive to the overpowering forces of the compellation, Claire withdraws into an almost total denial of them too. Somehow unable to tolerate life as a banal opportunity to simply get married again, she leaves both men while desperately thinking what “nonsense it is to suppose one man so different from another when all that life really boils down to is getting a decent cup of coffee and room to stretch out in?” (113). In the bleakness of the trivial act of changing one life from another, the man she thought she knew has returned to be just one among others, a stranger in a crowd that has no claim on her anymore. The choice of living her life devoid of sex parallels Lottar’s virginal state. Marriage or sex without love is seen as a bleak alternative to being free, but the story seems to suggest that there is no total mutual exclusion.

Even as the romantic Hollywood⁴⁴ ending of the Lottar story is unrealistic and distinct from Claire’s life, the osmotic workings of love and destiny have allowed her to remain in an existence that has been hopefully stable. When Charlotte, as the link to the story disappears, love as fate becomes improbable too. It no longer assures her. Freedom and destiny come to stand in opposition. “The change in the apartment building seemed to have some message for me. It was about vanishing. [...] they had vanished” (126). The promise of Charlotte’s and Gjurdhi’s love is now out of sight, and it leaves Claire in a state of overwhelming openness.

I had lost my bearings. I had to get back to the store so my clerk could go home, but I felt as if I could as easily walk another way, just anyway at all. My connection was in danger—that was all. Sometimes our connection is frayed, it is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn’t we rather have a destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days? (127)

Here, the possibility-space grows so vast that nothing seems possible anymore. In this state of destitution, Claire slips into the act of de-romancing fate. Nothing else but her own realistic life is at stake. However, seen as a space for possibilities, as there “is always in this life something to discover” (128), it seems to summon the unlikely event of Nelson appearing. “For this really was Nelson, come to claim me. Or at least to accost me, and see what would happen” (127). Claire’s hackneyed imagining of her life with Nelson in the quite ordinary difficulties and joys of married people, as opposed to the Hollywood-like ending of the romance where the couple is assumed to live happily ever after, stresses the fact that the end is just a beginning. The ambiguous meaning of the word accost, implying a careful gratitude and a

⁴⁴ In Peter Gzowski’s interview that followed the publication of *Open Secrets*, Munro refers to the story of Lottar as an improbable Hollywood movie romance that is in a way the ultimate love story (*Morningside*. September 30, 1994. CBC Archives).

clear-sighted dread points to an infinite fullness in the characters' lives. The story of Lottar ends with her call for the Franciscan's return, but as both couples hover in layers of the fictive and the real, their story might also continue partly in the story just read and partly in their vanishing somewhere else. The intricate temporal weaving of the stories circling around each other in an endless movement simply denies an end. Charlotte repeatedly utters how that "part [the end] is not of interest" (109, 124). The story turns in order to reveal that perhaps there are no "definite endings" (115). Among the trivialities, clichés and repetitions in life there are infinite possibilities and what we have seen as a balancing act between realism and romance love seems to be one too.⁴⁵ The anti-end throws the reader back into the story's spaces of possibilities where the characters' lives are allowed to disappear in holes of un-narrated implications, layers that can only be guessed at (124).

⁴⁵ Chekhov's famous story of the illicit affair, "The Lady with the Dog" is relevant to the conception that true love is a tricky matter. Whether Gurov truly loves Anna Sergeyevna or whether it is only a romantic fantasy that he wishes to maintain seems impossible to decide, because what the story displays is that there is no way to distinguish between the two. As in the "The Albanian Virgin," the ending of the story recognizes that the romantic end is just the beginning of something else. "And they both realized that the end was still far, far away, and that the hardest, the most complicated part was only just beginning" (Chekhov 235).

3 Jolted into Lightness: Epiphany without Transcendence

Munro's sense of the fatal moves away from destiny as a tragic or happy end-point. In fact, her stories do not present a traditional revelation as the end of a story. In Eleanor Wachtel's 1991 interview, Munro phrases a cancellation of a regular closure. "I want the story to keep going on. I want the story to exist somewhere so that in a way it's still happening, or happening over and over again. I don't want it to be shut up in the book and put away—oh well, that's what happened."⁴⁶ The epiphanic moment that is still present in Munro's fiction and that Wachtel aptly names a "moment of accidental clarity" is of a specific order. It may evaporate, change or lead to the emergence of something utterly startling, entailing a dramatic renewal of sentiment and thought. When exploring Munro's stories as narrative structures, James Carscallen argues that "these structures crystallize around epiphanies" (8). I would like to develop his discussion of the central epiphany in order to modify it. As dazzling eruptions of the familiar, significant moments in Munro are not exactly epiphanies if by that we mean a total revelation or realization of a predicament's deepest meaning. Instead, epiphany, as tied to the fatal, crystallizes in moments that circumvent the characters' choices and predictions.

The aperception of fatality is not necessarily ominous or depressing. It is often indistinguishable from a sensation of improbable happiness and lightness. This can be clearly seen in early stories such as "Bardon Bus," where the typical sidestepping of the commonsense world constitutes an intriguing release. Here, spatially disconnected from their past lives, a man and a woman meet on a work trip to Australia. For the protagonist/narrator, being in Australia ought to be quite exotic, but for some reason everything is "remarkably familiar" (*MJ* 112). A distinction is set up between naturalistic and fatal familiarity. The latter "was not oppressive but delightful" (113). There is "a slight strangeness to it, as if we had come by it in a way we didn't understand" (113). Here incomprehensibility is no cause for distress; on the contrary, it somehow reassures the protagonist. They experience "a

⁴⁶ Eleanor Wachtel. "An Interview with Alice Munro." *Brick* 40 (1991), 52.

holiday of lightness of spirit” and she does not have the “feeling of being at loose ends” (113). As the roads of the lovers’ lives diverge—she going back to Canada, and he joining his wife in India—the affair ends. Having returned home, the narrator/protagonist is in the distressing state of both wanting to memorize their meeting and trying to get over it. The seemingly irrational behavior of the woman she shares an apartment with intensifies the protagonist’s appreciation for that which is unexpected, and she enters a domain where loss of control may constitute a general insouciance. The “rare” privilege of being jolted into the joys of “lightness” (127) is made possible by sequences in which the operative components do not have the feel of being connected. “The Turkey Season” speaks of such “unlikely” sensations as things seemingly unconnected to “real life” (69). A “cold snap” in the weather, involving a “series of hard, clear mornings” (68), may itself be conducive to the special lightness. What is “hard” and “clear” in the morning air is not the *cause* of the releasing rarity but is itself what is rare and special. What is bright, inexplicable and unexpected materializes as self-existent. “What Avails” from *Friend of My Youth* speaks of the phenomenon in question as something that somehow comes to “lodge” in the mind (*FY* 212). As a gift given to consciousness, such a “hard crystal” is not a psychological component having the feel of *belonging* to conscious life as one of its psychic acts—but is rather acknowledged as “a strange, small, light-refracting object, a bit of alien treasure” (*FY* 212). In “Bardon Bus,” such a lustrous mind-gem may be some rhyme or poetic line that “conforms” to nothing whatsoever in the subject’s aesthetic preferences or on-going thought processes (*MJ* 122). Puzzled by her own mental meanderings, strangely detached from her own knowable identity, the suddenly “lighthearted” protagonist finds that the ‘alien treasure’ does “not accord” with her current mood, yet she does “not stop to wonder” what the incongruously materializing poem is “doing” in her “head in the first place” (122).

The “alien treasure” that can appear in isolation as a single “hard crystal” (*FY* 212) or as a “series” of “hard” clearings (*MJ* 68) can also totalize its richness into a comprehensive but still alien *field* of unexpectedness. Due to the recurring accentuation of moments of irruption or initiation in Munro’s writing, there is a quasi-religious feel to segments of discourse where an entire plane of release is exhibited. A type of enlightenment is at hand, but seems more like a Buddhist eradication of delusion where “misplacement” might still be a “clue,” (128). Seeing this, protagonists momentarily belong to another sphere. In “Bardon Bus,” the “stagy” but “real” field into which the amorous subject is lifted by means of infatuation’s compellation is a dreamy stratum where love does not need to be “serious” in order to be “fatal,” and where one can become a “spectacle” in the banal sense of being ludicrous (126), but also in the sense of belonging to a visionary sphere ruled by a transforming principle of “lightness”:

I have had a pleasant dream that seems far away from my waking state. X and I and some other people I didn't know or can't remember were wearing innocent athletic underwear outfits, which changed at some point into gauzy bright white clothes, and these turned out to be not just clothes but our substances, our flesh and bones and in a sense our souls. Embraces took place which started out with the usual urgency but were transformed, by the lightness and sweetness of our substance, into a rare state of content. (127)

Here lightness lies close to the 'sovereignty' that materializes in endgames where the stakes no longer matter, and where the ascendancy of fate over reason is often accompanied by 'sovereign' laughter.⁴⁷ There is a tension here between being deadly serious and totally carefree.⁴⁸ Here the new fatal order of things is uncreated, "far away" from the creative urges of will, mind and libidinal "urgency." Phenomena turn "out" to constitute in a specific fashion once the process of transfiguration reaches a certain "point." The fatal figure—"X"—is always "somewhere in the vicinity," the compellation having made extension limitless by means of its dreamy cancellation (127). Without becoming Platonic and ideal, rejecting the world as a source for knowledge, the subject becomes as insubstantial as the phenomena giving it pleasure.

The compellation is a source of enjoyments and knowing even when love fails to become reciprocal. In fact reciprocation might prematurely terminate its spell (128). The relinquishing of hope is capable of augmenting the lightness, of thematizing its reality into a clearly discernible fact of life.

A lick of pain, furtive, darting up where you don't expect it. Then a *lightness*. The *lightness* is something to think about. It isn't just relief. There's a queer kind of pleasure in it, not a self-wounding or malicious pleasure, *nothing personal at all*. It's an *uncalled-for* pleasure in seeing how the design wouldn't fit and the structure wouldn't stand, a pleasure in taking into account, all over again, everything that is contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating about life. (127–128; emphasis added)

⁴⁷ In Bataille's understanding of the 'sovereign' subject, she can be conscious but unknowing, giving priority to nothing else but the present moment (203). Sovereignty is in the domain of the useless where the future has no meaning. As a self-sufficient activity performed for its own sake, it is transgressive rather than obedient.

⁴⁸ Magdalene Redekop reads "Bardon Bus" in terms of irony (*Mothers and Other Clowns*, 13–14). In the context of the image with the Madonna and the child, Redekop comes to the conclusion that what "we notice at the end of "Bardon Bus" is the silence of the narrator who is struggling to repress her own sexual appetite. Her lust for life competes with her implicit yearning to be in the place described by [her woman friend], the place of the Madonna" (14). What Redekop does not discuss is a more deep-going stratum where subjective appetite and yearning are dissolved.

Selfhood, the human being as person, is no longer important. The yoke of what one has wished for, struggled for, or worked to organize falls away in the realization of the impossibility of cognition's total control. Here the falling apart of order gives way to a sanctified feeling. The exhilaration is dependent on a total reduction of a personal wish, will, or effort. Being relieved of the burden of trying to reconcile her life with her longings, the protagonist experiences a shift of values. Somewhat detached, she can take pleasure in seeing the complexities of her life and not having to control them. With her "new definitions of luck" she can now truly enjoy the simplicity of just drinking a cup of coffee watching people pass by (128). A reduction is involved in the character's release of her need to orchestrate the totality of her life. Her life returns to her at the moment when she no longer anticipates it.

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In "Fits," similarly, the letting go of happiness as personal achievement makes way for a felicity that is unmeritoriously given. Limitation of knowledge, reduced perspective, and plainness of life promote a rudimentary assurance inducing felicitous laughter. In this story a man has killed his wife and then shot himself. Unsurprisingly, the appalled and puzzled citizens engage in small-town gossip and speculation. Peg, the couple's neighbor, who has discovered the obscene crime, becomes the focus of people's attention. The ensuing investigation is side-tracked by the community's perception of what is taken to be Peg's strange, unnatural, or even inhuman behavior. Her 'mistake' is that she only presents facts, and is extremely unforthcoming about the incident itself. Although she is normally a reserved woman, this pronounced reticence seems an insult to the people around her. They cannot understand why she does not reveal any feelings. Peg smiles "as she would smile in the store when she gave you your change—a quick transactional smile, nothing personal" (PL 108–109). Like the narrator, Peg is cool. She lets surface appearances speak even in private and intimate conversations (129). Phenomena themselves hint at what may lie hidden. This is indicated in the account of the way Peg's husband perceives the world. The sense of existence—as something one passively witnesses as frozen into lines, silences, acts, and patterns that have already fully materialized when one arrives upon the scene—is so full of the excitement of discovery that additional contributions of a personal kind seem superfluous and even irrelevant. Like a story, life is fatal—for its script, with all its formality and irrevocable precision, is already in place.

He was hungry from his work in the cold air, and aware of the brilliance of the day, with the snow on the fields looking *sculpted*, dazzling, as *permanent* as *marble*. He had the sense he had fairly often in Gilmore,

the sense of walking onto an informal *stage*, where a rambling, agreeable play was in progress. And he *knew his lines*—or knew, at least, that his improvisations *would not fail*. His whole life in Gilmore sometimes seemed to have this quality, but if he ever tried to describe it that way, it would sound as if it was an artificial life, something contrived, not entirely serious. And the very opposite was true. (117; emphasis added)

While the citizens succumb to speculation and uninhibited forms of fanciful deduction, Peg stubbornly refrains from explanatory conjectures. She points out that she “hardly knew” the couple; no one knew “if they had a fight” (125). Peg discards explanatory factors that might be transcendent to the scene. Robert is torn between fascination for his wife’s detachment and the unbearability of ignorance. Unable to gain satisfaction in the explanations given, he finds himself suspended in a nightmarishly uncertainizing limbo, yearning for resolution and release. “If he could have believed one of them, hung on to it, it would have been as if something had taken its claws out of his chest and permitted him to breathe” (119–120). To get away Robert goes out for a walk in the winter landscape. Narratologically, the walk is broken up by an account of a quarrel that he had with his former mistress before marrying Peg. This turns out to be not just any bickering, but an extraordinary moment of candidness that will decide life’s succession.

All of a sudden, the argument split open—Robert couldn’t remember how, but it split open, and they found themselves saying the cruellest things to each other that they could imagine. Their voices changed from the raised pitch and speed of argument, and they spoke quietly with a subtle loathing. (127)

The malevolent spirit of the argument is uncalled for. They *find* themselves taking pleasure in saying these things in this particular manner. “They trembled with murderous pleasure, with the excitement of saying what could never be retracted [...]” (128). The discourse, which they come to speak, seems to arise from nowhere, like Peg’s transactional smile, and as it develops a life of its own, without and almost against the free consent of their personal willpower, it gathers momentum so as to unravel truths emerging slightly to the side of the lips uttering them:

“This is the first time we’ve spoken the truth since we’ve known each other!” For even things that came to them more or less on the spur of the moment seemed the most urgent truths that had been hardening for a long time and pushing to get out. (128)

Strangely, the truth materializing in the eventual turbulence brings release. What counts is not the meaning or directedness of affects, but their priority. “They laughed in recognition of their extremity, just as they might have

laughed at another time, in the middle of quite different, astoundingly tender declarations” (128). At other times, the situation might be the opposite. The sense of something urging to push itself to the surface is exchanged for the sense of something carrying one past it. In the small town of Gilmore, a sprinkling of snow has transformed the world into a place where everything suddenly seems unusually distinct and slightly magical. It is in the landscape of this shift that Robert regains a sense of life’s certainty. The feeling that you “could walk over the snowy fields as if you were walking on cement” and that the snow is “hard and easy to walk on” is likewise the sensation of having access to an elevated plane of unfailing lightness (127). This might be a thin surface that will carry one past “obstruction” (108). The snow’s smoothness exhibits a serenity that is akin to his wife’s common body-movements, a serenity now uncovered in the strange glamour of renewal. Peg’s household tasks now belong to a quiet choreography in which the world is intensified in its simple realness.

She was preparing an ordinary meal, listening to the boys in her usual mildly censorious but unruffled way. The only thing more apparent than usual to Robert was her gracefulness, *lightness*, quickness, and ease around the kitchen. Her tone to her sons, under its severity, seemed shockingly serene. (124; emphasis added)

The lightness that is latent in snow and body-movement is accentuated by the fatal event’s compelling energies, turning gracefulness into grace. An almost imperceptible but gigantic intensification of the phenomenal world signals a complete renewal of life. What matters is no longer right and wrong, correctness and incorrectness, but the mercy that lies in renewal itself, in the universe understood as *pure* possibility-space. This space is also where unpredictable fits of all kinds may occur at any time, something Peg already seems to know about from a former marriage. As Robert finally arrives at a description suitable for the horrible event, likening it to “an earthquake or a volcano,” a “fit” that people as well as the earth can take, Peg is overtaken by feeling (126). She “looked dried out, chalky, her outlines fixed in steady, helpless, unapologetic pain” (126). The emotional depth that surfaces leaves the subject powerless in the face of the feeling that strictly speaking holds her together. Peg is nothing but feeling. When Robert comes to realize that Peg’s report on the room of death is deliberately faulty, he is released from a natural world that is no longer of importance. The detail that does not fit gives way to a moment of clarity that bypasses any simplistic explanation of the murder-suicide and restricts itself to Robert’s own seeing.

It had nothing to do with him. One discrepancy, one detail—one lie—that would *never have anything to do with him.*

Walking on this magic surface, he did not grow tired. He grew *lighter*, if anything. He was taking himself farther and farther away from town,

although for a while he didn't realize this. In the clear air, the lights of Gilmore were *so bright* they seemed only half a field away, instead of half a mile, then a mile and a half, then two miles. Very fine flakes of snow, fine as dust, and *glittering*, lay on the crust that held him. There was a *glitter*, too, around the branches of the trees and bushes that he was getting closer to. It wasn't like the casing around twigs and delicate branches that an ice storm leaves. It was as if the wood *itself had altered* and begun to *sparkle*. (130, emphasis added)

The alteration that Robert witnesses runs parallel to a feeling that frees him from any urge to explain the mystery of the shocking deaths. He no longer needs to psychologize his wife's lack of emotional outburst, or to solve a moral dilemma. The fatal event is left intact as treasured enigma.⁴⁹ It belongs to a moment of knowing in the sense that it reorients all that was known before. By permitting the unreasonable circumstances of the fatal event, Robert gains access to the certainizing sensation of an enigma's possibilities. Incertitude becomes the certitude of a possibility-space. Truth no longer pertains to a quest for adequate knowledge or moral satisfaction.⁵⁰

The moment of renewal is not really to be understood as an insight that empowers a subject, but rather as a shift that regenerates by leaving the subject aside. What we see is not an epiphany in the sense of a revelation of anything transcendent, but a sudden apprehension of what is important in life.⁵¹ In the shedding of personhood, assurance no longer stands in need of any acquisition of knowledge. Robert succumbs to an alteration devoid of any importance attached to him as a person. The huge intensification of the phenomenal world made evident by regeneration's allowance for unlimited renewal and unlimited possibility is almost too much for the subject—and Robert accordingly laughs off the unsettling depth of the granted vision as something that is reducible to a banal, underlying stratum of trite facts (“nothing but old wrecks,” 131). Yet, as in the case of the shot man whose

⁴⁹ As Baudrillard rightly points out, seduction is enigmatic rather than mysterious. A mystery is unintelligible whereas an enigma is fully intelligible but inexplicable (*Fatal Strategies* 107).

⁵⁰ In James Joyce's “The Dead,” it is Gretta's revelation of a secret that gives way to Gabriel's unselfish, tender feelings of love. The grandeur of Gretta's narrative makes Gabriel understand his own minor importance. His new knowledge balances “his riot of emotions” (*Dubliners* 222). However, in Munro's stories it is the clarification of the existence of an enigma that works as a balance spring against the extremes of emotion. This is something that also Deborah Bowen attests to in her article “In Camera: The Developed Photographs of Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro” (26).

⁵¹ In *The Modernist Short Story*, Dominic Head critiques the prevailing epiphany principle within short story theory for its tendency to simplify (21). However, as he criticizes attempts at close-readings of the stories, he opts for a historical, contextual description of the stories as mere practices of literary devices. I would argue that epiphany has to do with the encapsulating of and dealing with the complexities and dilemmas exposed in the story. To me there is nothing simple about the process of exploring this principle neither on the part of the writer nor on the part of the critic.

body lies “partways” in another room on account of “the force of the shot” that had thrown him backward (131), the new universe introduced by the fatal event is not “like anything” we know, any more than it looks “like anything” we see (130). What is seen is something that side-tracks simile, something of an altogether “new kind” (130). The new order matches nothing previously real or known. In fact, the components internal to the new possibility-space are even internally “unmatched” (130). What is given is exactly what is given to the senses; yet the senses cannot themselves exactly know what is being made possible as given and what is being given as possible.

He was getting quite close to a large woodlot. He was crossing a long slanting shelf of snow, with the trees ahead and to one side of him. Over there, to the side, something caught his eye. There was a new kind of glitter under the trees. A congestion of shapes, with black holes in them, and unmatched arms or petals reaching up to the lower branches of the trees. He headed toward these shapes, but whatever they were did not become clear. They did not look like anything he knew. They did not look like anything.... (130)

The fact that the shapes are nothing but old cars covered in snow does not alter the sense of lightness. The knowledge that Robert has received is not an extension of a factual repertoire, but redirects every known item so as to release him into a possibility-space where telling Peg about his mistake promises to carry his marriage over into a renewed stage.

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The sense of lightness runs through Munro’s stories in a way that overtakes chronology. We may compare the disaster-rejoicing in “Fits” with the exhilaration over an impending flood shown in the earlier story “The Found Boat.” Here a similar “fit” but of laughter occurs without seeming cause. A whole town momentarily dwells in the “vague hope of disaster” (*SMT* 125). The constitution of possibility is enhanced by catastrophe’s turbulent energies. Feeling the infectious adventurousness of the flood and imaginatively exhilarated by the sight of floating debris, Eve and Carol suddenly see that the unexpected discovery of a damaged boat opens the possibility of playing some tricks on nearby boys. “Their idea came to them without consultation, at the same time” (127). The boat is a gateway to a possibility-space. To the surprise of the girls, the boys immediately appreciate the possible reality of this new space, seeing its potential. Looking at the poor state of the boat, they do “not show a moment’s disappointment,” (127). The girls are somehow taken off guard by the boys’ capacity to perceive the boat as possibility rather than impossibility. It is as if it “had been whole, and new” (127). By way of a surprising reconciliation, hostility has suddenly turned into a pact, a

secret bond. The emergence of sensuality, especially between Eve and Clayton, involves a sense of electness but also of impersonality.

She stirred the tar as it softened. *She felt privileged.* Then and later. Before she went to sleep, a picture of Clayton came to her mind; she saw him sitting astride the boat, tar-painting, with such concentration, delicacy, absorption. She thought of him speaking to her, out of his isolation, in such an ordinary peaceful taking-for-granted voice. (131; emphasis added)

A certain awe is discernible in the imagined liaison, yet it is not personal, remaining intrinsic to the plain reality of the event.

After a game of 'Truth or Dare,' an audacious stripping takes place. Here all world-context vanishes—and although the event signals outrageous novelty and deviation, there is no transgression of simple present moment. In the reduction effected by the stripping, what is aglow is the immanent remainder: boat, water, light, bodies, directedness. Nothing has been added; instead phenomena appear as such, swift and instant aiming at nothing beyond the flow of immanent sensation:

Nobody said a word this time, they all bent and stripped themselves. Eva, naked first, started running across the field, and then all the others ran, all five of them running bare through the knee-high hot grass, running towards the river. Not caring now about being caught but in fact leaping and yelling to call attention to themselves, if there was anybody to hear or see. They felt as if they were going to jump off a cliff and fly. They felt that something was happening to them different from anything that had happened before, and it had to do with the boat, the water, the sunlight, the dark ruined station, and each other. They thought of each other now hardly as names or people, but as echoing shrieks, reflections, all bold and white and loud and scandalous, and as fast as arrows. They went running without a break into the cold water and when it came almost to the tops of their legs they fell on it and swam. It stopped their noise. Silence, amazement, came over them in a rush. They dipped and floated and separated, sleek as mink. (135)

The event infuses the children with an enthralling empowerment. The lightness and the smoothness have their source in the quiddity of the situation. Intuitive anticipation of the next move is almost synchronous with its materialization. There is a strange accordance between doer and deed, as if each act precedes personal knowledge of it. The possibility of denying the reality of the whole episode (in case of adult concern) is as carefree as the stripping itself. As there was no anticipatory caution, there is now no retrospective sentimentality, regret, or nostalgia.

'What if they tell?' said Carol.

'We'll say it's all a lie.'

Eva hadn't thought of this solution until she said it, but as soon as she did she felt almost light-hearted again. The ease and scornfulness of it did make them both giggle, and slapping themselves and splashing out of the water they set about developing one of those fits of laughter.... (136–137)

Effortlessly, the solution is already there, lacking both a subject planning ahead as well as any sense of anxiety. The hilariousness of the moment is the outcome of a compulsion's irresistible drive. When it has run its course, one can only laugh at the paradoxical freedom it has momentarily made available.

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As we follow the phenomena of lightness into the similar patterns that are discoverable in "Oranges and Apples," it is important to observe the role played by reduction in the characters' sense of freedom. Possibility-lines are also reduction-lines: one possibility-space makes possible a reduction that neutralizes or conceals another. The fatal juxtaposition of possibility-lines is evident in "Oranges and Apples," where Murray comes to notice a boulder "with a line through it" (*FY* 133–134).⁵² The fault line is an image of the type of doubling we see in the stories examined throughout this study. Discovering this rock near the shore, Murray perceives the way it is "folded, as well as split" (134). Like the lives of the protagonists in "Oranges and Apples," the boulder has "been split diagonally and the halves fitted together again not quite accurately" (134). I read this phenomenon as doubling rather than displacement, for what is decisive in the stories is not that one thing no longer fits the structure it belonged to, but that *fitting goes on in a new mode*. As the just quoted line confirms, "the halves fitted together again." This is what is uncanny and disturbing in this type of story—not at all that things no longer fit, but that they do. As we will see in "Post and Beam" in the conclusion, Lorna's life fits almost perfectly into its previous mould, but on account of the regeneration produced by Polly's 'return' from the dead, the substance of everything has been transfigured⁵³ into selfsameness. It is the

⁵² Possibility hidden in a boulder occurs also in "The Stone in the Field," where it figures as a grave stone marking the "mystery" of Mr. Black's life, "one you have to think twice about regretting" (*MJ* 35).

⁵³ "Substance" here means what something is in itself. A hat's shape is not the hat itself, nor is its color the hat, nor is its size, nor its softness to the touch, nor anything else about it perceptible to the senses. The hat itself (the "substance") has the shape, the color, the size, the

same Polly, the same Lionel, the same marriage, the same children, the same life—yet completely different, completely new. What the fatal event shows is not renewal through displacement or transcendence, but regeneration through nothing-at-all, through a re-perception of selfsameness in which the ordinary is reborn. Nothing here hinges on difference, but rather on non-difference. What remains (Polly, the family, ordinary life) was there before, but has passed by means of a crossing of possibility-lines into an invisible transfiguration.

In the crossing, there is no entanglement. For Murray, as for Lorna, the possibility-lines have simply intersected so that everything—quite alarmingly—is as before, though “not quite accurately” (*FY* 134). In both cases, the transfiguration involves an event that permits things to “turn ugly”; something sinister in the universe has doubtlessly been “stirred up from the bottom” (134). But that foulness also brings along with it a refreshing of old orders, the creation of a completely new light. A streak of pure “malevolence” unleashes a priceless but frightening beauty that, without its “poisoning” capacity, would never have been exhibited (134)—just as Murray’s wife, Barbara, and their friend, Victor, would not have enthralled Murray had they not been “splendid” as well as “disturbing” (114).

The clashing of possibility-lines that I am calling attention to—their ability to cross by means of fatal constitution—presupposes a sensitivity in reader and character to in/difference rather than difference. In a world of freedom, choice rules by mean of the laws of difference or contrasting options; but in a world of fatal constitutions crisscrossing each other, choice gives way to its impossibility. Here the law has been surpassed, everything in a sense is absolutely arbitrary, totally wide open. This state of affairs is made highly explicit in the build-up of “Oranges and Apples,” where the “game of choices” called ‘Oranges and Apples,’ invented by Barbara “to keep the children occupied on car trips” (123), is being played also by the adults. In this game there are neither losers nor winners, neither right nor wrong choices. Instead, a certain perverse elation is produced in the act of bringing about a capitulation in the face of options that are on a par by being equally attractive, equally disgusting, or equally absurd.⁵⁴

softness and the other appearances, but is distinct from them. While the appearances are perceptible to the senses, the substance is not.

⁵⁴ In “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink,” Edgar and Sam immerse themselves in an equally absurd game of choices. Triggering each others sexual imaginations, almost unthinkable partners and situations appear. “What would you do to Shirley, or Doris, Sam asked Edgar, and quickly passed on, in a spirit of strangely mixed ridicule and excitement, to ask him what he would do to other girls and women, more and more unlikely, caught where they couldn’t defend themselves. [...] The grotesque nature of certain choices excited them more than the grace and prettiness of girls who were officially admired” (*PL* 144).

The really hard choices could be between two things you liked very much or two things you disliked very much or between things that were for some reason almost impossible to compare. There was no way to win. The pleasure was in thinking up tormenting choices or in being tormented by them, and the end came only when somebody cried “I give up. I can’t stand it. It is too stupid. I don’t want to think about it anymore!” ...

Would you sooner dive into a cool lake on a blistering hot day or enter a warm kitchen where there is fresh bread baking after you’ve walked through a bog in a snowstorm? (123)

Here it is evident that surrender is tied to reduction. The player is reduced to non-choice, to giving up. Like Lorna in “Post and Beam” who resigns to the overpowering forces of the non-event of Polly’s death, the player gives in to the absurdity of the rules of the game. The game becomes a compellation in which one becomes obsessed by the pleasure of finding oneself trapped into an escalation of torment. As the game gathers momentum, the ever-returning freedom of choice becomes increasingly difficult to cope with, each ‘choice’ being in fact an alluring dead-end that reduces consciousness to absolute indecision. But this impossibility-space (the one governed by the impossibility to choose) is also a possibility-space. The game would not be played if it did not provide a clearing, if it did not supply a playing field that is nowhere else to be found. The event of being fatally drawn into a narrowing field of sensible choices is by the same token the event of being released into the ugly joy of a malevolent momentum. The climax is the moment of defeat—the secret sensation of gratuitous victory when one quietly rejoices at having been part of the relentless drive that has been heading all along for the seeming disaster of surrender. The important thing is that the self is being captured by the event. There is no mastery of circumstances. When Murray, in a moment of self-pity, recollects a childhood fight, the paradoxes of victory and defeat are on display.

As a child, Murray had seldom got into fights. He was diplomatic and good-humored. But eventually he had been in a fight and had been knocked to the ground of the Walley school-yard, knocked out, probably, for half a minute. He lay on his back in a daze, and saw the leaves on a bough above him turn into birds—black, then bright as the sun poked through and the wind stirred them. He was knocked into a free, breezy space where every shape was light and changeable and he himself the same. He lay there and thought, *It’s happened to me.* (132)

More than being struck by his opponent, Murray is struck by something in the situation that elevates him. He comes to belong to the truth of the situa-

tion.⁵⁵ Released from self-pity by an event strong enough to puncture egoism, personhood is reduced to the dizzying light traversing it.

Once these mechanisms have been understood, it does not take long to see that the whole story is based on their paradoxes. When Murray has discovered, or thinks he has discovered, that Barbara is being visibly unfaithful to him, a thin fault line is discernible in his world—one that has a striking resemblance to the diagonal line fracturing the boulder he later begins to examine. What is essential, however, is that this thin line is not the constitution of a rupture. What it brings to view is selfsameness. “He drove around the back streets of Walley and over a railway crossing, out into the country. *Everything looked as usual* and yet like a spiteful imitation of itself” (127; emphasis added). Murray’s new life does not begin to look like something different, like a transcendent mode of otherness; it begins to look *like itself*. This *looking-like-itself* phenomenon is a source of beauty—as in the case of the boulder that is noticeably “beautiful” as a trace of the Precambrian shield precisely by sporting “a line through it,” enhancing its massive splendor (133–134). Phenomenologically, a scar draws attention to the underlying intactness it has marked out as worthy of special attention.⁵⁶ Barbara, who is lying glossy and strapless in her black bathing suit, becomes an object of beauty in Murray’s eyes—not really because Murray’s dubious rival may be looking lecherously at her through his distant binoculars, nor really because Barbara may be self-consciously exposing her physical assets to this onlooker’s admiration, but rather because it is the *same* Barbara, the very woman he knows, or thought he knew. This frightening proximity between the known and the unknown (or unknowable) Barbara is marked by the words “slightly” and “slight:”

She was lying on her back with her arms loose at her sides....He saw her lift one arm, to shield her eyes. Then she lifted her hips, she changed her position *slightly*. The movement *might have been seen as entirely natural*, casual—one of those nearly involuntary adjustments that our bodies make. What told Murray that it wasn’t? Some pause or deliberateness, a self-consciousness, about that *slight* swelling and settling of the flesh made it clear to him—a man who knew this woman’s

⁵⁵ Badiou: “Let us say that what we can know of him is entirely engaged in what took place, that there is, materially, nothing other than this referent of a knowledge, but that all this is taken up in the immanent break of a truth-process, such that, belonging both to his own situation (political, scientific, artistic, amorous...) and to the truth that *becomes*, ‘some-one’ is internally and imperceptibly *riven*, or punctured, by this truth that ‘passes’ through that *known* multiple that he is” (*Ethics* 46).

⁵⁶ As Lilian Alweiss points out, we “need to remember that the task of the phenomenological reduction is to make manifest that which usually remains hidden. Phenomenology is not a return to a *logical* beginning that needs to be thought, but a return to the things themselves as they show themselves” (43–44).

body—that the woman wasn't alone. In her thoughts, at least, she wasn't alone. (126; emphasis added)

An erotic transformation seems to materialize when Barbara receives the attentions of Victor looking at her through his binoculars from a third-floor apartment window, but this shift is so “slight” that it could pass off as “entirely natural.” It could indeed be argued that much, if not all, of the upheaval—transfiguring bodily presence is a function of the double magnification furnished by Murray using his binoculars to spy on the man who has trained his binoculars on the woman in her corset-like bathing suit:

When he looked at Victor through the binoculars, he saw a face like his own—a face partly hidden by binoculars. Victor had them, too. Victor was looking through binoculars at Barbara.

It appeared that he was naked...Murray could feel the heat of the room and the sweat-slicked hard seat of the chair and the man's powerful but controlled and concentrated excitement. And looking at Barbara he could feel the glow along the surface of her body, the energy all collected at the skin, as she gave herself up to this assault. She lay not quite still—there was a constant ripple passing over her, with little turns and twitches. Stirrings, shiftings. It was *unbearable* to watch. In the presence of her child in the middle of the day, in her own back yard, she lay on the grass inviting him. Promising—no, she was already providing—the most exquisite cooperation. It was obscene and enthralling and *unbearable*. (126–127; emphasis added)

We see here that insupportableness is intoxicating (“enthralling and unbearable”). It is “enthralling” not to be able to bear something—for then one is no longer the one who needs to bear, but someone else, someone new, like Lionel in “Post and Beam,” who “preferred things to be utterly bewildering and past bearing, yet ironically, even merrily, borne” (*HFC* 195). This new figure is no one different from the familiar person, any more than a man with binoculars would be an altogether different creature. But the binoculars are emblematic of the alteration they have helped institute, the fatal reduction. Binoculars present a double set of rims, as does the double sunset that can be seen in Walley by anyone rushing up the seventy-eight steps of the Sunset Steps from the beach: “The idea is that if you run very quickly from the bottom to the top of the steps you can see the last arc of the sun disappear a second time” (*FY* 133). Binoculars provide a double arc of vision through which the sighted object is magnified, but also excised, reductively removing everything peripheral to the selected focus. When two men “partly hidden by binoculars” (126) have subjected themselves to the same species of tunnel-vision, one of them binocularly spying on the other's binocular spying, the sense of reduction and tunneling is hugely magnified. It would seem that one man's disaster (the unfaithfulness of his wife) is the other man's

delight (the illicit visual pleasure taken in another man's woman), but by sharing the binocular mode of being, the two men inadvertently join forces, in the lens-plus-lens manner of binoculars. Accordingly, reduction in "Oranges and Apples" is a bi-reduction, a generalized narrowing of the world to a jubilantly reduplicated "disaster" (127). "Daily life continued, ringed by *disaster* as by a *jubilant* line of fire" (127; emphasis added).

Here the line, or arc ("last arc of the sun"; 133), is a circle encircling all that is. As a "line of fire," it is a ring ("ringed") around "daily life," the very horizon of on-going human existence. The ring does not disclose a different universe, for as we have seen, everything "looked as usual" (127). As a *surface*, the jubilant disaster's possibility-line is a "glow," a "constant ripple" that keeps "passing" over the body of that which is intoxicatingly unbearable to see (127).

This line that more or less invisibly keeps the innocent Barbara distinct from the one causing all the jubilant disaster is not separating her into two different beings, any more than the world appearing as a "spiteful imitation of itself" is a world other than the "usual" one Murray finds himself in (127). The "ripple" that has become a constant on the surface of Barbara's body is an oscillation whose "stirrings" and "shiftings" keep the old and the new in cohesion (127)—just like the Precambrian "waves" that "folded" primeval magma into the rock of the magnificent boulder (134). This melding of the jubilant disaster's newness into the daily life of all that is familiar becomes apparent in Murray's collaboration with the event's fatal momentum. Instead of resisting its dangerous allure, he cooperates, much as Barbara has been said to exhibit an "exquisite cooperation" with Victor's intrusive voyeurism (127).

What we now see in clear evidence is the fatal compellation as such in its full sway. Murray is not simply attracted to the binoculars-triggered reduction of life to an "unbearable" but intoxicating "imitation of itself" (127); he is *compelled* to that reduction. Murray no longer has the ability to choose—any more than the participants in the game of 'Oranges and Apples' finally had the ability to make sensible choices. In fact, the fatal compellation is so overwhelmingly rigorous that Murray finds himself obeying it as an actor obeys the lines and stage directions of a script:

Murray could see himself—a man with binoculars watching a man with binoculars watching a woman. A scene from a movie....

He watched the glimmer of her blouse until it vanished, and then he walked all through the house very quickly, taking noisy breaths. He stopped in the bedroom and picked up the clothes she had taken off. Her jeans and shorts and sweater. He held them up to his face and smelled them and thought, This is a play....

He went back to the kitchen. (*He stumbles into the kitchen.*) He poured himself half a tumbler of gin, without tonic or ice. (*He pours half a tumbler of gin.*) (127–132)

Munro has italicized the words needing to be taken as stage directions in order to set up the drama of a third-person affectivity (“He”; “He”) in which Murray discovers himself to be trapped in the fatal coursing of something like a “movie” or “play.” In the middle of such a theatrical or cinematographic performance, the actor—the one who imitates, the one who is here locked in a personal life’s “imitation of itself” (127)—cannot alter the course of things to come, since the script has already been written, imposing on the player *a possibility-line that has already been chosen for him or her*. What happens in the next scene, act, or instant has already been engraved in the drama’s temporality, just as the words a reader of a short story is about to read, *if the story-line is lineally, faithfully, and obediently followed*, are not selected by her or him, but are simply waiting ‘out there’ to be encountered. Just as few readers of a literary text would feel inhibited or restricted by the act of lineally following its pre-set row of words, Murray does not feel depressed by the on-going compellation’s possibility-line. Like the reader of a specific piece of fiction, or like the actor in a specific play, he is enthralled by the hypnosis of a possibility-space that is already finished before he arrives on the scene—and in which he participates as an appalled but collaboratively aroused spectator. In the current possibility-space, possibility is much larger than ever before; but it is not *his* possibility-space, not anything governed by *his* set of plot-preferences or stage directions. There is probably no human agency doing the plotting and directing, for the momentum of the unfolding of presentations seems to be a mechanism rather than a human environment, something aesthetically or fatally pure. Accordingly, there is a sense of a preordination outside of the characters’ powers. As the words “perhaps” and “might” (indicating possibility) are subordinated to the reiterated word “would” (indicating compellation) that stands as their constituting source in the paragraph that boldly accentuates the stage directions for Murray’s life, the sense of a future is deprived of willpower and personal agency, the compellation’s power being the sole ruler of possibility-lines to come:

He had understood that there *would* be surprises.

He went back to the kitchen. (*He stumbles into the kitchen.*) He poured himself half a tumbler of gin, without tonic or ice. (*He pours half a tumbler of gin.*) He thought of further humiliations. His mother *would* get a new lease of life. She *would* take over the children. He and the children *would* move into his mother’s house. Or perhaps the children *would* move and he *would* remain here, drinking gin. Barbara and Victor might come to see him, wanting to be friends. They might establish a household and ask him over in the evenings, and he might go.

No. They *would* not think of him. They *would* banish the thought of him, they *would* go away. (132; emphasis added to “would”).

The word “would” points to a sense of inevitability. It materializes as a word that does not simply point to the future—to what is likely to happen—but to something that has *already* happened, namely to the compellation that is currently constituting time, already determining the bounds of its fatal coursing.

The fatal compellation’s precursory impulsion as a constituting force for all that is to happen to Murray belongs to a temporality similar to that of a stage direction. It is valid for *all* times, for *any* performance of this specific set of acts, for *every* staging of the sinister “comedy” that is being enacted (127). Hence the tense of the compellation’s (stage) direction (namely the present; “He *pours*”) stands in immediate contrast with the tense (namely the past) of the act itself (“He *poured*”). This juxtaposition of tenses does not point to a difference, that is, to an on-going discrepancy between the past and the present. What is indicated is the distinction between two conceptions (two constitutions) of the present, the distinction between the present and itself. In “Oranges and Apples,” the present is first the present as such; but secondly it is also a present belonging to a world that is an “imitation of itself” (127). This second being-present is the present’s own imitation of itself—the totally unreal but also totally compelling “He *stumbles* into the kitchen”; “He *pours* half a tumbler of gin” (132). Murray is doubly present in the present: he is present there (but by now only vaguely) as a human being in command of his actions and of his choices by means of free human will; but he is also there as a happy victim of the compellation. He feels “in all his trouble a terrible elation. He was being robbed. He was being freed of his life” (129).

The reduction is horrible, but its compellation is thrilling, enchanting, glorious, and absolute. At a first glance, it would seem that the collapse of Murray’s life-illusion establishes that disaster-scene as the shadow of his full, proper, intact existence. But in fact the reverse is true. It is his previous, un-disastrous life that is the shadow. The circumstance that he is being “robbed” of this disaster-less life is “terrible” (129)—but only in a superficial sense. For the victim of robbery here is the one who is enriched. Murray is being “robbed” of his life; but once the unbearable deprivation constituted by the compellation’s coursing is understood as the source of the new sense of jubilant “elation,” it is recognized as emancipation: “He was being robbed. He was being *freed* of his life” (129; emphasis added). Murray no longer needs “his life.” What he needs, instead, is its cancellation, the event of being “freed” from it. What he needs is the compellation.

We can be assured that this is the true state of affairs by considering Murray’s collaborative efforts in some detail. He wants to be part of the compellation. Since the compellation is a reduction, Murray wants to be part

of the reduction. Being part of this type of reduction is being *compelled* to be part of the reduction. In so far as the reduction is a “game” (123), “play” (131), or “movie” (127), he needs to play by the appropriate *reduction rules* governing the specifics of the ongoing event—as a soccer-player sacrifices the use of hands and arms in order to be accepted as a fully worthy actor on the pitch. Someone who does not accept the bodily reduction in question (who goes on using all of the natural body as an intact, unreduced totality) *simply cannot play*, simply cannot belong to the elect possibility-space of the compelling game. (Nor can this individual therefore know the elation that is immanent to such a game/reduction.) Having more or less immediately understood that the life “ringed by disaster” is an allure that he cannot resist (127), Murray begins to want to *fully exist* in a regenerated world where he is so reduced that he ceases to be opaquely manifest as a natural creature in a natural environment. He becomes as translucent as his newly discovered universe: “He felt his house transparent, his life transparent—but still standing” (127).

Murray now strives to become transparently and seamlessly co-extensive with the compellation’s possibility-space. Instead of obstructing the possibility-space in which Barbara and Victor become accessible to each other, Murray cooperates by giving transparent assistance to the constitution of that clearing. He makes a point of removing his own obstructing presence, inventing all sorts of timely and untimely errands:

He often left them alone together. He went into the kitchen to get more gin or ice; he went to check on the children, pretending that he had heard one of them cry out. He imagined then that Victor’s long bare foot would slide out of its sandal and would graze, then knead, Barbara’s offered calf, her outstretched thigh. Their hands would slide over whatever parts of each other they could reach. For a risky instant they might touch tongues. But when he came clattering out they were always prudently separated, talking some treacherously ordinary talk. (128)

Murray gives warning of his arrival by means of the noisy “clattering” that announces his movements. He does not wish to break the spell. Here it is not a matter of an over-imaginative person who is perverse enough to want to set up a scenario of vicarious sexual enjoyment—for Murray is truly horrified by Victor’s erotic intrusion, and as we have seen, he finds the poignant signs of his wife’s illicit erotic arousal to be unbearable. As the story’s title has suggested, what is at stake is rather the circumstance that Murray simply has no choice. He cannot choose to be apart from the compellation, any more than Barbara and Victor can. He can choose neither to be apart nor a part. That he is a part of the whole affair is not something he has chosen, and his continued collaboration with the given possibility-lines is not a series of acts expressing his free agency as a path-selecting individual staking out his own personal destiny. He has no destiny of his own by now, but is drawn into a

movie, play, or game that in a sense is perfectly abstract. This is possibly what makes its unbearable horror and unbearable deliciousness manageable—they too are in a sense abstract. The feeling of detachment in the course of the compellation makes it possible for Murray and Barbara to pass beyond the intrigue of adultery. Murray does not need to accuse her, and Barbara does not need to feel hurt by the accusation. Instead of revelations, they can cancel bitterness and decide never to talk about it.

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The complex feeling of unexpected intoxication at the moment of life's tragedy occurs also in "Floating Bridge." Strangely enough, Jinny who is ill with cancer feels something promising in her own approaching death. The fact that her husband is sixteen years older has quite logically led her to think

that she would hold, or touch his hand, at least once, when he was dead. And she would not be able to believe in that fact. The fact of his being dead and powerless. No matter how long this state had been foreseen, she would not be able to credit it. She would not be able to believe that, deep down, he had not some knowledge of this moment. Of her. To think of him not having that brought on a kind of emotional vertigo, the sense of a horrid drop.

And yet—an excitement. The unspeakable excitement you feel when a galloping disaster promises to release you from all responsibility for your own life. (*HFC* 59–60)

That she seems to be the one who is going to die first overturns the rational structure of expectations. Life has been introduced as something that can bypass anticipation. The unpredictability of a mortal disease has brought Jinny into a liminal space where the coursing of normal procedures no longer counts. For one thing, she is no longer in the hands of her own powers, but in those of the illness. This might be frightening, but it might also entail a liberation from that which is extensive, from that which is transcendent to the present moment. With the nothingness of death hovering in a quite near future, what goes beyond presence and immanence becomes unnecessary and unimportant. Being in illness, one is reduced to a state where the single occupation of medical treatment takes over. There is no room left for feelings dealing with what might be the endpoint of chemotherapy. Jinny notices how she in the midst of it, with "so much going on and present events grabbing so much of her attention, she found it hard to take any view at all" (60). In contrast with this diminished life, normal behavior appears as arbitrary and meaningless. People around Jinny are seen to keep tools and machines "that would be useful or not useful depending on the uses you could imagine," and it suddenly seems ridiculous and absolutely nonsensical how

“people could find themselves in charge of” a lot of bits and pieces that “might end up being thrown out” (73). Jinny’s existence has been purged of everything that exceeds life itself. When going into chemo, “everything got taken away,” except life itself (73). However painful and troublesome the state which Jinny finds herself in, it is defined in terms of a peculiar lightness. The disease has taken over Jinny’s ability to orchestrate her own life, but in this destitution she is left with a feeling of immunity and of modest liberty. When she receives positive information from her physician concerning a significant shrinkage of the tumor, she does not admit this to be altogether favorable. “It was too much. What he had said made everything harder. It made her have to go back and start this year all over again. It removed a certain low-grade freedom. A dull, protecting membrane that she had not even known was there had been pulled away and left her raw” (77). To have to return to a world full of things that have lost their halo of meaning seems almost impossible. In a world exposed as being totally arbitrary, Jinny’s life is seen to be deprived of its own aura. She is left without a shield of integrity that connects the life she is living with her being. The excessiveness of things is seen to be aleatory, and this includes life. She is no longer destined for anything, not even death. When she steps out from the hospital, the “parked cars, the pavement, the bricks of the other buildings, seemed positively to bombard her, as if they were all separate facts thrown up in ridiculous sequence” (57). Jinny’s existence is being fragmented, separated and lost, leaving her without any power to resist an over-proximity of the things around her. Her minimal sense of a possibility-space is crushed under the sudden return of a whole world.⁵⁷ Even people are seen to almost invade her. The girl that will attend to Jinny at home is insupportably transparent and overexposed. “Everything must be right at the surface with her, her attention and the whole of her personality coming straight at you, with an innocent and—to Jinny—a disagreeable power” (62). The nausea caused by chemotherapy spills over to include a susceptibility towards insincerity such as camouflaged opinions or an exaggerated hospitality. Jinny wishes to protect herself from this, and she seeks to come “into the shade” (73). As she and her husband are invited to eat and drink at the nurse’s parents’ trailer, it is impossible for Jinny to accept. When she feels the pressure to comply with people’s expectations, she secretly escapes into a cornfield. “What she’d thought she’d do, once she got in here, was lie down. Lie down in the shade

⁵⁷ This space may vary in degree between different stories. In “The Albanian Virgin” it threatens to grow so large as to evaporate into nothingness when “[v]iews and streets deny knowledge of us” and “the air grows thin” (*OS* 127). In “Baptizing,” Del experiences a sharp regaining of power after having broken with her boyfriend Garnet. Her reconnection with the environment emphasizes an empowering possibility-space. “As I walked on into Jubilee I repossessed the world. Trees, houses, fences, streets, came back to me, in their own sober and familiar shapes. Unconnected to the life of love, uncolored by love, the world resumes its own, its natural and callous importance” (*LGW* 224).

of these large coarse leaves and not come out till she heard Neal calling her. Perhaps not even then" (73). The significance of this welcomed isolation appears in the light of an ambiguous feeling towards detachment. Jinny recalls a situation before she became ill. She is frustrated to the verge of the unbearable by her husband's behavior. He has nonchalantly finished a cake she had made for a special occasion without realizing that he did something wrong. Having left the house and taken shelter by a bus stop in order to decide whether to leave him or not, she contemplates the scribbled messages on the walls:

Would she be compelled to make statements on public walls?

She felt herself connected at present with the way people felt when they had to write certain things down—she was connected by her feelings of anger, of petty outrage (perhaps it was petty?), and her excitement at what she was doing to Neal, to pay him back. But the life she was carrying herself into might not give her anybody to be angry at, or anybody who owed her anything, anybody who could possibly be rewarded or punished or truly affected by what she might do. Her feelings might become of no importance to anybody but herself, and yet they would be bulging up inside her, squeezing her heart and breath. (56)

When feelings have been stripped of their extension, no longer directed towards Neal or any other person who may reflect Jinny, she might come to feel her own selfness. Disconnecting Neal from her emotions makes her see them in a clearer light. Immanence leads to the appearance of her emotions as real and as unquestionable. What is fundamentally given to Jinny is a life of emotions that is permanent in its endless iteration. Without the process of reduction, this foundational aspect of life would not have appeared. As Lillian Alweiss so accurately points out, the "enigma of life [...] can be solved only after the reduction" (66).

By way of the groundlessness that Jinny's illness has placed her on, we have seen how she has become closer to the constitutive forces of life, not in a spatial sense, but in terms of a familiarity with what is central to life. This has also led to a negative type of status quo. An unacceptable disharmony prevails between a truer world and a world full of dishonesty. As she loses her sense of "direction" (*HFC* 74) in the cornfield, the confusion she feels between life and not-life, importance and non-importance makes her "exhausted" and leaves her "in some kind of muddle" (78). The quite ordinary event of a man arriving on a bike, and starting a conversation in which she does not have to explain anything, will interrupt Jinny's sense of disorientation. Somehow the young man's double "air of patience and alertness" is a prerequisite for the possibility-space to find its opening (78). He offers to drive Jinny home, but instead of taking the right direction, he heads towards a territory that he wishes to show to Jinny. She is surprised by her willingness to accept this. "If this was happening back in her old, normal

life, it was possible that she might now begin to be frightened. If she was back in her old, normal life she would not be here at all” (82). Her life has suddenly been led onto a side-road that deviates from its normal coursing, leaving Jinny to discern its possibility as a doubling. The dark place where the young man takes her is a swamp with a ‘floating bridge.’ As they stand on this solid but slightly moving strip of ground the atmosphere is allowed to alter into a carefully optimistic mode. “The sky seemed to be lighter ahead and there was a different sound—something like mild and rhythmical conversation” (83). Harmony is at hand when Jinny no longer has to orient herself in order to find her way. She can now do “as she was told” and follow “in one of the wheel tracks” (83). To move and to keep on living no longer appear as efforts dependant on the subject alone, but appear as the indissoluble intertwining of life and living. He comes close and touches her as “if he was guiding her” but as he then takes his hand away and leaves “her to walk on these planks” independently, she is left to feel how the movements of life steady her. It was “like the deck of a boat. Like the deck of a boat they rose and fell. But it wasn’t a movement of waves, it was their footsteps, his and hers, that caused this very slight rising and falling of the boards beneath them” (83). The mode of the surrounding harmonizes with the mode of Jinny. She has now been able to return to a stable world whose stability depends on its movements.

The slight movement of the bridge made her imagine that all the trees and the reed beds were set on saucers of earth and the road was a floating ribbon of earth and underneath it all was water. And the water seemed so still, but it could not really be still because if you tried to keep your eye on one reflected star, you saw how it winked and changed shape and slid from sight. Then it was back again—but maybe not the same one. (84)

The insular and free-floating existence that Jinny now experiences is reflected in the landscape. The changes of the winking stars are reduced phenomena of a changeable world. They may seem variable and vague should one try to compute them in any spatial/temporal sense, but they obviously contain a definiteness which is thoroughly intelligible to her. The modesty of the stars and the mysterious, semi-dark landscape reinstalls a protective veil of existence that is intrinsic to it. When the young man offers Jinny a kiss, it comes to resemble a story that expands immanently. The kissing-act lingers inside time and not in relation to anything that has occurred prior to it or will happen in a future.

He slipped his arms around her as if there was no question at all about what he was doing and he could take all the time he wanted to do it. He kissed her mouth. It seemed to her that this was the first time ever that she had participated in a kiss that was an event in itself. The

whole story, all by itself. A tender prologue, an efficient pressure, a wholehearted probing and receiving, a lingering thanks, and a drawing away satisfied. (84)

The kiss is not caught up in communication, in the exchange of meaning. It is not a sign in a symbolic order. As pure gift it operates in another system of value. Overthrowing all forms of exchange, it renews life as possibility. As the moment is lingering in the present, the anxiety for the future is temporarily closed off. That Jinny's nurse's stepmother is an amateur fortune-teller becomes a detail of humorous value. Jinny's husband is a skeptical and pragmatic man. The possibility that he would agree to have his fortune for courtesy turns out to be a matter of life's irony. "Jinny had a sudden thought of Neal, back on dry land. Neal giddy and doubtful, opening his hand to the gaze of the woman with the bright-streaked hair, the fortune teller. Rocking on the edge of his future" (85). In the midst of the absurdity of the effort to find tokens of the future in the lines of one's hand, a certain seriousness is being reinstalled. Life as future is now something that leaves one "amazed and sobered" (85). That Neal's life too contains uncertainties leaves them on an equal ground where Jinny can feel "a lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given" (85). As in so many of Munro's stories, the irreconcilability of an unexpected event gives way to a sudden clearing in which the character is ridden of delusion and momentarily lifted beyond distress. Being caught up in a movement of lived experience she comes to see not the everyday in a different light, but the "workings" of that life.

Newness: Reorienting the Ordinary

The incursion into the realm of the life-world is often preceded or followed by reduction. In phenomenology, reduction means an abstention from an unreflecting belief in that which has hitherto been taken for granted. The world is then seen as strangely magical. In Munro's fictive world, driven as it is by compellation, reduction typically involves an act of "shedding" (*PL* 188), or a breaking down of common-sense regulations (*HFC* 162). The ensuing renewal of life involves a renewal of feeling. Here I am not speaking of a shift in which old sets of emotions are replaced by new ones. The rise-to-newness-of-affect is not strictly a feeling. Rather than a subjective coloration of the real as magical there is a presentation of the world as fatally mag-

ical. Radiance comes from the world and not from subjective feeling. The affect has an aesthetic feel, but is not really to be seen as a psychological element of a human repertoire of emotional possibilities. The affect-possibility is not presented as something connected to wishes or merits of the characters. It has the feel of an emotion that is unmeritoriously given to the character in moments of fatal circumstances that the character happens to be part of. Regenerated, affective possibility seems to have its source in something that once was or once resembled a human creature, but which now somehow is transubstantiated and given aesthetic shape. In the stories, there is typically a showing of possibilities that are not constituted in behavior. "Nettles" features a renewal of love-feelings unfolding in a possibility-space that is constituted to the side of the common courings of existence. What is fatal here arises indirectly out of a reunion between childhood sweethearts. The phenomenon of fatal election has to do with the recalling of the event of each boy picking one of the girls as companion in a war-game. Within the game, the rationale for selecting one's savior is untouched by any adult sense of reason or justice. What counts is the thrill of election itself—quite apart from any explainable process of selection that could justify it. "It was such a joy to be part of a large and desperate enterprise, and to be singled out, within it, to be essentially pledged to the service of a fighter" (*HFC* 163). The game is a structure of simple rules to which all players are subordinated, and in which issues of gender-equality and social-geographic background are immediately put out of authority. Suddenly "the usual restrictions" have "broken down" and everybody is under the same, unspoken compellation (162). The formality of the game, where the role that each child assents to is taken seriously, seeps out into the amorous affectivity of a particular relationship between two children. She "accepted readily, even devoutly, the roles that did not have to be explained or worked out" between them. She "would aid and admire him, he would direct and stand ready to protect" (165). In the narrator's recollection, the amorous allure had no complications but was wrapped in an air of earnestness and sovereignty. "We were like sturdy and accustomed sweethearts, whose bond needs not much outward expression. And for me at least that was solemn and thrilling" (164). The intimate liaison establishes a fatal synchronicity, plain and unquestionable, yet secret. The girl can obviously not know the boy's thoughts, but she can sense an unspoken agreement. The symmetry between the children absorbs the narrator-protagonist's attention, her special attentiveness that is attuned to precisely this order of correspondences.

Years later, as a grown-up woman, the protagonist happens to be invited to spend some days with her friend Sunny in her summerhouse. As they walk into the kitchen, they meet a man spreading ketchup on a sandwich in a familiar way. Incredibly, the protagonist's childhood friend has also been invited to play golf with Sunny's husband, Johnston. This haphazard encounter between what used to be two amorous children is recognized as a dazzling renewal that lies hidden in the moment as a return of special ener-

gies. The future opens up as a possibility for something altogether remarkable to happen, and for its destiny to seal their fate. “Mike and I were still looking at each other and laughing—we seemed to be making it clear to each other that this discovery which Sunny and Johnston might think remarkable was to us a comically dazzling flare-up of good fortune” (173). The visit becomes an agonizing experience for the protagonist as she longs for a continuation of their childhood romance. By chance, the opportunity to go to the golf course alone with each other is presented. The time shared on the course will come to knit their lifelines in ways that are governed by fatal rather than romantic forces. The fatal trajectory that the protagonist has prematurely personified, as something monitored by the need for purely personal fulfillment, is deflected and overridden by a fatal coursing of a different order. The naturalistic scenario of childhood romance sliding into adult desire is sidetracked into a possibility-space exhibiting something stronger than sexual yearning. The storm that physically thrusts the couple together results in an intimacy that is curiously impersonal. The affectivity of fate outstrips the limited phenomenon of personal feeling. As the man and woman embrace each other, their kiss is fatal rather than amorous, “more of a ritual, a recognition of survival rather than of our bodies’ inclinations” (182). Here the movements of lips and hands possess the seriousness and formality of the childhood game whose rules one had to obey. Sexual attraction is bracketed, but without cancelling sensual attentiveness to what is made physically poignant by the specifics of the situation. The coolness of the formal kiss gives expression to a warmth concealed within the chilliness of fate. Its glow denotes the electness of fatal survival. The fact that they are lucky to escape the unbelievable force and unalterable danger of the rainstorm enables Mike to reveal the unbearable sorrow caused by a family tragedy. As the weather starts to clear, a sense of underlying seriousness materializes. “His voice surprised me, like the sun. But in the opposite way. It had a weight to it, a warning—determination edged with apology” (183). Here personal feeling is altered to the phenomenon of awe and surrender. There can no longer be any attempt to ‘influence’ the future. Having caused his youngest son’s death by accidentally running over him on the driveway, Mike is already locked into a specific lifeline.

I knew now that he was a person who had hit rock bottom. A person who knew—as I did not know, did not come near knowing—exactly what rock bottom was like. He and his wife knew that together and it bound them, as something like that would either break you apart or bind you, for life. Not that they would live at rock bottom. But they would share a knowledge of it—that cool, empty, locked, and central space.

It could happen to anybody.

Yes. But it doesn’t seem that way. It seems as if it happens to this one, that one, *picked out specially* here and there, one at a time. (184; emphasis added)

By materializing as something resembling an objective mechanism, the fatal momentum rules out any sense of subjective origin. Yet in not being subjectivistic, fatal sequences remain fatally rather than naturalistically objective. Their origin is not to be found in what Hartmann calls “naturalistic objectivity” (*Moral Phenomena* 164), and therefore their allure is not felt as belonging in any ordinary way to the natural world perceived by the senses. Munro’s texts actualize a self-existent sphere in which fatal values are native—much as aesthetic values are automatically immanent to the non-subjective and non-naturalistic sphere of an artefact. The coursing of a fatal sequence cannot be covered over. Recognition of this predicament is paradigmatic for protagonists and narrators. The coursing might be alive as a “sweet trickle, an underground resource. With the weight of this new stillness on it, this seal” (*HFC* 186–187). A setting for the renewal of affect, the adventure at the golf course marks the couple with “a prickling, an itch or burning” caused by the nettles they have fallen into during the storm. However, the renewal has its source in something seemingly “insignificant” that might pass “unnoticed,” the heeding of the fatal forces of the event (187).

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Developing a non-behavioral account of the constitution of newness exhibited in the texts, I now return to another one of its conditions of possibility—shedding. The phenomenon of shedding may seem to indicate something trivial—but it has larger implications. In “Miles City, Montana,” the narrator recounts how happy she was to “shed our house”—meaning simply the event of leaving it and setting off on a long journey along the Canadian border. “I was happy because of the shedding. I loved taking off” (*PL* 88). For her, such a reduction involves the event of a “wooing [of] distant parts of myself” (88). The taking off promises more than just a family trip across the northernmost parts of the United States. The narrator and her husband had known moments of relief when the dominant affect had been that of shedding feelings altogether and of shedding the depressing roles of family entanglements. Husband and wife had momentarily managed to exit from the claustrophobic world of reassuring emotionalism by means of an affective reduction that had “purged” feeling of the self. Rising to newness of life is to experience a lack of ‘experience,’ to skip the sense of constantly ‘having experiences.’ Those that linger behind in a world where emotion is full of self have failed to enter the region where affects are not the cherished possessions of an emotional subject. The man and the woman can rise to a newness of feeling by relinquishing their emotional ‘rights.’ Each person’s right-to-feel has the hidden ability to enter a possibility-space where it is possible to give way to a lack of this right. In such a pure state, something lacking the burden of affectivity’s meaningfulness has been released. “And finally—finally—racked and purged. We clasped hands and laughed, laughed at those

two benighted people, ourselves. Their grudges, their grievances, their self-justification. We leap-frogged over them. We declared them liars” (92; emphasis added). Normally shedding implies that the husk is shed and the kernel retained; the shell is stripped away so as to leave intact the pure ‘inner life’ only. Here a converse process is in place: it is the ‘inner life’ that is shed, the retained part leap-frogging over and away from it. *It is the egoism of the inner affective life that needs to be shed*, the part of us that is absorbed in the depth of its feelings and soulful sensitivity. Justification may still be important but not self-justification. To leap-frog over oneself is to skip the emotional self. Personal feeling is no longer enclosed in the affective circuits of self-and-self or self-and-other. In the various stories under discussion in this study, the act of rising to newness of life is neither a relinquishing of possessive individualism, nor an encounter with the otherness of the other. It is not a question of going outside the self. The leap-frogging mentioned above does not occur on the inside-outside continuum. It does not mark a change of position with respect to a hypothetical choice between internalism and externalism, or between selfishness and altruism. It is not a matter of moving from solipsism to synergy, for it is the synergistic absorption in the “love” and “fights” that the leap-frogging leaves behind (91–92). Selfhood is shed, but so is the reassuring word of ‘interactivity.’ The text does not show us a person seeking an exit from her emotional self-preoccupation but “two benighted people” who clasp hands in a mood of delight resulting from a cessation of emotional life as affective interaction. Love is uncovered in its simple pureness, leaping over the solemn nexus of its relational seriousness. When the fixation on amorous synergy is discarded, something else remains: love-without-relation. As monergy rather than synergy, love is simply love. The man and the woman laugh because love laughs. They are no longer ‘lovers.’ They simply love. It is no longer a question of human beings being inside love, but of love being inside love. Being-inside does not betoken any internalism here, but a renewal that has stripped love of everything that is not itself, including human egoity.⁵⁸

The associative structure in which newness and shedding become synonymous is accentuated as the travelers cross a landscape from which much of nature seems to have been stripped. All that remains is mile after mile of a wide plateau containing little more than grassland and grainland. The narrator enjoys what she sees “because it isn’t scenery” (92). As they drive

⁵⁸ Nicolai Hartmann refers to a necessity of the self-containment of feelings. “The whole meaning of the realm of values, so far as it is a world of ideal self-maintaining entities, stands or falls with this foundation-principle. But especially is it the spiritual values, even down to their ultimate details, which by their constitution reveal this autonomy. What is beautiful is beautiful for its own sake; what is comical is comical in itself; what is noble or lovable is noble or loveable intrinsically. All reference back to something else for the sake of which it is what it is, is fantastic speculation” (*Moral Phenomena* 28–29).

through the fairly undramatic and featureless world of Douglas County, the empty views materialize as stripped horizons with a special appeal. The terrain holds back the possibility of the picturesque in order to set up its allure as a *pure* possibility-space, a space already present in the car trip itself. The leisure of just passing by car where nothing really claims her, not even the landscape, lifts the protagonist into a state where she can enjoy how distant thoughts come together. “The essential composition would be achieved. This made me hopeful and lighthearted” (88). The restraint of having to organize a life does not weigh on her because she has left all that behind. She is no longer a “keeper” of her life, but a “watcher” viewing whatever she passes (88). Visual possibility is not limited to the option of projecting a landscape-feeling towards the spectator. The absence of the picturesque is not an absence-affect, for there is—after reduction—no one ‘there’ hypothetically feeling any supposed loss. Reality is no longer epistemologically synergistic, with a subject enjoying the scenery, and a scenic world furnishing scenic wonders. The terrain makes no claim. It leaves the spectator alone. The plateau does not advertise a set of significant promises or defined possibilities. Everything rises to newness. The narrator-spectator is not part of a field of projective landscape presentations. The un-landscaping of landscape and the un-selfing of selfhood are co-extensive. Infinitely extensive, the possibility-space transforms the land into an absolutely pure geography. As terrain, its sole purpose is to be an extensity whereby space and spaciousness are perceived as such. As possibility-space, the pure geography presents a map of newness—a *tabula rasa* in which nothing needs yet to be felt—except newness itself. The un-landscaped terrain is released from every requirement for appropriate emotion. It is possible to travel through the landscape without the burden of one’s emotional life, without being pulled one way or the other. Here intellectual “bits and pieces” can “be flying together inside” the protagonist without her having to orchestrate them (88).

The affective possibility of detachment is not unproblematic. The story of the journey is framed by the narrator’s childhood memory of the death of a young boy. What the narrator as a young girl experiences in the atmosphere surrounding this death is meshed with the guilt of the narrator as a mother who nearly would have to gaze at her dead child, drowned in a pool. The narrator cannot help but marvel at the unanchored life that Steve Gauley seemed to live with his father, but her curiosity is tinged with fear and distress. When the boy’s search party brings back the horrible news of his death, this does not seem to be the worst, but the fact that there is “no mother, no woman at all—no grandmother or aunt, or even a sister—to receive Steve Gauley and give him his due of grief” (85). All about Steve’s life seems “accidental,” the house they live in, the way his father takes care of him, and the way “their life” is “held together” (85). Their connection has been purged of all cozy family arrangements. There is no pretence that they mean anything to each other except for the chance-like event of the boy being born and the father finding himself there to be his only care-taker. This

might be read as a warning, in the same manner as the protagonist imagines that through her parents' everyday conduct or joking advice seeps the warning: "Watch out. Get along" (97). Throughout the different layers of the story's chronology, the protagonist again and again notices discrepancies and cracks in the timeline of developing life. Analogous to the drowning of Steve Gauley, the younger daughter in the family is about to drown in the pool where they have made a stop to refresh themselves. When the protagonist all of a sudden has an intuition that her children might be in danger, she is painfully aware of her older daughter's blindness to potential danger. She perceives her child's "strangely artificial style of speech and gesture" (100). The whole episode of the rescuing of the younger girl is tinged by an atmosphere of impossibility. "So many things seemed not quite plausible," and they didn't "know how it could have happened" (101). The accident that nearly took place and the rescue are both part of the irrealisation of seeing the event in the moment of its appearing. The strangeness of reality is when a seemingly impossible simultaneity suddenly can become real. "That must have been the moment under the trees when I thought, Where are the children? It must have been the same moment. At that moment, Meg was slipping, surprised, into the treacherously clear blue water" (102). What saves Meg is something that deviates from the laws of probability. It is something that is capable of preventing the "most ordinary tragedy" (103). Impossibility runs through all circumstances as so "many things seemed not quite plausible" (100). The strange unanimity of the intuitive and almost inhuman actions of the parents appears out of nowhere, being independent of anything before its own unanimity. As a "chain of lucky links," the eventual rescue emerges as a quantum choice (102). This choice is completely free from being affected by anything prior to it, even though it arises from the prior moment, and radically affects everything in its aftermath. Stapp comments that within "the quantum formalism each Heisenberg/Dirac quantum choice is a grasping, as a unified whole, of a certain combination of possibilities that hang together as a local enduring form. The actualization of this form utilizes and restructures some of the quantum potentialities and produces an immediate rearrangement of the possibilities available for the next event" (195). Being aware that they are all at the mercy of such quantum choice, the characters are in a state of shock, and all they could speak about is "luck" (PL 102). The protagonist acknowledges that it is out of her control to have prevented the opposite from happening if that had been the quantum choice, but she is compelled to imagine it. "Thinking if only we hadn't stopped, if only we hadn't taken this route, if only they hadn't let us use the pool. Probably no one would ever have known about the comb" (103). The possibility-space is precisely this parallelism where the choice in either direction is pure and free of causality.

In the realisation of the possibility of her own child's death as a pure tragedy without cause, the protagonist catches the meaning of this as the basis for freedom. She comes to think of Steve Gauley and all children, who

should know that “by rights they should have sprung up free, to live a new, superior kind of life, not to be caught in the snares of vanquished grownups, with their sex and funerals” (104). All grown-up fuss is seen to deny the inherent danger in every moment. The protagonist somehow acknowledges the impossibility of self-protection. The fact that Steve Gauley “was neglected” also made him “free” (104). This is why the protagonist refrains from a negative judgment of Steve’s father. “He was the only one I didn’t see giving consent. He couldn’t prevent anything, but he wasn’t implicated in anything, either—not like the others, saying the Lord’s Prayer in their unnaturally weighted voices, oozing religion and dishonor” (104). The radical truth that the protagonist has met is wedged right at the heart of her sense of parenthood. It balances any extreme reaction by striking a deeper chord of recognition of human beings’ vulnerability. “So we went on, with the two in the back seat trusting us, because of no choice, and we ourselves trusting to be forgiven, in time, for everything that had first to be seen and condemned by those children: whatever was flippant, arbitrary, careless, callous—all our natural, and particular, mistakes” (105). The fragile circumstances that hold the family intact are shown in a mirroring of seemingly different parenthoods where accidents and the prevention of accidents are truly evental and not altogether dependant on the deterministic laws of nature.

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In “A Queer Streak,” the shedding of emotion and the bypassing of emotive centeredness is even more prominent. The emotional subject is so eager to escape from feeling as emotive synergy that she attempts to hide completely from view. The aim of such flight, however, is not to remain alone with private emotions. The entire episode is governed by a compellation that appears “without any special emotion” (*PL* 234). Driving along a low road stretching between thick brush-wood, Violet suddenly notices that she is hearing a “voice” commenting on the life of a woman who long ago had come to play a role in her life:

“Her life is tragic,” the voice said clearly and *without any special emotion*, and Violet, as if blinded, ran the car right off the road. There wasn’t much of a ditch at all, but the ground there was boggy and she couldn’t get the car out of it. She walked around and looked at where her wheels were, then stood by the car waiting for somebody to come along and give her a shove.

But when she did hear a car coming, she knew *she didn’t want to be found*. She couldn’t bear to be. She ran from the road into the woods, into the bush, and she was caught. She was caught then by berry bushes, little hawthorns. Held fast. Hiding because she didn’t want to be seen, if her life was tragic. (234; emphasis added)

The fact that Violet is caught points to her hiding as an act not altogether of her own will—just like the act that caused her to drive off the road or that caused her to want to jump from the bridge are not purely of her own will either (232). In Munro's stories, women, men, girls, and boys typically find themselves in situations that are not defined by choice or free will. Having been in love with a minister, with one who "is never quite free to love and choose for himself" (229), Violet is used to feelings that are not internally monitored by a decision-making agent with control over life's important moments. Yet to be attuned to a compellation is not simply to relinquish willpower. Violet knows what she is doing when she hides from car drivers, when she considers jumping from a bridge—the scenario, however, is not defined by will but by compellation. The compellation is not a compulsion—the will is still free, still there. Yet instead of forcing itself to willing, it listens or feels around. This type of Buddhist receptivity is not an interior emotion, but is more like the elliptic movement of sensory reception. It means navigating unforcefully in recognition of existence as an intricate set of obstacles and opportunities.

When Violet one day finds that she has encountered a radical obstacle to her happiness with Trevor, the minister she is in love with, and when she understands that the obstacle is her sister Dawn Rose, she does not take up a fight to bend life to her will. Instead, Violet adjusts herself slightly so that existence takes a new shape. The sense of her purpose with life shifts over to a sense of life's purpose with her (232). This discovery involves a renewal of her life in which the select pathways of personal existence no longer materialize as decisions of free will.

The compellation that seems to push life through a set of twists and turns dissolves the opposition between free will and necessity. It involves a fidelity to what life presents to her rather than to her own wishes and desires. Glimpsing a brief vision of herself jumping from a bridge, Violet comes to enjoy a clairvoyance comparable to the one felt by Colin when he seems to be about to jump from a bridge in "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux" (*PL* 82–83). We saw in "Miles City, Montana" that the man and the woman "leaped-frogged" over the emotion-fixated egos signified by their names⁵⁹ (*PL* 92), and we find a similar leap-frogging in "A Queer Streak" and "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux." The protagonists relinquish emotion as an innermost reality. In "A Queer Streak," Violet discovers that her sudden glimpse of the abyss has placed her in a zone where she can watch herself be part of her own life. "Unless you jumped from a bridge. Could this be Violet? Could she be the person thinking these thoughts, reduced to such possibilities, her life turned upside down? She felt as if she was watching a play, and yet she was inside" (*PL* 232). Transfigured by eventual astonishment, Violet stands in

⁵⁹ The shedding of names is a recurring phenomenon in Munro's writing. See "The Love of a Good Woman," (10–11), "The Found Boat," (135), and "Bardon Bus," (112).

the cavity produced by the departure of her proudly choice-making ego. She can fully enjoy just watching her own moves. At first, the new, fatal “Violet”—the one being astonishingly constituted by the eventual forces of the compellation—is quite unreal, like a figure that is real only within the reduced space of a stage.⁶⁰ For Colin in “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux,” likewise, the melodramatic possibility of throwing himself from a bridge quickly emerges as an event that is as theatrically unreal as the accidental shooting of his brother unleashing this proposed act of pure despair. Released by the worldly event into a state of rest where nothing in the world counts any more—not even the possible act of throwing oneself off the edge of the world—Colin finds himself existing in a new reality where it is effortlessly possible to resist intrusion. The banal world of happenings and feelings is over. What matters is the serenity where acts are not intelligible, discrete units of a cause-and-effect sequence unfolding in a universe of solid bodies seriously inter-positioned. He is not in a remorseful frenzy, such unreduced feelings being “too puny and personal” (PL 82). Far from being about to cast himself into the Tiplady River, Colin

had forgotten the river was there. He had forgotten that a bridge was a structure over a river and that his mother was a person who could order him to do things.

No, he hadn’t forgotten those things so much as grasped how silly they were. How silly it was that he should have a name and it should be Colin, and that people should be shouting it. It was silly, in a way, even to think that he had shot Ross, though he knew he had. What was silly was to think in these chunks of words. Colin. Shot. Ross. To see it as an action, something sharp and separate, an event, a *difference*.

He wasn’t thinking of throwing himself into the river or of anything else he might do next, or of how his life would progress from this moment. Such progress seemed not only unnecessary but impossible. His life had split open, and nothing had to be figured out anymore. (82)

⁶⁰ This doubling of art occurs also in “Post and Beam,” where Lionel thinks of himself as being part of “a Dickens novel” (HFC 190). In “The Flats Road,” Del remembers Uncle Benny’s mail-order bride “like a story” (LW 27). Robert in “Fits” recurrently senses life’s dramatic potential: “He had the sense he had fairly often in Gilmore, the sense of walking onto an informal stage, where a rambling, agreeable play was in progress” (PL 117). In “Carried Away,” Louisa feels like a tragic heroine as she travels around the country (OS 9). In “The Albanian Virgin,” a bookshop keeper sees her new home town as “a town in a story” (OS 107). In a furious moment, the protagonist of “Chaddeleys and Flemings” throws a dirty plate at her husband: “The plate missed, and hit the refrigerator but the pie flew out and caught him on the side of the face just as in the old movies or an *I Love Lucy* show. There was the same moment of amazement as there is on the screen, the sudden innocence, for him; his speech stopped, his mouth open. For me, too, amazement, that something people invariably thought funny in those instances should be so shocking a verdict in real life” (MJ 18).

Prior to the shedding that transforms the “event” from something mundane and histrionic into the coursing of a regeneration unfolding on the hither side of the world, the universe is a set of solid acts, of solid feelings—and of solid intervals *between* these. We have the solid bodies “Colin” and “Ross.” We have the solid acts “shot” and “jumping.” And between such solids we have “difference” (82). The interval between one solid and another is a solid. Here feeling, if it is to fit, must itself be a solid. As soon as Colin perceives that this is not so, all of the other solids—and even the spacings presumed to be constituted by “difference”—seem like a huge joke. For a moment on that bridge, before being brought back ‘safely’ to the quite ridiculous universe of positions-and-differences, Colin is allowed to enjoy the freedom where solid bodies and their all-important interpersonal spacings are as unimportant as the discrete feelings in which they are embedded. In his elevated position on the bridge, Colin has momentarily risen to a newness of feeling. The bridge here does not indicate connection but disconnection. Feeling’s newness is not constituted by its flanks. Nothing in the world of discrete “chunks” of consciousness or existence has *anything* to do with the waves of serenity that are giving peace and insight. As sheer discontinuity, as something quite distinct from the world of classical laws, the possibility-space is a quantized energy-level. The quantization that has produced its sovereign quantum of feeling is not a liminal event. The serenity is not ‘between’ anything. The suddenly quantized level of energy-waves is not an intermediate chunk sandwiched out between the “chunks” flanking it. It is not a liminal space between life and death, between not-jumping and jumping. The affect-possibility materializing in the wake of death-toward-emotion had not unfolded in a twilight zone between one thing and another. It is not the consequence of a hesitation or lingering. The rise-to-newness is no gap between units, not “a difference” (82). The escape from “difference” is the sensation that acts belonging to a new and fatal coursing are self-aligned in a compelling sequence. The positional universe ruled by “difference” gives way to a possibility-space in which one thing follows another with the sense of being predestined to do so. The newly-formed, fatal coursing resembles “an orderly succession,” “an arrangement that was ordained” (81). The solution of a predicament is not a resolution, but an item belonging to a “succession” (81). The moment that releases Colin from his tenseness above the jump-hypnotized crowd simply *succeeds* its predecessors. “Solutions were waiting like a succession of rooms” (81).⁶¹ The phenomenon of *pure succession* is in my view a key factor in the build up of Munro’s stories. No agent (no rationale or human agency) is felt to be ordering acts into a pattern that fits any

⁶¹ In “Bardon Bus,” the disposition of succession is employed as a means for day-dreaming, and as a consequence also for story-telling as such. “The letter X seems to me expansive and secretive. And using just the letter, not needing a name, is in line with a system I often employ these days. I say to myself, ‘Bardon Bus, No. 144,’ and I see a whole succession of scenes” (MJ 112).

pat formula that reason or desire could find rewarding or interesting.⁶² Nothing is emotionally or intellectually satisfying. Affects follow the arrow of the fatal coursing without much concern for anything that is transcendent to that pure, unsignifying streaming as such.

In "A Queer Streak," newness of life is tied to a yielding to the fatal forces of one's own life. Violet can "leave her old self behind" by means of surrender: "To give in. To give up" (*PL* 232). The compellation, the foreign "something" that for no apparent reason has "settled on her," is a command, certain "[w]ords ... binding her." The yielding is there as the certainty of a foreknowing. It permits Violet to "know" what lies ahead. The word "would" indicates that, through compellation, the future is known beforehand. Now that everything has suddenly changed, now that life's "purpose" is altogether different, Violet "would never care" for the things of the world, "would bow down and leave her old self behind" (232; emphasis added). The compellation's main word—"golden"—points to that which the recognition makes available not only as promise but also as certainty: namely, possibility. What is "golden" is "a golden opportunity" (232). Violet is claimed by a possibility-space in which, quite strangely, the one who is "chosen" (233) feels a "weight gone off her" when she is able to "bow down" under the compellation that has "settled on her" (232).

And what she afterward believed that she learned ... was that prayers are answered. Desperate prayers are answered. She would believe that she had never had an inkling before of what prayers could be, or the answers could be. Now something settled on her in the train and bound her. Words settled on her, and were like cool, cool cloths, binding her.

It was not your purpose to marry him.

It was not the purpose of your life.

Not to marry Trevor. Not the purpose of your life.

⁶² Lydia, the woman who goes for a trip to an island wishing to get over an ex-lover in "Dulse," finds herself disconnected from her will to choose. "After Lydia's last attempt to call Duncan, the man she had been living with in Kingston, she had walked along the street in Toronto, knowing that she had to get to the bank, she had to buy some food, she had to get on the subway. She had to remember directions, and the order in which to do things: to open her checkbook, to move forward when it was her turn in line, to choose one kind of bread over another, to drop a token in the slot. These seemed to be the most difficult things she had ever done. She had immense difficulty reading the names of the subway stations, and getting off at the right one, so that she could go to the apartment where she was staying. She would have found it hard to describe this difficulty. She knew perfectly well which was the right stop, she knew which stop it came after; she knew where she was. But she could not make the connection between herself and things outside herself, so that getting up and leaving the car, going up the steps, going along the street, all seemed to involve a bizarre effort" (*MJ* 41). In this state of depression we see something other than a regular scenario of illness. The act of choosing is irrealized in the wonder of the enigma of its constitution. "It amazed [Lydia] to think that she had chosen the loaf of bread and the cheese, which were now lying on the floor in the hall" (*MJ* 42).

Your life has a purpose, and you know what it is.

To look after them. All of them, all of your family, and Dawn Rose in particular. To look after all of them, and Dawn Rose in particular.... To give in. To give up. Care for them. Live for others.... A weight gone off her. If she could bow down and leave her old self behind.... (232–233)

No longer chosen to marry Trevor, Violet will be chosen to her life now renewed. She will be “lit up” (233). What is actually being illuminated here is not Violet as a corpuscularly discrete being, but possibility as such. In the regenerating newness of the possibility-space, she becomes transparent—like the created world glowing in the light of its creative source. “And she could still be chosen. She could still be like the June grass that the morning light *passed through*, and lit up like pink feathers or streaks of sunrise cloud” (232–233; emphasis added). No longer an aggregate of substances or a conglomeration of natural objects, the world is an array of energy-levels. The spectacle of nature no longer emits hope but possibility. Ricochetting off the path of personal dreams, Violet comes to belong to herself as something or someone who, like possibility itself, has no physical existence. It is enough for her to be aglow, to belong to the possibility-space, to belong to newness. It is enough for her to bow down and surrender, all of hope’s “weight” having “gone off.” Possibility is golden because the familiar world of personal desires and private hopes is not. Violet will no longer *care* for that which gives her pleasure, for there is greater intensity in what the compellation compels her to care for. The possibility-space changes the nature of care. “She was looking out the window, understanding this. The sun shone on the feathery June grass and the buttercups and toadflax and the old smooth rocks, on all the ragged countryside *that she would never care for*, and the word that came into her mind was ‘golden’” (232; emphasis added).

There is gentle irony in the rendition of this state of affairs. The narrator is a bit aloof from the idea of salvation, viewing Violet’s compellation with some detachment. Yet this narrating coolness cannot easily be distinguished from the detachment produced by compellation, by what is happening in Violet. The narrator’s aesthetic-creative distance from the character and the character’s distance from her old self are expressive of a parallel compassion. The narrator’s concern for Violet equals Violet’s concern for lives other than her own.

The unstated intimacy between narrator and protagonist manifests a common release from a burdensome orchestration of wishes, needs, feelings and their synchronization with the happenings of the world. Letting affects, lives, and episodes run along the riverbeds of their predestined coursings, Violet is no longer a creator of her own destiny. She is not entangled in the world as one of the dramatic figures that needs to benefit or suffer from its upcoming twists and turns. This disentanglement makes her narrator-like. Conversely, the narrator has from the start been what Violet finally becomes: someone not personally victimized by the feelings traversing her. It is the

narrator's job to let passion pass through. The one who tells the story avoids getting bogged down in the clots of personalized emotion that slow the passing of words, the pure flow of telling. It is Violet's mission to have her life told to herself by the compellation, rather than to be its self-seeking author.

As a result of this graceful affinity between narrator and protagonist, descriptive details enable the reader to witness perceptions governed by detachment and clarified by a newness of life that sanctifies the commonplace. Accordingly, when shown Violet's living-quarters, what we feel that we see is not really her 'experiences' of this milieu. The domestic world is not rendered as personally experiential. The reader sees Violet's life in the bright new glow of its detachment from experience. In different circumstances, the attention given by the narrator to details of furniture and interior decorating might have reflected an artistic intent to convey some relation between a character and her world; but here objects of perception manifest the shedding of such relations. The visible items of the milieu have themselves risen to newness of life. Emotion seems to have departed from subjectivity, being a pure attribute of things and of their cool arrangement.⁶³ The subject has been set free to notice this without feeling that some displacement, loss, or alienation is at hand. We are not shown the objects as things filtered through Violet's consciousness. They are exhibited in an oddly neutral fashion. A deceptive sense of normality sustains the neutral but surreptitiously exalted clarity given to Violet's world by the force of regeneration. Though presented to the reader by the narrator, rather than to Violet by the compellation, the objects in her apartment are part of the "understanding" that previously flooded the protagonist's life with a sense of "golden opportunity" (232). A moment ago "the feathery June grass and the buttercups and toadflax and the old smooth rocks" were "golden" (232). Now, without Violet having to play the role of a psychological being who interprets what she sees as a factor of consciousness, the entire world presents itself as a novelty, as something given to, but not through or for, Violet.

In town, Violet in an apartment over the Royal Bank ... The walls were painted, not papered. They were pale green.... The curtains were called drapers, and had pull cords. As they closed over the windows, a pattern of shiny cream-coloured leaves rippled out across the dull cream background. There was no ceiling light—just floor lamps. In the kitchen there were knotty-pine cupboards and a knotty-pine breakfast nook. Another

⁶³ Perception is drained of subjective force also in "Cortes Island" where the woman who aspires to become a writer is detached from her own life and her milieu from its natural context. "The other thing I did behind the curtain was read. I read books that I got from the Kitsilano Library a few blocks away. And when I looked up in that churned-up state of astonishment that a book could bring me to, a giddiness of gulped riches, the stripes were what I'd see. And not just the characters, the story, but the climate of the book became attached to the unnatural flowers and flowed along in the dark-wine stream or the gloomy green" (*LG* 124).

flight of steps—these were open and steep – led down to a little hedged-in back yard which only Violet had the use of. It was tidily enclosed, as susceptible to arrangement and decoration, as any living room. (236)

Here there are no special words or phrasings that could be picked out to make a point about how the protagonist feels. It is not a question of inner emotions being projected onto an environment. We do not enter Violet's psyche by entering her apartment, and we are not dealing with a projection of feelings, or with symbolic exteriorization. Without psychological presentations, a unity is established between Violet's "understanding" (232) and that of the telling. Release into newness of feeling comprises character and narrator as a trait that permeates the narrative. The recounting of the details of the room is precise and abstract, both intimate and distant.

Despite the fact that the curtains have pull-cords and that the back yard is "susceptible" to modifications, the various features of the rooms of Violet's apartment are not presented as the functions of any conscious arrangement evolving from the agency of her psyche (236). Violet may be the force behind the pulling of the drapes, but she cannot be the author of the unexpected beauty it releases. She is not the source of the rippling of shiny cream over dull cream, of leaves over background. It is to be noticed that each significant material unit is carefully reduced. Like the "two tiny balconies with waist-high railings of wrought iron," the little back yard is "hedged-in," "tidily enclosed" (236). The absence of ceiling light and of wallpaper accentuates a bareness, heightening a sense of airy circulation, as if Violet were part of the cubicles of air held in each segment of space rather than part of a regular apartment-life involving the usual wear and tear of surfaces, pieces of furniture, carpets, etc. The upper hand given to coolness over synergism derives from the sense that Violet will never live a fully personal life in the apartment, its feelings belonging to the electness of the reduced space itself rather than to the personal agency of a human being. This is not a loss, especially not for Violet. The enrichment furnished by the compellation's blessing opens a possibility-space in which happiness goes hand in hand with a forgetting of the personal and private feeling of being happy. With Violet, we sense that the shiny effect of the cream-on-cream belongs to *the drapes* and not to the pleasures of the imagination, that the ripple of the pattern oscillates in a motion belonging to the constitution of the apartment rather than to the egoity of a sensibility's aesthetic desire. Violet is "tidily enclosed" in an excision that is little as space but not little as possibility-space. The rippling is witnessed in a calm that has forsaken the self-concern of human emotion. It is a quiver in the possibility-space as such. Existence is not experience but possibility.

We have seen that the form of regeneration that typically materializes in Munro's stories involves a reduction in which the bond between affectivity and personhood is loosened. The paradigmatic consequence of this transfiguration is that discrete feelings make their appearance as belonging to the

discrete items of the created world rather than as affective properties of the human being's emotional life. In "Miles City, Montana," the protagonist

paid attention to a squashed leaf, ground a Popsicle stick under the heel of [her] sandal, squinted at a trash can strapped to a tree. This is the way you look at the poorest details of the world resurfaced, after you've been driving for a long time—you feel *their singleness and precise location* and the forlorn coincidence of *your being there* to see them. (PL 99; emphasis added)

The phenomenon of "being there" (*Dasein*) is subordinate to the phenomenon's "singleness." In phenomenological parlance, *Dasein* gives way to *Sosein*.⁶⁴ The "precise" being-so or being-thus of the discretely-given phenomenal detail has the upper hand. In such a world of *Sosein* rather than *Dasein*, the human being's presence and situatedness is a matter of chance, and the world-item's exact materialization is not.⁶⁵ Consciousness is merely a "forlorn" witnessing ruled by contingency. In contrast, even the "poorest" world-items are distinctly outlined by a compelling necessity that gives them ontological and phenomenological priority. It is perception's privilege to happen to be where the phenomenon, indifferent to perception, makes its appearance. Normally considered insignificant, the "poorest details" of existence have an inexplicable ascendancy.⁶⁶ Within the momentum of the compellation's regenerating directedness, the human being's cohesive sphere of private feelings gives way to a fatal set of *affective sequences*. The items in Violet's apartment, innocent as they seem, are awesomely there for her as her perceptual destiny. She does not choose which things to see. The *things* choose their being-seen. Violet does not choose the purpose of her life, or even her life. It chooses her. As *things* here choose the perceptual acts that bring them to perception, the compellation's story-line elects Violet as the event's beneficiary. The compellation has bequeathed something that resists

⁶⁴ I am following Nicolai Hartmann's presentation of *Sosein* here. He dissolves familiar binaries such as existence-versus-essence and substance-versus-attributes by putting properties on a par with the things they seem to supplement. Properties are just as real as objects, existing as fully as them. See Nicolai Hartmann, *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie*, 4th edition (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 104–124.

⁶⁵ In a discussion on the type of fatality in Margaret Drabble's fiction, John Hannay draws attention to an interdependence of chance and fate. "Drabble, too, understands this duality and, like Hardy before her, relies on coincidence and on chance to create her sense of fate" *The Intertextuality of Fate: A Study of Margaret Drabble* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986) 8.

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard speaks of the power of the seemingly insignificant object in terms of seduction. "But everything is inverted if one passes on to the thought of seduction. There, it's no longer the subject which desires, it's the object which seduces. Everything comes from the object and everything returns to it, just as everything started with seduction, not with desire. The immemorial privilege of the subject is overthrown" (*Fatal Strategies* 111).

symbolic significance.⁶⁷ From the viewpoint of reason and its explanatory expectations, objects of perception may therefore be outrageously nonsensical, impossible, absurd, or scandalously lunatic. In “A Queer Streak,” Violet has a completely inexplicable vision of “King Billy,” a horse that has been dead for sixty-five years. What is striking about this zany episode is that she is not quite emotionally attached to the hallucinatory object:

She said she had known him right away. His familiar, foolish, dapple-gray head. She told him to go on, get out of there, and he lifted his head over the sill and moved off in a leisurely kind of way....

“I was never especially fond of that horse, either,” said Violet. “I was never *un*-fond of it, but if I had my choice of anything or anyone I wanted to see that’s gone, it wouldn’t be that horse.” (243)

Violet is not emotionally directed towards the apparition—either positively or negatively. She has been seen slapping her head in order to prevent further apparitions, these being of no interest to her (244). But if she is not interested in the objects of hallucination, they certainly have an interest in her. A week later, she reports seeing two girls dressed in army clothes going by her house. “They have some interest in it” (244). Affective objects or events such as these hallucinated girls do not belong to the character’s subjective emotions. Unlike many people who are visited by visions, Violet does not court the idea of “possession,” but rather resents it (244). One day the girls in army clothes “came and knocked on my door. They said they were looking for a Violet Thoms. I said there was no such person living here, and they looked very downcast” (244). There is no synergy between the girls and Violet, between something that seeks possession and someone succumbing to it. The girls in army clothes are autonomous. They materialize as if it is *they* who seek confirmation of the weird event’s intrinsic reality. It is the thing hallucinated, not the hallucinator, that seems to vacillate between a sense of hallucination’s reality and a sense of its unreality. The vision seems to be internal to its terminus, to the appropriation itself. Violet somehow has nothing to do with the appearing phenomenon. The hallucination-object possesses the emotional self-fulness normally ascribed to the subject.

In such a world, odd predicaments involve “no definable feeling” in people who need to cope with them (237). Oddity “was just the way it was” (237). Apparitions are laughably self-existent. “I see things I know aren’t there,” (242) is Violet’s only comment on her visions. Yet this closure that seems to place what appears beyond the pale of the self’s interpretative doings is not a personal tragedy. What might be seen as deplorable resides in

⁶⁷ I distinguish between meaning and significance in the same way as Wolfgang Iser does in *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978): “Significance is the reader’s absorption of the meaning” (151).

the banal world of synergy where the busily interactive compartments blot out the possibility of sovereign laughter. Here it is possible to laugh even in moments of sheer destitution—as when Violet Thoms accidentally drives life’s seriousness off the road. Like the couple in “Miles City, Montana,” who finally managed to laugh off the self that insists on ever-so-serious synergy, Violet manages to survive the deepest crisis of her life by accepting her reluctance to “face” humanity. There is nothing wrong in running “off into the bushes” (253), if what you run away from is the oppressive presence of all too subjective emotions. When, having driven her car off the road, Violet had concealed herself in the roadside bushes to avoid assistance from other drivers, she found herself stranded in deep misery. Trapped and scratched by the bushes, she was finally discovered by Wyck, a man who “didn’t seem the least surprised to find a person in that predicament” (253). Feeling like an animal in a trap, and seeing this “dutiful” man in a summer suit going about the business of disentangling her, Violet had suddenly been released into laughter as pure possibility-space. This space has little—or indeed nothing—to do with the emotional self-concern of her normal existence.

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Characters are temporarily to be held in zones of renewed emotion. Denise in “White Dump” is troubled by happiness. As a grown-up, remaining in a grievous remembrance of her parents’ divorce, she can still be struck by unfair, “unbidden thoughts” of accusation (*PL* 288). But at a visit to the family summer house, she apprehends how her father’s new wife is unconcerned about their distressing repetitive arguments. “Magda floats on top of these conversations, smiling at her flowers” (277). Magda is a woman overly concerned with style and design, and irritating as that may be to Denise, she cannot help but absorb some of Magda’s seemingly superficial attitude. Taking on an attitude of light-hearted innocence, she “has been able to slip past” all comments that might cause a quarrel (277). For a brief moment, Denise is allowed to see the pattern of an orderly dinner as extending into a feeling of unexpected joy. Trying to shed entangled feelings about a painful past and a set of political opinions ridiculed by her father, she tentatively thinks that perhaps “this is happiness” (288). Not totally convinced, Denise may still see how an ordinary dinner party might extend into “layers of harmony and satisfaction” (288).

That disconnected orders of significance exist quite incomprehensibly or unremarkably in certain contexts is accentuated by Denise’s grandmother’s childhood memory. An upper class girl, Sophie is intrigued by the wildness of the poor Bryce children. She dreams up images of how to sophisticate them, but when she is once allowed to invite one of them to her house, she is even more fascinated by the Bryce girl’s complete ignorance of all supposedly splendid things in a rich family’s environment.

She would not indicate a preference of any kind. She wouldn't say what sort of sandwiches or cookies or drink she wanted, and wouldn't choose to go on the swing or the teeter-totter, or to play by the water or play with dolls. Her lack of preference seemed to have something superior about it, as if she was adhering to a code of manners Sophie couldn't know anything about. (294)

The incompatibility of two systems of behavior promises an entrance into a completely new world where a new value scale applies. Enthusiasm has been freed of any materialistic burden causing it. The cancelling of a deterministic and rational ordering of things is both exhilarating and frightening. It invites a belief in forces not controllable by the human psyche. Sophie is intrigued by the circumstance that experience-islands⁶⁸ may be negative as well as positive. As a child, Sophie had found this “genuine shrinking feeling” to be “marvellous”—so why, now that she as an adult is experiencing it in an aircraft, is it no longer an “awful pleasure”? (296). “Because it was no longer her choice, now. She had a sure sense of changes in the offing, that were not her choice” (297). This rationalization may be seen as an adult attempt to reduce the inexplicable to commonsensical issues of personal liberty. It is likely that Sophie would have been able to discover instances of the “awful pleasure” and of the “shrinking feeling” in many childhood episodes that were not governed by the child's ability to freely choose the time, nature, and place of its peak excitements.

When Sophie is taken on a pleasure trip within a small aircraft on her son's fortieth birthday, the event materialises as a sense of shrinking. Unexpectedly, what has shrunk into miniature is not the world left behind at take-off but the subjectivity ascending into flight. The world-escape does not reduce the world so much as those who have become airborne. “That toylike, perfect tininess of everything had a peculiar and distressing effect on Sophie. She felt as if it was she, not the things on earth, that had shrunk, was still shrinking” (296). “Because it was not her choice, now. She had a sure curled up into that sickening dot, but not vanishing, she held herself up there” (297). The feeling is perceived to be encompassing all of them as they soar into a world of “golden” electness. Yet the sense of it all remains “incommunicable.” Something seems to be shared, but the pooled affective reality is really itemized into discrete units. Feeling refuses to relinquish its intrinsically private nature.

Her feeling of a mistake, of a queer and incommunicable problem, did not abate. It wasn't the approach but the aftermath of a disaster she felt, in the golden air—as if they were all whisked off and cancelled,

⁶⁸ The image is borrowed from “Deep-Holes” and “Circle of Prayers.”

curled up into dots, turned to atoms, but they didn't know it. (296; emphasis added)

The dot is a speck of miniature constituted by a newly-disclosed possibility space ("golden air"). As a child of "disaster," that space is fatal, but in whisking the participants "off" into the event's "golden" opportunity, its uplift is regenerating. In the same peculiar manner, the evening when the in many ways unhappy ending of Laurence's and Isabel's marriage starts is allowed to be infused by a blissful atmosphere. This evening contains nothing of the ordinary grudges and constraining remarks of their family constellation. The possibility-space facing Isabel in the rich gaze from the man who has taken her family up in the aircraft is not so much an invitation to infidelity as it is a promise of the freedom "or not even freedom. Emptiness," that Isabel longs for (303). The excitement of that freedom gives way to a rare happiness. On the particular evening they "all felt her happiness. They felt as if an invisible, customary barrier had been removed, as if a transparent curtain had been pulled away" (306). The exhilarating feeling of the bold but respectful male gaze that Isabel has been subject to is analogous to a child's greatest wish of an unlimited resource of candy. Sophie's childhood memory of the leftovers from the production in a biscuit factory radiates as a coming true of the impossible. "It was something about the White Dump—that there was so much and that it was so white and shiny. It was like a kid's dream—the most wonderful promising thing you could ever see" (306). At a crossing between the ideal and the real, at the moment when "it flashes on you what's possible," the world of the character opens into a pure space where remote or unrealized longings materialize as the beginning of something shingly new or extraordinary (308).

4 Dividing Moments: The Event as Rupture and Release

The whole scene in front of her, of Patrick and Anna at the table, the coffee pot with dribbles down the side, the jar of marmalade, was exploding with joy and possibility and danger.

—Alice Munro, “Mischief”

The break of the marriage in “White Dump” materializes in a transforming beam of light that has no source in any characters’ agency, but is a rupture with uncanny significance to their lives. Something similar could be said of the constituting light of the literary work of art in so far as its finished form exhibits a quality of energy that deprives the artist of final or exhaustive authority over the artefact.⁶⁹ We see this state of affairs in “Material,” where a woman is shown writing a letter to her ex-husband, congratulating him on a published story of his. In it, a moment of their past lives has passed into art:

I was moved by Hugo’s story; I was, I am, glad of it, and I am not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks. There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. It is an act of magic, there is no getting around it; it is an act, you might say, of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love. A fine and *lucky benevolence*. (*SMT* 43; emphasis added)

The words “lucky benevolence” suggest that something given, somewhere to the side of the creative process, is decisive for its materialization. This factor

⁶⁹ Maurice Blanchot speaks of this predicament as “the solitude of the work.” He means that the bringing into being of a literary work “excludes the complacent isolation of individualism; it has nothing to do with the quest for singularity” (21). The person writing “is set aside” in the process of writing literature (21).

is present even in conditions of presumed mastery where human agency does not seem to be at the “mercy” of anything whatsoever.

At the same time, at dinner, looking at my husband Gabriel, I decided that he and Hugo are not really so unlike. Both of them have managed something. Both of them have decided what to do about everything they run across in this world, what attitude to take, how to ignore or use things. In their limited and precarious ways they both have authority. They are not *at the mercy*. Or think they are not. (43–44)

The sudden hesitation about being or not being subordinated to a “benevolence” exceeding all human agency triggers her act of protesting resistance against the authorial image of Hugo’s personalized aesthetic competence. This protest itself manifests the process it wishes to prioritize, namely a reversal of the creative momentum where its constitution is ahead of the subject constituting it. There are fits of unknowing that do not properly belong to a fully premeditating agency.

After the boys had gone to bed and Gabriel and Clea had settled to watch television, I found a pen and got the paper in front of me, to write my letter, and my hand jumped. I began to write short jabbing sentences that I had never planned:

This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn’t. You are mistaken, Hugo. (44)

This truth that suddenly emerges does not materialize as a train of thought in the writer’s powers of reasoning, but as the urgent speaking of a compelling energy surrounding the common workings of consciousness. Understanding writing as compellation involves surrender to the nature of that force, and surrender to the logical “impossibility” of its idea. Finally, it is only the impossible that is compelling. It belongs to a possibility-space where possibility has “jumped” outside itself.

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In terms of aesthetics, the possibility-space becomes the affective sphere of submitting to an allure’s constitution. In the aesthetic cohesion formed by joint surrender to the creative momentum, there is always a hidden fragility exhibiting art’s readiness to quickly fall back into the paltry structure of normality. Consider Edgar and Sam, the cousins in “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” who in their spare time train to become acrobats. In the aesthetic formation they strain to take control over their bodies and the laws of gravity.

They shaped their bodies into signs—into hieroglyphs—eliminating to an astonishing degree their separateness and making the bumps of heads and shoulders incidental. Sometimes, of course, these creations toppled, everything came apart, arms and legs flew free, and grappling bodies reappeared—just two boys’ bodies, one tall and slight, the other shorter and sturdier. They began again, building jerkily. The balancing bodies swayed. They might topple, they might hold. All depended on whether they could *subdue* themselves into that pure line, invisibly join themselves, attain the magic balance. Yes. No. Yes. Again. (*PL* 135–136; emphasis added)

In a crossing of bodies and ideas, mass becomes language and language becomes mass. The boys set themselves to explore the possibilities of their materiality as idea. In the forceful act of dominion there is the opposing subjugation. They must trust themselves to the very laws that threaten to overbalance them. That the boys “subdue” themselves does not mean that they are lacking in intensity or strength. On the contrary, they *gain* force through subjugation. Badiou speaks of this phenomenon as a fidelity to the trace of the aesthetic event.⁷⁰ The submission is a trust, but it also contains a giving into the challenge and charm of form in matter. The choreographically pure structure that holds Edgar and Sam together depends on a certain type of balancing-act as well as an unquestioned belief in the immanent necessity of the practice. What can be judged useless and meaningless in a different system of values, is here seen as sensible. If complete belief in the aesthetic compellation topples, form might scatter, shattering the possibility-space of precise performance. The particular type of immanent belief shown in the boys’ exercises is crucial to the tension of the story.

At the age of seventeen, Edgar and Sam move from the country into the small town of Gallagher in order to attend Business College. As lodgers at Kernaghan’s boarding house, they meet Callie, a strange girl of unknown origin. She seems oddly detached from the hardships of her life. Supposedly the adopted child of Miss Kernaghan, the owner of the boarding house, Callie is made to take care of most of the work at the house. People “called her a drudge,” but the “mistake they made was in thinking that she minded” (133). What others view as a dreadful life is paradoxically manifested as being of a higher order. “Far from being oppressed by all the work she had to do, she gloried in it” (142). Escaping the banality of simply being subject to her own tragedy, Callie’s life is set in a realm ruled by a quite different order. It is governed by the type of fatal strategy that Baudrillard highlights as the “deviation of things from the finalities always prescribed by the subject” (*Revenge of the Crystal* 17). The “possibilities” that Callie is “alert” to are not

⁷⁰ Alain Badiou states that the pure event is an “opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible” (*Saint Paul* 45).

personal, but appear in a situation as its immanent allure (*PL* 143). This is what Baudrillard refers to as “an enchanted order” (*Revenge of the Crystal* 17). Here object and event elude the control of the subject, and are without precise origin or end. For Callie, they are not driven by desire, but by a “challenge,” by that which is a seeming impossibility (*PL* 142). Risking “broken bones or even death,” Callie helps the boys gatecrash into the town skating rink without benefiting from this perilous act herself (141). The magic of her accomplishment is analogous to the charm of the ramshackle skating rink itself. Here an artificial moon casts a spell that enhances the sense of a given game as submission to the artificiality of its rules: “The other lights are turned off when the moon is turned on. A system of wires and ropes makes it possible to pull the tin can this way and that, creating an impression of shifting light—the source, the strong yellow bulb, being deeply hidden” (140). The presence of the magic in the rink depends on surrender to a certain truthfulness inhering in the contingency of a game’s arbitrary laws.

At this time, Sam is the one who lacks complete faith in the seriousness of the world of pure artifice. He is the one who will worry about gaps, about practical issues, and about finalities such as how to earn a living (135). In contrast, Edgar is quite untroubled by worldly problems. He has managed to enter a realm of uncanny constitution, where the only thing that matters is the electrifying specificity of certain elect phenomena. When Edgar believes he is in trouble because of his clandestine sexual encounters with Callie, he will quite seriously suggest that the boys can support themselves by doing “stunts on the sidewalk” in Toronto (148). Sam begins to see that what he has viewed as a separate world of entertaining enchantments is for Edgar something totally enmeshed with the real. As he realizes the possibility of the world to be just as it is for Edgar, he too comes to live in a reality where such a rational separation is invalid. This change of perspective has to do with a generalized dismantling of rationalism. When, for no obvious reason, Miss Kernaghan tells them the story of Callie’s birth, logic and reason seem out of place. “Truth and lies didn’t matter [...] What mattered was Miss Kernaghan’s cold emphasis as she told this, her veiled and surely unfriendly purpose, her *random* ferocity” (151; emphasis added). Here evil’s fatal randomness seems somehow to be specifically directed at the boys as a warning.

Sam had sometimes before had a sense of being in trouble, but he had always known exactly what the trouble was and what the punishment would be, and he could think his way past it. Now he got the feeling that there was a kind of trouble whose extent you couldn’t know and punishments you couldn’t fathom. It wasn’t even Miss Kernaghan’s ill will they had to fear. What was it? Did Edgar know? (151)

The coursing of fatal constitutions envelops their behavior in a momentum that is sensed as larger than the subjects it concerns. In Edgar, there is a confluence of the phenomena of compellation and the sense of possibility-space: He “could feel something being prepared—a paralyzing swipe” (151). The compellation is the enigmatic force that prompts the youths to finally make the dramatic escape to Toronto by train. The event, which for some reason materializes as a necessity, is synonymous with the possibility-space that is its eventual clearing. The flight to Toronto is permeated by an intriguing sense of ease and ungraspable elation. Sam tries to anticipate likely obstacles that might prevent their escape, only to be astonished by their complete failure to materialize: “Sam felt that he had to hold himself ready for a great assault, try to anticipate the complexities ahead so they wouldn’t take him by surprise. Then something came into his head that was *like a present*. He didn’t know where it came from” (153; emphasis added). Pure actualizations of possibility come to givenness like ideas “out of the blue” (153). Possibility is a space of certitude—benefiting from “knowledge that seemed to have simply leaked out into the air and to be waiting there to be absorbed” (155). Truth takes the form of a gift. Its certainty gushes out of an alluring crevice in the world, out of a rupturing of the ordinary. “The blast of the whistle, the departure—the escape. Escape like an explosion, setting them free” (153). What happens is beyond the plausible reach of human capability. When Callie joins the boys on the train, her materialization does not seem to “fall short of being miraculous” (155). The moment swims in a bliss derived from a sense of infallibility akin to the sensation that accompanies the illicit ventures into the Gallagher skating-rink.

They didn’t feel as if they were caught. Right away they had understood that Callie hadn’t come to bring them back. She was joining them. In her boy’s clothes, she reminded them of the cold nights of luck and cunning, the plan that went without a hitch, the free skating, speed and delight, deception and pleasure. When nothing went wrong, nothing *could go wrong*, triumph was certain, all their moves timely. (156; emphasis added)

In the figure of Callie, the boys—quite wrongly—see the source of possibility. In actual fact, its source is itself. It is the sense of *being* in a possibility-space that generates the feeling of possibility, and as soon as that space vanishes, so will the feeling and its reality.

Even Sam stopped thinking about what they would do in Toronto, whether their money would last. If he had been functioning in his usual way, he would have seen that Callie’s presence was bound to bring them all sorts of trouble once they descended into the real world, but he was not functioning that way and he did not see anything like trouble. At the moment, he saw power—Callie’s power, when she

would not be left behind—generously distributed to all of them. *The moment was flooded*—with power, it seemed, and *with possibility*. But this was just happiness. It was really just happiness. (156–157; emphasis added)

That the moment is flooded “with possibility” does not mean, we eventually come to see, that life itself and in general will be flooded with the affirmativeness of happy possibilities. Nor does it mean that life, after this flooding, will be a life of happiness. We see, in fact, “that we have a life of happiness” only as a doubling existence with which our natural, sustained life can only momentarily “intersect” (160). It is doubtful whether the amazing second-order life has really anything to do with “all that has happened to us in our lives” (160).

The elect, special, doubling of life is so elect and so special that it may not even come to “shed” any significant “light” on our existence in general (160). With its intensely illuminated moments of heightened knowing and sovereign happiness, this strange, supplementing life perhaps only sheds “light” on itself—leaving our ordinary life more or less untouched. To “intersect” (160) is not to touch, if the intersecting line merely traverses the other line as a pure cutting-across. If the elect, happiness-irradiating moment belongs only to the elect string of special moments constituted by the compellation, it remains as inscrutable as the compellation itself. It is not a matter of enlightenment, but of a recognition of the enigma of its existence. Accordingly, in his belated attempts to make sense of the marvels formerly shared with Callie and Edgar, Sam makes the frustrating discovery that they remain epistemologically inaccessible and existentially uninformative. He “never” comes to know “what to make” of the elect instants. Their directedness that does not point to a possibility-space transcendent to the gift which is the immanence of their remarkable felicity. Viewed as human behavior, the incidents, acts, and decisions that once occurred within the exalted possibility-space opened by the compellation do not make sense. From the viewpoint of rational reconstruction, they remain enigmatic. No matter how much Sam turns over this or that fragment of bygone behavior, he cannot uncover its hypothetical rationale. Lost in a morass of questions without answers—“Perhaps...Did he...did he...?”—Sam does not even know if Edgar felt that he was acting out of necessity or free choice (160). Time and thought do not lift the veil with which the event has covered itself from the moment of its first self-actualization. Like a laser-beam that cuts through the night without really illuminating much more than its own incisive path, or like the “artificial moon” that “altered colors and left some areas in near darkness” (154), the ray of felicity constituting the precious sequence of elect moments may or may not shed light on the rest of existence.

The moment of happiness he shared with them remained in his mind, but he never knew what to make of it. Do such moments really mean,

as they seem to, that we have a life of happiness with which we only occasionally, knowingly, intersect? Do they shed such light before and after that all that has happened to us in our lives—or that we've made happen—can be dismissed? (160)

If the elect happiness that is sometimes able to “intersect” ordinary life and ordinary happiness is not really synergistic at all but enigmatically self-existent, it is more or less autistic. This is why, brain-damaged in the autism of his last days, Edgar can remain in attunement with the compellation's specificity even when he declines to step out of his mental seclusion. “Edgar didn't seem to want to go out” Sam says. ‘He didn't seem to want to go out after all.’ ‘No,’ says Callie. ‘No. He's happy’” (161). As the philosophical query has reached its end-point—there seems to be no linguistic answers to Sam's questions—it is sealed in a simple statement that reveals the deep-running bond between the characters. The story closes down but it does not come to a distinct closure.⁷¹

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What is in process in “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” is also a decisive factor in “Prue.” Here, too, the compellation's possibility-space is not subordinated to any hypothetical explanation or rationale. Prue's petty thefts are constituted by a compellation rather than by a compulsion. The event of intermittently stealing things does not have its source in some inner drive. As in most Munro stories, necessity cannot be understood as a psychological effect. Prue is really no more attached to the bizarreness of her own behavior than she is to the man who wants to marry her when he has run out of women to entertain or upset him.

I think he was afraid I was going to laugh. He doesn't know why people laugh or throw their overnight bags at him, but he's noticed they do. He's such a proper person, really. The lovely dinner. Then

⁷¹ The ending of “Wigtime” from *Friend of My Youth* presents a similar type of closing down after an intimate talk between two childhood friends on the topic of the attraction and disappointments of men. Briefly, Anita can see a power that runs to the side of her own intentions, wishes or endeavors. “We had power, Anita thought. It's a power of transformation you have, when you're stuffed full of fear and eagerness—not a thing in your life can escape being momentous. A power you never think of losing because you never know you have it” (*FY* 273). Having understood this, the narrator transplants the epiphanic moment into the landscape, where everything “seems bright and distinct and harmless. Spellbound.” (273-274). However, the story ends with a leveling of epiphany, pulling it back into the perspective of the characters. “Margot and Anita have got this far. They are not ready yet to stop talking. They are fairly happy” (274). We see a similar ending in *Wigtime* as we do in “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink,” but instead of a closing down there is a promise of continuation.

she comes and throws her overnight bag. And it's quite reasonable to think of marrying me in a few years' time, when he gets over being in love. (*MJ* 133).

For the reader, Prue might easily have been turned into an object of pity, being something of a stand-in for Gordon's ex-wife and for various girlfriends. However, the focus is not really on the subjectivity of her personal feelings but on inanimate units of the non-subjective world, on things that by definition evade any psychological prying. Instead of being directed psychoanalytically to hypothetical causes that might make behavior somehow understandable, we are introduced to the alarming but also refreshing possibility that "there is no explanation ever" (129). So, while people are ready to feel sorry for Prue, thinking that she never makes any real demands or complaints, she remains a hard nut to crack, keeping her integrity, just as the story does. Prue's bizarrely unimportant thefts of worthless trinkets are too uncanny and slight to signify, being the discrete gestures of an inscrutable choreography without apparent human agency. Prue, the text's subject, is not presented as an interesting case soliciting inquiry. As the trinkets are "just taken" and "put away in the dark," Prue simply remains the slimmed, etched outlines of the figure who is perceivable through her miniscule thefts, completely hidden from subjectivizing analysis. There is no psychologizing. Prue is under no significant compulsion, yet the objects, "the pieces of nonsense" compel her (133). The compellation is not a form of possession. Prue is precisely *not* possessed by the idea of stealing the objects. Her excitement does not concern some hypothetical relationship between herself and the object (the thing to be stolen). Instead, the thrill lies in the curious inexplicability of just taking. Taking is a form of desire, but just-taking is not. It is a form of taking. The sequence of negations—"not," "not," "*not*," "never," "not," "don't," "does not," "*doesn't*," "*doesn't*,"—points to the austerity of the reduction that serves the purpose of inhibiting a commonplace psychologism that would conveniently grasp this special possibility-space as an aberration of human behavior to be resolved by diagnosis, reason, care, and healing.

Now the tin has in it several things besides the cufflink—all small things, not of great value but not worthless, either. A little enamelled dish, a sterling-silver spoon for salt, a crystal fish. These are *not* sentimental keepsakes. She never looks at them, and often forgets what she has there. They are not booty, they don't have ritualistic significance. *She does not* take something every time she goes to Gordon's house, or every time she stays over, or to mark what she might call memorable visits. *She doesn't* do it in a daze and *she doesn't* seem to be under a compulsion. She just takes something, now and then, and puts it away in the dark of the old tobacco tin, and more or less forgets about it. (133)

In the brightness of their self-existent glitter, the (undesired) trinkets beckon to be “picked up” and “dropped into a pocket” (133). They are themselves the constituting source of theft. They are the agents. If there is any play or tension of feeling it is in *them*. They irradiate certain micro-commands, quietly insisting on the tiny event in which they get stolen. Prue is enveloped in what Baudrillard sees in the fetish as its “fatal strategy,” its ability to perform “this miracle of erasing the accidentality of the world and substituting for it an absolute necessity” (*Fatal Strategies* 114). As an instantiation of smallness, each insularly discrete trinket calls attention to the fatal item’s outline as an energized silhouette that fails to belong to the cohesive features of the world. It is each elect object’s small destiny to lack a proper place or meaning in a universe where each component of existence has a place, and where each human act has an evident or hidden meaning.

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In “Circle of Prayer,” glittering trinkets are equally poignant. Without knowing how to drive, a young girl has for some reason got behind the wheel of a car and crashed into a tree. At the funeral, her classmates file past the half-open coffin, each making her personal sacrifice. “All this jewellery went flashing and sparkling down on the dead girl” (*PL* 263). The sacrificial act becomes an esoteric, almost gemological event of a largely unexplained order, and for this very reason stands out as an eerie parade of fatal appearances. Nobody

made a move to stop it. How could anyone interrupt? It was like a religious ceremony. The girls behaved as if they’d been told what to do, as if this was what was always done on such occasions. They sang, they wept, they dropped their jewellery. The sense of a ritual made every one of them graceful. (263)

One of the girls has put a precious family necklace into the coffin. For her mother, Trudy, this is a huge loss. Her colleague at the Home for Mentally Handicapped Adults mentions the ‘Circle of Prayer’ as a possible source of consolation. The sense of self-justifying formality is present in this proceeding too. A prayer is passed along a chain of people who phone one another about something that has upset the first caller. With the exception of this person, the ones who come to pray are unaware of the reason or source of the prayer. It is a non-synergistic praying in which devotion is not a rapport between the individual and God but a closed circuit where desire is replaced by sympathy, as the anonymous prayer is passed from person to person. “It’s not strictly speaking religious,” Janet says. ‘I mean, it’s not connected with any church’” (268). Ridiculing the circle, Trudy points to the impossibility of retrieving lost objects or persons by means of prayer. Yet, the se-

riousness of it remains as Janet remarks that Trudy has no real authority over “what’s possible or impossible” (269).

Here again, the phenomenon of possibility is accentuated. No one ‘decides’ or stands at the helm of decision-making. Acts and events have their sources in themselves. Inexplicable, their credibility is immanent rather than depending on explanatory contexts hypothetically determining them. Trudy has begun to slip into the world where things are self-credible—as astonishing but also as fatally inevitable as the line of teenage girls with precious pieces of jewellery. One can “let them go” into the coffin for no real reason at all. The letting-go is itself the reason. In this milieu strangely deprived of psychology, logic, and causation, there is an absence of motivating constitutors for events and actions, and concomitantly an uninhibited release towards facts, objects, and their possibility. The rationally commonplace gives way to the unreal as real.⁷² Instead of the exposure of the act as a revealing of its cause there is an aesthetic illumination of its enigma.

This storyline meshes with the narration of Trudy’s prolonged break-up with Dan and with an account of some incidents at the Home. The realistic recounting of domestic and professional trivia serves to increase rather than diminish a sense of inevitability. When Dan leaves Trudy for the second time, his passivity seems to be part of an outcome towards which they are both helplessly drifting: “He seemed paralyzed. She felt that he might just sit there, repeating what she said, never be able to move or speak for himself again. ‘If you feel like this, that’s all there is to it,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to choose. You’re already gone’” (267). At this moment, there is no sense of decision in either of them, yet Trudy finds that she fits perfectly into this lack, deriving an unusual exactness of presence from the intrinsic impulse of inevitability. Her “movements seemed skilful and perfect, as they never were, usually. She felt serene. She felt as if they were an old couple, moving in harmony, in wordless love, past injury, past forgiving. Their goodbye was hardly a ripple” (267). Separation is engineered by the sense of a quiet compulsion that would have been surprising for anyone who had not surrendered personal agency to the coursing of things to come. Dramatic instants that ought to be moments of human decision are just particles of the fatal coursing—cool and insular. Here, real life is presented as a sequence of disconnection or of empty connections. What keeps things together is little more than the enigmatic run of events. Its direction is itself the (quite unknowable) principle of meaning. This troubles the protagonist, but only on a rational level.

⁷² Maurice Natanson: “‘Irreal’ does not mean ‘unreal’; ‘irreal’ signifies a turn away from the given fact or event in a situation of any kind to, instead, the possibility of that fact or event” (*The Erotic Bird*, 26–27).

Trudy can't stand to watch those old reruns of *Dallas*, to see the characters, with their younger, plumper faces, going through tribulations and bound up in romantic complications they and the audience have forgotten all about. That's what's so hilarious, Janet says; it's so unbelievable it's wonderful. All that happens and they just forget about it and go on. But to Trudy it doesn't seem so unbelievable that the characters would go from one thing to the next thing—forgetful, hopeful, photogenic, forever changing their clothes. That it's not so unbelievable is the thing she really can't stand. (258–259).

The possibility of things being insular and unrelated is difficult to bear, since it means that they cannot be understood or controlled by the human intellect. There is an ordering of episodes and feelings that is plausible without at all being anchored in a logical sense of plausibility. Caught in the eventually real but psychologically unlikely, people are lifted slightly out of the believable. A taken for granted circumstance of time as passing of moments is revealed as frightening in the actors' obliviousness of loss. They are unconcerned about things out of their power. The past, irrevocably lost, no longer matters to them and the future is a vast unknown towards which they are inevitably directed.

Psychologically unlikely are also Trudy's feelings—during her honeymoon—when watching Dan's mother play a classical piece on the piano over and over again. Suddenly, the space in which she was standing is a pure circle of sadness, something quite unjustified for someone who at that moment was living in a sea of happy erotic love. Instead of seeking to smooth over the disparity between the feeling and its affective counter context, Trudy accentuates the contrast by noticing how it mirrors in reverse a present predicament: when Dan had left her in the morning, she had not, as when listening to the piano, been a little circle of misery standing in a life of happiness, but a little circle of love standing in a life of misery. Here, life's context does not explain anything. It is the individual, seemingly unjustified moment that is the secret to existence. It is the "clear patches" that give hope, not life itself (273). The striking disconnection between the clearings and life offers a release that lacks illumination.

Why does Trudy now remember this moment? She sees her young self looking in the window at the old woman playing the piano. The dim room, with its oversize beams and fireplace and the lonely leather chairs. The clattering, faltering, persistent piano music. Trudy remembers that so clearly and it seems she stood outside her own body, which ached then from the punishing pleasures of love. She stood outside her own happiness in a tide of sadness. And the opposite thing happened the morning Dan left. Then she stood outside her own unhappiness in a tide of what seemed unreasonable like love. But it was the same thing, really, when you got outside. What are those times that stand out, *clear*

patches in your life—what do they have to do with it? They aren't exactly promises. *Breathing spaces*. Is that all? (273; emphasis added)

Trudy not only experiences being slightly separated from her emotional life; feelings are also disconnected from life itself. In these ruptures, the sense of possibility arises, not as a personal wish but as an unknown opening clearly out of her influence.

Still intrigued by the issue of prayer, Trudy finds herself not only posing a question she did not know that she was going to ask, but also being strangely irradiated by the answer forwarded by one of the residents.

“If I was smart enough to know what to pray for,” he says, “then I wouldn't have to.”

He smiles at her, with some oblique notion of conspiracy, offering his halfway joke. It's not meant as comfort, particularly. Yet it radiates—what he said, the way he said it, just the fact that he's there again, radiates, expands the way some silliness can, when you're very tired. In this way, when she was young, and high, *a person or a moment could become a lily* floating on the cloudy river water, perfect and familiar (274; emphasis added).

Here the lily is not “familiar” by materializing out of a familiar reality (“the cloudy river water”). It is “familiar” because it belongs to a possibility-space (indicated by the word “could”) where things are perceivable as fitting perfectly into a recognizable order of electness *once they have appeared there*. What matters is not the value of meaning of such things, but their common immersion in the special light that gives them separateness. It is the “reruns” (258) of fatal sequences that makes their endemic phenomena “familiar” (274). The poignancy of these lines derives from passing insight into the eventual reach of the familiar. Ordinary life suddenly unconceals its spaces of elusive possibility of significance. The radiation, expansion, and floating go nowhere but stay in the flare of the moment's brief spell. The sense of flotation announces the paralysis of a beauty that haunts. The lily marks a poise whose insular stillness depends on a compression of energy. In this energy, the narrative does not come to meaning or to thematic resolution but to a fleeting sensation of fatal suggestion.

*

The ‘circle of prayers’ is a closed circuit—much like the pieces of evidence that bring Mr. Willens' fate in “The Love of a Good Woman”⁷³ into an orbit

⁷³ Robert Thacker has called “The Love of a Good Woman” a “central Munro text” (“Introduction: Alice Munro, Writing ‘Home’: ‘Seeing This Trickle in Time.’” in *Essays in Cana-*

of retrospective hints that fail to elucidate anything transcendent to their discrete existence. A box of medical instruments has been anonymously donated to the local museum. The equipment once belonged to the drowned optometrist. The objects might have become evidence in a murder trial. But the story allows them to remain singular—signifying little beyond their hermetic allure much like the discovered car in the water.

By mere coincidence, three boys find the car in which Mr. Willens' body remains submerged in the river. For them, the event of finding the vehicle is a fatal moment with a force that totally enwraps them. It entails a sense of surpassing authority as an arresting instant "of deepening respect, even of gratitude" (*LG* 7). The event signals the ever-existing possibility of normality's rupture and of significance as materializing from nothing but disconnected circumstances. The discovery cannot be processed in patterns of generally accepted knowledge, and therefore the act of communicating the news to adults is problematic. Those who have made the discovery stand clearly separated from the event. The pre-adolescent boys find themselves marooned in an evental isolation that is also a freedom, since they lack the status of grown-ups as well as the innocent incapability of infants. The liminal space between childhood and adulthood is accentuated by the deserted place where the boys go out to seek for adventures. In this space, they are also physically to the side of the social structure of small town life. Here they "talked as if they were free—or almost free—agents, as if they didn't go to school or live with families or suffer any of the indignities put on them because of their age" (10). Citizens of the event, the boys are emancipated into a space of fatal energies where the crisscrossing of fatal forces has made personhood insubstantial and social affiliations redundant. As an evental community, the group is not really a social construct, but a constellation of human figures constituted by possibility:

And yet they hardly thought of each other as friends. They would never have designated someone as a best friend or a next-best friend, or juggled people around in these positions, the way girls did. Any one of at least a dozen boys could have been substituted for any one of these three, and accepted by the others in exactly the same way. (11)

Here anonymity is almost aesthetic, making possible an attunement to something elusive in existence. At the moment of discovery, the presentation of suddenly-revealed phenomena produces a sense of reverence and awe. "'Son of a gun,' [...]. With gathering energy and a tone of deepening respect, even of gratitude. '*Son of a gun*'" (7). Being eventually stranded, the boys feel that

dian Writing 66, 1998) 1. Further, Dennis Duffy discusses it in terms of a "pivotal work in the structure" of Munro's fiction and "the capstone of the temporal arch that her narrative arc has been spanning over the history of Sowesto (a popular term for Southwestern Ontario)" (169).

the thing discovered is too excessive to be easily reported in the adult world. When they at last encounter a retired officer, it is ironically the circumstance that he is deaf that makes him the adult person most suitable to 'receive' the awesome news. The "decision to do this was made without any consultation" (29). Like the boys, the deaf man lives in a state of apartness from most adult life in the little town (29). He cannot discern what they have to tell him without his hearing aid. By the time he has fixed it for them to reiterate the news, the proposed act of disclosure turns unexpectedly into a prank. Instead of narrating what they have discovered, one of the boys yells: "'Your fly's undone,' ... Then they all whooped and ran away" (29). The hilarious postponement of the testimony of what they have seen comes to givenness as fidelity not to factual truth but to eventual truth. The appropriate sense of respect and amazement cannot be adequately rendered in human language but must be turned into a joke. The boys feel an awkwardness in having to reveal what they have discovered, since it is not likely that the event will be received in the form of a revelation. It will probably not be left in its awesome state of possibility. The inability to communicate the separate event makes the ability to communicate anything whatever all the more important. This is why a trivial piece of alien news becomes such a welcome interruption. "'I got money,' Cece said. This matter-of-fact announcement brought them all relief" (27). It keeps them upbeat, just as their prank does. "Their elation did not vanish right away. But it was not something that could be shared or spoken about: they had to pull apart" (30). The event and its passing stages obviously do not fit into regular forms of interaction and communication. It is too wild to enter into a set discourse. However, the story suggests that Captain Tervitt has somehow picked up the self-contained implications of the joke as connected to the event. Instead of an expected reprimand, the insult "remained a secret" (31). The extraordinary resurfacing of the body in the car is drawn into normality by authorities appointed to safeguard against the irrational in life. "A police car drove into Jutland from the township road, and all was confirmed" (30). However, the solitary character of Captain Tervitt upholds the immanent glory of the event and accentuates its emancipating power. With his "noble and clownish white hand," he "gave consent" (31). The enchantment of the enigmatic death and its aftermath give the boys unexpected leeway. They are confined to lives where names and pet names will stick for generations and where family arrangements are suffocatingly restrictive, but the daring existence out in the area of Jutland offers them resurrection from a depressing life. Jumping into the freezing spring water, they would "feel the cold hit them like ice daggers," (5) only to be relieved and overwhelmed by the feeling of "the painful recapture of their bodies by their startled blood" (5). They have physically roused their bodies back into a life no longer limited. Their boast became true.

In the ensuing three sections of the story, Enid, a nurse who tends to dying people in their homes, takes over. She will show a similar escape from conventional entrapment. What factually holds together the various sections

of the story is the mystifying event of Mr. Willens's drowning, but disclosure concerning that event is constantly side-tracked by what is unpredictable and contingent in life. Like the boys, Enid exists a little to the side of the social order. She is a "saint" whose "hope was to be good, and do good," but "she was slightly set apart" (41). Like the boys and like the deaf captain, Enid is a solitary figure, easily exposed to eventual fatality (41). Her life seems accompanied by something that precedes personal decision and a transcendent credo. She "quickly and easily" slipped into her "essential, central, yet isolated role" of philanthropy (41). This "had been her role all along" (41). "She did not seem to have made a choice this way" but her faith and ambition to serve and tend neatly coincides with the course of her life (41). The title of the story—"The Love of a Good Woman"—most obviously refers to Enid, but her philanthropic wish to "be good, and do good" will fall short of goodness and virtue here (41). Enid's attempt to please her dying father by promising to give up her plans to become a professional nurse is not altogether virtuous. "The deathbed promise, the self-denial, the wholesale sacrifice. And the more absurd the better. This was what she had given in to. And not for love of her father, either (her mother implied), but for the thrill of it. Sheer noble perversity" (40). As Catherine Sheldrick Ross suggests, the polarities of the good woman/bad woman are not fixed. Echoes from previous stories add to the complexity of the characters (791–794). However, whereas Ross wants to place Enid among the variants of invading practical nurses, Mary McQuade in "Images" and Audrey Atkinson in "Friend of My Youth," I see stronger parallels to Flora in "Friend of My Youth" and Callie in "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink." More than being a static figure of simpleminded brutality, Enid like Flora and Callie is evasive. Enid can try "a joke where it had hardly a hope of working" (*LG* 33). Flora has "the air of a comedian—sportive, unpredictable" (*FY* 7). As Callie "seemed quite extensive," and "unwieldy and complicated" (*PL* 146), Enid is "stubborn" and "secretive" (*LG* 42). Glorifying in the martyr-like occupation of tending to the dying, "sniffing out rampant impurity," (*LG* 38) she might justly be described as a "Presbyterian witch" like Flora (*FY* 21–22), but a sensitivity towards possibility suggests an extension of this view. These characters are allowed to keep their integrity. Struggling with the contradiction between "giving in" to the sacrilegious promise that she believes exceeds her and her propensity for self-determination, Enid finds a linguistic leap hole that allows her to return to nursing without regrets. "That promise," she said to her mother the next day. "That was about working in a hospital, wasn't it?" (*LG* 42). Through Enid, the story builds up a tension between free will and religious determinism that is comic at times, but the implications of choices or non-choices, of prayers and the ridiculing of prayers, are disturbing to an ego-centric view of life-control. When Enid's mother interprets Enid's need for time to think about a job-offer as a need for praying, she refuses to reveal herself or simplify the notion of a prayer. "You mean pray?" her mother said, and Enid's face took on a stubborn,

secretive expression that in another girl's case might have had to do with meeting her boyfriend" (42). As she still supports Enid's negotiations for making it possible for her to take the job, she cannot refrain from pointing out the irrational decision to this self-sacrificing job as opposed to "the possibility of a decent job" (42). This is, however, not a "real" option for Enid who refuses to do things in an "orderly, customary" way (41). A possibility is perhaps something less predictable than circumstances that one imagines will make up a successful life.

The story is deeply concerned with the justification of choices and matters of good and evil. Enid is fatally immersed in incongruous forms of gross depravity, in sinister fantasies devoid of any known explanatory rationale. "In the dreams that came to her now she would be copulating or trying to copulate (sometimes she was prevented by intruders or shifts of circumstances) with utterly forbidden and unthinkable partners. [...] she would set to work with roughness and an attitude of evil pragmatism" (51). Enid is somehow not concerned with the evil that she keeps constituting. She does not experience herself as its agent. In order to psychologize, internalize, and trivialize evil, she rejects a theological form of analysis that promotes a paradigm of invasive exteriority. The words "[s]urely not" (51) suggest that the notion of invasive force may be stronger than Enid wishes to suppose. The text suggests that it is possible, within a certain possibility-space, that she does not cause evil, but that it may be an "invasion" foreign to her (51). Evil may be something "that grabs us when we are sleeping; pain and disintegration lie in wait" (52), or it may be "something deliberately vile," as that which infuses her patient's diabolical laughter (56). This is a viciousness that in one's mind might orchestrate a detailed narrative in order to ruin Rupert's life. When Mrs. Quinn tells the story of Mr. Willens' death, hints of its validity point in several contradictory directions. There is a possibility of its being a lie constituted as a fatal drama that stages itself in the same manner as Enid's dream. This viciousness somehow does not concern Enid. She leaves it at what it is, a fatal datum that cannot be adequately extinguished but circumscribed. Before becoming defensively dismissive, internalizing her predicament, she has an intuition of the tremendousness of what is happening:

If she were a Catholic, she thought, was this the sort of thing that could come out at confession? It didn't seem like the sort of thing she could even bring out in a private prayer. She didn't pray much anymore, except formally, and to bring the experiences she had just been through to the attention of God seemed absolutely useless, disrespectful. He would be insulted. *She was insulted, by her own mind.* Her religion was hopeful and sensible and there was no room in it for any sort of rubbishy drama, such as *the invasion of the devil* into her sleep. The filth in her mind *was in her*, and there was no point in dramatizing it and making it

seem important. Surely not. It was nothing, just the mind's garbage.
(51)

The desire to conveniently reduce the sense of diabolical mental intrusion to a harmless entity that the mind somehow has “just” put into itself tallies with Enid’s pragmatic religiosity. Continuing to work is the “best way to be penitent” as far as she is concerned (52).

The text is focused on the issue of depravity in conflicting ways, seeing depravity as theologically related to the opposition between guilt and the absence of guilt, between repentance and the absence of repentance, between conscience and the absence of conscience, between agency and the absence of agency, between choice and the absence of choice, between free will and the absence of free will, between predestination and the absence of predestination. The theological framework is put in place by references to the Reformation (48), to the Edict of Nantes (48), to the phenomenon of prayers (53), to blessings (53), to penitence (52), to Catholicism (51), to “depravity” (51), to the devil (51), and to election (48). In Enid’s rational and self-reassuring dismissal of these notions, their possibilities and implications accentuate their poignancy. On the one hand the Edict of Nantes materializes as a mere unit of useless information in a book. On the other hand, the Edict signals controversy over theological issues that have a bearing on the relation between conscience, depravity, guilt, and confession—things that begin to concern Enid. Is “the attention of God” to “depravity,” to “an attitude of evil,” and to “filth” (51) to be answered by a human effort “to be good” (52)? And, “if a person does something very bad, do they have to be punished?” (66). Or ought there be surrender to a principle of predestination conforming to the knowledge that life “can get turned on its head in an instant” in a world where evil simply “grabs us,” where “pain and disintegration lie in wait” as “horrors” pushing every “lovely life” to “disaster,” and where “pretending it wasn’t so” only aggravates the “end” (52). It may be wise to disregard the reality of “Nantes” or “the Tyrrhenian Sea” (46). “Where, where exactly, *is* the Tyrrhenian Sea” (47; emphasis added)? What *was* the history of the Reformation, the Edict of Nantes (48), the dream “slick with lust,” “this coldness of heart, this matter-of-fact depravity,” this “unrepentant” being that is a “carcass” yet still Enid, this perversity that is “hollow and groaning” with its “sweaty” look of “disgust and humiliation” (51). “Surely not” (51)—the two words point to Enid’s uncertainty. These may *be* the point in “dramatizing” (51). These may *be* the point in being the chosen few, those “grave and docile children” remaining when others have “been weeded out” (48). The event of becoming a subject of truth⁷⁴ does not

⁷⁴ In Badiou’s words, the subject of truth is “the bearer [*le support*] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation ‘before’ the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject” (*Ethics* 43).

involve a relinquishing of morality and faith but a renewal of these in which they are freed from subjectivity's assertiveness. In the disconnected layers of meaning concerning Doctor Willens in the pond, the question of guilt and penance is reconfigured so as to encompass a fading away of personhood, of self-control, and of choice. Enid remembers the reverence and enchantment that she used to feel for knowledge that was quite unconnected to her person. What seems useless and unconnected might be usefully connected to the individual in ways exceeding the ones anticipated by the mere dissemination of educative information:

Edict of Nantes. The very uselessness, the exotic nature, of the things in those books and in those students' heads, in her own head then and Rupert's, made Enid feel a tenderness and wonder. It wasn't that they had meant to be something that they hadn't become. Nothing like that. Rupert couldn't have imagined anything but farming this farm. It was a good farm, and he was an only son. And she herself had ended up doing exactly what she must have wanted to do. You couldn't say that they had chosen the wrong lives or chose against their will or not understood their choices. Just that they had not understood how time would pass and leave them not more but maybe a little less than what they used to be. (48)

The passing of time leaves certain monumental events as facts recorded in books but leaves Enid only with its passing. Time's lack of interest in her—its indifference to her choices, all fading before the constituting force of predestinating chance—makes it possible for Enid to step out of any sense of personal importance, and this reduction is a condition of possibility for the regeneration she comes to undergo.⁷⁵ As long as she believes that she has to sort everything out, that she has to be in charge for anything to happen, there will not be any renewal. For her to find release, release needs to find her.

Enid goes out to the river, and stands there just watching “a boat moving. Tied to a branch, a plain old rowboat was being lifted very slightly, lifted and let fall. Now that she had found it, she kept watching it, as if it could say something to her. And it did. It said something gentle and final. *You know. You know*” (63–62). Suddenly Enid's life undergoes a deviation. Realizing that she is not in control, in need of “establishing order where there was none before” (52), and that it is not up to her to judge or find out about anyone's guilt, she enters a state of release. The uncertainty of Rupert's guilt in the death of Mr. Willens can remain concealed. She is no longer burdened by the need or wish to confront Rupert with a question.

⁷⁵ For Del in “Princess Ida,” knowledge as facts has the possibility of being “warm and lovely” (*LGW* 62). The encyclopaedias that her mother sells embrace a layering of “mystery, of beautiful information” that can suddenly fall open in one's lap (62). Chance-like intrusions of information repeatedly show new levels of meaning in Munro's stories.

And as long as that was so, this room and this house and her life held a different *possibility*, an entirely different *possibility* from the one she had been living with (or glorying in—however you wanted to put it) for the last few days. The different *possibility* was coming closer to her, and all she needed to do was to keep quiet and *let it come* [...] She had started to weep. Not with grief but with an onslaught of relief that she had *not known she was looking for*. (75–76)

Enid is suddenly let into a field of energies where the pure constitution of events falls short of a personal shaping of human destiny. She is no longer concerned with her life as destiny. To deliberately place herself in the role of saint or martyr diminishes the progression of her own life as pure possibility. “She was embarrassed now that she had dressed herself up in readiness for such a melodramatic fate” (76). Enid somehow escapes being trapped in a pathetic role of self-sacrificer, and she also manages to break free from genre conventions such as the gothic murder or the romantic destiny.⁷⁶ She simply puts on a pair of rubber boots and meets whatever will follow: love, life, sex or death. The plane of forces that is anterior to the characters and their choices—the possibility-space as such—is not a uniform vacuum upon which their free will leaves the imprint it chooses, but is, like a weather chart, full of depressions and highs, of constituting lines and swirls that themselves have a say, compelling courses to go this way or that, choices to materialize in one way or place rather than in another. The delicacy of power and choice is presented in the narrator’s notice of a natural phenomenon.

The air was clear in some places, then suddenly you would enter a cloud of tiny bugs. Bugs no bigger than specks of dust that were constantly in motion yet kept themselves together in the shape of a pillar or a cloud, How did they manage to do that? And how *did they choose* one spot over another to do it in? (77–78; emphasis added)

The shape established by the cloud of insects manifests a compelling intensity that lacks explanatory moorings. Here, the event of coming to “choose” an appropriate “spot” is not felt to be a function of conscious selecting, but suggests the sovereignty of an elect but unpreferred locus given to those who are released from a banal world of hollow preferences and an all too self-conscious choosing. This, however, does not exclude the characters’ having preferences or possessing free will. With her strong sense of order and readi-

⁷⁶ Ildiko de Papp Carrington and Coral Ann Howells read the story as a romance, where a woman reestablishes a connection with a man from her past, whereas Dennis Duffy chooses to emphasize its gothic overtones. He argues that the heroine’s fatal attraction for self-sacrificial will most probably lead to death.

ness for work, Enid will probably make the “house into a place that had no secrets from her and where all order was as she had decreed” (77). Demanding as she is, she has still come to understand that certain things are beyond her control. Somehow re-situated in a more earthy state of mind, she welcomes “the deeply sweat-soaked skin of a hardworked man” not unfamiliar to her, “but there was something *new* and *invasive* about the smell of a body so distinctly not in her power or under her care” (77, emphasis added). The ordinary perception of a man’s appearance has taken on a heightened sense of meaning. Refraining from melodrama, Enid returns to her reality that is now transformed by something foreign to her, something that she could never have imagined because it was already there, but unnoticed. She discovers the sexual appeal of a male body.⁷⁷ Paradigmatic of Munro’s heroines, the attraction radiates with true surprise; so instead of seeming predictable it presents itself as the appearing of a miracle.

Where Dennis Duffy sees the story as permeated by “a Pauline revulsion” to the body, I see an awakening of a spiritual possibility of male and female physical attraction (184). In “The Human Body Uncovered... in Early Christianity and Buddhism,” Nadine Quehl argues for a different reading of Paul’s view of the body.

Paul’s writings were misunderstood by extreme ascetics and wrongly used to support contempt for the body [...] Paul writes in Galatians 5:16–17, “But I say, walk by the spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh....” The misinterpretation concerned Paul’s use of the word flesh (*sarx*) and spirit (*pneuma*), which many people equated with body (*soma*) and soul (*psyche*). However, Paul uses “flesh” to mean not the physical aspect but total humanity, soul and body, when it is separated from and rebelling against God. “Spirit,” then, is not soul, but total personhood when it is living in obedience to God.

She goes on to say that Paul estimates the body to be “potentially holy.” It is not the unsolvable matter of God’s existence that is in question here, but the religious overtones in Munro’s writing as referring to the spirituality of the body. In “Baptizing” the first touching of hands between Del and her lover Garnet makes her feel “angelic,” and she would rather “pay attention to his instincts” than his ideas as a regenerate Baptist (*LGW* 199, 206). It is not the

⁷⁷ In Munro’s stories there is a difference between sexuality as touched by a spirit and one that is not. If we return to “Baptizing” we see how the incipient eroticism between Del and Garnet has a rare quality to it. “This was the knowledge that is spoken of as “only sex,” or “physical attraction.” I was surprised, when I thought about it—am surprised still—at the light, even disparaging tone that is taken, as if this was something that could be found easily, every day” (*LGW* 206).

metaphysical as idea that is in focus, but the metaphysical in its bodily manifestation. The body becomes a site for possibilities of a spiritual order.

Charles E. May claims that “The Love of a Good Woman” is ambiguously open-ended and that the reader does not know “whether Enid confronts Rupert and, if she does, whether he pushes her in the river or rows them both back to the shore” (“Why Short Stories” 17). Nevertheless, the story does not primarily rely on the workings of ambiguity but on the phenomenon of possibility.

She hadn’t asked him yet, she hadn’t spoken. Nothing yet committed her to asking. It was still *before*. Mr. Willens had still driven himself into Jutland Pond, on purpose or by accident. Everybody still believed that, and as far as Rupert was concerned Enid believed it, too. And as long as that was so, this room and this house and her life held a different *possibility*, an entirely different *possibility* from the one she had been living with (or glorying in—however you wanted to put it) for the last few days. The different *possibility* was coming closer to her, and all she needed to do was to keep quiet and let it come. (*LG* 75–76; emphasis added)

The welcoming of possibility does not have its source in the character. It is rather the coming itself (“come”) that is the constituting agency, that which establishes the fatal bond between possibility and personal reality. The individual can only “let” what is coming come. This letting presupposes the coming. Growing out of eventual insularity, the possibility-space furnishes a clarity of insight that lies in wait for Enid as a “simple thing,” of the moment (76). Being intrinsic to its own situation,⁷⁸ it cannot be chosen or constituted by her. Its constitution is the event itself.

Fatal Events: Moving Beyond Coincidence

We have seen how ordinary objects and events are lifted out of ordinariness through an *immanent break* that compels the individual to perceive the situation as the possibility or necessity for a new line of action or changed mode

⁷⁸ Badiou: “At a certain moment, the set of actors of a generic procedure, of a truth-procedure, are clearly ignorant, unknowing, of what it is. This is an essential point. So nobody is in a position to say that since he *knows* the truth, he is the one who will decree [*normer*] how it is to be known, since the truth itself depends on its own production” (*Ethics* 116–117).

of conduct to appear.⁷⁹ This newness is a fragile promise of possibility in its momentary unsealing of significance. In “Comfort” too, newness materializes in a wavering position of being and not-being. When Nina returns home after a game of tennis, she finds that her invalid husband, Lewis, has taken his life. Although she is accustomed to the kind of clinical, unsentimental, and atheistic straightforwardness favored by the biology teacher she has been married to, the stark materiality of death is disconcerting for Nina. “Shifted from pillow to mattress, the head made a certain sound, a sound that was heavier than she would have expected” (*HFC* 123). The discrete particulars about corpses and funerals do not really have the effect of nauseating and shocking Nina but of moving her into an oddly renewed world that feels “cool and spacious” (153). In this new space tickling her “curiosity” (153), not only death is possible—but anything. It is “spacious” because possibility suddenly seems endless. Death has heralded this sensation, being as it were an incarnation of the impossible. It “seemed impossible that he would not still have something to say to her” (122).

The slippage of what is possible and what is impossible has made the habitual world dubious. Nina will experience this again when she receives flowers as a token of commiseration; she “felt as if she could easily throw the roses on the floor, smash the vase, squash the congealed mess in her supper plate between her fingers. But why? She wasn’t angry. It was just such a crazy effort, to keep doing one thing after another. Now she would have to warm the pot, she would have to measure the tea” (152). The man delivering the flowers is the undertaker, Ed Shore, who has cared for Lewis’s dead body, but to whom Nina also has a twofold connection. “They were a pair of people with no middle ground, nothing between polite formalities and an engulfing intimacy” (152). Nina has had an apperception of this strangely disclosed possibility-space when on one occasion, long before Lewis’s death, she managed to get away from a commonplace debate about miracles and the hypothetical existence of God. She in fact makes an encounter with actual rather than conjecturable or disputable possibility. When Ed quite surprisingly embraces her in a passage behind the kitchen where they find themselves alone “for a little while,” close to the “little pane” in the back door (146–147), the possibility-space materializes out of nowhere as a pocket in time-space where the given phenomenon needs no explanation other than possibility itself. In an alcove of the world, the tiny event sparkles in the light of its own unbelievability rather than from any signifying clarity cast by the fire of incandescent desire. “Ed Shore puts an arm around Nina. He kisses her—not on the mouth, not on her face, but on her throat. The place

⁷⁹ Badiou states that “a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the eventual supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break*. ‘Immanent’ because a truth proceeds *in* the situation, and nowhere else—there is no heaven of truths. ‘Break’ because what enables the truth-process—the event—meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation” (*Ethics* 42–43).

where an agitated pulse might be beating, in her throat” (147). The kiss lacks all amorous context, being atypical and solitary. It is cherished as something personal and bonding despite (or because of) the absence of any human reaching-out, reaching-for, or soulful fusion of beings. It seems a tribute to the fragility and miraculous of the life-nerve itself.

Her memory of Ed Shore’s kiss outside the kitchen did, however, become a treasure. When Ed sang the tenor solos in the Choral Society’s performance of the *Messiah* every Christmas, that moment would return to her. “Comfort Ye My People” pierced her throat with starry needles. As if everything about her was recognized then, and honored and set alight. (148)

The lack of extension, the kiss is not a springboard to anything else, makes it potentially holy. However, Nina is unable to take on organized metaphysical speculative conceptions of faith—yet there is a degree of faith in her recollection of Ed’s embrace: “it was not nothing” (152). Faith’s possibility-space is here opened in an aperture that lies close to the nonexistence, illusion, or negation of belief. Ed’s answer to Nina’s question about the existence of souls is delicate. “Do you believe in such a thing as souls?” He stood with his hands pressed down on her kitchen table. He sighed and *shook* his head and said, ‘Yes’” (154; emphasis added).⁸⁰ The affirmative answer and the negative movement of the head point to the impossibility of either. Yet Ed’s “yes” is akin to the one that surfaces in Nina as she disperses Lewis’s ashes. In both cases, the affirmative force materializes out of that which is the least likely to promote it. Ed’s “yes” completely contradicts his body-movement and has no organic support in it.

What Nina *saves* from the annihilation of the former life of Lewis is only a set of elect morsels rescued from the streaming of negativity, “recalcitrant” items ready to glimmer as “surviving” remnants of a bygone existence. As units of pain, the remainders point back to the lost past in which they had a situated, organic meaning (as the “bits” point to the un-cremated body) but also towards a regenerated existence. Here the saved fragment has nothing in common with anything else that is spared other than the event of regeneration and the clarity shed by its almost abstract luminosity:

Everything was *distinct* under the moon. She could smell horses. *Yes*—there were two of them close by, *solid* black shapes beyond the cattails and the farmer’s fence. They stood brushing their big bodies against each other, watching her.

She got the box open and put her hand into the cooling ashes and tossed or dropped them—with other tiny *recalcitrant* bits of the body—

⁸⁰ A similar question is asked in “Circle of Prayer” (PL 273).

among those roadside plants. Doing this was like wading and then throwing yourself into the lake for the first icy swim, in June. A sickening shock at first, then amazement that you were still moving, lifted up on a stream of *steely* devotion—calm above the surface of your life, *surviving*, though the pain of the cold continued to wash into your body. (155, emphasis added).⁸¹

In a story that debates the existence of God and leaves the protagonist in a liminal space where shadings of either standpoint are affirmative, the resistance of the corporeal pieces points to an eminence of the body and its materiality. Here as in most of the stories, fatality originates in bodily sensations and inclinations. This can be seen clearly already in “Baptizing,” a story that enters into religious precincts. Del jokingly designates her interest in a Revival Meeting as “scientific curiosity,” and as she meets her future lover at one of these meetings their first physical touch brims with fatality and a sensuous sanctity (*LGW* 195).

Our little fingers rubbing delicately against one another, his gradually overlapping mine. Hesitation; my hand spreading out a bit, his little finger touching my fourth finger, the fourth finger captured, and so on, by stages so formal and inevitable, with such reticence and certainty, his hand covering mine. When this was achieved he lifted it from the chair and held it between us. I felt angelic with gratitude, truly as if I had come out on another level of existence. I felt no further acknowledgement was needed, no further intimacy possible. (199)

Even though this is the beginning of Del’s and Garnet’s emerging erotic bond, this touching of hands holds the same lack of extension as Ed’s starry kiss in “Comfort,” as if they were embodiments of a rare and enigmatic sensuality to be absolutely honored. However, the possible spaces of love that materialize in these sensual encounters are tinged by danger and a closeness to death. Nina exposes her vulnerable throat to a man caring for the dead. In that offering, the duality of a vital eroticism and death is inherent, as it is in Nina and Lewis’ relationship where comments about religious matters could become a “deadly threat” (*HFC* 131). The rows that could follow have strangeness to them, like the “freak occurrence[s]” discussed in “Fits” (*PL* 126). “People can take a fit like the earth takes a fit” (126). The “loathing” that Nina and Lewis are lucky to get over is equated with a “narrowly escaped” earthquake (*HFC* 130). Their reunions carry an awareness of the lack of control of their own emotions, when “shaking with love” they walk “around in naked desolation” (129–130). But, just as the merciful continuation of their marriage is a possibility-space, the letting go of that tie is also

⁸¹ The sensation of an icy swim is a recurring image in Munro’s fiction, (*LG* 5; *SMT* 135).

one. Nina recovers from the overwhelming pain and survives to the cold clarity that this is the case. As the love affair, “the fatal game” between Del and Garnet ends in an attempted act of baptizing/drowning, she resurfaces empowered into a world that has resumed “its natural and callous importance” (LGW 224).

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The sense of fatal cool clairvoyance and its attraction is developed most fully in the remarkable story “Passion.” Here Munro’s aesthetic exploration of the phenomenon of compellation reaches its apogee. For no apparent reason, Grace elopes⁸² with her fiancé’s half-brother Neil. The accidental cut from a clamshell that she receives jumping from a swing opens up a possibility-space that moves beyond coincidence, not in terms of plot but in terms of what it initiates. Maury’s half-brother, who is a doctor, arrives and cares for her. Having taken her to hospital for an emergency tetanus shot, he simply leads her out the back to avoid Grace’s suspiciously prying and proprietary fiancé and drives off with her. The enigma at the core of the story’s highly intense energy-field is Grace’s inexplicable, silent acquiescence to each and every move of Neil’s eventual initiative. She remains strangely calm in view of the fact that she is just about to take off with her fiancé’s married brother. By being exterior to the compellation, her fiancé is exterior to concern. The possibility-space does not even know of this man. “She didn’t have to think of him” (R 182). In contrast, Grace and Neil are so overwhelmingly possible in this space that they hardly need to communicate. “Grace and Neil did not talk” (183). The few words they need are part of the compellation, signs belonging like tattoos to its inner membrane: “And Neil said to Grace, ‘You didn’t want to go home yet, did you?’ ‘No,’ said Grace, as if she’d seen the word written in front of her, on the wall” (182). Her name points to a transformative event that is taken for granted in the instant of its materialization. It calmly wipes out whatever had existed, being by now indifferent to her will-power (182). The predicament, phrased in Badiou’s manner, is one where she has “no power against the truth, but only for the truth” (*Saint Paul* 92). As the narrator also notes, the mechanism of choosing never even seems to be activated for Grace.

Describing this passage, this change in her life, later on, Grace might say—she did say—that it was as if a gate had clanged shut behind her. But at the time there was no clang—acquiescence simply rippled

⁸² The contemporary meaning of the word “elope” is to run from parents to marry secretly. However, the word used to mean “to run away from a husband with one’s lover” and it is in this sense that I am using it here.

through her, the rights of those left behind were smoothly cancelled (*R* 182).

The change is abrupt, violent, irreversible, and absolute, yet she is already on the hither side of the rupture, and can therefore not hear the “clang” reverberating in the old world where the new is a resounding obscenity. Grace knows that “there was nothing she could do” (181). From the perspective of the old world and its “rights” (182), there has been a calamitous upheaval, but from the viewpoint of the compellation’s regenerating clearing, nothing remarkable, offensive, strange, or unexpected has happened. Grace’s “acquiescence” is simply the compellation’s acquiescence to itself (182). It ripples “through” her as a coursing of predestination claiming “rights” that belong to no human but uniquely to fatal sensation. From the viewpoint of the old and unregenerated, the fatal event divides the past from the future by instituting a caesura promoting closure. In contrast, newness knows the past only as a foreknowing of itself. For quite some time, the compellation’s irresistible advance had been vaguely discernible to Grace. Reality “seemed slightly off kilter to her” (172–173).

Since acquiescence ripples through itself as the compellation’s assent to its regenerating sovereignty, Grace and Neil find themselves in an elopement that is “not frantic but miraculous, serene” (183). What makes the possibility-space special is not its wealth of sensual delights, but its ability to bring the two of them to “final” truth. As something predestined and “meant for them,” this new absolute is a darkness that nothing transcendent to it can illuminate. It is all that is. Its only context is itself.

She’d thought it was touch. Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone on bone. Inflammation. Passion. But that wasn’t *what had been meant for them at all*. That was child’s play, compared to how she knew him, how far she’d seen into him, now. What she had seen was final. As if she was at the edge of a flat dark body of water that stretched on and on. Cold, level water. Looking out at such dark, cold, level water, and knowing it was *all there was*” (193; emphasis added).

As I have suggested, the assent that makes this event’s passion possible is not a man’s or a woman’s acquiescence to a proposal or seducer but an assent that is internal to the compellation as pure immanence without reserve. What she meets is not a heated passion that blinds her, but one of cold clarity. Hence Grace cannot allow herself to be defensive or apologetic when her fiancé solicits a word of explanation. His plea for mercy must remain unanswered: “*Just say he made you do it. Just say you didn’t want to go*. She wrote back five words. *I did want to go*. She was going to add *I’m sorry*, but stopped herself” (196). The space where Neil and Grace actually meet is a “sanctuary,” but the only thing to be safe there is recognition, a “rock bottom” truth like the one we have seen in “*Nettles*.” The characters cannot

save themselves from the depth of what they come to see any more than they can prevent the seeing as such. That Grace is a “godsend” (181) does not point to her ability to save Neil from alcoholism, (this being only a distraction), but to the fact that they “knew some of the same things” (190). That she beholds the dimension of the “lack of hope—genuine, reasonable, and everlasting” paradoxically leads to Neil’s release (192). In congruence with her name, he does call her a “relief,” but only in terms of their sharing a sense of unfathomable space. As they finally embrace to say goodbye, he is granted a slight sense of hopeful possibility not removed from the fatal (192). The impress⁸³ he makes on her then marks her fortune with his tragic destiny. He surrounds her with his arm, “his body strong and light, demanding and renouncing all at once, as if he was telling her she was wrong to give up on him, everything was possible, but then again that she was not wrong, he meant to stamp himself on her and go” (195). The possibility-space enfolds both Neil’s mysterious accident and Grace’s beginning of a different life.

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As we now move from the possibility-space opened in “Passion” to the equally fatal one delineated in the much earlier story “Accident,” it may be useful to first review the difference between a deterministic fatalism and one that springs out of what I have called “compellation.” In order to distinguish the dramatic self-actualization of possibility-spaces in Munro’s stories from determinism, I now briefly touch certain ideas within quantum physics. As Henry P. Stapp points out, the quantum conception of the universe is one where meaning “is defined intrinsically” (194). Expanding the sense of ‘choice,’ so that it encompasses not only free human acts but also non-human paths taken in the physical universe by anything from particles to large event-branches, some quantum theorists present the vision of a constitution of reality that is not fundamentally deterministic. Here an materialization of a “quantum event” has a striking resemblance to the dramatic self-actualization of possibility-spaces in Munro’s stories. In Heisenberg’s and Dirac’s quantum system, a meaningful entity is able to meaningfully constitute itself “without any reference to any external criterion of meaning” (194). Accordingly, the “sustainability” of a possibility-space is immanently engineered. It lasts because of itself, and it is what lasts because of itself.

Each quantum choice pulls itself out of the quantum soup ‘by its own bootstraps’; *it justifies itself by the meaning inherent in the sustaina-*

⁸³ Following Coetzee in *Inner Workings* who uses this word in order to emphasize the influence Tolstoy has had on Joseph Roth, I want to draw attention to the distinctive mark that Neil leaves on Grace and to the lasting effect of the event.

bility of the form that is actualized. The ‘meaning’ of this choice, then, is not based upon anything lying outside the chosen form: it resides in the sustainability of that form itself.

This introduction of a notion of intrinsic meaning at the level of the elementary quantum event provides the rudiment of a general quantum conception of meaning based on the intrinsic criterion of sustainability. (194)

So the sustainability of the form is meaning. As something inherent in the sustained form, meaning is that form. What sustains the form is what sustains the meaning, and vice versa. The newly-constituted space is in this way self-justifying (“it justifies itself”). Self-constitution and self-justification inhere structurally in each other. Furthermore, the actual production of the quantum space and of the novelty it introduces is itself without transcendent cause or reference: it “pulls itself out” of the world by “its own bootstraps.”

The constitution of a quantum event or of a possibility-space are not processes that appear out of nothing, because as we see in Stapp’s formulations, the event arises out of a “quantum soup” rather than out of nothingness. Just as the possibility-space arises for the literary characters out of the bland “soup” of everyday transactions and conversations, the intensity of the quantum event as “local enduring form” does not constitute itself out of an absence of “quantum potentialities” but as a specific, choice-like “grasping” or “rearrangement” of such potentialities (195). The characters that find themselves in the local event within Munro’s stories are being drawn into something that is not alien to their own choices but that is not exclusively reducible to them either. Stapp and other quantum theorists speak of a non-human choice ‘made’ by the quantum event itself in the moment of its actualization. Choice here is the event’s self-actualization.

In “Accident” the self-justifying quantum event is radically limited in time and space. Two lovers meet in a supply room at the school where they both work. Ted, the science teacher, is a married man, so their meetings are a matter of secret plotting. As Frances passes the workday in a state of longing, it occurs to her that their affair might be nothing more than “a rickety invention,” something “deliberate” and “artificial” (*MJ* 79). A woman that is looking for “a chance to take chances” and who always thought that “the future had something remarkable in store for her” is prone to imagine for herself a romantic destiny of love. But even though she has somehow anticipated the whole affair, she is bewildered by the earnestness that materializes when they meet. It seems to have very little to do with their planning and conscious arrangements. In fact, as we will see, it overshadows all the implications of human initiative.

In the process of reading the story, a doubleness becomes increasingly apparent. When Frances and Ted eventually meet after work, she has “two ways of looking at him” all in one moment (82).

First, she saw him as if it was a year ago, and he was someone who had nothing to do with her. Ted Makkavala, the science teacher, not in the war, though he was under forty; he did have a wife and three children . . . It could be supposed he had a similar sighting of her, standing there looking irresolute and alarmed, with her coat over her arm and her boots in her hand.... (83)

In a world untouched by the compellation, they are two separate persons whose lives are remote. Their connection seems so far off to Frances that she is utterly confused about her next move. In the riskiness of deliberately having taken a chance on an “occasion provided” (79), it is ultimately not their efforts that will make any of their sensual embraces true or solid. Frances is painfully aware of the risk of their arrangements falling to the ground as a fanciful mistake, seeing that there “was a moment’s chance they would not be able to make the switch, to see each other differently; they wouldn’t remember how the crossover was managed or grace wouldn’t be granted them, and if that could be so, what were they doing in this place?” (83). In the vicinity of what seems to be randomness, of Frances’ own longing for “a chance to take chances,” the typical Munro fatality strikes in full force. Suddenly the nothingness of chance is no longer an issue. As Ted “drew the door shut she saw him again, the side of his face and the slant of the cheekbones, a marvelous, polished, Tartarish slant; she perceived the act of drawing the door closed as stealthy and ruthless, and she knew there was no chance in the world they would not make the switch. It was already made” (83).

It is not Ted’s acts or his looks taken separately that cause Frances to be seduced. All the details of the moment are pervaded by an immanent perfection that comes from the sense of eventual ordinance. The orderliness of the scene is there at the moment when all things are linked in a fatal instant. The sequence is actualized as a destiny that in its formation of itself injects meaning. Frances just knows that “it was not a fraud, it was all true, it surpassed everything; and the signs that it could happen—the locked eyes, the shiver along the spine, all that elemental foolishness—those were true, too” (83). As in quantum-mechanical conceptions of nature, it is “the actualizations of an entire enduring complex macroscopic form” that determine what actually happens, “not the subordinate microscopic parts” (Stapp 196). The signs are only the markers that indicate the meaning of the event in its entirety. The enigma is in the possibility for these meaningful formations: “The truth was she had not expected so much or such *purposeful* embracing” (*MJ* 84; emphasis added).

In Ajay Heble’s reading of this story, order and disruption are set up as oppositional poles where order excludes possibility or surprise. He concludes that

the story’s attempt to promote a sense of order—an order which militates against the possibility of surprise, of unexpectedness—is ulti-

mately unsuccessful because Frances realizes that what is ‘true’ about her life is that it *might have been* other than it is. Admitting the truth, in other words, involves, for Frances, an acceptance of the role of unexpected change, of possibility, of disruptive moments in the order and acquiescence of her life. What she thinks is the truth, however, can never be admitted, and can be inscribed only in a discourse of absence, because it poses a threat to the pattern and continuity—the propriety—she wants to impose on her life. Frances, then, despite thinking about how things might have been, presents, to the world, a facade of order, just as the narrator presents, to the reader, this very same facade. (138)

What Heble argues is that possibility and surprise are incompatible with order and truth. I would like to challenge this view by suggesting that the surprise is exactly what springs from the moment when the protagonist discovers order where she does not predict it. Startling moments full of immaculately-ordered significance materialize again and again in the story. Frances is overwhelmed by the truthfulness and grace that accompany Ted’s preparations for love-making in the school’s supply room.

He opened the door slightly, to give them a bit more light. He took her boots from her and set them outside the door. Then he took her coat. But instead of setting it down outside he was opening it out and spreading it on the bare boards of the floor. The first time she had seen him do something like that was last spring. In the cold, still-leafless woods he had taken off his windbreaker and spread it inadequately on the ground. She had been powerfully moved by this simple preparatory act, by the way he spread the jacket open and patted it down, without any questions, any doubts or hurry. She had not been sure, until he did that, what was going to happen. Such a gentle, steady, fatalistic look he had. She was stirred by the memory as he knelt in this narrow space and spread out her coat. (*MJ* 84)

In awe, Frances watches what is played out before her in a simple manner. What occurs there resembles the succession of movements in a ceremony where the acts do not mean anything outside their own purposeful inclusion in the event’s formal shape. They have no origin or cause other than being the awesome intimacy of the compellation. Flooded in its erotic light, these formal preparations are all the more compelling for their ability to be repeated as parts of a fatal ritual. It is noteworthy that they are quite distinct from the contrived arrangements that Ted carries out in order for the lovers to have the opportunity to be alone and undisturbed.

His displayed confidence in the lie that helps them carry out their deception will smudge Frances’ experience. “She liked the idea of his planning it, she liked to think of determined lustfulness working in him this afternoon while he was busy directing his class. And in another way she did not like it

at all; she giggled to cover some dismay or disappointment that she would not listen to” (86). The same misgiving but with larger implications is apparent when Ted refuses to assent to his son’s funeral having religious overtones.

He did it all for himself, Frances was thinking. He wasn’t thinking of Greta for a moment. Or of Bobby. He was thinking of himself and his beliefs and not giving into his enemies. That was what mattered to him. *She could not help* seeing this and she did not like it. *She could not help* seeing how much she did not like it. That did not mean that she had stopped liking him; at least, she had not stopped loving him. But there was a change. When she thought about it later, it seemed to her that up to that point she had been involved in something childish and embarrassing. (103; emphasis added)

Further insights produce a similar sense of reluctance infused with the foreboding of the weight of the gravity of one’s life. Later on, Frances’ conflicting feelings for Ted are not disappointing enough to entirely ruin her initial passion. Yet her sense of the power of fatal attraction does not obliterate an underlying sense of caution and modesty. Ted’s sense of compellation is gross and purely pragmatic—he sees the supposed inevitability of their marriage as a purely causal result of a certain set of determining factors establishing a necessity. He is so sure of marriage that he can proclaim their wedding before even making a marriage proposal. “‘My mind was made up long ago,’ said Ted. He believed that was true” (104). His view that marriage “would have happened anyway,” that sooner or later they “would have decided,” presents a sense of inevitability that is reductive from the viewpoint of the compellation’s reverberations inflecting Frances’ being (106). Ted sees marriage as necessity rather than possibility.

But it didn’t seem so to Frances, and she wondered if he said it just because he could not bear the thought of anything being set in motion outside his control—and so wastefully, so cruelly—and because he felt bound to conceal from her how small a part she herself had played in all this. No, not a small part; an ambiguous part. There was a long chain of things, many of them hidden from her, that brought him here to propose to her in the most proper place, her mother’s living room. She had been made necessary. And it was quite useless to think, would anyone else have done as well, would it have happened if the chain had not been linked exactly as it was? Because it was linked as it was, and it was not anybody else. It was Frances, who had always believed something was going to happen to her, some clearly dividing moment would come, and she could have foreseen some scandal; but not the weight, the disturbance, the possibility of despair, that was at the heart of it. (106–107)

Because the compellation has been real for Frances, she already finds its immanent truth to be different from the traditional, expected sense of a stereotypical love-fatality, which is often no more than an idealisation of an external necessity or enslaving set of determining circumstances. The fact that all acts may belong to a causal structure, however complexly woven the tapestry of circumstances might be, is not the true source of Frances' wonder. What bewilders her is the immanent arrangement of the link of events as a constitution of possibility.

In his account of paradoxes and parallels in Munro's fiction, W. R. Martin judges "Accident" to be one of Munro's less successful stories since he believes that it lacks "a dynamic interplay between two modes or principles, almost equally valid, and working perhaps through some creative friction towards a resolution or epiphany" (140). He finds the affair between Frances and Ted to be "unsatisfactory" and Frances to be "too passive a victim" (140). To my mind, this is a misjudgement of the story based on a wish to arrange it into some sort of equation that will provide a conclusion or synthesis. The full value of the compellation, which Martin clearly does not see as structurally immanent to the rest of the story, is precisely that it cannot be accommodated to any personal wish or action. Martin is right in stating that "Accident" is a tragedy, but this has to do with the limitless forces of love and death rather than with a mere curtailment of free will and choice. The gravity of love and death and of their aftermaths are per se sources of fearful energy.

The eventual effects of the tragically accidental death of Ted's son serve to affirmatively constitute what Stapp calls a "rearrangement"—one that is part of the potentiality that gets eventually chosen and that installs meaning. "Within the quantum formalism each Heisenberg/Dirac quantum choice is a grasping, as a unified whole, of a certain combination of possibilities that hung together as a local enduring form. The actualization of this form utilizes, and restructures, some of the quantum potentialities, and produces an immediate rearrangement of the possibilities available for the next event" (195). The "rearrangement" is immanent ("immediate") to the fatal coursing. Meaning is not construed by the characters themselves after the unnerving car accident. The event itself is the constituting agent. Strangely enough, the accident will transform not only what happens afterwards but also everything that has passed before. Things that previously seemed important do not matter any longer. "Everything was changed" (*MJ* 87). This transformation cannot be prevented, but is an irrevocable reconfiguration that the eventual participants desperately try to adjust themselves to.

Ted, who is inadequately receptive to the phenomenon of compellation, endeavours to rationalize love and death. His reasoning mind is trapped in a deterministic panic-attack in which fate somehow remains in the governance of reason and its system of computations. In the hospital, anxiously waiting for news about his gravely injured son, the science teacher finds himself at a

point of intersection between guilt, fear and reason. Suddenly, he starts to believe that this family tragedy is divine punishment for his infidelity. A continued contact with his mistress is bound to seal his fate.

He was just going to excuse himself, and get up, when he received out of nowhere the idea that if he went to phone Frances, his son would die. By not phoning her, by not even thinking about her, by willing her to stop existing in his life, he could increase Bobby's chances, hold off his death. What a flood of nonsense this was, what superstition, coming over him when he didn't expect it. And it was impossible to stop, impossible to disregard. What if worse was coming? What if the next idea to present itself was one of those senseless bargains? Believe in God, the Lutheran God, promise to go back to church, do it at once, *now*, and Bobby would not die. Give up Frances, give her up for good, and Bobby would not die. (88)

Suddenly infused with a previously absent morality, abruptly sensitized to an ethical-religious reality as based on his sin and the impending threat of his son's death, Ted enters a mode of reflection where religion has become a credit-and-debit relationship with God. During his panic, he believes without "believing" that a specific sin can be remedied and neutralized by a good deed that resets the balance. Ted's rational dismissal of what he soon will come to review as a senseless trick of the mind sounds untrue and unsatisfactory to Frances. She fails to be moved by her lover's ordeal since the way with which he has extracted himself rationally from the event's momentum designates that the compellation never appeared. His way of narrating this train of thought as an anecdote, as "an illustration of the way the most rational mind could relapse and grovel," is disenchanting (89). Ted's disappointing behavior begins to push Frances into a loss of faith in the compellation's persistence. Before surrendering to a final sense of 'selfsameness,' she begins to rationalize the shaping events of her life in terms of a trite determinism. In this declination, life is just a collage of coincidences, each one minutely determined by another. If, on the day of the accident, the man who drove the car that Ted's son tied his sled to had not gone out

to take the baby carriage across town, Frances would not live in Ottowa now, she would not have her two children, she would not have her life, not the same life. That is true. She is sure of it, but it is too ugly to think about. The angle from which she has to see that can never be admitted to; it would seem monstrous. And if he hadn't gone out that day—Frances is thinking as she talks to him—where would we all be now? (109).

With the progressive loss of faith in the compellation, hastened by Ted's disbelief and rationalistic reserve, there is a further declination into a state of pure reduction.

What difference, thinks Frances. She doesn't know where that thought comes from or what it means, for of course there is a difference, anybody can see that, a life's difference. She's had her love, her scandal, her man, her children. But inside she's ticking away, all by herself, the same Frances who was there before any of it. (109)

The life-changing events make and do not make a difference. Since compellation has been involved in the eventual transformations, and since Frances does not "know" what to make of the difference that is not a difference, it is hard to definitively assess the ultimate status or nature of compellation with respect to existence. What is being said, possibly, is that compellation happens *to* the individual, but not for her or him. One *undergoes* a compellation, and the events that are its actualization, but one does not necessarily 'develop' or gain a greater wisdom under its pressure or grace. In a sense Frances remains a spectator who witnesses rather than changes. The compellation has walked hand in hand with a sameness of self that it has constantly left intact. Difference and change have come to accentuate sameness. The changes like the "wrong shade of hair, however, like the dashed-on lipstick, the plaid tailored suit, the enduring leanness and distracted, energetic manner, only makes her seem more like herself" (107).

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In "Accident" we have seen how certain events constitute themselves with the feel that they have their source and *raison d'être* exclusively in themselves. Much the same mechanisms can be seen also in "What Is Remembered." The erotic event that takes place between Meriel and a man she happens to meet at a funeral is charged with a significance that does not seem to have its cause outside its own materialization. Dr. Asher's somewhat unexpected proposal to drive Meriel to the nursing home where she is to visit an old aunt after the funeral is the beginning of a fatal train of events that is seen to run parallel to ordinary life as one of its surprising possibilities. Meriel's existence as wife and mother seems to contain very little beyond its routines. However, the obvious conventionality and strenuousness of her life will be undermined by something that has a surplus of form. It is possible to think of compellation as form taken to the extreme limit. We may see how the formal side of the funeral, rather than its suggestion of motorcycle wild-life, leads up to the event as compelling form. The accident itself fits in to an unexciting pattern of probability, riding a motorcycle late at night on a gravel road is likely to cause an accident. But the atypical reactions of the persons closest to the victim signal an inevitability that is obscurely tied to his

being. His best friend “did not seem to be surprised or particularly stricken,” and his mother “sounded so quickly resigned, so unsurprised” (*HFC* 221). Being juxtaposed to the narrator’s attention to everything that is given a pronounced formal outline on the funeral day, an emergence of a profound respect and curiosity towards that which has no explanation outside of its own significant appearance is presented; like the out of place advice to “wear white gloves” which is such “absurd and final wisdom” that it cannot enter into an ordinary discussion but remains an image of wonder (219). Likewise, at the funeral reception, small talk is not interpreted as superficial and false, but its wariness goes hand in hand with a precise caution that prevents the conversing guests from unsettling the details of the table decorations. Meriel looks

down at the table napkins, which were folded in quarters. They were not as big as dinner napkins or as small as cocktail napkins. They were set in overlapping rows so that a corner of each napkin (the corner embroidered with a tiny blue or pink or yellow flower) overlapped the folded corner of its neighbour. No two napkins embroidered with the same color of flower were touching each other. Nobody had disturbed them, or if they had—for she did see a few people around the room holding napkins—they had picked up napkins from the end of the row in a careful way and this order had been maintained. (225)

The protagonist/narrator is sensitive to the circumstance that the emphasis given to form is not reducible to a hypothetical lack of feeling or sincerity. At a funeral, the business of meticulously respecting the foreordained deployment of intricate patterns is not just the habit of keeping up appearances. The form has an appropriate life of its own. This condition is central to what follows the funeral, namely the erotic event that Meriel and Asher undergo by subjecting themselves to the compellation’s demand. We will see how the protagonist again and again is unsettled by the fact that life might suddenly reveal itself as a meaningful pattern.

In the discussion where it is decided that Dr. Asher will drive Meriel to the nursing home to visit her disabled aunt, “the slight forcing of courtesy” is expressive of something that Meriel captures but cannot define linguistically. Dr. Asher’s look directed at her “was not disagreeable,” and “it was not bold or sly, it was not appraising. But it was not socially deferential, either” (227). What might be taken as ordinary politeness is a formality of quite another order. Meriel is enchanted by what she senses to be a possibility vaguely lurking in the situation’s discreet void. The almost-nothing of this sensation is the affective embryo of the possibility-space she is to enter. Its growing form is the adumbration of a fatal route that excludes every other possibility, and therefore in a sense also the phenomenon of choice. No importance can any longer be attributed to volitional issues such as what Meriel “planned to do,” the fact Dr. Asher “would not have tried any further,” or “that he would

have said good-bye” had she not accepted his offer. The reasonable validity of a world ruled by the natural processes of causal determinism is put out of authority by the eventual formation of the compellation. Logical probability is pierced by a fatal form of the unlikely. Here the very form of the improbable is its (only) possibility.

In the moments that precede Meriel’s and Dr. Asher’s illicit love-making, they cease to anticipate their own actions. Strangely enough, their choices and wishes are at the mercy of something that apparently must run its own course. Meriel is for some reason more elated than she usually is. She progressively becomes a slightly amazed witness to her own behavior. Much to her own surprise, Meriel “*found* herself bestowing glad greetings” when arriving with him at the home (234; emphasis added). The fragility of the situation seems strangely capable of generating a tangible sense of power. Meriel can feel that something “had happened to her. She had a sudden mysterious sense of power and delight, as if with every step she took, a bright message was travelling from her heels to the top of her skull” (229). As she lets the event take over, she no longer acts on her own accord but switches gear in order to be part of that which is happening to her. What is shown by the text, more than anything else, is the shift from self-reliance to abandon. The “transfer” is not really interpersonal, for Dr. Asher is himself in a state of dissolution, indeed of transfer.

Take me, was what she had said. *Take me somewhere else*, not *Let’s go somewhere else*. That is important to her. The risk, the transfer of power. Complete risk and transfer. *Let’s go*—that would have the risk, but not the abdication, which is the start for her—in all her reliving of this moment—of the erotic slide. (235)

The word “abdication” is crucial. Meriel abdicates. The event rules. Its compelling sovereignty holds sway. She is not just ‘experiencing’ the event: “Something had happened *to her*” (229, emphasis added). As in a “charade” where ordinary life is bracketed to the advantage of the rules of the game (225), Meriel is pulled off and away by the insistent surge of the eventual affect. While there is infidelity in the act, there is none *vis-à-vis* the compellation’s fatal momentum.

The story suggests that we come, “here and there,” upon “a quality in the world” that only passion, art, or faith let us “absolutely” acknowledge, and in the way that it is to our “own surprise” that we find ourselves captivated by something commonly perceived as quite unremarkable, Meriel later on in life revisits various components of the amorous event in an attempt to find, or indeed to defer, affective closure (231). In a reconstructive fantasy that does not have its ground in a perfectly exact rendition of the factual details of what took place, but in its experienced directedness, she permits the incident to take the form of obedience to a compellation that irresistibly

forces the trespassers into a state of fully exhibited shame. Ironically this abjection is shamelessly acknowledged as a sense of pure delight.

Nothing actually dirty or disreputable, just an atmosphere of long accommodation of private woes and sins. There she would have to cross the little lobby with head bowed and arms clinging to her sides, her whole body permeated by exquisite shame. And he would speak to the desk clerk in a low voice that did not advertise, but did not conceal or apologize for, their purpose. (236)

The intimate and respectful caution generated by the erotic instant is entirely clear about its sinful purpose, being a materialization of feeling immanent to the compellation's monergy,⁸⁴ to the event's pure auto-affection. The momentary lovers are not "respectful" and "intimate" in any ordinary sense promoted by the synergy of a human relationship. The "recognition" in which the woman and the man are immersed is not interactively structured between participants establishing a neat system of sharing or exchange—for what is conjointly recognized is the awesomeness of the compellation's powerful thrust. The two of them do things "together" in a complicity that is not a bonding (but a fatal) togetherness. In this monergistic zone, there is no arrangement, no synthesis, no marriage of opposites. In her recollections of the event, Meriel recalls all sorts of details, all of them expressive of the compellation's "cold" formalism. Yet that almost inhuman patterning of acts gives access to a tenderness and care that seems to exceed the framework of standard, human possibility.

She would keep picking up things she'd missed, and these would still jolt her. She would hear or see something again—a sound they made together, the sort of look that passed between them, of recognition and encouragement. A look that was in its way quite cold, yet deeply respectful and more intimate than any look that would pass between married people, or people who owed each other anything. (239)

Monergistic immanence is autistic. It knows nothing outside itself. As monergy, as retreat from all world-synergies, the event is self-enclosed. Its lack of exteriority materializes for those immersed in it as an "attitude of inflexibility" (242).

As the story draws to its end, Meriel's "romantic" vision of her hypothetically staged death might seem to take passion too far, and allow for an ironic relativisation of the event. Yet even that fantasy is in a sense legitimate, authentic, and perfectly in accord with the event's formal rationale.

⁸⁴ Monergy is the lack of synergy, the wonder of self-reference as distinct from reference to some thing, of pure immanence as distinguished from "world."

Remaining in the aftermaths of the compellation, it is not insensible to calmly and coolly focus on the conception of her imminent death for by now Meriel cannot strictly speaking imagine herself outside the event.

So she stayed looking at the froth stirred up in the wake of the boat, and the thought occurred to her that in a certain kind of story—not the kind that anybody wrote anymore—the thing for her to do would be to throw herself into the water. Just as she was, packed full of happiness, rewarded as she would surely never be again, every cell in her body plumped up with a sweet self-esteem. A romantic act that could be seen—from a forbidden angle—as supremely rational. (241)

This is not a romantic woe where someone is being swept up in self-feeling, but a rather cool appraisal of what the formal possibilities of the event have given in terms of actualized, unbridled happiness. The sense of being happy is no personal asset, but something clairvoyantly appreciated for the sake of its eventual possibility. That the dimension of that possibility is larger and more complex than Meriel can grasp is something that she acknowledges. Her assimilation of the event triggers infinite fantasizing in defiance of what might reasonably be possible.

The fact that he was dead did not seem to have much effect on her daydreams—if that was what you could call them. The ones in which she imagined chance meetings or even desperately arranged reunions, had never had a foothold on reality, in any case, and were not revised because he was dead. They had to wear themselves out in a way she did not control and never understood. (240)

The constitution of the fatal event is synchronized with the characters' recognition of it. It is fathomed before it is understood. Understanding and control are operations too slow ever to catch up with the fatal coursing. Only years afterwards does Meriel recollect details that she has for a long time "successfully" suppressed (242). In retrospect, she reviews the moment of parting at the ferry. Dr. Asher's reluctance to give her a final kiss is perceived complexly as an act facing both sides in the split between the compellation and the world. He had said "no"—but also "I never do." The "no" was "simple," a "cautioning," a "refusal," being only a considerate form of protection (241). "*I never do* was something else altogether. Another kind of cautioning. Information that could not make her happy, though it might be intended to keep her from making a serious mistake. To save her from the false hopes and humiliation of a certain kind of mistake" (241). In point of fact, Dr. Asher is simply acknowledging the circumstance that the possibility-space is closed. They are back in the ordinary world where Meriel can keep her memory as a "treasure," "set aside" in a place where it somehow serves "to keep her balance" (242). As in "Accident," the fleeting moment of

passion is not emblematic of a difference even though Meriel in retrospect acknowledges that there was “another sort of life she could have had” hypothetically made possible by other choices (242). She “could think of that other sort of life simply as a kind of research which had its own pitfalls and achievements” (242). However, now an aging woman, her sense of possibility-space is thinning out. She is aware of “the thin cool air” she has breathed ever since her husband’s death, and realizes how all the possible variations that could have been her life would emphasize her being the same (242). “Maybe you didn’t find out so much, anyway. Maybe the same thing over and over—which might be some obvious but unsettling fact about yourself” (242). Through difference and variation, sameness appears as the compulsion/compellations the subject cannot resist and that will mark her as herself.

5 Clearing a Space for Sameness

Rose and Ralph Gillespie looked at each other. There was the same silent joke, the same conspiracy, comfort; the same, the same.

—Alice Munro, “Who Do You Think You Are?”

Like “Accident,” “What is Remembered” ends with an unforeseen sense of sameness. As Meriel lets herself imagine options, alternatives, and variations, she arrives at the quite extraordinary conclusion that there was not so much else to find out, only accentuations of “the same thing over and over” (HFC 242). Similarly, all generated changes in Frances’ life make her seem more like herself. The significance of both characters’ lives is tied to a self-sameness, its underlying invariancy being the repeatable compellation that is their plain but also fatal existence. Through reduction or a clearing, sameness has appeared as something not obvious, but rather as the quite startling unifying factor of their lives that they, for some reason, have not been aware of before. The frame-narrator in “Meneseteung” lives by the “hope” of discovering elusive patterns in time (FY 73). The event of coming across a sense of identity will emerge as a matter of grace, or as for the lady poet in the story, a matter of trust in the formation of poetry. Alain Badiou suggests that ‘differences’ are what is ordinary and expected in life, sameness and truth are atypical, things jutting out of endless variety, breaking the norm.

Philosophically, [...] the difficulty lies on the side of the Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the infinite multiplicity of differences) but what *comes to be*. I have already named that in regard to which only the advent of the Same occurs: it is a *truth*. Only a truth is, as such, *indifferent to differences* (Ethics 27).

The set of choices with which a character is confronted is revealing of a truth about themselves in connection to their surroundings. It is Badiou’s conviction that ethics must be built on a human capacity for truths rather than on the logic of cultural differences. I contend that Munro’s characters confront sameness, and that this confrontation has the value of truth for them and for

the narrators. However, for Frances and for Meriel, a capacity for truth does not necessarily mean that everything in its wake will be resolved. Truth in these stories is neither to be understood as the total revelation of things in the form of disclosure nor as propositional truth furnishing verification of correctness. To Heidegger the ground of truth is unconcealment. He does not make the claim that true or correct expressions necessarily unconceal, but rather that unconcealment is what first makes correctness possible.⁸⁵

In “Meneseung,” the essential pattern is the story of a writer’s poetic rebirth, a birth that is simultaneously an unveiling of metaphor as sameness. As we have seen, the possible has come to givenness as something other than opportunity or heterogeneity. The manifestation of possibility can here be considered as something fatally homogenous.⁸⁶ The frame-narrator is intrigued by the life of the nineteenth-century poetess, Almeda Joynt Roth, and she absorbs a book of her poetry that contains a photograph and a preface with personal data. By means of a fruitfully lingering attention to details and facts, a story of a woman living by herself in an old family house emerges. In this story, Almeda’s usual poetic mood involves a quest for a rather naïve and seemingly beauty. This is revealed in the short verses that are quoted from her poems. However, the frame-narrator imagines how Almeda stubbornly holds fast to her poetic conviction. “The countryside that she has written about in her poems actually takes diligence and determination to see. Some things must be disregarded. Manure piles, of course, and boggy fields full of high, charred stumps, and great heaps of brush waiting for a good day for burning” (FY 61). Being the locally cherished poetess, Almeda is respected, though she is seen as slightly suspect by her small community because of her artistic aspirations. In the intrusive and restrictive newspaper clips that the narrator finds and reads, it is insinuated that Almeda may have dreams of marriage about her next-door neighbour Jarvis Poulter, a prosperous widower. Almeda’s tentative reflections on the possibility of matrimony are viewed against an ironic remark of the tendency of the Victorian morality to see every encounter with the opposite sex as the likely source of an erotic opportunity. “As soon as a man and woman of almost any age are alone together within four walls, it is assumed that anything may happen. [...] What *possibilities* men and women must see in each other to infer such dangers. Or, believing in the dangers, how often they must think about the *possibilities*” (60; emphasis added). However, here the factors that decide love and marriage will prove to be more complicated than just a question of

⁸⁵ See Mark A. Wrathall. “Heidegger and Truth as Correspondence” (5).

⁸⁶ Badiou: “Extensive and numerical multiplicities must be distinguished from intensive or qualitative multiplicities. An event is always the gap between two heterogeneous multiplicities. What happens produces a fold between extensive segmentation and the intensive continuum” (*Theoretical Writings* 99).

mere opportunity.⁸⁷ There is never a possibility if there is not the enigmatic and perilous force of compellation. As compellation has not been part of their neighbourly connection, it has never occurred to Jarvis Poulter that he and Almeda Roth might be husband and wife until one early morning when there is a break in the ordinary course of things. A violent fight during the previous night has left a woman lying against Almeda's backyard fence. In her nightdress and wrapper, Almeda runs to Jarvis's house for help.

What Jarvis Poulter feels for Almeda Roth at this moment is just what he has not felt during all those circumspect walks and all his own solitary calculations of her probable worth, undoubted respectability, adequate comeliness. He has not been able to imagine her as a wife. Now that is possible. He is sufficiently stirred by her loosened hair—prematurely gray but thick and soft—her flushed face, her light clothing, which nobody but a husband should see. And by her indiscretion, her agitation, her foolishness, her need? (67)

A rearrangement of circumstances provides Jarvis with an opening to fall in love. However, what is now possible for him turns out to be impossible for Almeda, and vice versa. The outcast woman of last night's fight radiates a sense of eventual possibility that Jarvis fails to recognize. He callously shoves the woman away like an animal. The somewhat hidden peril and sovereignty⁸⁸ in the situation are caught by Almeda who perceives "something taunting and triumphant about her cry.... an exaggeration, a missed connection. As if anything they did—even a murder—might be something they didn't quite believe but were powerless to stop" (63–64). The tensions between brutality and theatricality or between power and powerlessness clear a space for the disorientation that so affects Almeda. To her this burst is a sign of vitality. It is the "body" that shows itself in its raw living vigour with its "blood and vomit" as signs of resisting death (66). The same life affirmative movement in the face of approaching death is shown in Almeda's menstrual flow. The "pain and fullness" of the "accumulation of menstrual blood," a release from giving birth, is a possibility of creativity where there is no room for any "household considerations" (68, 70). Ordinary marital arrangements do not belong to this possibility-space. Keeping "Jarvis Poulter's dinner warm and hanging his long underwear" is no longer part of Almeda's repertoire of possible occupations. Almeda's view of the townspeople is also affected by her disorientation, since there is no allowance for a raw and uncivil possibility in them, they now look like "tombstones" walking to Sunday

⁸⁷ This can be seen already in "Baptizing" when Del recognizes that "physical attraction" is not commonplace, not "something that could be found easily, every day" (*LGW* 206).

⁸⁸ We are concerned here with Bataille's understanding of the word, "the apparently lost sovereignty to which the beggar can sometimes be as close as the great nobleman, and from which, as a rule, the bourgeois is voluntarily the most far removed" (197–198).

church (69). They are regarded as the living dead because they deny the layerings of the disordered but vigorous life in the deteriorated parts of the town. The derangement of accepted bourgeois values is preceded by a rupture in the tissue of the ordinary where the uncalculated or unpredictable may seep through. Before Almeda goes out in the early morning to find the body lying against her fence, still left in the irrational though spontaneous state of sleep, she is receptive to something calling her.

She wakes, startled, in the early light. She thinks there is a big crow sitting on her windowsill, talking in a disapproving but unsurprised way about the night before. “Wake up and move the wheelbarrow!” it says to her, scolding, and she understands that it means something else by “wheelbarrow”—something foul and sorrowful. Then she is awake and sees that there is no such bird. She gets up at once and looks out the window.

Down against her fence there is a pale lump pressed—a body.
Wheelbarrow. (64)

Familiar items are permeated by a strangeness, but the oddity is somehow unsurprising and mandatory. Totally absorbed by the event, Almeda now finds everything else secondary to it. The atmosphere is fatal. “The house is getting hot. She drinks more tea and adds more medicine. She knows that the medicine is affecting her. It is responsible for her extraordinary languor, her perfect immobility, her unresisting surrender to her surroundings. That is all right. It seems necessary” (69). The spell of eventual autonomy is at hand and concerns her entire house with all its familiar domesticity. Ordinary tablecloths take on an importance of unlimited dimensions.

For every one of these patterns, decorations seems charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter. Or possibly to explode. Almeda Roth’s occupation throughout the day is to keep an eye on them. Not to prevent their alteration so much as to catch them at it—to understand it, to be a part of it. So much is going on in this room that there is no need to leave it. There is not even the thought of leaving it. (69)

The patterns and decorations are perceived on the spot, in the bare truth of their configured autonomy, aesthetically stark and immanent. They are expanding beyond their normal existence, but not as something different from themselves. Their familiarity has been stripped of its natural obviousness, being now something brimming with movement and possibility. What Almeda has seen during these last hours, overflows all her previous conceptions of life, and like the grape jam pulp that she has left dripping for the night which now stains the floor, she is now marked by this event.

Seeking to fit Munro’s art into a feminist theory of patriarchal dominance Magdalene Redekop sees *the event* as a matter of subject-construction.

“The poet in ‘Meneseteung’—her writing imaged both in the process of menstruation and in needlework – represents the latest development in Munro’s way of seeing the woman’s construction of herself as a subject in the face of the massive power of the old symbols” (*Mother and Clowns* 223). I would argue, however, that we are dealing with an altogether different type of subject, one that is in the process of being *eventally* constituted, and that does not fall within the theoretic logic of an ironically treated symbolic-social order. The subject does not construct herself; it is the event that makes her a subject without identity. In the process of eventual constitution, Almeda as a regular ‘human person’ is no longer in control. Instead of the narrator’s supposed irony, there is a humbleness towards the feeling of being both charmed and captivated. The construction of herself as “the writing I” is of little importance (*Mothers and Clowns* 223). All that happens is necessarily concentrated on the radically new poem that she now feels to be part of the life-stream. Her energy is focused on the appeal and rhythm of the event, and on not losing this balance or touch. The intensity, the poetic sense, stems from the perception of a specific pattern of life-significance manifested prior to linguistic construction or subject-identity. Almeda is witnessing a process to which she is a bystander more than a performing writer. The moment is marked by an extreme concentration on catching something that is there already. Language shows itself to be secondary to the enigmatic movement’s surprise. However, Almeda’s intense experience of language suggests that the connection between event, words, and things is not a mere naming of the surrounding world.

Of course, 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. [...] Almeda is a long way now from human sympathies or fears or cozy household considerations. (*FY* 69–70)

Almeda does not invent pertinent phrases or acute associations; instead the words overcome her. They seem to be awakened by the poetic process as the material bearer of *a priori* significance. Object, word, and subject are caught in a primally enigmatic layout that is not a set of relations. The creative mode in “Meneseteung,” as in so many other Munro stories, depends not on a linguistic structure but on the poetic status of the word. Paul Ricoeur makes a relevant remark when he writes:

A linguistic system, precisely because it is synchronic, has only a virtual existence within the passage of time. Language really exists only when a speaker takes it in his possession and actualizes it. But at the same time as the event of discourse is fleeting and transitory, it can be identified and reidentified as ‘the same’; thus, meaning is introduced,

in its broadest sense, at the same time as the possibility of identifying a given unit of discourse. There is meaning because there is sameness of meaning. (80)

In Ricoeur's conception of language, sameness is the most basic feature for establishing meaning, and its systemization is always second to language in use. When Almeda confronts sameness, her intuition of identity is even prior to words, and the remarkable feature of words is that they are imbued with a power to announce themselves. Heidegger shows how this works in his elucidations of what a poet experiences.

Experience means *eundo assequi*, to obtain something along the way, to attain something by going on a way. What is it that the poet reaches? Not mere knowledge. He obtains entrance into the relation of word to thing. This relation is not, however, a connection between the thing that is on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it "is" a thing. (*On the Way to Language* 66)

Almeda knows this convergence of world and word. Language and life do not establish reference. They intersect. There is no distance here between world and word, as when a word points to something supposedly not there, something imagined, instead the word brings forth that which it names. The word *is* that of which it speaks.

The name of the poem is the name of the river. No, in fact it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem [...] Almeda looks deep, deep into the river of her mind and into the tablecloth, and she sees the crocheted roses floating. They look bunchy and foolish, her mother's crocheted roses—they don't look much like real flowers. But their effort, their floating independence, their pleasure in their silly selves do seem to her so admirable. A hopeful sign. *Meneseteung*. (FY 70)

The *sameness* of the river and the poem lies not in substance but in being. They are on the hither side of metaphor where their quiddities are exposed as sameness. Signifier crosses the signified at a moment of intense sovereignty. In their presence they proclaim themselves as existing by a consubstantial motion that simultaneously moves in her mind. The three units are held together in this one movement. Something almost aesthetic arises out of the silliness, autonomy, and artificiality of the pattern of the tablecloth. The roses have come alive as words and as such separate themselves from the ordinary world. When Almeda is poetically reborn, metaphors reveal themselves as clairvoyant sources of discovered or felt sameness. The entangling of mind, world and art reflects their same source in activity, but the recognition their conviviality gives rise to, paradoxically includes the autonomy of art

and word. In its pettiness, this movement is at the basis of possibility and life as something grand. There is an intervention in the worldly use of language of a sphere that is pre-linguistic, a presence of identity, where the river and the poem are co-existential in pure movement that is at the heart of life itself. In seeking to come to terms with form in poetry, Robert Hass reflects on the human inability to resist being enticed by patterns. He imagines how magical the world must seem to the mind of an infant as it shapes itself around repetition.

They were experiencing in the fluidity of things a certain orderliness: footsteps, a face, the smell of hair and tobacco, cooing syllables. One would gradually have the sense that looking-out-of-the-eyes was a point around which phenomena organized themselves; thinking *this is going to happen* and having it happen might be, then, the authentic source of the experience of being, of identity, that word which implies that a lot of different things are the same thing. (57)

This suggests that at the heart of sense-making is the capacity to recognize identity.

In imagining the story of the poetess, the frame-narrator reflects on her own inability to present a reliable narration. She might have got “it wrong, after all,” but this observation does not undermine the possibility of a discovery. She keeps the “hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (FY 73). Almeda’s perception of a “hopeful sign” and the narrator’s discovery of a “trickle in time” are modes of a selfsame phenomenon. They betoken truth, not in terms of a satisfactory correspondence between the artefact and the object it represents, but rather as a truthful happening of the possibility for things to be meaningful. The narrator is not undercutting her own story but displays a mind sensitive to singular matters of signification that are distracted by time, but that may also be captured again. The story reveals this as a fighting against the insupportable feeling of senseless loss.

The main-character in “Oh, What Avails,” experiences a similar tension between meaninglessness and signification.

It’s just this —that suddenly, without warning, Joan is apt to think: *Rubble*. Rubble. You can look down a street, and you can see the shadows, the light, the brick walls, the truck parked under a tree, the dog lying on the sidewalk, the dark summer awning, or the grayed snow-drift—you can see all these things in their temporary separateness, all connected underneath in such a troubling, satisfying, necessary, indescribable way. Or you can see rubble. Passing states, a useless variety of passing states. (FY 208)

Significance here, as in “Meneseteung,” appears as a possible intricate orderliness concealed by layers of time. Temporarily, this order might be discernable, not as in a brief flash of light that suddenly enlightens a character, but in the uncanny coinciding of different time pockets of memory and present time. Heidegger comments that “nothing is clear; but everything is significant” (*On the Way to Language* 64). A thing is significant in so far as what is seen points to the latent aspects that are internal to it while remaining hidden. The visible details of an object are links to its concealed parts. When the narrator clears away the grass and dirt that covered Almeda’s grave, she is allowed to discover a layer of reality concealed by the passing of time. For her, this becomes a welcome, sudden meaningful clearing in a muddled world compact with temporal layers. The past is somewhat concealed but encloses the capacity to become known. The old newspaper clips announcing the deaths of Almeda and Jarvis that the narrator reads are suggestive of the details of their lives that she has been imagining. In their compressed format they become sources to recall what has disappeared. To find a missing link or to recognize the momentary revelation when a pattern falls into place as a connecting sameness is seen as a promising possibility.

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Signification in Munro is often fatally singled out as absolute knowledge based on sameness. In “Carried Away” it is against the background of a reality full of risks that a particular assurance appears in an awesome familiarity of a small piece of candy. The female protagonist, Louisa, starts to receive clandestine letters from an unknown man who has been called to the fronts of World War I. She becomes aware of a danger, but also of a certain freedom that the risk of the war entails. “Now she felt what everybody else did—a constant fear and misgiving and at the same time this addictive excitement. You could look up from your life of the moment and feel the world crackling beyond the walls” (*OS* 11). Like so many of Munro’s protagonists, Louisa is a daring and attentive woman. That she seems to possess a readiness for what life abruptly throws in her path reminds us of Callie’s alertness “for possibilities” in “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink.” Pauline in “The Children Stay” is a woman to whom anything could happen, and Lottar is seeking for adventure in “The Albanian Virgin.” In resemblance to these protagonists, Louisa “was glad of a fresh start, her spirits were hushed and grateful. She had made fresh starts before and things had not turned out as she had hoped, but she believed in the swift decision, the unforeseen intervention, the uniqueness of her fate” (*OS* 51). The romantic promise of the letters makes Louisa believe that this man will turn out to be her destiny. However, fatality is not destiny. When the war is over and he returns to the small town of Carstairs, he never gets in contact with Louisa—but from a notice in the local newspaper, she learns that he is now married to another girl. In an attempt to come to grips with these circumstances, Louisa re-

counts the story of her missed romance to a male acquaintance over a dinner. Jim Frarey is sensitive to the touch of self-assurance and boldness in Louisa's appearance. A "fateful sort of kindness" hovers over their conversation, and as they end up in bed Louisa finds herself immersed in a sense of indifference (19).

"I never intended for this to make a difference to you."

She said that it hadn't. Now without him pinning her down and steadying her, she felt herself whirling around in an irresistible way, as if the mattress had turned into a child's top and was carrying her off. She tried to explain that the traces of blood on the sheets could be credited to her period, but her words came out with a luxurious nonchalance and could not be fitted together. (20)

There is something in the man's apologies that unsettles Louisa. He is no longer claiming her, sexually or otherwise. The sense of the dissipating context for behavior around Louisa opens up the possibility-space. Here pure fatality may appear disconnected from the personal. She is oblivious to difference. Her indifference to losing her virginity is part of a strange possibility-space that establishes her thrill as a generalized unconcern. For some reason, life's impending chaos and lack of significance do not matter to her. She seems ready now to accept altogether other kinds of patterns than the ones she has been inclined to imagine before. There is a disoriented search for sameness.

The intricate weaving of the characters' parallel lives will show how layers of hidden significations somehow connect. The male protagonist in "Carried Away" is the heir of the town factory, Doubs. As a man of great responsibility, Arthur always carries a certain vague anxiety for the future, and "it was often at the back of his mind now that something might happen" (26). After his wife's death, he feels that his carefree existence has shifted into wariness. It is possible to see the "difference" that "nobody had noticed in him" and the "difference," the pitch in Louisa's looks, that Jim Frarey has paid attention to, as only emphasizing a selfsame character (14, 21). He does not seem to have a determinate goal. He is sensitive to risks and opportunities, but more importantly to the possibility that chance-like things happen for some reason. He "never thought about reading a book until another one came along, in this *almost* accidental way" (29; emphasis added). As his fear of disasters materializes in his dreams, the notion of fatality is emphasized.

In his dreams of an accident there was a spreading silence, everything was shut down. Every machine in the place stopped making its customary noise and every man's voice was removed, and when Arthur looked out of the office window he understood that doom had fallen. He never could remember any particular thing he saw that told him

this. It was just the space, the dust in the factory yard, that said to him *now*. (26)

The stillness and order of the scene accentuate a certain artificiality. However, when the accident takes place in real life, a worker having been decapitated by one of the machines, in the factory the chaos of the event does not interrupt the compellation. The shock and complete irruption of regularity when the man's head is parted from his body by the saw do not leave any space for rational action.

Arthur could have wished for the silence, the sounds and objects drawing back in that dreadful but releasing way, to give him room. It was nothing like that. Yelling and questioning and running around, himself in the midst *being propelled* to the sawmill. (33; emphasis added)

The reduced space produced by chaotic activity points to the speed and ferocity of the compellation. He is not released from responsibility, but he is assured. As the managing director of the factory, he must be the one to act, the one to re-establish some kind of order. In its simplicity, his act of replacing the head on the body connects to a shared conception of dignity.

The sound of vomiting saved him, steadied him, gave him an almost lighthearted determination. He picked it up. He carried it delicately and securely as you might carry an awkward but valuable jug. Pressing the face out of sight, as if comforting it, against his chest. Blood seeped through his shirt and stuck the material to his skin. Warm. He felt like a wounded man. He was aware of them watching him and he was aware of himself as an actor must be, or a priest. What to do with it, now that he had it against his chest? The answer to that came, too. Set it down, put it back where it belongs, not of course fitted with exactness, not as if a seam could be closed. Just more or less in place, and lift the jacket and tug it into a new position.

He couldn't now ask the man's name. He would have to get it in some other way. After the intimacy of his services here, such ignorance would be an offence.

But he found he did know it—it came to him. As he edged the corner of his jacket over the ear that had lain and still lay upward, and so looked quite fresh and usable, he received a name. (34–35)

The fact that Arthur has a preordained position as the one in charge is a formality that steadies him against chaos. The others are allowed to act disorderly. He is not. Formality is an emptiness that by grace can be filled with dignity. Just as the priest or actor can receive inspiration to preach or act so that others are affected, Arthur's curiously effortless actions steady the

workers. At the moment of the eruptive accident, he fits into the role he has been given. This matching appears as a brittle salvage against complete chaos.

Arthur is assigned to return the dead man's library books. This is how he meets Louisa. She is the town librarian and the dead man, Jack Agnew, turns out to be the mysterious letter writer who has secretly continued to borrow books, perhaps because he is unable to let go of the potential love-affair. The fact that Louisa is shaken by the coincidence without revealing any of the circumstances to Arthur is a connection that Arthur senses but will never know. However, it is the catalyst for his marriage proposal. Connections in this story reveal themselves to be complex, mysterious and grounded in character. When Arthur thinks about possible reasons for the fatal accident, he does see a possible explanation in the man's disposition.

Was there any connection? Between thinking you could do things a little differently that way and thinking you could get away with a careless move that might catch your sleeve and bring the saw down on your neck?

There might be, there might be some connection. A matter of attitude.
(36)

The ironic and uncanny effects and affects that the significations of the man's death will have for the characters are not lost on Arthur though he does not know their full implications. He cannot estimate his own value to Louisa. "He only knew that he had some, and it wasn't the usual" (40). Knowledge is not a matter of a clear-cut distinction between knowing and not-knowing. What is known contains layers of the mysterious and vice versa. When Arthur proposes to Louisa, he is paradoxically amazed and composed as if he had already known somehow. "He had never imagined that he would find himself in a situation like this, visited by such a clear compulsion. But it seemed he was not unprepared" (40-41). Typically, Arthur seems to act not out of choice, but as someone prompted by a calling.

After a gap in time, when we meet Louisa again as an old woman, her husband is no longer alive, and she is still haunted by the memory of the hypothetical love affair with Jack Agnew. She cannot resist the compulsion to seek for what she knows is a dead man. In the waiting room at her physician, she happens to come across his name in a newspaper ad for a ceremony and she "found herself changing course" towards the ceremony. Even though the "coincidence of the name was hardly even interesting" (43), Louisa cannot resist the allure of the man's haunting name. The possibility that he would finally make himself known to her does not have a foothold in what is to be thought of as normal reality, but in the layers of the would-be-reality that is part of Munro's narrative nerve. Her imagination plays a quite dangerous trick on her as she envisions herself speaking to Jack Agnew. In their ghost-like argument about love, a love that according to Jack "never dies,"

Louisa clears the space of her “normal life” that is to be permeated by ungraspable possibilities (48). However, irritated by Jack’s romantic notion of love that is partly her own, she rationalizes that love is “distracted, overlaid,” and that her love for Arthur contains nonsensical elements of violence. “None of that would make sense [...]. It wouldn’t make sense” (48). In all of this reasoning, she is struck by “an amorous flare-up of the cells” and is so agitated with her experience that her sanity is at risk. Potential signs of destiny or the coincidence of the similarity of names are felt to be sinuous.

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. (50)

In all of this turmoil, Louisa is steadied by a little Mennonite girl offering her a butterscotch mint. The phenomenon of sameness is accentuated. “She is surprised to be able to hold it in her hand, to have her lips shape thank-you, then to discover in her mouth *just the taste that she expected*. She sucks on it as they do on theirs, not in any hurry, and allows that taste to promise her some reasonable continuance” (50, emphasis added). For all its smallness the piece of candy is a token of the world’s ability to repeat itself. The sense of sameness is something very primal—as when a baby is enthralled by repetition.⁸⁹ For Louisa, the sameness of the butterscotch mint conveys a plain certainty at the root of life. The sense of sameness instills a hope as a simple imperative of continuation. But in Munro’s world, hope lingers in the present and does not point to a presumed future.

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“Carried Away” and “Spaceships Have Landed” occur in the same collection *Open Secrets*.⁹⁰ In these stories, Munro explores phenomena that border on the mystical power of inhuman things. The ghost in “Carried Away” makes company with creatures from outer space in “Spaceships Have Landed.” What seems to be freakishly supernatural, however, has a bearing on the

⁸⁹ Robert Hass makes a note of this: “The first fact of the world is that it repeats itself. I had been taught to believe that the freshness of children lay in their capacity for wonder at the vividness and strangeness of the particular, but what is fresh in them is that they still experience the power of repetition” (56).

⁹⁰ Some of the stories in this collection take place in the small town of Carstairs and there are certain connections between characters. For example, Billy Doud in “Spaceships Have Landed” is the son of Louisa in “Carried Away.”

unfathomable significations of ordinary life. A young woman in the small town of Carstairs mysteriously vanishes one night. A strange sense of sameness guides the characters lives. Eunie Morgan's disappearance and return is juxtaposed with another young woman's extravagant evening of first-experience drunkenness and sexuality. When these women were girls, they used to play an odd game together, a game that only they could understand. Other kids are involved, but they never seem to catch the seriousness and allure of this game.

It is through Rhea that most of the story is focalized. She is brought to a bootlegger's house by her boyfriend, Billy Doud. The atmosphere is clandestine and somewhat hostile. Intoxicated, Rhea lets herself be seduced by Billy's best friend. But the drama does not center on unfaithfulness and jealousy—rather on the phenomenon of detachment where a space for a radical sort of sameness may appear. Rhea reviews the rumor that the bootlegger's wife, Mrs. Monks, sleeps with just about any guest who wants her. Instead of being aghast at the notion of prostitution Rhea is peculiarly fascinated by the woman's capacity to endure such exploitation.

This indifferent readiness, this cool accommodation, the notion of such a quick and driven and bought and paid-for encounter, was to Rhea shamefully exciting.

To be so flattened and used and hardly to know who was doing it to you, to take it all in with that secret capability, over and over again. (*OS* 232)⁹¹

In Rhea's view the bootlegger's wife is not a victim but is admirable, and her endurance is somewhat inhuman. Rhea is not totally foreign to the situation but experiences some kind of accordance with the unsentimentality of the arrangement. When not concurring with the prevalent opinion about prostitution, Rhea can imagine the deep and grand mystery of Mrs. Monks' behavior. Social phenomena contain layers of truth that are not easy to grasp or even discern.

As the protagonist, Rhea tends to be concerned with "the truth" and the "true" (246, 247). To her it will become clear that truth is not something plain and obvious, but something complexly veiled and revealed, open and secretive. Here, truth seems to be not something that is, but something that appears. The characters can "hit on the truth," or it might be something that tries "to make itself understood" (246, 248). Despite the evening's decadent ambience, Rhea felt that nothing "could hurt her" and "nothing was lost on her," and this is because she feels an honesty in the room. There is no way of

⁹¹ The same indifferent attitude towards sex is displayed in "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink" when Callie lets herself be "seduced" by Edgar and Sam (*PL* 145–146).

escaping truth once it has made itself known. Her sense of security and power is circumscribed by affectivity's fatal control of her.

She had the idea of herself, at this juncture, being opened and squeezed, opened and squeezed shut, like an accordion. She was getting a warning, too—something in the distance, not connected with what she and Wayne were doing. Some crowding and snorting, inside or outside of her, trying to make itself understood. (248)⁹²

At this oscillating moment of opening and closure something this-side-of the interior and exterior dichotomy obviously has a great impact on what will happen. This “something” bears the same qualities as the childhood game that Rhea and Eunie played together as small girls.

One whole summer, Eunie and Rhea played together, but they never had thought of their activity as play. Playing was what they called it to satisfy other people. It was the most serious part of their lives. What they did the rest of the time seemed frivolous, forgettable. When they cut from Eunie's yard down to the riverbank, they became different people. Each of them was called Tom. The Two Toms. A Tom was a noun to them, not just a name. It was not male or female. It meant somebody exceptionally brave and clever but not always lucky, and—just barely—indestructible. (235)

The game is not an innocent role-game but points to a raw, sincere, inhuman, and provocative dimension of reality. In the battle against the Bannershees, they have to survive strange physical torments in order to be saved. There is a complete reconciliation of the players with a priori rules that do not need any explanations or democratic agreements.⁹³ Rhea and Eunie are friends of the necessity of the game, and not of what is normally thought of as the foundations for friendship. Their bond is strengthened by the complete fi-

⁹² When Pauline, in “The Children Stay,” apprehends the full effect of her escape with her lover from her family, the truth waylays her in the same manner as it does Rhea. It has been “waiting, cruelly nudging her ever since she woke up, or even all night” (*LG* 211). Parallel is also Edgar's sense of “something being prepared—a paralyzing swipe,” in “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” (*PL* 151).

⁹³ For Badiou a truth event does not operate in the domain of consensus or communication. “An event has no objective or verifiable content. Its ‘happening’ cannot be proved, only affirmed and proclaimed. Event, subject, and truth are thus all aspects of a single process of affirmation: a truth comes into being through those subjects who maintain a resilient *fidelity* to the consequences of an event that took place *in* a situation but was not *of* it. Fidelity, the commitment to a truth, amounts to something like a disinterested enthusiasm, absorption in a compelling task or cause, a sense of elation, of being caught up in something that transcends all petty, private or material concerns” (*Ethics* ix-x).

delity to the sameness of what is in the name.⁹⁴ As such, it is untouched by opinion or variation.

They were not friends, in the way that Rhea would understand being friends, later on. They never tried to please or comfort each other. They did not share secrets, except for the game, and even that was not a secret because they let others come and go in it. But they never let the others be Toms. So maybe that was what they shared, in their intense and daily collaboration. The nature, the danger, of being Toms. (237)

The Tom-game is openly presented and substantiated in a name and in play, but the quiddity of the game is secret in the sense that it is a silent agreement between the girls. It is their simultaneous directedness towards *the same* that is the foundation for their friendship. This ground is not apprehended by the other children. Hence “the McKays could not or would not submit themselves to the plot, and they soon cried or escaped and went home, so that it was just the Toms again” (235).

As a young woman Rhea separates herself from Eunie. Her peculiar looks and eccentric behavior have become a matter of embarrassment for Rhea. Eunie’s way of socializing by telling outrageous stories infuriates Rhea, especially since she does not distinguish between fiction and reality. Rhea is “frazzled” by questions of the origin of these stories. “*Was it real or was it play?*” (239). However, this distinction seems to be distracting from truth as will be seen during the evening at the bootlegger. Rhea finds herself wrapped up in the juvenile business of courtship. That she becomes the girlfriend of the heir of the town’s founder makes her special among the other girls, and this more than the feeling of being in love upsets her:

and in truth Rhea’s heart did throb—at the sight of him, his bright hatless hair, his negligent but surely powerful hands on the wheel. But also at the thought of herself suddenly singled out, so unexpectedly chosen, with the glow of a prizewinner—or a prize—about her now, a grace formerly hidden. [...] in the mornings she would wake up with the sense that she had been given a great present, but that her mind had boxed it away overnight, and she could not for a moment remember what it was. (240).

The feeling of being chosen for a purpose, that of being Billy Doud’s girlfriend, is entangled with the more weird feeling of dispersed knowledge.

⁹⁴ The de-subjectivized friendship established through a submission to artificial rules of a game occurred also in “The Moon in Orange Street Skating Rink” when Sam, Edgar, and Callie become “three boys” enraptured in “jokes and dares” (PL 143, 142).

The secret content of the box is definitely felt to exist but it remains unreachable. It has lost its substance, and is now warning her of an emptiness in her relation to Billy. At the night at the bootlegger Rhea's life slips open in a doubling side-effect. She is detached from her own happiness and is left in a temporal and spatial vacuum.

She was lucky: Billy Doud had chosen her, an engaged girl was confiding in her, her life was turning out perhaps better than anybody might have predicted. But at a time like this she could feel cut off and bewildered, as if she had lost something instead of gaining it. As if she had suffered a banishment. From what? (244)

The naïve or measurable happiness produced by gaining the love of the most handsome boy is humbled by the sense of being distinguished from a felt authenticity of one's life. In the toxic dazzle of drinks at the bootlegger Rhea becomes risky. Having been left aside by Billy she enters into a conversation with his best friend, Wayne. In a stagy posture of intoxication Wayne offers his opinion about Billy. "He said all this in two strange voices—one artificially high, singsong, one gruff and serious" (245). In between playacting and seriousness, Wayne touches on the truth. Rhea realises the falseness of her relationship to Billy. "She laughed, giddy from the rocking or perhaps because he had hit on the truth" (246). In the continuation of the night's spirits she cures her hangover and is left with a reassuring spatiality that started to form already when Mrs. Monks "without sympathy and without blame" helps her home (249). "The aspirins had started to work and now instead of the headache she had a space in her head, a clear precarious space with a light buzz around it" (250). The blankness is a precious waiting, an advent of something to arrive. As Rhea walks out in the early morning, she spots Eunie returning.

Eunie Morgan with her white hair sticking up, her hair and her pajamas catching the light. Like an angel in feathers. But walking in her usual awkward, assertive way—head pushed forward, arms swinging free. Rhea didn't know what Eunie could be doing there. She didn't know anything about Eunie's disappearance. The sight of Eunie seemed both strange and natural to her.

She remembered how on hot summer days, she used to think that Eunie's hair looked like a snowball or like threads of ice preserved from winter, and she would want to mash her face against it, to get cool. She remembered the hot grass and garlic and the jumping-out-of-your-skin feeling, when they were turning into Toms. (252)

Eunie's angelic air, ungraceful though absolute, appears as something in the world but not originating from it. From the beginning of her life, she "never seemed subject to her parents, or even connected to them, in the way of other

children” (237). The freedom of the Tom-game suggests a complete restriction to the plot of the Toms, and in the same way Eunie seems detached from the world but totally in accordance to a ‘reality’ of space-invaders. On the night of her disappearance, she claims that she has been captured by some unknown creatures and she recalls:

the possibility that one of her secret eggs had been spirited away, that fertilization had taken place in an alien dimension—that there had been a subtle or explosive, at any rate indescribable, mating, which sucked Eunie’s genes into the life stream of the invaders.

She was sat down in a seat she hadn’t noticed, she couldn’t say if it was a plain chair or a throne, and these children began to weave a veil around her. It was like mosquito netting or some such stuff, light but strong. (256)

Eunie’s improbable event must be seen in the light of her inability to polarize fiction and reality, or imagination and fact. She has always been prone to tell bizarre stories or describe “freakish events” (238), and Rhea’s infuriated urge to find out whether these are factual or not is a matter of laughable impossibility. Rhea could not

get Eunie to tell her whether these things had really happened, or even to make that distinction—as far as Rhea could tell—to herself.

Was that on the news, Eunie? Was it a story? Were there people acting in front of a microphone or was it reporting? Eunie! Was it real or was it play?

It was Rhea, never Eunie, who would get frazzled by these questions. Eunie would just get on her bicycle and ride away. “Toodeley oodeley oo! See you in the zoo!” (238–239)

Eunie’s odd behavior makes commonsense concepts topple. The oscillation between strangeness and normality flickers through the lives of the characters, and it is the possibility of the strange being normal that is decisive. Eunie felt that some “singing or humming might have been taking place, getting inside her head, something pacifying and delightful. And everything had got to seem perfectly normal” (256). Eunie’s experience is parallel to Rhea’s stir of emotions when she decides to leave Carstairs. “This was what she meant to do. She would always swear it was what she meant to do. She felt more at liberty now and more dazzled by herself than she had last night when she was drunk. She made these suggestions as if they were the easiest things in the world” (253). Being totally enwrapped by the clarity and veracity of her decision, she is immune to counter-arguments of its insanity. Badiou stresses the fact that a truth “is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address” (*Saint Paul* 14). However, “a truth procedure does not comprise

degrees. Either one participates in it, declaring the founding event and drawing its consequences, or one remains foreign to it" (21). A truth then can never be proved, only felt as an absolute accordance. A truth is the same for all that become part of its materialization.

Despite social differences, Billy Doud and Eunie share an outlook on life. "People close to the bottom, like Eunie Morgan, or right at the top, like Billy Doud, showed a similar carelessness, a blunted understanding" (*OS* 239).⁹⁵ At Eunie's return home there is a crowd of important persons present but consequently the only one that can respond to the event is Billy.

"Wonderful," said Billy Doud several times as he watched and listened to Eunie. Nobody knew exactly what he meant by that. He smelled of beer but seemed sober and very attentive. More than attentive—you might say enchanted. Eunie's singular revelations, her flushed and dirty face, her somewhat arrogant tone of voice appeared to give Billy Doud the greatest pleasure. What a relief, what a blessing, he might have been saying to himself. To find in the world and close at hand this calm, preposterous creature. *Wonderful.* (257)

There is symmetry, a one-to-one correspondence between Billy's a priori anticipation and Eunie's appearance, but not of their persons. Love, here, is an event that only becomes known in its realisation. "His love—Billy's kind of love—could spring up to meet a need that Eunie wouldn't know she had" (257). Her strangeness is a matter of sincerest satisfaction for Billy, as if she is a promise of the existence of a veiled aspect of reality. Though Billy's reactions are visible, his vision remains unknown. As Billy can accept all the conditions and consequences of Eunie's return, he partakes in the event, all others are excluded. However, the exclusion consists of not being able to accept the totality of the truthfulness of the event.

The rare kind of love that springs up between Billy and Eunie appears as a kind of counterbalance to the quite ordinary marriage that Rhea and Wayne live through. Years later, when the couples meet again, all of them white-haired now, Rhea exclaims how she cannot "get used to it" (259). She may be referring to the painful shifts in her marriage. It has been uncertain and passed several stages of unfaithfulness. Or, she may be referring to the crudeness of having one's name cut out on a family gravestone prior to one's death in order to save money. In contrast, Billy's lack of financial interest—as predicted he lets the family business run down—and his preoccupation and concern for people in need, as well as the glorious, asexual relationship between him and Eunie can be seen as incomprehensible possibilities, alien but visible secrets of the perfect match of lovers.

⁹⁵ Bataille: The sovereign "belongs" essentially to all men who possess and never entirely lost the value that is attributed to gods and "dignitaries" (197).

We have seen sameness appear as a matching of covered understandings in the relation between Billy and Eunie as well as in the childhood game played by the girls. In “Dance of the Happy Shades” sameness comes to view as a disorderly yet supreme doubling of normality. The old piano-teacher of a small town, Miss Marsalles, has invited her pupils with their mothers to the festivity of the annual recitals. The whole arrangement has gradually become out of place over the years and the narrator, one of the reciting performers, is extremely sensitive to the oddity and misplacement of the party. Miss Marsalles continues to move into smaller houses, so the party is more and more uncomfortable. The status of Miss Marsalles and her piano lessons seem to decrease by the shrinkage of her home which is now in “an even smaller place” (*DHS* 211). However, there is always “an awkward little space” that resists influence from anything external. It stubbornly remains the same and it is a catalyst for possibility (213).

The narrator makes notice of a sameness slightly to-the-side-of persons and spectacle.

Even the shadow behind her of another Miss Marsalles, slightly, older, larger, grimmer, whose existence was always forgotten from one June to the next, was not discomfiting—though it was surely an arresting fact that there should be not one but two faces like that in the world, both long, gravel-coloured, kindly and grotesque, with enormous noses and tiny, red, sweet-tempered and shortsighted eyes. It must finally have come to seem like a piece of luck to them to be so ugly, a protection against life to be marked in so many ways, *impossible*, for they were gay as invulnerable and childish people are; they appeared sexless, wild and gentle creatures, bizarre yet domestic, living in their house in Rosedale outside the complications of time. (214)

The doubling of the odd aura and bodily features of the two sisters is a matter of comic enchantment that strangely shelters them from any kind of pity.⁹⁶ The mothers of the reciting children in “Dance of the Happy Shades”

⁹⁶ The two aunts in “Heirs of the Living Body” share the same kind of superior oddity. They seem to operate from a different set of notions, mysterious and bewildering. “There was a whole new language to learn in their house” (*LGW* 36). These obscure but expansive traces are explored in “The Stone in the Field” too. The aunts that the protagonist and her family go to visit in the country “looked too much alike” (*MJ* 25). She “could never get them straight” (25). They are defined by hard work, but ambition is not an issue here. It would be frivolous and presumptuous. That the aunts are “being so perfectly encased in what they had and were” turns out to be a negative possibility that one has to think “twice about regretting” (29, 35).

show an appalling excitement over such immunity to opinions and any external influences that might cause a change. The continuous repetitions of the exact same details at the party that the mothers remember as “ceremonies of their childhood” and that they still find themselves being part of, strangely persist. It may be implausible, but even so it “survived, and unaccountably still survived” (215). Sameness is also strangeness.

They exchanged smiles which showed no lack of good manners, and yet expressed a familiar, humorous amazement at the *sameness* of things, even the selections played on the piano and the fillings of the sandwiches; so they acknowledged the incredible, the wholly unrealistic persistence of Miss Marsalles and her sister and their life. (215; emphasis added)

Paradoxically, in its formality sameness becomes a catalyst. Around its fringes, things can start to move in all sorts of directions. “There is a feeling that can hardly be put into words about Miss Marsalles’ parties; things are getting out of hand, anything may happen” (212). So, when a group of children with Down’s Syndrome arrive unexpectedly to prepare their performance, their apparent sub-ordinariness is normalized against the background of Miss Marsalles’ unflagging belief that children’s hearts are holy. She has complete faith in their capability to produce beautiful music. It is in the re-orienting process of what is normal and what is strange that one of the girls performs music that no one anticipated except for Miss Marsalles.

We are accustomed to notice performances, at Miss Marsalles’ parties, but it cannot be said that anyone has ever expected music. Yet this time the music establishes itself so effortlessly, with so little demand for attention, that we are hardly even surprised. What she plays is not familiar. It is something fragile, courtly and gay, that carries with it the freedom of a great unemotional happiness” (222).

The oddity of Miss Marsalles’ faith is attuned to the awkwardness of the girl’s production of music. However, the auditory event falls short of any transcendence. It does not reach any beyond. In this sense, it lives up to Baudrillard’s definition of the miraculous. He refers to miracles as “never result[ing] from a surplus of reality but, on the contrary, from a sudden break in reality” (*Seduction* 62). Such a rupture is not blended into the life stream but stands forever aside of it. To Miss Marsalles, however, it is not otherworldly or transcendent, but “natural and satisfying,” something “she always expected” (*DHS* 223). As a miracle, it does not mark a difference in any ordinary sense, but establishes a free-floating possibility of perfection. The happiness felt by the perfection of the piece played is a gift without address. It does not belong to anyone, but to a temporal pocket, to a moment of insularity.

For the moment she is finished it is plain that she is just the same as before, a girl from Greenhill School. Yet the music was not imaginary. The facts are not to be reconciled. And so after a few minutes the performance begins to seem, in spite of its innocence, like a trick—a very successful and diverting one, of course, but perhaps—how can it be said?—perhaps not altogether *in good taste*. For the girl's ability, which is undeniable but after all useless, out-of-place, is not really something that anybody wants to talk about. To Miss Marsalles such a thing is acceptable, but to other people, people who live in the world, it is not. (223)

As the subject of the miracle, the girl is not encapsulated in a triumph that transforms her. She is the same as before, left to the side of her own performance, and this is a circumstance that leaves her, as well as Miss Marsalles, untouched by both admiration and pity. There is fatality because there is sameness. Their inability to be anything else than the same persons, odd while rare, traps them in a success that is simultaneous with stasis. Filled with the reverberating significance of fatal uniqueness this stasis is marked by the reassuring memory of the marvelous event of music, an event that disrupts disharmony in order to refold into a regenerated “drabness and sameness” (220). This is that new mode, a reorientation of life's regularity, that so many of Munro's characters find themselves in. It might be the discovery of the possibility of love's fatality that bypasses regular life, as it does for Robin in “Tricks,” or the certainizing sensation of an enigma's possibilities that releases Robert in “Fits” from a natural urge to find answers to everything. Recollections of momentary zones of uncalled for “happiness” or exhilaration repeat themselves as marvelous treasures of a sovereign harmony. The “clear patches,” the “breathing spaces” that Trudy experiences in “Circle of Prayer,” and the space just “above the surface of your life” that Nina in “Comfort” enters are variations of heightened possibility-lines separate but not dislodged from the characters' regular lives. “Post and Beam” unites the focuses of the previous chapters, and in this fit will close the current exploration of Munro's fiction. In this story of an eventual flip, the closeness of life and its possibility is especially remarkable. Here the horror of imaginative possibility-lines will release commonplace existence into the most awesome possibility-space of all.

Conclusion

That it was a Utopia, there being no known method from the known to the unknown.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

It is as if everything, everything that exists, every thing I can recall, everything my confused thinking touches on, means something.

—J. M. Coetzee, *Elisabeth Costello*

Throughout the four chapters of this thesis I have arranged and read, in analytical terms, a range of Alice Munro's stories as an expression of my belief that the imaginative/fictional sphere in her *œuvre* does not operate as an addition or opposition to what is real. Rather, this sphere exists as a dimension on the hither side of reality as its possibility. The jolt of sudden materializing patterns in the domain of the real, enigmatic or not, becomes a source for storytelling. In the stories, we encounter a familiar world that does not seem strange or its circumstances startling until someone thinks of trying to make a narrative out of them.⁹⁷ When we try to comprehend the deepening layers of the real, it exposes itself in its full mysterious glamour. In "Post and Beam," as in so many of Munro's stories, the fascination for these unfathomable patterns and secretly lurking forces of life has priority over personal misery. Munro's stories are character-based, or as Jonathan Franzen exclaims in praise of her fiction: her "subject is people. People people people," but character gives way to something vaster and more enchantingly elusive than them ("What Makes You" ii). Protagonists are not headed for destiny, but vice versa. In amorous affairs, fate is not a matter of lovers finally finding each other and fitting together, but of seemingly insignificant life-factors establishing fatal courses that allow existences to intersect. Such factors

⁹⁷ In "Open Secrets," when the mystery of the disappearance of a young girl is not resolved, the drama will wear out and the event will be enfolded into the rhythms of the everyday. However, the protagonist will keep an awareness of a potential revelation in the details of an event. The intricate turns of vision and memory make her think that she is "looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it" (160).

often come to givenness as traits of a personality or of behavior, but are not reducible to these. Munro's fatality is not Thomas Hardy's looming inescapable determinism, nor is it the hopeless arbitrariness of Albert Camus. Instead, it appears as an inescapable or undeniable possibility that sets the characters free.

In "Post and Beam," the story that will emphasize the set of characteristics that I have discussed in this study, the somewhat chance-like emergence of a solution carries sacred significance. Lorna, a small-town girl who marries a professor of mathematics, takes the step of moving away from provincial mentality and family entanglements, a decision tinged by relief as well as guilt. When her cousin Polly announces a first-time visit without being invited, Lorna deems it unlikely that her husband and the visitor will get along with each other. In a desperate mood of irresolution, Lorna makes a clandestine visit to a friend's apartment, leaving her two children waiting outside. She feels the heaviness of her everyday-life pressing on her as something she cannot escape. But Lorna somehow senses that the room suddenly becomes a possibility-space in which she can feel the promise of a regenerating lightness without limit. This space is in juxtaposition to her life without being caused by anything in it. What

she really wanted to do was not to investigate anymore but to sit down on the floor, in the middle of the square of linoleum. To sit for hours not so much looking at this room as sinking into it. To stay in this room where there was nobody who knew her or wanted a thing from her. To stay here for a long, long time, growing sharper and lighter, light as a needle.⁹⁸ (HFC 203)

The words "sharper," "light," "lighter," and "needle" point to a reduction of the world to a condition of immersion ("sinking") where selfhood is an almost-nothing, acutely enjoying the absence of the world and its own attentive but undirected slenderness. Here movement is not directedness but a calm growth ("growing") of the reduction itself. On the hither side of perception and of directedness ("not so much looking at"), there is pure affectivity as such, feeling as something that is no longer the supposed outcome of interaction ("nobody who knew her or wanted a thing from her"). There is in the last analysis no point in "looking" (203), because, as Michel Henry points out, "life is what we never see and what constantly escapes our view" (382). Susan Sontag speaks of this as the ineffable content of consciousness. "Every work of art," she argues "needs to be understood not only as some-

⁹⁸ The protagonist in "Five Points" has a similar experience as her extra-marital relation is about to end. "She feels edgy but happy. Her happiness is tight and private, not that sort that flows out from you and fuzzes everything up and makes you good-naturedly careless about what you say. The very opposite. She feels *light* and *sharp* and *unconnected*" (FY 43; emphasis added).

thing rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable” (36). When Lorna is unable to find a solution, she enters into a zero state. This state can become an energy-field for Lorna when she momentarily discovers that possibility’s immanent room as a thing she does not have to think out (*HFC* 203). There is a sudden immersion in the presence of something which she has previously not thought about but which is foundationally always there. By *not* thinking of it—but only permitting the “sinking” as such (203)—Lorna comes to taste the promise of the small eternity (“long, long time”) of feeling as pure possibility-space, as something that knows no exteriority, staying only in itself as an immanence that defies the outside. Here there is neither perception (“looking”) nor thought (“to investigate”)—for thought is, in Michel Henry’s words, what “moves in exteriority” (385), in the place where people want something from Lorna, and where she wants something from them. This negative movement of thought into non-thought, non-resolution, or into a non-explanation that detours an unsatisfactory conclusion is akin to Robert’s experience in “Fits” when he refrains from probing further into the details of the murder-suicide. In this story, there is a revelation, but without an epistemological transcendence. The lightness felt comes out of a recognition of life as possibility rather than a life full with possibilities. This reversal of attention occurs in all the stories surveyed in my second chapter and finds its full force in the ending of “Post and Beam.”

The man who lives in the apartment, Lionel, is an old student of Lorna’s husband’s who comes to visit them every now and then. Lorna is fascinated by his way of looking. He “talked with his head on one side, usually, his gaze on something slightly beyond Lorna’s head” (*HFC* 190). For some reason, she becomes aware of an immediate attraction that bypasses selfhood. Lionel’s and Lorna’s intimacy does not come into being as a relation between two pointlike subjects, but as a communion within a possibility-space that has been unknown to them. The poems that he sends are not aimed at her, but at something that she too can recognize.

She began to think that she could regard them as offerings, not as messages. But not love-offerings—as Brendan, for instance, would assume. There was nothing in them about Lionel’s feelings for her, nothing personal at all. They reminded her of those faint impressions you can sometimes make out on the sidewalks in spring—shadows, left by wet leaves plastered there the year before. (194–195)

Here the “impression” is not “faint” by being a second-order phenomenon, that is the trace or representation of a first-order imprint of bygone times (“the year before”). Instead, the leaf-metaphor points to *the primacy of faintness as such*; that which in its withdrawal from the world is faint, hidden, and modest is life’s innermost, constituting treasure—“a gift which constantly forms itself” as Michel Henry puts it (381). Lionel’s feeling for Lorna belongs to what Henry calls a “modesty”—a modesty that opens the possi-

bility-space by being the “foundation of all conceivable existence” (381). It is not conditioned by the practical world. It is not useful, but addresses anybody who perceives its existential importance. For Lionel, the primary episodes of life occur in an economy other than the world of problems having solutions, questions finding answers, and mysteries receiving explanations.

You could not speak to him about anything seen seriously as a problem. To speak of problems meant to search for, to hope for, solutions. And that was not interesting, it did not indicate an interesting attitude towards life. Rather, a shallow and tiresome hopefulness. Ordinary anxieties, uncomplicated emotions, were not what he enjoyed hearing about. He preferred things to be utterly bewildering and past bearing, yet ironically, even merrily, borne. (*HFC* 195)

To be allowed to have this attitude promises relief from the burden of foul-smelling self-pity. Cousin Polly goes through an unconscious alteration when she and Lorna momentarily leave the house that keeps confining them to the roles of wife and burdensome guest. “But she spoke now matter-of-factly, without her undertone of virtue and complaint. Some sour atmosphere that had surrounded her—like old dishrags—was falling away” (204). This reduction is not self-controlled. Being evental,⁹⁹ it runs ahead of itself in the rushing immanence of Polly’s utterance. As in the stories in chapter three, the constituting forces of the moment seem to spring out from the event itself rather than from the characters’ interventions.

Each spring, the above-mentioned imprints from the wet leaves of a previous year are not discernible everywhere, but specifically “on the sidewalks” (195). The poems that Lorna receives from Lionel are “faint impressions” (195) that make “a curious path across the page” (194). There “were never many words” (194). His signature is “just a squiggle”—“but then so was every word of every poem” (194). Yet this sparseness of writing is not an uncertainty of the sparseness itself. Fully present to itself, it is complete—a small absolute. Therefore, nothing is amiss. Each poem is perfectly intact, a tiny immaculate self-presence. Every stretch of words is “quite properly sealed” (194). Each poem and each word, (“mostly nouns”), is a world, a richness (194). The scarcity of phenomena increases the value of individual units. These stand out as self-existent, carefully itemized. Hence a “Buddhist” impression is made (194). There is a density encapsulated in every small item. A minimalistic paradox reigns: less is not just more but abundantly more. In fact, the verbal restraint produces a curious surplus of possible meaning. The vastness of this excess makes Lorna feel the need to put

⁹⁹ “The evental site is that datum that is immanent to a situation and enters into the composition of the event itself, addressing it to *this* singular situation, rather than another” (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 70).

the poems aside for a while. Each one is “a resource”; its enigma needs to be allowed to lie dormant as an energy-field that she can “tap into, in the future” (194).

As a growing collection of minimalist artefacts, Lionel’s odd poems thus transform sets of nouns into a verbal clearing that is nothing less than language seen as a possibility-space ruled by a compellation. There is no manifest agent monitoring the flow of linguistic units. There is no “Lionel” there orchestrating certain meanings or communicating certain “feelings” (195). Although the poems are “signed,” and therefore not “anonymous,” the “signature,” being a mere “squiggle” (194), does not point to anything “personal at all” (195). At the head of the flow of poems there is nothing more—and nothing less—than what lies as the constituting source shaping a path of feet/leaves on last year’s sidewalk; nothing more—and nothing less—than what lies as the constituting source shaping “uncertain bird tracks” (194). This is the compellation, something comprising necessity, chance, and directedness as an enigmatic-aesthetic intersection of all these elements. When writing, Lionel might be uncertain. Likewise, Lorna might feel unsure while reading. The “path,” the set of “tracks” (194), the line of “faint impressions” (195)—all of these might be “uncertain” (194). Yet the compellation forming these constitutings is not itself unsure. It empowers its own momentum and those who come to touch it with the certainty of an incorruptible inner assurance. This is why Lionel goes on writing and sending the poems, despite the lack of ‘feedback’ from Lorna. This is also why Lorna marvels at each poem and at each word, despite their paucity of immediately extractable sense. This is why words do not even feel that they need to be configured according to grammatical laws of “punctuation” to make sense (194). Being connected by nothing more than “dashes” (194), they proclaim the existence of a directedness that is not that of language and sense, but that of the compellation and of the more-than-linguistic possibility-space it opens. Here the ‘non-verbal’ dimension of Munro’s writing is in evidence, the circumstance that fine language pushes us not only to the outskirts and limits of verbal possibilities, but also far beyond these—into the “Buddhistic” domain of appearing that the text cannot refrain from mentioning as what lies tantalizingly out of reach while being momentarily in view as an absolute. This does not mean that Lorna and Lionel have come to an agreement about the meaning of the poems, only that they are directed to the same source of verbal constitution. A sense of intuitive accordance reigns. They share the same view about the non-purpose of the poems that needs no further explanation. As we have seen, this correspondence of outlooks occurs also in “Spaceships Have Landed” between Billy and Eunie. The connection in sameness in Billy’s reaction to the extra-terrestrial event and Eunie’s hidden prerequisites for love is a surprise to everybody involved.

A large proportion of Munro’s stories are about love. These narratives show a surprise and excitement at this a-personal concord in the attraction between lovers or potential lovers. Most often it is there in a brief moment of

an evental turn, as in the ceremonious bolting of a door in “The Children Stay” or “Accident,” or as in the fullness of the kiss between Jinny and Ricky in “Floating Bridge” reminding us of the cool or starry kisses in “Nettles” and “Comfort.” These evental moments do not reconcile with the protagonist’s lives as they progress, but are sources of a hopefulness that I see as pervading Munro’s fiction. In worlds where the stuff lives are filled with threatens to be nothing but “rubble” or “rubbish,” these moments are resources that are resonant in the promise of content and meaning (“Deep-Holes,” *LG, FY, WDY*).

All of this presupposes a detachment from the subjective. In a screening-away of relational thinking, Brendan, the relational hub of Lorna’s existence, can therefore not be included in the world where relations are replaced by dashes and meaning by compellation.

She did not tell Brendan about the poems. Once a week or so a poem arrived quite properly sealed and posted, in the mail. These were not anonymous—Lionel signed them. His signature was just a squiggle, quite difficult to make out—but then so was every word of every poem. Fortunately, there were never many words—sometimes only a dozen or two in all—and they made a curious path across the page, like uncertain bird tracks. At first glance Lorna could never make out anything at all. She found that it was best not to try too hard, just to hold the page in front of her and look at it long and steadily as if she had gone into a trance. Then, usually, words would appear. Not all of them—there were two or three in every poem that she never figured out—but that did not matter much. There was no punctuation but dashes. The words were mostly nouns. Lorna was not a person unfamiliar with poetry, or a person who gave up easily on whatever she did not quickly understand. But she felt about these poems of Lionel’s more or less as she did about, say, the Buddhist religion—that they were a resource she might be able to comprehend, to tap into, in the future, but that she couldn’t do that just now. (*HFC* 194–195)

Despite the uncertainty, the difficulty, and the illegibility, “words would appear” (194). They cannot be forced to materialize. Therefore it is pointless “to try too hard” (194). There is a distinction between “appear” and “would appear.” The word “would” signals a power in the words themselves. Not only are they self-existent (the dashes promoting separation rather than connection); their *appearing* is self-existent. They “*would* appear.” The human agent is not in full control over them, for then the “would” could not materialize. If Lorna tries “too hard,” there is too much Lorna and too little “would.” If Lorna is *Lorna*, then the compellation (the fatal row of words—and-dashes) loses the initiative. In order to discern the compellation’s truth, it is necessary to “look.” But here it is no longer a matter of someone reading, of a subject activating an interpretative desire on a set of given signs in

order to unleash a process of decoding. What is needed is the simple, essentially passive, act of holding “the page in front of her.” The word “her” does not really point to Lorna, but to the figure she becomes within the possibility-space opened by the compellation—or, to put that in “Buddhistic” terms, the consciousness that she becomes when she has “gone into a trance” (194). That state is meditative, as the words “long and steadily” (194) signal. Yet the trance does not lift the subject into a transcendent realm where hallucination might exhibit things not actually given in the real world. On the contrary, the compellation compels Lorna to see the words literally—as things, as actually viewable world-units, as “nouns,” as purely immanent substances that anyone in the position of a ‘reader’ is going to miss. Here it is pointless to be a reader, or perhaps even to ‘be’ at all. The compellation—the fatal sequence of nouns—and-dashes, of “tracks” and “impressions”—has in a sense cancelled Being...so that there is only left the stream of certain elect units that “continued to arrive” (194). This phenomenon of detachment from the personal is more or less prominent in all of Munro’s stories. Without this propensity to sheer away from subjective goals, final interpretations or simplistic resolutions, the protagonists would not be attuned to the compelling forces that lift them into their various and different possibility-spaces. It is the fatal coursing of an event that is in focus here, not a revelation of a preset destiny.

In all of this, it is easy to overlook the momentous role played by time and the directedness of time. “Post and Beam” only makes sense as a particular sequence of acts and events, and the same goes for the “faint impressions”; on the “sidewalks” (195). They denote movement, not simply in space, but also in time. All the mentioned leaves have not fallen or been “plastered” at the same time (195). The imprints of feet in “uncertain bird tracks” have been left one after the other (194), just as spring needed to follow autumn in order for the leaves to appear as “shadows” rather than as leaves (195). Spring does not follow autumn by means of some decision, but by way of necessity. This sense of a *necessary* coursing of things, and of humans being trapped in time’s compulsory onwardness, is foundational in “Post and Beam.” The pre-eminence of necessity is highlighted by the phrase that is central to the story: “will not have happened” (211). Feeling guilty about the way Polly has been treated during the unexpected stay in her home, Lorna suddenly feels certain that this forlorn cousin has taken her life. If the vision of Polly’s body reclining lifelessly against the kitchen door is true, there is nothing Lorna can do to save her, and her keenness to get back to Polly from a brief trip out of town is pointless with respect to the factual coursing of acts and events. Yet Lorna wishes to speed as urgently as possible towards the deed that has or has not occurred, as if the fixity of its necessity were lying in the future rather than in the past. On the one hand, the words “have happened” refer to an absolute necessity that, if it is real, is buried unconditionally in the past. She tries to tell herself to be calm and rational instead of hysterical and over-imaginative: “This is stupidity, this is

melodrama, this is guilt. This will not *have happened*” (211; emphasis added). On the other hand, the words “have happened” refer to a necessity that falls slightly short of being absolute by lying in the hands of God. On the way back in the car to the hypothetical suicide scenario, Lorna furtively pushes herself into the extreme position of believing “that it was *possible*, up to the last minute it was *possible* to make a bargain” (212; emphasis added). In a story that is full of passing references to religion, this “bargain” is theological in nature. There is an apparent parallel to Jephthah and his daughter from The Book of Judges where he makes a vow to the Lord to offer the first person that meets him at his victorious return from the Ammonites. To Jephthah’s despair, this person is his beloved and only daughter. Lorna’s bargain, in which she snatches away any thought of her children, refers to a deal she might want to make with an all-powerful God, strong enough to change the coursing of eventual lines that have already happened: “When they entered Stanley Park it occurred to her to pray. This was shameless—the opportune praying of a nonbeliever. The gibberish of let-it-not-happen, let-it-not-happen. *Let it not have happened*” (211).

The accentuation of the possibility-factor is evident in the *italics* used in the last sentence, as well as in the repetition of the word “possibility” itself in the line that presents the notion of a “bargain” with destiny (212). The shift of tense that takes Lorna from let-it-not-happen to let-it-not-have-happened is of course crucial, since the transition marks a move from a moderate possibility-space to an infinitely larger one. If God is capable of preventing things from happening, that is awesome; but if he is capable of preventing events that *have* already happened, then we have entered a possibility-space that has totalized the range of the phenomenon we call ‘possibility.’ Then God’s power to govern space and time is as limitless as Lorna’s panic. I suggest here, and for this reason “Post and Beam” is central to the conclusion of the current study, that the ultimate possibility-space is fatal enough as to be absolutely fluid, absolutely open to any possible turn, twist, or “wrenching” (212). It momentarily seems to Lorna that she lives in a universe where some mental act of her prayers could actually influence events taking place elsewhere, indeed events that had *already* taken place elsewhere. If she goes down vertically and radically enough into her own being, and if she is in absolute earnest about exchanging her own good fortune for Polly’s misfortune, time and space will flex under the pressure from a new and fatal oscillation set up in the constituting forces shaping them. “It had to be serious, a most final and wrenching promise or offer. Take this. I promise this. If it can be made not true, *if it cannot have happened*” (212; emphasis added). In such a bargain—which still remains hypothetical, which still remains merely *possible*—Lorna might get Polly back from the dead by sacrificing her looks, her health, or even her life (212).

In imagination’s most faraway possibility-space, Lorna would see Polly miraculously recovered from the dead—having sacrificed something important in her own existence...basically anything, but her children (212).

The achievement of the text, however, is that it shows the existence of a possibility-space that is even more wide-open and miraculous than that. And this most remarkable of all possibility-spaces is ‘common’ reality: simply the event of driving home and finding that Polly is just sitting there, perfectly intact and complete, relaxing with Lionel in the garden. While still being in common reality, Polly is saved from it. What is common is no longer commonplace. She has moved into the space governed by Lionel and his poems—into a possibility-space where that which makes space intriguing and wide-open is not a system of complicities, but phenomena left to appear in a plainness from which all transcendent clutter “had been removed” (213). This is the meaning of the story’s title “Post and Beam,” which is a reference to a style of architecture that achieves a “plain” effect by leaving beams “exposed,” none of the woodwork being “covered up” (197). The text is actually a meditation on the phenomenon of reduction. Lorna’s bargain with supernatural forces has reduced her life to its bare essentials: having a somewhat disappointing husband like Brendan, having a somewhat pathetic cousin like Polly, etc. It is these things that fall short of the miraculous that, paradoxically, are now the constituting factors of Lorna’s ultimate possibility-space. Her compulsion is one that drives her back into what she has got, defining possibility in terms of immanence rather than transcendence. Indeed, it belatedly occurs to Lorna that she never really made any bargain in the first place.

But what was it she had promised?

Nothing to do with the children.

Something to do with herself?

She had promised that she would do whatever she had to do, when she recognized what it was.

That was the hedging, it was a bargain that was not a bargain, a promise that had no meaning at all.

But she tried out various *possibilities*. Almost as if she were shaping this story to be told to somebody [...].

Give up reading books.

Take in foster children from bad homes [...]. (217; emphasis added)

At first Lorna assumes that the phenomenon of ‘possibility’ refers to something transcendent, as indeed the phenomenon ‘bargain’ would seem to do. The truth is that in the panic of the rush to get to Polly, she never finalizes a transcendent deal. But by means of the fatal coursing, she has come into full possession of the selfsameness that she always has been in possession of, *though not as possibility*. Prior to the incident with Polly, it had not occurred to Lorna that her seemingly banal life, with its seemingly banal marriage, is itself a possibility-space. As soon as this is made clear to her by means of the fatal coursing of events, as soon as the missing fatality of the given evental sequence itself proves to be fatal, Lorna no longer perceives her common life

as commonplace, but as uniquely possible. She is no longer resigned to self-sameness, but surrenders to it. In resignation there is an enslavement of the subject, a bowing down before a state of affairs that is perceived as a personal affliction, a blow unfairly dealt by life to a ‘victim.’ But in surrender there is no such enslavement, for there is no uneraser subject there reveling in the affliction’s misery. Like Lionel’s mother, Lorna is now in the zone where “prediction” reigns (188)—but what she can “foresee” is not anything “strange” (218), like the exact moment of one’s death (188). What Lorna can “foresee” is life itself understood—quite commonly but also quite uncommonly—as the ultimate possibility-space anyone can hope to “bargain for” (218). “New to bargaining” (218), she has been prematurely initiated into one of its secrets; namely that the bargaining is done by an agent other and more compelling than oneself. In a new clarity, materialized on the hither side of deals and negotiations, Lorna sees that the bargain

she was bound to was to go on living as she had been doing. The bargain was *already in force*. To accept what had happened and be clear about what would happen. Days and years and feelings much the same, except that the children *would* grow up, and there might be one or two more of them and they too *would* grow up, and she and Brendan *would* grow older and then old.

It was not until now, not until this moment, that she had seen so clearly that she was counting on something happening, something that *would* change her life. She had accepted her marriage as one big change, but not as the last one.

So, nothing now but what she or anybody could sensibly *foresee*. That *was to be* her happiness, that was *what she had bargained for*. Nothing secret, or strange.

Pay attention to this, she thought. She had a dramatic notion of getting down on her knees. This is serious.

Elizabeth called again, “Mommy. Come here.” And then the others—Brendan and Polly and Lionel, one after the other, were calling her, teasing her.

Mommy.

Mommy.

Come here. (217–218; emphasis added)

The possibility-space does not depend on “change” or something extraordinary or magical put in place in order to push the borders of what is possible. Realism in itself is that which reveals its extraordinary possibility. It does not necessarily transcend what is immediately given, the status quo. The fact that all of them will grow (she and Brendan, existing children and those still unborn) is itself compelling. The fact of the family, of plain family life, is a

bargain already “in force” (217–218), already a possible arena for serious living.

Lorna’s dramatic recognition of common life as a possibility is a congenial counterpoint to Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle.”¹⁰⁰ There, the protagonist, John Marcher sets regular life to the side while living in the vacuum of always expecting or apprehending that he is destined for something overwhelming or spectacular. After it is too late and the woman whom he might have fallen in love with has died, he realizes that the “fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance—he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the man, to whom* nothing on earth was to have happened” (266). A selfish and paralyzing faith in his own personal electness, his expectation of something beyond the ordinary, makes him overlook all the signs of possibilities around him. This is the paradoxical tragedy of the story. Munro’s narratological landscape is not a sketching of a world where nothing happens, but a tracing of a moment’s eventual turn into a possibility-space. However, characters might very well enter a possibility-space by the effects of drama never taking place, as for example Polly’s non-suicide, or Meg’s near-drowning in “Miles City, Montana,” or an unrealized unfaithfulness as in “Oranges and Apples.” The plots in these stories crack open to display a doubling of possible scenarios where the pure luck of disaster not taking place saves the characters, but the doubling-effect is an energy-field renewing their lives.

As we see in “Post and Beam,” reduction goes hand in hand with insupportableness and doubling. As soon as the feeling of the certainty of Polly’s suicide had established itself in Lorna’s imagination, her existence splits into two separate possibility-lines. For the duration of the worrying drive home, the insupportability of Polly’s hypothetical death covers her own intolerable empty family life. As soon as Lorna discovers that Polly is safe and sound, the insupportability of her commonplace existence re-surfaces. But since the agony concerning Polly has been so protracted, due to the slowing of time experienced during the return-journey, there has been time for the hierarchy between the possibility-lines to change: at first normal existence was the common possibility-space, and a universe where Polly was hanging dead against Lorna’s kitchen door overshot that plane of common existence as a nightmarish clearing for unlimited (negative) possibility. But during the drive home towards that hypothetically lifeless body in the kitchen, Lorna becomes so accustomed to horror that the horrific possibility-line establishes itself as the regular one, with her ordinary existence overshooting it as an almost paradisiacal possibility-space. The two insupportability-strata change places, so that true amazement no longer lies in the drama of the extraordi-

¹⁰⁰ It is my intention to extend, beyond this dissertation, the subject of possibility-space to include a number of iconic short story writers, among them Hawthorne, Joyce, Mansfield and Trevor.

nary, but in the non-drama of the ordinary. It is heavenly to see Polly and Lionel just sitting there, quite alive. It is even heavenly to surrender to the domestic insupportability of a routine life—for it is no longer something taken for granted, but a gift constituted by grace.

As Munro's stories continue to appear in *The New Yorker*¹⁰¹ it becomes evident that new spaces for possibilities are going to be cleared. "Deep-Holes," published in the June 30 2008 issue, is yet another version of them. This is the painful story about a lost child. At a family excursion to a vista of steep crevasses, the oldest son accidentally falls into one and is badly injured. The severe accident and the convalescence change the boy deeply. He seems to become more serious, but as an adult he is unable to work in an organized bourgeois life centered on keeping a job and paying bills or making a career. His increasingly vagrant existence that will finally lead to his disappearance causes distress in the family. In order not to fall into complete despair, his mother fastens upon a fantasy, the possibility that her son might be living, metaphorically or for real, on a remote island. Her own long-time attraction to "remote islands" is rooted in the allure of details, knowledge pointing to layers of meaning embedded in facts. In the same way, the surface of the earth may contain signs that whisper of the meaningful moments of its constitution. Sally, who has absorbed scientific knowledge of the formation and structure of the earth from her husband, who is a geomorphologist, shows a reticent awe at the creative powers of the universe.

Gradually she learned to use her eyes and apply her knowledge, till she could stand in an empty suburban street and realize that far beneath her shoes was a crater filled with rubble that had never been seen, because there had been no eyes to see its creation or through the long history of its being made and filled and hidden and lost. ("Deep-Holes" 70)¹⁰²

The hidden or lost layers of the history of the earth draw Sally to reflect on her son's reasons for choosing a different way of life, and how they might be embedded in facts she does not yet understand. However, years later, when by chance she gets to see her son again, his existence as a hobo living day to day is an assault on her own way of conducting her life. She has difficulty accepting its miserable reality and her son's slippery, complete withdrawal from all personal attachments. In a state of anger and confusion, she feels at a loss at how to deal with her wish to help him and his distaste for that wish. However, the little word "maybe" not being dismissed in a request for fur-

¹⁰¹ *The New Yorker* has first option to decline all Munro's stories.

¹⁰² Edith Maybin's photograph that accompanied the story in *The New Yorker* and is on the cover of this dissertation, features the same sense of the human being's relation to and dependence of the eternal creation of the forms of the earth.

ther communication becomes a thin straw of hope that expands into a possibility-space.

There is something, anyway, in having got through the day without its being an absolute disaster. It wasn't, was it? She had said 'maybe.' He hadn't corrected her. And it was possible, too, that age could become her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen that look of old people, now and then—clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making.” (73)

The tentative affirmation of a miniscule possibility saves her from falling into complete despair. It becomes a key to sanity. Now the future is not being anticipated as anything else than a pure passing of time. It has no visualized goal or aim at its end-point. The trust felt in time as an agent for possibilities makes a haven in the protagonist's present.

There is in Munro's fiction an exploration of the constitutive forces of the moment seen as its conditions of possibilities. This is the infinite empowering circumstance of keeping the treasure of a possibility as always yet to be further examined. During the time I have investigated possibility-spaces in Alice Munro's fiction, I have become aware that the quite similar term “possibility space” is in use in game theory. Will Wright, the creator of *The Sims* among a dozen other games, wishes to oppose negative opinions about computer games by pointing to their positive effects on human imagination and problem-solving. In a game, possibility space represents the space between the beginning state of the game and its end state. One could think of it in terms of a setting with certain rules and goals where the player navigates this space through their choices and actions. Analogies are made to view our own lives as epiphenomena in a gigantic possibility space. Wright argues that games “cultivate—and exploit—possibility space better than any other media. In linear storytelling, we can only imagine the possibility space that surrounds the narrative: What if Luke had joined the Dark Side? What if Neo isn't the One? In interactive media, we can explore it” (“Dream Machines” 1). Being centered on achieving goals and being assured of progression, games cultivate another sort of experience than literature. In games the right combination of things will lead to some sort of success as, for example, that of being transported into a more elaborate level. Possibility space in computer games does not explore the possibilities as the essence of the moment, but only concentrates on the out-come of a possible choice. Games are oriented towards a future where expansion is equal to winning, to more options, more power, more conquests.

However, what Munro's stories do is not only explore multiple possibilities within a set frame where a creative choice leads to success, but they reveal what an hitherto unknown possibility truly is and how it emerges as something recognizable at the moment of its becoming known. These stories provide a suspended occasion for considering a given configuration of the

ordinary—something offered by the world as one of its possibilities. It illuminates what it cannot quite capture, the enigmatic movements between the known and the unknown. Literature gives rise to a particular type of knowledge. Being orderly without falling into the systematic or programmatic, literature helps us to retrace what we thought we already knew. This knowledge appears out of the experience of lyric and dramatic episodes that Charles E. May describes as “seductive and magical” (333).

Those are extreme events that loosen the well-tied context and leave more questions than answers behind them. In Munro’s intricate weaving of past and present, time is shown to be a possibility-space that exceeds the human capacity for making rational choices. A shattering childhood memory in “Face,” Munro’s most recent published story, will prove to have an everlasting and almost mystical bearing on the protagonist’s life as an adult. What shocked and frightened him when he was a child is in retrospect what he comes “to think of as the Great Drama” of his life (“Face” 60). The protagonist’s right side of his face is covered with a disfiguring birthmark, a predicament that leads to his father’s resentment and his mother’s devotion. Living in this extreme tension between love and hate lets him think that life is not at all inhabitable. He makes a close friend of the girl in the next house. However, one day when they mess around with some tins of paint, the girl gets it into her head to paint her face red to imitate his birthmark. Hoping to be his twin, she “was overjoyed, as if she had managed something magical, a radiant transformation. You’d have thought that this was something she’d been hoping for all her life” (64). This freak occurrence of a violent wish for being twin is misunderstood by the young boy who is shocked to learn the conspicuous truth of his mutilation. The riot he causes will lead to a turbulent break. The girl and her mother move. Much later, the protagonist learns how the girl in devastation had done something more violent. She had cut her cheek trying the best she could to make herself look like him. The girl’s extreme behavior touches him to the point where he can conjure her up as a rare phantom of love, reading him lines of poetry. “Your place left vacant / You not there” (67). The space that is occupied with her absence is unmistakably there, filled with compassion for the event that took place in the house he now cannot leave. He is guided by that event with which he could not reconcile himself, until he became a grown-up and could recognize the miraculous appearance of a wished for sameness. What so upset and disconcerted him in his early youth is now heeded as an event of remarkable significance. “Something had happened here. In your life there a few places, or maybe only one place, where something had happened. And then there are the other places, which are just other places” (67). In fidelity to what has happened in that house, the protagonist decides to remain there for the rest of his life. This is a tangible materialization of a space where the affectivity of love floats around as an eternal possibility.

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