

# Tricks with “a Sad Ring”: The Endings of Alice Munro’s “The Ottawa Valley”

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Article abstract

In a 1981 interview with J.R. (Tim) Struthers, Alice Munro says that “The stories in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* are nearly all holding-pattern stories, except for ... ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ and that was a big turning-point story.” Later she modifies that opinion (“scratch that holding-patterns business”), saying, “The truth is, one becomes very dissatisfied with everything.” When Struthers notes the importance of such dissatisfaction, Munro agrees: “It’s in ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ I believe. The last paragraph in this book is all about dissatisfaction with art” (28). That commentary raises several important questions. If the inadequacy of her representation of “real lives” matters, then how can she maintain (in the same interview) that those who dispute her accuracy demonstrate “a total confusion about what fiction is” (33)? And why does she say that the conclusion of “The Ottawa Valley” deals with a general “dissatisfaction with art” when it actually makes a different point? The answers to these questions involve autobiographical connections: as Munro states in her *Paris Review* interview, “The material about my mother is my central material in life” (“Art” 237), and therefore the ending of “The Ottawa Valley” does express a “dissatisfaction with art.” For her, the writer must be free to use “bits of what is real,” however “presumptuous” that sounds. Munro’s commentaries tend to divert attention from the painfully vivid memories that give her work its force in favour of less volatile metafictional issues.

# Tricks with “a Sad Ring”: The Endings of Alice Munro’s “The Ottawa Valley”

TRACY WARE

... so wide appears  
The vacancy between me and those days  
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,  
That, musing on them, often do I seem  
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself  
And of some other Being.

— William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (2: 28–33)

**I**N A 1981 INTERVIEW with J.R. (Tim) Struthers, Alice Munro says that “The stories in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* are nearly all holding-pattern stories, except for the last story in the book, which is ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ and that was a big turning-point story” (“Real” 21–22).<sup>1</sup> Later she modifies that opinion (“scratch that holding-patterns business”) by saying that “The truth is, one becomes very dissatisfied with everything, you know, with almost everything” (28). When Struthers notes the importance of such dissatisfaction, Munro agrees: “It’s in ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ I believe. The last paragraph in this book is all about dissatisfaction with art” (28). Here is the last part of that paragraph:

The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (246)<sup>2</sup>

Here is Munro's commentary from the Struthers interview:

In "The Ottawa Valley," I'm looking at all this material, I'm looking at real lives, and then I not only have to look at the inadequacy of the way I represent them but my right to represent them at all. And I think any writer who deals with personal material comes up against this. (28)

That commentary raises two questions. If the inadequacy of her representation of "real lives" matters, then how can she maintain (in the same interview) that those who dispute her accuracy demonstrate "a total confusion about what fiction is" (33)? And why does she say that the conclusion of "The Ottawa Valley" deals with a general "dissatisfaction with art" when it actually makes a different point? Comparing her work to a "series of snapshots," the narrator states, "In these snapshots Aunt Dodie and Uncle James and even Aunt Lena, even her children, come out clear enough ... The problem, the only problem, is my mother" (246). The answers to these questions involve autobiographical connections: as Munro states in her *Paris Review* interview, "The material about my mother is my central material in life" ("Art" 237), and therefore the ending of "The Ottawa Valley" does express a "dissatisfaction with art." For Munro, the writer must be free to use "bits of what is real," however "presumptuous" that sounds ("What is Real?" 226), and the idea that people "don't know what fiction is" is complicated by this qualification: "And how could they know, when what it is, is changing all the time, and we differ among ourselves, and we don't really try to explain because it is too difficult?" ("What is Real?" 223). Helpful as they are, Munro's commentaries tend to divert attention from the painfully vivid memories that often give her work its force towards less volatile meta-fictional issues. Indeed, such self-criticism is common in Munro's fiction, even by this point in her career, so much so that one reviewer of *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* complained that the writer's disclaimers "are uttered so often that they become in themselves a 'trick.'"<sup>3</sup> While some readers never tire of self-reflexivity,<sup>4</sup> "The Ottawa Valley" is about the problems of a daughter more than it is about the problems of a writer, not that the two are exclusive. As Magdalene Redekop writes, "The writing daughter's conscious failure to understand or represent the mother remains ... at the heart of Munro's aesthetic" (209).<sup>5</sup> That failure would lose its point if mimesis itself were doomed to failure. The most vivid images in "The Ottawa Valley" are of the mother, but, because these images form "a series of snapshots" that cannot be unified, the story has three endings. Since this structure is

more daring, and this mother more compassionately depicted, than those in Munro's previous work, "The Ottawa Valley" is both a turning point and, in Redekop's words, Munro's "most profound and subtle tribute to her mother" (103).<sup>6</sup>

Most of the story concerns the narrator's memory of a trip made with her mother and her sister to her mother's "old home in the Ottawa valley" (227), the territory of Munro's mother (see Ross 30). For the narrator, "It was no valley. I looked for mountains, or at least hills, but in the morning all it was was fields and bush, and Aunt Dodie outside the window holding a milk pail for a calf" (229). When she hears that Lena had married at sixteen, "straight out of the backwoods," she says it "left you to wonder, where was this?" (231). This is a story of women without men, with Uncle James the exception that proves the rule, since his wife "lays down the law," according to Dodie (233). Of the narrator's absent father, we know only that he has kept his promise to his wife not to drink. Otherwise we go from the "Ladies' Lounge" of Union Station (227) to Dodie's house, "the poorest house [the narrator] had ever been in, to stay" (229). Dodie does not speak to her sister Bernice or to Lena, who for her part "did not speak much to anybody" (231). The narrator's mother cannot forgive Lena for her words at the time of her own mother's death, and the narrator and her mother often negotiate their differences with silence.<sup>7</sup>

Ildikó de Papp Carrington argues that while the story might seem loosely linked (Irvine 102) or jumbled (Carscallen, "Munro" 74), "the links are not loose at all, and the sequence, far from being jumbled, is deliberately calculated to jar the reader into experiencing the same central emotion that the narrator feels and that unifies all these memories and impressions. They are all about the humiliations of helplessness, both comic and tragic" (191). Although her cousins quickly forget the beatings they receive from Lena, the narrator states, "With me, such a humiliation could last for weeks, or forever" (232). For Carrington, "The word *forever* is the addition of the retrospective narrator, forty-one or forty-two years old, the same age as her mother when her parkinsonism began" (191). As we will see, Munro's careful management of a retrospective perspective that is rarely explicit outside the opening and the closing is one of the subtlest tricks in the story.<sup>8</sup> To Carrington's compelling emphases on tragic and comic humiliations, Catherine Sheldrick Ross adds one more factor: both "the humiliation of exposure" and "the shame of the observer who witnesses exposure" are among Munro's "major themes" (40); as the narrator of "Winter Wind" says, "it was not just for myself but

for my mother that I had to feel shame" (196).<sup>9</sup> This sense of humiliation as contagious is crucial for understanding the two incidents with which I will begin: Dodie's story of tricking Allan Durrand; and the narrator's distress when the elastic of her underpants breaks when the family goes to church. Both could be told only by women, and both blend comedy with sadness, as indeed does Dodie's life: "Lots of girls would've cried," she says about being jilted, "but me, I laughed" (230). Since Dodie's laughter never conceals her pain, there is no contradiction between her account and the mother's memory of Dodie, two years after she was jilted, "crying in the night. Night after night" (230).

Seeing Durrand's name in the local newspaper, Dodie remembers a hot day more than two decades earlier,<sup>10</sup> when she sewed up the fly of his pants, then made Durrand a pail of lemonade spiked with vinegar, with the help of the narrator's mother. The two girls then hid to see him remove his overalls in order to urinate, and Dodie insists that he was fully exposed: "I haven't seen so many similar sights that I can afford to forget" (236). That's too much for the narrator's mother, who claims not to remember, but Dodie replies, "Oh you! You didn't run away yourself. Did you? Kept your eye to the knothole!" (236). The sequence ends with the narrator remembering the mother's "unusual expression": "helplessness. I won't say she laughed. She just looked as if there was a point at which she might give up" (236). As Carscallen argues, "Giving up here would for one thing mean showing pleasure" (*Other* 475), for the mother is usually determined not to "listen to smut" (236). But Dodie has involved the narrator's mother at every stage, not just in the past but also in the telling. Dodie frequently pauses to ask such questions as "How did we keep a straight face?" and "I wonder when it hit him, what'd been done?" (235). The mother's response to the latter shows no anxiety about the story's imminent conclusion: "Right then, I'd think. He was never stupid" (235). So she is split between the eighteen-year-old voyeur who enjoyed the joke and the humiliated mother who finds it indecorous. And the narrator is also split: she must have enjoyed seeing her mother exposed, but because of the guilt that pervades her retrospective narration, she must now share her mother's humiliation. So a story of voyeurism and humiliation contaminates its auditors, if not its teller. And if giving up would "for one thing mean showing pleasure," it would also mean giving up, period.

In a breathtaking transition, we move directly from the mother's look of "helplessness" to a quotation from Fishbein's *Medical Encyclopedia* on Parkinson's disease stating that "No recoveries are recorded" (237). The

quotation enables Munro to tell us all we need to know about the stages of Parkinson's disease, but to do so outside of the narrator's perspective, thereby hinting at the unresolved issues raised in the conclusion. As the opening shows, the narrator now knows that it was Parkinson's disease that caused her mother's hand to shake, but she did not know it then, probably because her mother did not know it either. The narrator knew only that her mother had to conceal her shaking forearm, and she is credulous to the point of tears when Dodie says that her mother has "had a little stroke," and that if that stroke leads to further deterioration, "You'll have to learn to be the mother, then" (243). Dodie would not be speculating so recklessly if she knew the proper diagnosis. To reassure the narrator, the mother says that her doctor has denied that she has had a stroke. Surely, if the doctor had said more, the mother, "in her categorical way" (227), would have also told Dodie, if not also her daughter? Therefore I cannot agree with Thacker that "during this visit [the narrator] recognizes for the first time [the Parkinson's disease] and so recognizes, as well, her mother's mortality, the fact that she will not always be there to comfort" ("Ontario" 217). I think that both recognitions come much later, and that the mother, like Munro's mother (see Munro, "Working" 38), knew that something was wrong long before she received a diagnosis. There is a connection between the mother's look of "helplessness" after hearing Dodie's story and her fate, but it is a connection that the narrator makes implicitly and later. Most of the narrative remains close to her youthful perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately after the entry from the medical encyclopedia comes the story's longest sequence, in which the family goes to church. There are at least three humiliations here, starting with the narrator's realization "that the elastic of [her] underpants had broken" (239). When the desperate girl turns away rather than attend church in such an embarrassed condition, her mother gives her the safety pin that holds up her slip:

Turning my back — and not saying thank-you, because I was too deep in my own misfortune and too sure of my own rights — I fastened together the waistband of my pants. Then my mother walked ahead of me up the toilet path and around the side of the church. We were late, everybody had gone in. We had to wait while the choir [singing "All things bright and beautiful"], with the minister trailing, got themselves up the aisle at their religious pace. (241)

I quote the passage at length because it reveals the narrator's utter dependence on her mother, and because it sets the scene for the next humiliation.

Painstakingly dressed in new shoes, flowered dress, and matching slip, hat, and gloves bought for the occasion, the mother walks belatedly into church, but “the grey slip had slid down half an inch and was showing in a slovenly way at one side” (241). Here the narrator herself is humiliated, at least in retrospect, because she is the cause of the failure of her mother’s plans. The word “slovenly” says it all, since it should never refer to the mother. Carscallen enables us to realize the stakes here: “the mother who descends into the outhouse to save her daughter from shame, and even takes shame on herself by appearing in church with her slip showing, is performing a kindness . . . Both the mother and Dodie, in their opposite ways, are figures of grace: both offer the narrator something for which, if she were less self-absorbed, she might say thank you” (*Other* 508–09).<sup>12</sup> Because the mother has performed a heroic act of self-denial in giving her daughter the pin, I cannot quite agree with Coral Ann Howells’s account of “the multiple failures of [the] mother’s social pretensions” (24). There is certainly failure in this scene, as we realize when Dodie later asks, “Why didn’t Allen Durrand come over and say hello?” (242). The mother has been snubbed (Carscallen, *Other* 507), but she has done nothing wrong, and so the narrator adds a compassionate note to her description of her mother’s outfit: “She must have planned this and visualized it just as I now plan and visualize, sometimes, what I will wear to a party” (241). Her retrospective distance is explicitly stated, but her guilt is left implicit.

Howells rightly observes that “The Ottawa Valley” is in part about the “loss of the daughter’s infantile fantasy of . . . maternal omnipotence” (25). In the church scene, the fantasy is satisfied before it is shattered. The narrator has only to walk towards the car and the pin is hers. After the service, people greet the family and comment on the resemblances among the mother, her children, and her own mother. It’s the kind of attention that the mother must have wanted, though Allen Durrand should have been part of it. The sequence ends with the words of a man whom the mother had taught: “She never learned me much, . . . but she was the best lookin’ one I ever had!” (242) In this respect, the mother is not only her daughter’s saviour but a legendary beauty. But the detail turns ironic with the terrible pun noticed by Carscallen: the tribute comes from “a sweaty man, whose hand [the narrator] could tell [the mother] did not want to shake” (242). As Carscallen writes, “one can see why the thought of shaking hands with the old Adam would be enough to make her own hand shake” (*Other* 477).<sup>13</sup> There should be no connection between these two kinds of handshake, but they are “tied

together in some inevitable and foreboding way” (227), to borrow a phrase from earlier in the story.

After church come the scenes in which Dodie talks about strokes and the narrator’s mother denies that diagnosis.<sup>14</sup> Since the narrator is “very much relieved that she had decided against strokes, and that I would not have to be the mother,” she asks two questions that verge on the unspeakable:<sup>15</sup> “So, are you not going to get sick at all?”; “Is your arm going to stop shaking?” (244) When she demands that her mother “turn and promise me what I needed” (244), her mother “went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent” (244). As the narrator later has it, that would have made a suitable ending to a bleak but “proper story” (246).<sup>16</sup> If the narrator had added the kind of retrospective insight that appears in the last paragraph of Margaret Laurence’s “The Loons” (“It seemed to me now ...” [120]), then the story would have the closure provided by a conventional epiphany. “The Ottawa Valley” would then conform to what Frank Davey calls the “implicit short-story contract,” according to which, among other things, the text “will display some structural unity or logic, show its character in a situation about which the reader can experience concern, and resolve this situation in a manner which instructs the reader in how to interpret the preceding text, yet also leave a ponderable residue of irresolution” (140). Instead of recognizing her error in retrospect, however, the narrator restates it: “As long as she lived, and through all the changes that happened to her, and after I had received the medical explanations of what was happening, I still felt secretly that she had given her consent. For her own purposes, I felt she did it: display, of a sort; revenge of a sort as well. More, that nobody could ever understand” (244).<sup>17</sup> As Dodie might say, “Oh, the cruelty of it!” (235). The narrator must have eventually realized the enormity of mistaking helplessness for consent, but that realization is left unstated, since Munro is more interested in presenting “two consciousnesses” than in subsuming youth into maturity.

Between the first and the final ending comes a scene that needs no revision to provide closure with no bitterness: the extraordinary scene in which Dodie and the narrator’s mother remember poetry from their “old readers” (245). Redekop and Louis K. MacKendrick have identified the sources, though they disagree on one detail: first, Dodie “cheerfully” recites four lines from Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Horatius” (1842) about the nobility of dying for one’s “fathers” and “gods”;<sup>18</sup> then the mother, with what the narrator calls “an embarrassing tremor,” recites two passages from



Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur" (1869) with two lines from Charles Wolfe's "The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna" (1816) spliced in between;<sup>19</sup> finally, after Uncle James surprises the others by remembering the first stanza of William Wilfred Campbell's "Indian Summer" (1889), all three recite the concluding stanza. MacKendrick finds the text "unclear," but feels that Dodie may have quoted the lines from Wolfe as well as the passage from Macaulay (*Some* 100). Redekop believes that "The female voice cannot seek to appropriate, without embarrassment, the powers inherent in the stories of male heroism," and so she argues that "Once again, it seems, the joke is on Momma and she does not see it. Like the involuntary movements of hand and face, the tremor in the voice is not necessarily an expression of deep emotion. It represents, more radically, the being taken over by a power beyond her control" (113–14). I think the tremor has other sources. After all, the mother "went away to Normal" (234) to become a teacher, and it would be embarrassing for her to jumble her texts.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the last lines that she recites from Tennyson concern a mythical hero who turns

To the island-valley of Avilion;  
 Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
 Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
 Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns  
 And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,  
 Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (ll. 427–32)

It is telling that the mother stops with the second line in the passage just quoted, since she has just returned to a valley to find that she is far from healing. In any case, the climax of this scene is when James remembers "Indian Summer," and as MacKendrick notes, "its theme is of passage as well, though here, unlike the male focus of Dodie and the mother's pieces, the terms are purely natural and not military" (*Some* 102). Here is the stanza that all three recite, "laughing at each other" (245):

Now by great marshes wrapped in mist,  
 Or past some river's mouth,  
 Throughout the long still autumn day  
 Wild birds are flying south.<sup>21</sup>

For the last time in the story, the comic turns tragic when Dodie supplies this commentary: "Though when you come to think of it, even that has kind of a sad ring" (246). As MacKendrick argues, by including these recitations, the narrator provides "a series of metaphorical epitaphs for a fighter who

has succumbed. The verses are variously elegiac, heroic, or nostalgic” (*Some* 102). They are also variously ironic, since a jilted woman speaks lines about dying for the fathers, a mother who prides herself on her propriety gives a failed recitation that is inadvertently revealing, and a man who earlier sang “Whiskey in the Jar” concludes with a slightly unseasonable text.<sup>22</sup>

The third and final ending of “The Ottawa Valley” begins when the narrator says, “If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture” (246). What I have called the second ending appears in this account as the narrator’s “attempt to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could” (246). At this point, if not before,<sup>23</sup> we are dealing with more than “a ponderable residue of irresolution” (Davey 140), and since Munro’s conclusion points outside of the text, the third ending is a kind of epilogue, and not an epiphany. No one except Munro — and probably not even she — can judge “The Ottawa Valley” according to the criteria implicit in its concluding paragraph. What is understandably a failure for Munro is not so for us, especially if we agree with Redekop that “The place where readings of Munro have been blocked — on the connection with autobiography — is the place of her greatest innovation” (234). As in the epilogue to *Lives of Girls and Women* and in such later stories as “Chaddeleys and Flemings” and “Meneseteung,” the ending questions the possibility of ever escaping the anxieties that the story first raised and then tried to allay. Here she seems to abandon the rhetoric of fiction to speak in her own voice, but her ending is neither more nor less autobiographical than the rest of the story. As Amoz Oz observes in another context, any reader who imagines “that he is actually invited to enter the dark room . . . fail[s] to realize that ‘backstage’ is not really behind the scenery but just a second set” (7). The ending is compelling because it has been foreshadowed by the series of humiliations that constitutes the story. What prevents me from calling it an epiphany is that, as Karen Smythe argues, “The visibility of the image is essential for the epiphanic moment to occur: this ‘ineluctable modality of the visible,’ as Stephen Dedalus describes it, can be achieved concretely through the apprehension of an object, person or gesture; or it can exist only in the mind’s eye, in a figurative seeing, as it is constituted in the aural experience of perceiving sound” (17). Since they involve the sights and insights of a moment, either of the first two endings could have been epiphanies, but not the third.<sup>24</sup> The point is not that the photographs induce an epiphany, but that they fail to do so: her pictures of “Aunt Dodie and Uncle James and

even Aunt Lena, even her children, come out clear enough.... The problem, the only problem, is my mother" (246). If she has an image of her mother, it is overexposed: "She is as heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow." Rather than calling that an epiphany, it is better to join such critics as Ann Beattie, Mark Levene, and W.H. New in emphasizing Munro's increasing distance from this hallmark of Modernist fiction.<sup>25</sup> As David Crouse writes in a comparison of Munro and Richard Ford, "Epiphany condenses complexity into a single moment; Ford and Munro spread this moment out, sometimes over years and years, dispersing the knowledge, diluting it with doubt" (63).<sup>26</sup>

In an interview with Peter Gzowski, Munro implies that "Family Furnishings" in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) is an exception to her usual avoidance of self-conscious stories about the limitations of fiction: "In general, I'm very wary of stories where the writer says, 'Oh, I feel so guilty, here I am, I'm using up these people.' So I didn't want to write that kind of story because the answer to that is, 'Well if you feel so guilty, quit doing it' ('You're' F5). Perhaps Gzowski did not remember the stories in and contemporary with *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, but what was Munro thinking of? Not only "The Ottawa Valley" but at least three contemporary stories raise similar issues. In "Material," first published in 1973, a woman reads a story by her ex-husband Hugo and finds it both "a very good story" with "Lovely tricks, honest tricks" (43) and an exploitation of the woman on which it is based: "*This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo*" (44).<sup>27</sup> In "Winter Wind," first published in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, the narrator admits, "I have used these people, not all of them, but some of them, before. I have tricked them out and altered them and shaped them any way at all, to suit my purposes." Her stories may be like those her subjects tell, but "that only takes care of the facts. I have said other things ... Yet I have not invented it, I really believe it. Without any proof I believe it, and so I must believe that we get messages another way, that we have connections that cannot be investigated, but have to be relied on" (201). Her most extravagant work of metafiction, a 1974 story called "Home" that Munro told Struthers is "a sort of final statement" ("Real" 28),<sup>28</sup> includes italicized commentaries that foreground the narrator's guilt in "using up these people." The last of these begins "*I don't know how to end this*" (151), and ends "*I don't want any more effects, I tell you, lying. I don't know what I want. I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can*" (153). These other stories are not as bleak as "The

Ottawa Valley”: the problem with Hugo is in part his masculine arrogance, and so female writers may be less exploitative; the narrator of “Winter Wind” retains a belief that she can somehow rely on her “messages”; and the narrator of “Home” holds out the possibility of “honour.” But the hopes are tentative, and the truth may be that some kind of guilt is inevitable for writers who deal with what Munro calls “personal material” (“Real” 28). When, in “The Ottawa Valley” and contemporary stories, Munro learned to foreground her guilt, she reached a new level of self-reflexivity. As Thacker writes, “What seems to have happened here ... is that Munro returned to Huron County [in 1973] and confronted memories that, as she worked on the stories that became *Something*, led her to question her very practice as an artist during the years since she left in 1951” (*Alice Munro* 262). Afterwards, her work is less overtly metafictional, and she has not reprinted “Home.” Nonetheless, as her comment to Gzowski demonstrates, it’s still hard to tell the “honest tricks” from the lies. If Munro knows the difference she’s not telling. Or she’s up to her usual tricks.

### AUTHOR’S NOTES

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Like most of the thirteen stories in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, “The Ottawa Valley” was originally published in book form in 1974 (see Thacker’s “Annotated Bibliography,” 359). According to Robert Thacker, “The Ottawa Valley” was the last to be written, but, in Munro’s first arrangement, “Winter Wind” was placed last, “immediately after ‘The Ottawa Valley.’ Had it been so, the effect created by the stories in succession would have been one of a narrator first discovering her mother’s Parkinson’s disease and then, years later and with the disease’s effects well established, living with it as an adolescent” (*Alice Munro* 260).

<sup>2</sup> I cite the 1996 paperback, which conveniently preserves the pagination of the original edition of *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*.

<sup>3</sup> The reviewer is Bette Howland, writing in the *Chicago Tribune* of 6 Oct. 1974. I have taken the comment from Thacker, *Alice Munro* 272.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly J. Rasporich writes that “The trick is that by proclaiming incompetence as an artist, belief in artistic competence is assured. Turning a trick. The female way” (67). Hallvard Dahlie finds a similar irony in the ending of “The Ottawa Valley”: “we as readers accept the

narrator's poignant lament about her own mother, but at the same time we reject these lines in their function as the disclaimer of Alice Munro the artificer, for throughout these stories she has admirably succeeded in communicating the 'something' she has wanted to tell us" (238). For a cogent analysis of how Munro's self-critical rhetoric supports her kind of realism, see A.E. Christa Canitz and Roger Seamon: "It is not that the looseness of construction mirrors the real world, but that as readers we are forced to work for our meaning, and we reward ourselves for the effort with the belief that we have penetrated a resistant reality" (69).

<sup>5</sup> Munro's daughter Sheila calls "The Ottawa Valley" her mother's "most purely autobiographical story about her mother" (141). Catherine Sheldrick Ross argues that "successive stories from 'The Peace of Utrecht' through 'The Ottawa Valley,' 'Winter Wind,' 'Home,' to 'Friend of My Youth,' recover an image of the mother that gets progressively younger" (41), though that progression is complicated by the stories in *Runaway*, especially "Soon." Since they were written shortly before they were published in 1974, "The Ottawa Valley" and "Winter Wind" are part of the movement described by Elaine Showalter: "Hating one's mother was the feminist enlightenment of the fifties and sixties; but it is only a metaphor for hating oneself. Female literature of the 1970s goes beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother" (135).

<sup>6</sup> As Thacker argues, this story and others originate in the author's life but are above all true to the logic of fiction: "Much of what is there, Munro has said, is autobiographical — the elastic on her underpants did break and she did insist on taking a safety pin from her mother, whose slip showed as a consequence [when they visited Scotch Corners in the Ottawa Valley in 1943]. However, its central scene, when the narrator confronts her mother about the symptoms of her illness, is imagined. Alice Munro did not do that" (*Alice Munro* 72).

<sup>7</sup> Since her mother lacks a proper name, it will be necessary to refer to her as "the mother," despite the risk of confusion in a story with several maternal figures: in addition to the mother, the mother's mother is variously remembered, and Lena has eight children, while Dodie imagines a time when the narrator will have "to learn to be the mother" (243), as Dodie did when her own mother was ill.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of how Munro learned to use "retrospective narrative" to "create a dialectic between experience and understanding," see Thacker, "Clear."

<sup>9</sup> As Ross notes, Carrington establishes connections among humiliation, voyeurism, and writing throughout Munro's work (5).

<sup>10</sup> Dodie states that the women were eighteen then (234), and the mother is forty-one or forty-two when she visits (237).

<sup>11</sup> Thacker calls her "pre-teenage," perhaps remembering the passage in which the narrator says, "I had no hips then to hold anything up" (239). If she is the same age as Dodie was when her mother became ill, as Dodie implies (243), she would be about ten.

<sup>12</sup> As always, Carscallen finds a mythical subtext that not all readers will accept, but his command of detail is remarkable. He argues that the narrator's mother is a version of the figure he calls the "Old Woman," whom he associates with martyrdom and even crucifixion: "We even find the Old Woman taking on the role of martyr, for in reciting the last words of Tennyson's Arthur, the mother ... is preparing for her own death. When she silently darkens and withdraws from the daughter who has exposed her mortality, this martyr's role becomes that of a crucified Christ" (*Other* 507).

<sup>13</sup> Carscallen knows that the mother's shaking hand "is technically the result of Parkinson's disease," but he feels that "there must be something more here: something to which the biblical palsy gives a suggestive echo" (*Other* 476–77). Outside of the mythical context that he works so hard to establish, the mother's disease is overwhelmingly important. For this and other stories, I agree with Redekop that "Munro takes a consistently ironic and wary approach to symbols and archetypes even as she makes it clear that there is no escape from them" (231).

<sup>14</sup> It is not clear what led Dodie to suspect a stroke. When the mother "had to go and have her

rest" earlier (230) it elicited no comment from Dodie, but something in the mother's behaviour later captures Dodie's morbid interest.

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Hirsch argues that, even in recent fiction, "some of the plots of mothers and daughters, especially the permutations of maternal subjectivities, remain fractured and self-contradictory — unspeakable. Yet the unspeakable itself acquires a different significance in texts that combine, without subsuming, the personal with the political" (39).

<sup>16</sup> Although it is much less bleak, the ending of "Walker Brother Cowboy" is similar: "I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine" (18).

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Munro explains that Parkinson's disease has "very peculiar symptoms ... so that it ... can seem in the beginning like a neurotic, self-chosen affliction. And it was seen so, by some people in the family" (50). Assuming that "an author's conscious intention is not what matters," Carscallen argues that "the triumphant mother in 'The Ottawa Valley,' as her daughter somehow knows, has consented to her own approaching death" (*Other* 11, 462).

<sup>18</sup> She quotes, with minor changes, the last four lines of stanza 27 (Macaulay 813).

<sup>19</sup> Munro alludes to both Wolfe's poem and the legend of Arthur in the title story (also the opening story) of *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (7, 4). Patrick Cameron has to memorize Wolfe's poem in Al Purdy's *A Splinter in the Heart* (14–15). For a discussion of Munro's allusions to Tennyson, see Lorraine York.

<sup>20</sup> Her first two lines are from ll. 170–71, and her last three lines are from ll. 424–28 of "The Passing of Arthur." In between come two lines from Moore: "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note, / As his corse to the ramparts we hurried" (Wolfe ll. 1–2). As a result, her recitation makes no sense, since Arthur's dying words follow a reference to a corpse. As Christopher Ricks notes (in Tennyson 1742), the lines from "The Passing of Arthur" were originally written for "Morte d'Arthur" (1842).

<sup>21</sup> Except for minor details of spelling and punctuation, the passage is accurate. As D.M.R. Bentley notes, the poem was first published in 1881 with five stanzas, two of which were omitted when the poem was revised in 1888 (viii).

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Ken McLean for identifying the song about taking "delight in the water of the barley" (238).

<sup>23</sup> Redekop finds that although she desires a critical distance from biography, "That position is compromised as soon as I introduce the extra-literary fact that Alice Munro's own mother died of Parkinson's Disease" (232).

<sup>24</sup> For a contrary view, see Smythe (133).

<sup>25</sup> Beattie refers to "lyrical passages that ultimately belie any belief that there are easy epiphanies to be had" (D3). Levene argues that the purpose of the ending of "The Ottawa Valley" "was not the kind of closure a submerged epiphanic ending can provide" (848). New writes that Munro "turned from writing stories involving 'epiphanies' or revealed meaning to stories that recorded the continuing adjustments of sensibility" (239). It is true that the Modernist epiphany is often an insight into the narrator's folly, as in Joyce's "Araby," and that it is not necessarily "easy" at all. In this respect it is worth noting that, in an interview with Jill Gardiner, Munro emphasizes the lack of a firm resolution in "Araby": "The adult narrator has the ability to detect and talk about the confusion. I don't feel that the confusion is ever resolved" (qtd. in Thacker, "Clear" 54). Nonetheless, the narrator of "Araby," unlike the narrator of "The Ottawa Valley," experiences a flash of insight in visual terms: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (35). When Eleanor Wachtel says, "Many traditional stories lead to a moment of insight, an epiphany, that

sort of thing. Your stories have moments of insight —” Munro interrupts, “Yeah, and then they’re wrong” (Interview 51–52).

<sup>26</sup>E.D. Blodgett argues that the stories in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* “first powerfully manifest that quality that is unmistakably Munro’s: the unremitting struggle the narrator makes with her material to find its truth in herself” (5). Ajay Heble writes that “Munro brings to this volume a new-found interest in and suspicion of telling as a source of power” (74).

<sup>27</sup>W.R. Martin notes that the word “tricks” in the last sentence of “The Ottawa Valley” “takes us back to ‘Material’”: “It is altogether appropriate that an artist as thoughtful about her art as Alice Munro is, should place at the beginning and at the end of the volume two stories about ‘materials’ and artificers” (90).

<sup>28</sup>She continues, “It’s an almost ‘I’m not going to write any more of this junk’ kind of statement [laughter]. Well, no. It’s an ‘I can’t do it’ or, even beyond that, ‘Nobody can do it’ kind of statement. And every once in a while I write a story like this because it’s what I feel” (28).

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