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The Ideology of Form: Political Interpretation and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*

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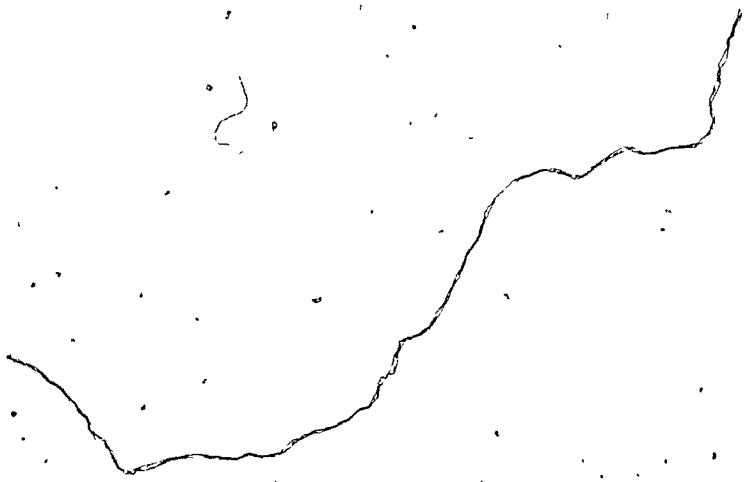

ABSTRACT

The Ideology of Form: Political Interpretation and Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women

Sandra Wynne Dangley

Rachel Blau Du Plessis' Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers and Fredric Jameson's The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act affirm that, as processes, narratives enact social contradictions experienced by the writer and would work to "resolve" them. The general import of these works will be detailed to indicate the socialist-feminist interpretive codes through which I will critique Alice Munro's perception of and humanist critical interpretation of her work as a depiction rather than an interpretation of experience, rewrite Munro's Lives of Girls and Women, and relate its formal expression of the ideology of individualism to her social experience.

I will critique Jameson's failure to address sexual politics, and argue that since ideology informs all conceptualization, all theoretical understanding and critical interpretation must be historicized.

Lives of Girls and Women works to naturalize social reality through realist form, while contradicting its own "arguments" in the very process of their semic enactment.

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Introduction

> Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social -- successful courtship, marriage -- or judgmental of her sexual and social failure -- death.
>
> Rachel Blau Du Plessis in Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers

> L'explication des événements les plus simples fait intervenir toute l'histoire de l'univers.
>
> Hubert Reeves in Patience dans l'azur: L'évolution cosmique

Following Rachel Blau Du Plessis in Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers and Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act, I will affirm that narratives are processes which enact social contradictions experienced by the writer and which would work to "resolve" them. Interpretation, whether of "literary" or other texts, proceeds through a rewriting of the text confronted into an allegory of the metaphysical or social narrative projected by the interpreting subject, who produces rather than discovers meaning in a process that is constitutively ideological, and that is enacted in material signifiers. Consequently my interpretation of Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women will entail an examination of the socialist-feminist codes through which I would rewrite it and situate it historically in an ongoing cultural revolution.

Munro's perception of her fiction as a "depiction" rather than an interpretation of experience is informed by untenable concepts of the human subject and of language and

realist narrative as transparent mediums through which we may encounter the real. While Lives works to naturalize social reality through the use of realist form and by the manner in which it would build in its own reception, it contradicts its own arguments in the very process of their semic generation. Liberal-humanist critics have seen Munro's stories as self-contained organic wholes reflecting the synchronic structure of "Life" understood as a universal essence. My interpretation will affirm that Lives is a contradictory and divergent process to be understood in relation to the historical conditions of its production and reception. Lives would resolve the social contradictions experienced by Munro, as a woman writer from a working-class background in rural North America, through formal enactment of the imaginary resolution of individual self-creation. This involves an understanding of the subject as self-contained and unified by rationality, and as thus able to "contain" experience and personal suffering in an objective picture, produced from a position of distance outside the social determination of perception.

I will contend that twentieth-century novels by women which invest in individualist ideology must be considered dialectically, as at once part of the progressive movement in which bourgeois cultural revolution works to delegitimate the religious paradigms so central to patriarchy, and as complicit with a dominant ideology which situates "origin" in the free will of self-contained individuals. Jameson's failure to engage with feminism (expressed, in large part,

in his lack of consideration of how the bourgeois ideology of the subject relates to women) will be taken as an affirmation of one of his central contentions -- that the social experience of a member of a dominant class imposes structural limitations on that subject's epistemological framework.

Chapter I

A Method for the Interpretation of Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act: The Politics of Historical Interpretation

This chapter will define the terms and explain the methodology with which I will interpret/rewrite Lives of Girls and Women. Criticism of Munro's work has largely been in a liberal humanist tradition, fundamentally based on the conception of a work as a unified whole, as an object separable from its context. I will critique this perspective on the ground that Lives, like all texts, can only be seen to signify as a process, within the historical conditions of its production and reception. However, my study's intention -- to ask, not what the text "means" in some transcendent way, but how it works, in a historical context, to produce certain meanings -- must begin from a contradiction. The suggestion of how a text works always already implies what it means. Thus my interpretation is like all interpretations, in inevitably being predicated upon, and in working to perpetuate, the ideological perspective of the interpreting subject. Consequently I must begin by stating the assumptions through which I encounter Lives. My interpretation will be implicated in the process of objectifying Munro's text, even as I critique such a process.

From an anti-Marxist perspective, Marxist cultural criticism has often been considered as a static monolith whose assumptions are in contradiction to those of bourgeois criticism and to feminist criticism. Yet there are contradictory positions within Marxism itself. Georg Lukacs'

purportedly "materialist" reflection theory of literature has rightly been critiqued and denounced by Marxist critics such as Pierre Macherey and Raymond Williams.1 This theory, which tends to conceptualize a literary work as an organic whole, betrays many of the assumptions of idealist criticism. It fails to consider the process of the production of meaning and the material being of language. As I will later explain, it lends itself well to the patriarchal exclusion of the significance of women's experience.

In his first chapter, "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act," Jameson attempts to synthesize the interpretive approaches of Lukacs and Macherey through his proposal that interpretation be conducted within three concentric frameworks. Terry Eagleton, in "The Idealism of American Criticism," relates the Lukacsian-Hegelian thrust in Jameson's study to its "grave blindspot," its "failure to engage with feminism" (65). Jameson's critical practice is reprehensible in this regard even in relation to a Marxist outlook, as it has done much to alienate feminist critics from Marxist theory. The frustration for any socialist feminist confronting Jameson's work is that, while it everywhere makes its blindness to feminist concerns apparent, it theoretically carves out a <u>constitutive</u> place for feminist criticism in the interpretive framework it proposes. Jameson's theory of cultural revolution fully asserts the ongoing virulence of sexual oppression, and the need to address this in practical criticism. Yet the practical criticism in <u>The Political Unconscious</u> makes no

attempt to analyze the sign-systems of patriarchy. This chapter will culminate in a feminist critique of Jameson's text. Because my critique is based on the contradiction detailed above, I will develop it fully only after I have considered Jameson's interpretive proposal, and the qualifications I will make as to my use of it. My second chapter will conduct a feminist critique using a different strategy. As I briefly situate my interpretive approach in relation to other feminist approaches, I will critique the form of my own and of Jameson's study by considering them in relation to Jameson's observation that form itself may be read as an ideological content.

I will proceed, firstly, by detailing the general postulates of The Political Unconscious, of Writing beyond the Ending, and of my own study. My understanding of the terms used will be presented in greater detail after I have given an overview of my perspective. Secondly, I will follow the movement of "On Interpretation" through a consideration of the contemporary critique of hermeneutics, and of Louis Althusser's response to this as it relates to Lukacs' reflection theory. Jameson's proposal for three interpretive frameworks, which is advanced in relation to this consideration, will be discussed in detail. I will indicate how and where the methodology discussed will be used in my chapters on Munro's work, and how and why my interpretation will draw on Blau Du Plessis' examination of women's texts.

The reason this long theoretical consideration precedes

my interpretation of Lives is that, as Jameson affirms:

> our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code. (9-10)

Rewriting Lives through a socialist feminist code, I will (particularly in Chapter Six) indicate the pronounced inadequacy of Jameson's master code for a rewriting of a woman's narrative act. Jameson's master code is the history of class struggle, a history which I agree must be read in a text. His rewriting, however, neglects to consider how class solidarity is fractured by sexual oppression. This renders problematic his affirmation that other interpretive methods, once historicized, are to be accorded a local validity within a Marxist interpretive framework which claims priority. This claim is made on the grounds that other methods arbitrarily limit the context in which significance is to be found. The "strategies of containment" through which such limitation is achieved become visible when they are considered within the social totality. My own interpretation, and Jameson's interpretations, are themselves open to critique on the grounds that they deploy strategies of containment.

Jameson's goal is:

> to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation,

> of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of narrative, ... the central function or instance of the human mind. (13)

The object of study is "Darstellung," our presentation of our thinking. Syntax, or the movement of language and thought through time, is an integral part of how significance is produced. Thus any production of significance may be seen as a narrative. Eagleton observes that, in The Political Unconscious, Jameson emerges as a "shamelessly unreconstructed Hegelian Marxist" ("Idealism" 6). Yet Jameson may be seen to turn around the theoretical critique of Hegelian Marxism as a reduction of experience to an "essential" allegory by suggesting that this reductive process does occur, but is not to be constituted as a condensation or containment of "the Real." Rather, it is the means by which the Real is textualized, and a means to which all interpretation necessarily has recourse.

Narrative and critical strategies of containment close off the context in which an object of study is to be known and accorded formal unity. Jameson asserts that Marx may be seen to have conceived of ideology in terms of strategies of containment, that is, in terms of the structural limitations of the epistemological frameworks engendered by historically situated social experience.2 Such frameworks claim the capability to construct a universal model of experience. Thus they can be exposed "only by confrontation with the ideal of totality which they at once imply and repress"

(53). The methodological imperative of totalization must be seen in relation to T.W. Adorno's "negative dialectic." Critical application of the historical materialist proposition that the truth lies in the whole must also recognize the validity of this proposition's counteraffirmation, in Adorno's statement that "the whole is the untrue." This affirms that any dialectical analysis is itself open to a further historicization, to a critique of how its own strategies of containment betray the interested perspective of a historically situated subject. Totality "is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth" (55). My second chapter will consider my own strategies of containment.

That Jameson himself neglects to formulate a theory about how the social production of gender has worked to maintain dominant ideology must be taken to indicate the validity of one of his central contentions -- that the social experience of a member of a dominant class imposes structural limitations on that subject's epistemological framework. Considering the ubiquitousness of the love story in cultural artifacts through the ages, a proposal for cultural interpretation which neglects to consider gender is seriously lacking. Thus my approach to Lives will rewrite it in the manner Jameson proposes while critiquing and complementing Jameson's concepts by referring to the analysis in Writing beyond the Ending. As Blau Du Plessis claims, much of the twentieth-century narrative production by Western women has been concerned with a delegitimation of

the romance plot, a "trope for the sex-gender system" (ix).

While there are enormous differences in the critical practices of Writing beyond the Ending and The Political Unconscious, I would contend that the former frequently operates the central assumptions of the latter -- that narrative is a "symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and aesthetic" (77), and that narratives enact social contradictions experienced by the writer and work to produce imaginary resolutions to them. (Specific examples of the similarities and differences between these two works will be given in due course.)

Following Jameson, I will contend that:

> ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions. (79)

Jameson refers to Althusser's sense of the term ideology as "a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History" (30). In Writing beyond the Ending, Blau Du Plessis quotes and makes use of Althusser's definition of ideology as a "system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is" (3). My use of the

term will also refer to this definition. Ideology is not a passive "reflection" of the mode of material production, but both maintains and is maintained by the mode of production and reproduction. (The problem of the concept of "mode of production" for socialist-feminist analysis will be discussed later.)

Blau Du Plessis' study is based on the propositions that "narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale" (3) and that "narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live" (3). Writing beyond the Ending is largely a collection of practical criticism, in which Blau Du Plessis makes a fertile use of the above propositions, although she does not choose to develop them theoretically at any great length in this particular work.

Examining Lives of Girls and Women, I will suggest how Munro operates both "strategies of containment," a concept central to Jameson's study, and the "strategies of delegitimation" with which Blau Du Plessis' book is concerned. The former perform the function of "motivating and legitimating the boundary which seals off all of the social totality [a] narrative model can deal with . . ." (269). They work to naturalize those narrative materials suggestive of historical change by folding them back into a model of explanation (built into a narrative through conventions organizing the way it is intended to be received) such as metaphysics or a humanist vision of universal psychology. Strategies of

delegitimation point to the very way in which traditional narrative conventions have effected containment of the social within the natural. (This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.) They cannot of course themselves escape ideological marking, but are delegitimating insofar as they challenge dominant ideology, and containing in the way they themselves mark off epistemological and ontological boundaries.

Both strategies of delegitimation and containment facilitate the production of "imaginary" resolutions to and compensations for social contradictions. (In Blau Du Plessis' study, more weight is given to the transformative power of aesthetic resolutions. The implications of this will be developed in Chapter Two.) Resolution and compensation are not to be understood as produced only on the level of explicit content and plot closure. Blau Du Plessis and Jameson consider this production as evident in formal structure and prose style as well. Blau Du Plessis' study, examining a utopian thrust in feminist literature, casts the feminist narrative project as a re-envisioning of intimate human connection through collective unity rather than the traditional heterosexual couple. Jameson observes that analysis of traditionally determined "great" works, most of which have worked to reinforce dominant ideologies, is not complete without the reconstruction and affirmation of the oppositional voices with which they were and are in conflictual dialogue. By analyzing the subversive strategies of women's texts, Writing beyond the Ending completes the

dialectical movement of the project of socialist cultural analysis which Jameson gestures to as important but which is extrinsic to his work.

Post-structuralist theorists, among others, have denounced historical criticism on the basis that it has depended upon the concept of a "realistic" or "referential" text, a mimetic reflection of, or transparent medium to, some social ground placed over against it. As Raymond Williams observes in Marxism and Literature, such a concept has indeed informed much orthodox Marxist and historical criticism, which consequently takes as its objective the determination of the adequacy or inadequacy of the "reflection," or some lifelike reconstruction and elaboration of the society in which the text finds its context. Contemporary Marxist cultural theorists, including Williams, Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, have disclaimed and denounced the reflection theory deployed by earlier critics, notably Georg Lukacs.

Williams rightly observes that reflection theory depends on an idealist conception of language, ideas, and art as mere "echoes" or "phantoms" of some empirical real. My own critical approach begins from an agreement with Williams' understanding of language as detailed in Marxism and Literature. A definition of language is "always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (21):

> Language, then, is not a medium; it is a constitutive element of material social practice. . . .

[I]t is clearly also a special case. For it is at once a material practice and a process in which many complex activities, of a less manifestly material kind -- from information to interaction, from representation to imagination, and from abstract thought to immediate emotion -- are specifically realized. Language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality. And then, to the extent that material practice is limited to the production of objects, or that social practice is taken to exclude or to contrast with individual practice, language can become unrecognizable in its real forms. Within this failure of recognition, alternative partial accounts of language are made the basis of, among other matters, alternative kinds of literary theory. The two major alternative kinds, in our own culture, are on the one hand 'expressivism,' in its simple forms of 'psychological realism' or the writing of 'personal experience,' or its disguised forms of naturalism and simple realism -- expressing the truth of an observed situation or fact -- and on the other hand, 'formalism,' in its variants of instances of a form, assemblies of literary devices, or 'texts' of a 'system of signs.' Each of these general theories grasps real elements of the practice of writing, but commonly in ways which deny other real elements

and even make them inconceivable. (165)

As Williams observes, expressivist theory and criticism and formalist theory and criticism are complementary errors.

Expressivism does not account for the significance of meaning as a production rather than a discovery, a production extending through a process linking writers, words with a material being, literary forms and readers. Formalism rightfully "corrects" expressivism by asserting that we must take heed of "the words on the page." Yet it tends to posit a non-existent entity called "the text itself." A text cannot exist in a "meaningful" way independent of a reader's (re)production of it, a production informed by a "shared consciousness of already available meanings" (166), and enacted in a language "already embedded in active relationships" (166).

My third chapter will critique the understanding of realism as documentation expressed by Munro and by humanist critics of her work. This understanding presupposes many untenable concepts, such as that language functions as a transparent window onto lived experience, and that a writer can construct a narrative which does not deploy any motivated or ideological interpretation of the real.

Jameson observes that it is necessary for the literary critic to consider a work's formal properties, as the deployment of the concept of narrative as a socially symbolic act involves, not the determination of what a text might "mean" in some transparent or transcendent way, but how it works to produce certain meanings. Before returning

to a more detailed discussion of Jameson's conception of narrative, I will follow the movement of his text through consideration of the contemporary critique of hermeneutics, and Louis Althusser's response to this.

Althusser critiques the Hegelian concept of "expressive causality," opposing it to his conception of "structural causality." The Marxist precept that social life is one and indivisible, in the sense that no "part" of experience can be understood outside of its relation to the whole, leads to the much-debated question of how the whole is to be conceptualized. Althusser sees it as a structure, although:

> The structure is not an essence outside the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations. . . . [It] is immanent in its effects. . . . The whole existence of the structure consists of its effects. (Reading Capital 186-89)

Jameson observes that a critical tendency to dismiss Althusser's critique of expressive causality (an understanding of the whole as reducible to an inner essence) under the name of "totalization" must confront the contradiction that totalization is itself one of the targets of this critique.

Jameson explores Althusser's critique as a means of answering to the main charge that will be (and has been) levelled against his own text (and to which my own study is open), the charge of idealist reduction. Marxist cultural criticism has depended upon the notion of historical or

cultural "periods," determined by mode of production. Such periodizations do tend "to give the impression of a facile totalization" (27). As Jameson acknowledges:

> the construction of a historical totality necessarily involves the isolation and privileging of one of the elements <u>within</u> that totality . . . such that [it] becomes a master code or "inner essence" capable of explicating the other elements. . . . [It] can thus be seen as the implicit or explicit answer to the now impermissible interpretive question, "what does it mean?" (The practice of "mediation" is then . . . understood as a more seemingly dialectical . . . mechanism for moving or modulating from one level or feature of the whole to another . . . which, however, as in bourgeois periodization, has no less the effect of unifying a whole social field around a theme or an idea.) (28)

Jameson later suggests a means of surmounting this problem which begins from the observation that every historically existing society "has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of <u>several</u> means of production all at once" (95).

Individual period formulations both present the problem of synchronicity suggested above, and give the impression of a narrative consisting in a historical sequence of stages or modes of production. The critical practice of categorization and periodization has therefore been denounced under

the term of "historicism." Thus a fundamental target of Althusser's critique of "expressive causality" is:

> a vast interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artifacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more "fundamental" narrative, of a hidden master narrative which is the allegorical key or figural content of the first sequence of empirical materials. (28)

Althusser's statement that "history is a process without a telos or a subject" (Réponse à John Lewis 91-8) constitutes a refusal of categories locked in individualistic modes of conceptualization. These categories "form" master narratives, as they correspond to the conventions of narrative closure and of character.

Jameson's position is that, while a "master narrative" is indeed problematic, it allows an important process to occur. That is, it allows the individual subject a means of imagining her/his relationship to the public, social or political. To interpret a text allegorically is to open it "to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings" (29). To rewrite a narrative with an allegorical key represented in a "subject" or main "character" (which can be the representation of a collectivity or particular class) can permit, as it does in the medieval system of interpretation of the Old Testament, the generation of further levels in which the individual "is able to 'insert' himself or herself" (30). In the medieval system, Christ is

taken as an allegorical key, and a historical narrative about a group of people is reread as an allegory of Christ's life. This allows the reading subject to reread the story in terms of a further "moral" level, because Christ seen as an individual subject mediates between the historical narrative and the psychological experience of the reading subject. That subject's experience may then be placed within the last or "anagogical" level, as it is read as an allegory of a final story, concerned with the entire progress of the human collectivity and the collective "meaning" of history. Jameson observes that "it is precisely by way of the moral and anagogical interpretations that the textual apparatus is transformed into a 'libidinal apparatus,' a machinery for ideological investment" (30).

Jameson relates the critique of allegorical master codes to the "specific critique of the vulgar Marxist theory of levels" (32), or base and superstructure, a theory which may also be seen to project an allegory. In cultural and in more narrowly political analyses based on this theory,

> a movement of allegorical decipherment takes place in which the conception of class interest supplies the function or link between a superstructural symptom and its "ultimately determining" reality in the base. (33)

Because such a link refers to a particular mode of production, and thus to an implied sequence of modes of production, the "allegorical key" may itself be enlarged into a narrative of "some properly Marxian 'philosophy of history'"

(33).

Jameson recognizes the validity of Althusser's critique of expressive causality and of allegorical interpretation, yet reserves a local place in which these operations may be seen as valid. He proposes a provisional qualification of Althusser's formulation of history, as earlier cited:

> history is <u>not</u> a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . ., as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and . . . our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious. (35)

While accepting that history has neither an end nor a subject, that is, that is does not have the "structure" of a narrative, Jameson argues that we inevitably "read" it in narrative form. Our continued tendency to perceive allegory in story exists because "allegorical narrative signifieds . . . reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality" (34). Narratives are not seen as reflecting the real itself, but as reflecting the manner in which we think about the real.

Defending the practice of mediation or transcoding -- the application of a particular vocabulary to more than one type of "text," object of study, or distinct area of activity -- Jameson argues that Althusser's critique of expressive causality is largely directed towards the notion

of unreflected immediacy, or homology, which asserts the ultimate identity of structurally different "objects" of study, such as cultural artifacts, the state, and the economic. Althusser's conception of mode of production refuses the idea that levels may somehow be collapsed into one another, and ultimately into the narrowly economic. He understands mode of production as the structure as a whole, as "the entire system of relationships among those levels" (36).

Applying this understanding to cultural study, the literary text is not to be seen as a mere passive reflection of the relations of production. Rather, it produces forms and imaginary resolutions "in order to compensate for and rectify a structural lack at some lower or earlier level of production" (44). Thus, Jameson's analysis of Conrad's fiction is not concerned "to posit some static homology . . . between the three levels of social reification, stylistic invention, and narrative or diegetic categories" (44). Instead, it grasps "the mutual relationships between these three dimensions of the text and its social subtext in the more active terms of production, projection, compensation, repression, displacement, and the like" (44).

Jameson proposes that within a first interpretive horizon, whose "object" of consideration is the text as a symbolic act, we encounter a text through the dialectical appropriation of A.J. Greimas' scheme for mapping out the semantic structures of a text. The semic organization of a text is indicated through determination of the binary

oppositions around which it is structured, and the resulting generation of the contradictions of these terms and their attempted syntheses. This "mapping" is not to be understood in Greimas' manner, as indicative of the structure of reality itself, but rather "as the very locus and model of ideological closure" (47), because it indicates "the limits of a specific ideological consciousness" (47). (Such a scheme may also be applied to the semic structures of interpretive models, in order to historicize their conceptual processes.) The analyst is concerned to determine:

> the structure of a particular political fantasy . . . [a] particular "libidinal apparatus" in which [an author's] political thinking becomes invested -- it being understood that we are not here distinguishing between fantasy and some objective reality onto which it would be "projected," but rather . . . asserting such fantasy or protonarrative structure as the vehicle for our experience of the real. (48)

The reconstruction of a text's semes directs us "to the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master" (49).

My fourth chapter will consider an opposition between accommodation and dissent expressed in Lives through the textual construction of the characters "Del" and "Addie." My fifth chapter will examine "The Flats Road," Lives' opening section, in terms of an opposition between "the ordinary" and "the fantastic" which also functions in other

sections of Lives, an opposition through which the work would advance its argument for its own realist form as that which most adequately conveys a sense of lived experience. This opposition will also be seen to function in humanist criticism of Munro's work, as a way of containing the political by taking a text's representations to signify essences within a universal structure of being.

One of the ways I will interpret Munro's narrative act is in relation to Blau Du Plessis' analysis of narrative and social structures prior to it. A consideration of the first chapter of Writing beyond the Ending will both indicate my historical perspective as to Western middle-class women's narrative production, and exemplify the semic analysis proposed by Jameson. Such analysis allows the reductive generalizations by which we situate ourselves in relation to history.

"Endings and Contradictions" analyses the semic constitution of nineteenth-century novels by women writers in order to establish a narrative structure from which twentieth-century women writers depart.3 While a "contradiction between love and quest in plots dealing with women" (3) characterizes both nineteenth and twentieth-century structures, it is "worked out" very differently. Like Jameson, Blau Du Plessis suggests that a narrative script is not to be understood as a mere reflection of a dominant social script, but as a "compensatory" act:

> scripts of heterosexual romance, romantic thralldom, and a telos in marriage are also social forms

> expressed at once in individual desires and in a collective code of action including law: in sequences of action psychically imprinted and in behaviours socially upheld. Romance as a mode may be historically activated: when middle class women lose economic power in the transition from precapitalist economies and are dispossessed of certain functions, the romance script may be a compensatory social and narrative practice. (2)

A notable difference between Blau Du Plessis' critical practice and Jameson's is her use of conditional terms such as "may be." Her use of the term "romance plot" refers specifically to plots involving the relations of heterosexual couples. She conceptualizes the romance plot as "a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole" (5).

In nineteenth-century fiction by women, the love/quest contradiction is generally resolved through the repression of quest or Bildung by either marriage or death. Death as a line of containment for female revolt suggests "the price exacted for female critique" (16). To formulate Blau Du Plessis' observations in the terms that Jameson suggests, the texts are semically constituted by the opposition of passivity and activity, the first represented in the traditional role of the wife, and the second in the energies of the young female protagonist who has not yet become a wife. Ideological closure in the narrative's structure is achieved through both the closure in marriage and in death, as these endings associate "normality" with female pas-

sivity, and "abnormality" with female activity. Thus this semic structure puts itself forward as a mapping of "the real," in suggesting the inevitability of women's subordination through marriage. That a protagonist's inability to negotiate the "success" of marriage should lead to her death is "a way of deflecting attention from man-made social norms to cosmic sanctions" (4).

Yet these texts also constitute an active attempt to resolve the contradiction between the women writers' lived experience of their own physical and intellectual energies, and the vision of female limitation their society reflected back to them. An attempt to synthesize the repressed or excluded side of the structuring opposition -- female energy -- with the dominant term is generated in the narrative middle, which is concerned with the female protagonist's strategies in the process of courtship. The "quest" of the female "hero," the space where her energies are allowed realization, is thereby her active attempt to transform herself into a heroine. The eventual erosion of the traditional closure in marriage has as its condition of possibility a contradiction already present in the nineteenth century:

> the quest part of the plots at the center of these books propounds something that the marriage plot with difficulty revokes: that the female characters are human subjects at loose in the world, ready for decision, growth, self-definition, community, insight. . . . [T]here is a contradic-

> tion between two middle-class ideas -- gendered feminine, the sanctified home, and gendered human, the liberal bourgeois ideology of the self-interested choice of the individual agent. . . . As a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, [the female protagonist] has barely any realistic options in work or vocation, so her heroism lies in self-mastery, defining herself as a free agent, freely choosing the romance that nonetheless, in one form or another, is her fate. (14)

Having historicized the structure of the nineteenth-century novel, Blau Du Plessis examines how twentieth-century women writers began to "write beyond the ending," or develop narrative strategies to delegitimate the older structure and the dominant ideology implicit in it.

Jameson does not consider narrative resolutions as mere instrumental reinforcements of class ideologies, a way of conceptualizing them which he agrees leaves Marxist cultural analysis open to charges of structural functionalism. Rather, a cultural artifact's resolution projects "its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity" (291). This proposition, developed in his final chapter, "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology," is to be understood as an allegorical one. Any collectivity and the class consciousness it projects is "Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves figures for the ultimate concrete collective life of an

achieved Utopia or classless society" (291). The very source of class ideology's hegemonic power is seen to be in its simultaneous symbolic or figural affirmation of collective unity and practical reinforcement of oppressive social relations. Marxist criticism must practice both a positive and a negative hermeneutic, addressing both poles of the dialectic of utopia and ideology.

The critic's extraction of an imaginary resolution from a text may be seen as an investment in the concept of "expressive totality" associated with Hegel and Lukacs. This "implies the value of what is sometimes called organic form, and projects the notion of a work of art as an ordered whole" (56). Accordingly, the critic's task is to elaborate the construction of this formal unity and determine its meaning. By contrast, in the literary criticism of Macherey:

> the appropriate object of study emerges only when the appearance of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage. The authentic function of the cultural text is then staged as an interference between levels. . . . [T]he privileged form of this disunity or dissonance is the objectification of the ideological by the work of aesthetic production. (56)

The text is split into a multiplicity of codes indicative of the fragmentation and contradictions of social life. (My rewriting of Lives will suggest that contradictory significations may be received from it.) Unlike in deconstructive

operations, a reunification of this multiplicity is required, "if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent functional operation in its own right" (56). While I agree that we can and should formulate a description of this operation, a critic should acknowledge the limitations of situated individual perspective by indicating her/his limited ability to establish the "coherency" of such a complex, overdetermined social process.

Before considering the manner in which Jameson proposes to synthesize these contrasting approaches by way of affirming the "negative and methodological status of the concept of the 'totality'" (53), it is important to further develop their implications by referring to Macherey's "The Problem of Reflection," as Jameson does not enter into an extended consideration of the more glaring central fault in Lukacs' work. This is highly relevant to my consideration of Lives, since the humanist and metaphysical criticism of Munro's work that I will critique is fundamentally based on the conception of a work as a unified whole.

The comprehensive understanding, or total unification of vision, that these critics perceive in Munro's work is an illusion based on the concept of realism as a reflection of "Life" understood as a synchronic, universal structure, preceding and encompassing the mere particularities of history. As Macherey contends:

> Against this illusion . . . we must, on the

> contrary, affirm the incomplete, disparate -- and sometimes even incoherent -- nature of the literary work. Only then will we succeed in breaking the imaginary boundaries which close the "works" upon themselves, and which separate them from this "outside" which gives them their material conditions. We must understand . . . that their "outside" is inside them, that they are finally nothing more than this real process which separates them from themselves, which opposes them to themselves. (18)

The works "themselves" are, in one sense, marks on paper. The process of their 'concretization' by the reader or critic necessitates that they can have no existence, in a "meaningful" sense, outside of time. They are always produced and reproduced in a specific time and place, by subjects reading and writing through the codes of philosophical/ideological assumptions.

Macherey and Williams observe that Lukacs' apparently "materialist" reflection theory of literature is actually idealist. Lukacs, champion of realism, contended that when truly great writers "find that the artistic evolution of the characters and situations they have created enters into contradiction with their deepest prejudices . . . they will not hesitate for an instant to set aside these prejudices and convictions and describe what they really see" (qtd. in Macherey, 13).4 This presupposes a view of the writing subject as able at strategic moments to place her/himself

"outside of time," outside of her/his socially-conditioned consciousness inevitably marked by the hegemonic reinforcement of certain ways of conceptualizing. It is not so different from the free, fully conscious and contained subject postulated by idealist philosophy, and denies the active process of a text's material production and reproduction by subjects constituted by "language, world, history, the unconscious, differentiality, social relations" (Ryan 7), female and male subjects socially conditioned to gender roles that influence their imaginary representations of experience.

As Williams and Macherey see, art "reflects" the real, not as some external ground placed over against it, but because as a process it is never separate from it in the first place. It finds its "subject," not in an outside ground to be mimetically "represented," but in the reading and writing subjects who produce meanings. In Lukacs' theory, as in idealist cultural theory, an illusory initial separation between art and material reality necessitates that they be mechanically reconnected through some medium. Lukacs situates this medium in the "great" artist, able to be truly objective and give a total picture of "his" time. (The "totalness" of the picture is not seen to derive from an extended representation of naturalistic detail, but rather from a representation of how the central contradictions of an age are lived out.) This perpetuates the bourgeois myth of the genius, and informs Lukacs' propensity to "rate" writers according to the terms of his "realist"

prejudice. My interpretation of Lives is not intended as a rating of Munro's work.

In spite of Jameson's contention that Lukacs ultimately perceived interpretive totalization as having only a negative and methodological status, others such as Brecht, Williams and Macherey have observed that Lukacs' critical practices, notably that of a judgmental ranking of writers, do imply a "positive" conception of the totality as a synchronic system. Women's writing has often suffered dismissal through such arbitrary ranking.

Following Jameson, I would assert the validity of the Althusserian approach to interpretation, in which the work is not related to some extrinsic ground but is read as manifesting that "outside" within itself as process. The texts' elements are:

> interrogated in terms of their formal and logical and, most particularly, their semantic conditions of possibility. [This] involves the hypothetical reconstruction of the materials -- content, narrative paradigms, stylistic and linguistic practices -- which had to have been given in advance in order for that text to be produced in its unique historical specificity. (57-8)

The text is also seen to produce an imaginary resolution or compensation for the conditions within which it emerged. Jameson observes that Lukacs correctly attributed modernism to the effects of capitalist reification, but erred in thus castigating it, not understanding that it was also, at one

and the same time, one active attempt to respond to reification. The isolation of the image as a thing-in-itself has the utopian vocation of restoring "at least a symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it . . . [and] merely quantifiable" (63).

Each phase or horizon of the three concentric frameworks in which Jameson proposes that interpretation take place "governs a distinct reconstruction of its object, and construes the very structure of what can now only in a general sense be called 'the text' in a different way" (76-7). The first horizon sees the text within political history "in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time" (76), and as the imaginary resolution of a social contradiction symbolically enacted in the text through its formal construction. Such symbolic enactment is not to be understood as the result of a purely conscious authorial intention but as the form in which a political unconscious is immanent. The political unconscious is the site of a perception of power relations and of a narrativization of the experience of necessity that is history. Necessity is not "a type of content, but rather the inexorable <u>form</u> of events" (102).

The literary text is to be rewritten in a manner which allows it to be seen as itself "the restructuration of a prior historical or ideological <u>subtext</u>" (81). The latter is not to be conceptualized as an empirical real glimpsed through the text, but as something which must always be "(re)constructed after the fact" (81). As Eagleton ob-

serves:

> The paradox of the sub-text, indeed, is that it is at once object and projection of the text: the literary work produces its own sub-text, drawing the real into its linguistic texture, at the very moment that it stands operationally over against it. . . . It is thus always open to criticism to relinquish either end of this difficult dialectic: to veer, in short, into either formalism or reflectionism. ("The Idealism of American Criticism" 61)

Numerous critical objections can be raised to this aspect of Jameson's interpretive project. Eagleton relates The Political Unconscious to the structuralist affinities of Jameson's prior hermeneutical criticism, which, he observes, "merges with its object to the point where it is sometimes difficult to decide whether what we are witnessing is exegesis or critique" (61). I would observe that Jameson's neglect of a consideration of the position of the reader or critical (re)writer who would (re)construct a social subtext is indicative of a contradiction in his study. While his methodology constitutes an attempt to move away from individualistic categories of analysis, the interpretive project outlined implies a considerable ability on the part of the individual analyst to discern in a fairly objective manner the subtext from which the text asserts its structural autonomy.

The assertion of subjectivity in something so compli-

cated as the reception of a cultural text need not be seen as a retreat from the political. In feminist discourse, this assertion itself frequently marks the entrance of a political perspective. A reader's reception is subjective in that it always reflects the historically particular experience of the reading subject, as influenced by that subject's gender, class and race. The style in which I advance my own postulations about the structure of Munro's text will, I hope, gesture to my discourse as a situated polemic.

Within the first horizon, the text is approached through the dialectical appropriation of semiotic method, which posits "a system of antinomies as the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of something quite different, namely a social contradiction" (83). The latter, as an absent cause, "cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text" (82). Thus such an ultimate subtext is to be distinguished from

> a secondary one, which is more properly the place of ideology, and which takes the form of the aporia or the antinomy: what can in the former be resolved only through the intervention of praxis here comes before the purely contemplative mind as logical scandal or double bind . . . that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought, and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus . . . to dispel . . . its intolerable closure. (83)

The second interpretive horizon emerges when "the organizing categories of analysis become those of social class" (83). The set of the reading mind reconceptualizes its object of study as class discourse. The individual text, as an utterance within this discourse, is read as the site of the "ideologeme," the "smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social class" (76). Contradiction here "appears in the form of the dialogical as the irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes" (85). The dominant and oppositional voices of high culture and popular culture which partook of this dialogue are to be reconstructed. Blau Du Plessis' study might well serve as an example of such reconstruction. At the same time, it suggests a problem with Jameson's stress on the dichotomy of class relationship and struggle. This stress, which does much to inform the organizational coherence of his methodology, is perhaps also contradicted by his later theoretical development of the third interpretive horizon. Thus after considering this development, I will return to the problem indicated above.

The second horizon is approached through the analyst's identification of a text's ideologemes. The ideologeme

> is an amphibious formation . . . [which may] manifest itself either as a pseudoidea -- a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice -- or as a protonarrative . . . [A]s a construct it must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative

> manifestation. . . . [O]ur stress . . . on the fundamentally narrative character of such ideologemes will offer the advantage of restoring the complexity of the transactions between opinion and protonarrative or libidinal fantasy. (87-8)

The text is a complex work of transformation on the ideologeme. We "can grasp the ideologeme itself as a form of social praxis, that is, as a symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation" (117). As in Freudian criticism, the text is considered as an act of wish-fulfillment. However, textual ideology is not considered as a secondary rationalization of a subject's "primal" fantasies, but as "those conceptual conditions of possibility or narrative presuppositions which one must 'believe' . . . in order for the subject successfully to tell itself this particular daydream" (182).

My fourth chapter will consider how Lives operates the ideologeme of "ressentiment," which would situate the origin of oppositional political critique in the psychological makeup of an individual. I will argue that Munro's narrativization of this ideologeme is informed by the desire to establish the validity of the precept that a female subject can "will" an escape from necessity or objective social limitations.

The theoretical problems with the second interpretive horizon relate to the critique of Lukacs' critical procedures as a reification and idealization of history, cultural production and critical interpretation. This horizon does

tend to imply a synchronic model of an all-embracing mode of production, fully knowable through perception of the "essence" of the ideology determined by it. Such a model can empty cultural production of any actively oppositional function, as a text is taken to "reflect" a distinct class voice as determined by mode of production. Oppositional voices, and the particularities of a continuous historical change perceived as "secondary" or unmeaningful, then merely confirm the mechanisms of a structural determinism. Cultural analysis may become reduced to the mere empiricist procedure of dropping texts into various slots or categories of the mode of production.

Jameson's placement of the second interpretive horizon, whose "object" of study is class discourse, within a third horizon, whose "object" of study is cultural revolution, recognizes and surmounts the reifying potential of a synchronic interpretive framework. In any case, the concept of a mode of production, as his concluding discussion emphasizes, does not ultimately assert a synchronic perspective:

> at the level of historical abstraction at which such a concept is properly to be used, the lesson of the "vision" of a total system is for the short run one of the structural limits imposed on praxis rather than the latter's impossibility. (91).

It is the "concept" of the mode of production which is synchronic. This concept is formed at a level of abstraction which cannot pretend idealistically to contain and

explain the complexity of processes within any given social formation, in which several modes of production always coexist in relation to the current dominant. Social structure at any given historical moment is not synchronic but dialectic. The emergence of a new dominant mode of production entails a correspondent cultural revolution. Although most evident in the transitional periods of radical social restructuration, cultural revolution is perpetual. I agree with Jameson's understanding of perpetual cultural revolution as "the deeper and more constitutive structure" (97) in which a text is to be apprehended. The conceptualization of "deep structure" (synchrony or permanence) as transformation itself goes beyond the synchrony/diachrony opposition.

This understanding recognizes the heterogeneity of cultural production and its frequently apparent discontinuity with social life. In the third horizon, "form" is itself understood as content:

> a dialectical reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works. (99)

A dialectical use of genre criticism enables the determination of the contradictory messages of a text's multiple sign systems.

Jameson exemplifies the political relevance of the

study of cultural revolution by considering its relation to the debate between Marxism and feminism. As I intend to explore the implications of this example, I will quote it at length:

> The notion of overlapping modes of production . . . [allows] us to short-circuit the false problem of the priority of the economic over the sexual, or of sexual oppression over that of social class. . . . [S]exism and the patriarchal are to be grasped as the sedimentation and the virulent survival of forms of alienation specific to the oldest mode of production of human history, with its division of labour between men and women, and its division of power between youth and elder. The analysis of the ideology of form, properly completed, should reveal the formal persistence of such archaic structures of alienation -- and the sign systems specific to them -- beneath the overlay of all the more recent and historically original types of alienation -- such as political domination and commodity reification -- which have become the dominants of that most complex of all cultural revolutions, late capitalism. . . . The affirmation of radical feminism, therefore, that to annul the patriarchy is the most <u>radical</u> political act -- insofar as it includes and subsumes more partial demands, such as the liberation from the commodity form -- is thus

> perfectly consistent with an expanded Marxian framework, for which the transformation of our own dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical restructuration of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists. (99-100)

The appearance of this passage is striking in relation to the rest of this study, in which very little reference is made to feminism, and in which analysis of the sign systems of the patriarchal is markedly absent.

Through a consideration of how Jameson's study threatens to contradict itself, I will approach three problems with it as related to feminism: the concept of the first mode of production; the divergence of Jameson's own critical practice from his theoretical framework; and (in Chapter Two) how the analysis of the ideology of form might be applied to the form of Jameson's own critical discourse.

If with Jameson we assert that the structure of the psyche is historical, can it not be acknowledged that the oldest division of labour -- between men and women -- has had a particularly heightened role in the social determination of the human psyche? The historical significance of this division is easily obscured when it is subsumed under the broad concept of mode of production. If the ground for such categorization is simply that labour and power are divided unequally among different social classes, then the particularity of the labour accorded to women need not be considered as very significant. The labour of nurturance,

of the maintenance and production of new members of the social order, has a "product" and a process which surely differs greatly from those of other forms of labour. The forms taken by sexual oppression must also be seen to have a specificity which demands more complex explanation. A lack of consideration of the social production of gender, and how this has worked to maintain various dominant ideologies, remains the most glaring fault in Jameson's study. This issue is of the highest importance for cultural analysis because of the ubiquitousness of the mythology of hetero-sexual romance as utopia in cultural artifacts through the ages. As Blau Du Plessis's study is concerned to suggest, such mythology/ideology both perpetuates women's oppression and works to maintain the capitalist division between public and private life which powerfully informs apolitical explanations of human dissatisfaction.

The inclusion of the lengthy passage quoted above appears as a patronizing appropriation of feminist criticism within a study that elsewhere speaks of the first mode of production and of the constitution of oppressed classes without reference to women, and that asserts Marxism as "virtually the only" school of criticism concerned with negative ideological critique, again without reference to feminism (88, 289, 291). Jameson "theoretically" carves out a <u>constitutive</u> place for feminist criticism in his interpretive framework. The theory of cultural revolution fully asserts the ongoing virulence of sexual oppression, while Jameson's practical criticism does not. It may be concluded

that Jameson's analysis of the ideology of form is not "properly completed."

This relates to the reifying potential of the second interpretive horizon, and to how it is to be integrated with the third. The refinement of a text into an ideologeme may de-historicize and idealize an understanding of the production of ideologemes. This is of particular interest in relation to women writers, and to my critique of Munro. Blau Du Plessis' study underscores the importance of the contradiction between bourgeois values and the ideology of female domesticity in the twentieth-century emergence of women from "sexual feudalism." For women, the realist novel (with its humanist concentration on the individual and individual values) remains a challenge to the sacred cultural paradigms of patriarchal social organization. The ambiguity of the textual production of middle-class women is of central concern in Blau Du Plessis' study. (The material conditions of possibility for writing fiction have long excluded most working-class women. In Chapter Two, I will indicate political problems with Blau Du Plessis' analysis.) Blau Du Plessis' major analytical concepts include the "debate between critic and inheritor" in women writer's texts, as determined by their (ambiguously) non-hegemonic social position. Her study, while concerned with a critique of the ideology of women's texts, is also emphatically a celebration of the writing she considers, an exercise of what Jameson terms the "positive hermeneutic" which Marxist criticism must also practice. It captures more of a sense

of the ongoing of cultural revolution than does Jameson's examination of Balzac, Gissing and Conrad.

The import of women writers' challenge to "sexual feudalism" may be lost within the interpretive process of the second horizon, where it may be dismissed as more production of merely bourgeois ideologemes. It is necessary to inquire into the historical situations of the writing subjects who produce ideologemes and of the interpreter who would reproduce them after the fact.

Marxist critics such as Terry Eagleton (in "The Idealism of American Criticism") and Edward Said (in "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies") have criticized The Political Unconscious for its displacment of the political and its failure to establish its relevance to the quotidian politics of everyday struggle. As Said notes, Jameson only briefly discusses the latter. Observing the fragmentation among oppositional groups, he argues for alliance politics as the form mass opposition could realistically take in contemporary North America. Yet as Said observes:

> the irony is that in criticizing the global perspective and admitting its radical discontinuity with local alliance politics, Jameson is also advocating a strong hermeneutic globalism which will have the effect of subsuming the local in the synchronic. (147)

This is surely an imaginary resolution.

The diversity of theories and practices of Marxisms and feminisms is an indication of the current divisiveness among

oppositional groups. Nationalist struggles, struggles against racism and heterosexism, and the complicity of First World (ambiguously) oppositional groups with exploitation of the Third World, further indicate the complexity of the configuration of political interests. Within academic literary criticism, common responses to this context by different interest groups include: a situation of the most reprehensible failure to admit privilege in "other" groups, and a consequent wholesale rhetorical dismissal of their theory and practice; and passing reference to one's own sensitivity to the situation of "others" while constructing a theoretical model which excludes the significance of difference. I would advance the suggestion that the response to fragmentation might more appropriately begin from an admission of insensitivity and complicity, and should involve an attempt to articulate the historical reasons for the manner in which the situated interests of various groups objectively differ and conflict.

Particularly in Chapter Six, I will draw on Blau Du Plessis' analysis of Western women's texts as "(ambiguously) nonhegemonic," while considering Lives as an example of twentieth-century women writer's production of the realist novel. The ideological content of the realist novel form (a form central to the bourgois cultural revolution) may be "read" (in terms of a very reductive general formulation) as a situation of origin and meaning in individual identity. When in Chapter Six this understanding is applied to a text such as Lives, written by a woman from a working-class

background, the microscopic dynamism, overdetermination of and uneven development of cultural revolution is evident, because women's investment in individualist ideology must be seen as informed by a struggle against patriarchy. While in advancing this analysis (and in even being in a position to produce it) I am complicit with bourgeois feminism's First World privilege, my "sympathy" with Munro's investment in the imaginary resolution of self-creation is not a matter of the valorization of liberal feminism, but rather follows from an attempt to see the historical conditions determining this investment.

History as textualized in the political unconscious is to be read in the realist text in terms of how the desire of the writing subject stumbles against the subject's perception of objective limitations. She/he must "logically" resolve such limitations if she/he is to satisfyingly enact an imaginary script of wish-fulfillment. In Chapter Seven, I will consider "Epilogue: The Photographer," the final section of Lives, in terms of Munro's desire (explicitly formulated by Lives' protagonist) to hold the social world still in realist narrative. In confronting the obstacles to desire's realization, "Epilogue" generates a symbolic expression of that which it would exclude -- the understanding of meaning as an interested social production of conflicting discourses rather than as a reflection of transcendent significance. It is the reality of this "nonbeing" of meaning and of continuous historical transformation which frustrates Munro's desire to produce a "total

picture" of experience, and which renders any interpretation constitutively ideological.

Endnotes

1My formulation of Macherey's and Williams's positions are taken from "The Problem of Reflection" and from Marxism and Literature.

2In Marxism and Literature, Williams gives a history of the varying Marxist uses of the term "ideology," and states that "there can be no question of establishing, except in polemics, a single 'correct' Marxist definition of ideology" (55-6).

3The texts referred to include Jane Austen's Emma and Pride and Prejudice, Charlotte Brontë's Villette and Jane Eyre, George Eliot's Middlemarch and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth.

4Macherey is here quoting from Lukacs' Preface to the 1951 edition of Balzac et le réalisme français.

Chapter II

Historicizing the Forms of Critical Interpretation: The Loss of the Object and Commitment to Social Change

> . . . practice is always young, while ideologies age and are no stronger than their weakest link, the isolated representation. . . . Practice watches at the bed of all ideologies, at the foot of their cradle and of their coffin. (Bertolt Brecht, "Le procès de l'opéra de quatre sous")

As Catherine MacKinnon observes in "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State," "theory is a social activity engaged in the life situation of consciousness" (13). This principle, which I would contend is central to socialist-feminist thought, must be incorporated into criticism not merely on the level of conceptual methodology, but in terms of a subversion of the very forms of traditional theoretical discourse. I would contend that Jameson's "On Interpretation" affirms this principal in its "content," yet denies it in its "form." Before developing this contention further, a certain split within Marxism, which is relevant to this principle and to the debate between Marxism and feminism, should be mentioned.

Certain feminisms equate Marxism with a "theoretical discourse" understood as a homogeneous entity to be dismissed outright. However, as MacKinnon states:

> Marxist method is not monolithic. Beginning with Marx, it has divided between an epistemology that embraces its own historicity and one that claims to portray a reality outside itself. In the first tendency, all thought, including social analysis, is ideological in the sense of being shaped by

> social being. . . . The second tendency grounds the marxist claim to be scientific; the first, its claim to capture as thought the flux of history. The first is more hospitable to feminism; the second has become the dominant tradition. (13-14)

A Marxism which "embraces its own historicity" provides a fertile methodology for the challenge of all forms of authoritarianism, including especially that asserted by "scientific Marxism."

Raymond Williams' Marxism and Literature, with its emphasis on practical consciousness, represents a thrust in contemporary Marxist cultural theory to return to a more authentically dialectical tradition. Williams insists that Marxist thought must always function as an interminable historicization of itself. His book sets out to historicize the shifting usages of terms such as culture, language, literature, ideology, base and superstructure, determination, and productive forces. His analysis recognizes what has informed feminist reaction against "one dominant strain in Marxism, with its habitual abuse of the 'subjective' and the 'personal'" (29) as reifying categories for the dynamic process of historical change and conflict on a microscopic level:

> it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error. Marx often said this, and some Marxists quote him, in fixed ways, before returning to fixed forms. The mistake, as so often, is in taking terms of analysis as terms

> of substance. . . . [T]he living will not be reduced. . . . All the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself. Social forms are then often admitted for generalities but debarred, contemptuously, from any possible relevance to this immediate and actual significance of being. And from the abstractions formed in their turn by this act of debarring -- the "human imagination," the "human psyche," the "unconscious," with their "functions" in art and myth and dream -- new and displaced forms of social analysis and categorization, overriding all specific social conditions, are then more or less rapidly developed. (129-30)

This quotation both acknowledges Marxist culpability for reaction against Marxist thought and practice, and critiques such reaction.

In "Toward a Feminist Poetics," Elaine Showalter operates a concept of Marxism as a homogeneous entity virtually synonymous with the "scientific criticism" to which male literary critics are attracted because it makes the work they do appear "as manly and aggressive as nuclear physics[.]. ." (140). Her analysis follows the very process of reasoning Williams outlines:

> It is not only because the exchange between

> feminism, Marxism, and structuralism has hitherto been so one-sided, however, that I think attempts at synthesis have so far been unsuccessful. While scientific criticism struggles to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism is willing to assert (in the title of a recent anthology) The Authority of Experience. The experience of women can easily disappear, become mute, invalid, and invisible, lost in the diagrams of the structuralist or the class conflict of the Marxists. Experience is not emotion. . . . But we must also recognize that the questions we most need to ask go beyond those that science can answer. We must seek the repressed messages of women in history, in anthropology, in psychology, and in ourselves . . . . (140-41)

I certainly share with Showalter a concern and anger about the obscuring of women's experience in criticism. This obscuring is precisely what her own proposal for a gynocriticism (in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness") enacts.

"Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" opens the anthology Writing and Sexual Difference, which concludes with Carolyn Allen's response to Showalter, and Showalter's reply. Gayatri Spivak's "Translator's Foreword" to Mahasveta Devi's short story "Draupadi" precedes the "Critical Response" section. A brief consideration of the debate concluding this anthology will serve to situate and suggest the importance of a feminist historical-materialist approach

within feminist literary-theoretical discourse.

I have no quarrels with Showalter's suggestion that women's writing be of central concern to feminist literary criticism. Yet she proposes that such gynocriticism be based on the very sort of "scientific" diagram she objects to in structuralist criticism. This diagram is Edwin Ardener's model of the relationship between dominant and muted cultures, two overlapping circles which are conceptualized as men's and women's experience. This synchronic model does not even suggest any explanation of conflict, historical difference or historical change.

As Carolyn J. Allen observes:

> Showalter's proposal is inadequate on two grounds: (1), by referring to women's culture as something that encompasses arguments about sexual difference based on biology, language, and psychology, she has made her model too general to have much force; (2), by defining women's culture as women's experience, she does not suggest the plurality of those cultures. . . . She acknowledges that race and class are equally as important as gender, but when she goes on to say that those issues can be set aside, she opens herself to the charges of ethnocentrism that have been leveled against feminist criticism in both its classic and recent phases. (299-300)

Showalter's heated response to these charges in "Reply to Carolyn J. Allen" again unwittingly betrays her ethnocen-

trism. I wish to juxtapose Showalter's response to Gayatri Spivak's observations in her "Translator's Foreword."

Showalter states that:

> Allen's misgivings seem to be occasioned by a view of the Tower of Academia as lofty and remote from "real life." This argument strikes me as dated and even sentimental. Life in the university, especially in the humanities, was . . . and will continue to be in the 1980's, a struggle for survival whose accompanying stresses can be matched against the most authentically bracing -- or destructive -- careers the society has to offer. (304)

Showalter's life is of course just as "real" as anyone else's. Yet "careers" and "<u>the</u> society" seem to be the key words here, as they betray the very specific North American context from which Showalter sets out to construct a <u>universal</u> model of women's experience. The point is not a competition for some coveted prize for most oppressed group or for most authentically "real" life, but rather her model's implicit anti-historicism. She defends the use of this model while maintaining she is "keenly aware of the significance of race, class and nationality and would never suggest that these issues can be set aside" (305). Showalter's assertions that we must "sharpen our definitions of women's culture" (305) <u>and</u> "free ourselves from ethnocentrism" (305) bespeak a contradiction that she seems unable to see. The very concept of "women's culture" in the

singular is ethnocentric.

Showalter's expression of sensitivity towards "other" women may be contrasted to a statement of Spivak's:

> I have had the usual "translator's problems" only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude toward it as the late Peter Sellers had toward our English. (271)

Spivak is a left deconstructive feminist, critical of but sympathetic to certain theories and practices of Marxism(s). As she observes:

> when we speak for ourselves, we urge with conviction: the personal is also political. For the rest of the world's women, the sense of whose personal micrology is difficult (though not impossible) for us to acquire, we fall back on a colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval. (262)

Her introduction to "Draupadi" suggests that the education of the pluralist aesthete encourages a specialist's sense of interpretive prowess.

Vastly different as Jameson's "On Interpretation" and Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" are, it seems to me that they share an implied sense of interpretive prowess informed by an inadequate accounting for their own "perspectivity." While in the above quotation from "Towards a Feminist Poetics" Showalter appears to gesture towards the situated perspectivity of feminist analysis, her use of

"experience" seems to connote a source of "objective" authority no less convinced of its own unproblematic priority.

Spivak's reference to her own "racism" appears odd within a text which, like her other writings, is concerned to combat oppressive social formations. What interests me is the unusual "form" of this particular sentence's act of deconstruction, a form which has an effectiveness as viable as a "rigorous" deconstruction in the complex and intricate theoretical terms which Spivak is also able to operate.

The assertion that "theory is a social activity engaged in the life situation of consciousness" is generally rigorously denied by the messages emitted by the formal conventions or processes of theoretical discourse. When reading in the context of Jameson's third horizon, "it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works" (99). With this in mind I will consider a passage from Jameson's text:

> The problem of the subject is clearly a strategic one for both dimensions of the novelistic process, particularly if one holds, as Marxists do, that the forms of human consciousness and the mechanisms of human psychology are not timeless and everywhere essentially the same, but rather situation-specific and historically produced. It follows, then, that neither the reader's reception

> of a particular narrative, nor the actantial representation of human figures or agents, can be taken to be constraints of narrative analysis but must themselves ruthlessly be historicized. (152)

While in terms of manifest content these observations affirm that critical analysis is an activity embedded in social relationships, the formal structure of Jameson's text appears to me to argue that this text is not "situation-specific and historically produced," not itself a process.

The "voice," elsewhere signified by "we," is that of an objective and distanced, seemingly unsituated observer. Yet the voice asserts the historicity or "illogical" quality of any assumption, which is to be exposed by a gesturing to the situatedness of the perceiving subject. The historicization proposed will apparently lead to a logical closure, which theoretically must be reopened. But because of the demands of the form, which requires a closure in definite affirmation, this reopening must take place "elsewhere."

I do not think that self-reflexiveness can or should be enacted with every single phrase written, or that we can presently do without the enabling "condensation" of assumptions that traditional theoretical discourse allows. Yet the kind of experiential, personal, lyrical, rhetorical, and ethical discourse that feminism has begun to introduce into the academy should be juxtaposed and commingled with such discourse. The sign-systems of rhetoric and affective expression can do much to indicate textual production as an activity, inseparable from social context. The point of a

discourse whose formal conventions signify its situatedness is not a gesturing towards a full "presence" represented in the writing subject. Rather, the gesture is towards itself as an activity inextricably bound up in the whole web of social relations.

The "problem" of a dialectical inquiry is the problem of its object. This "text" sees itself, and Munro's text, as processes. Texts have no existence, in a humanly "meaningful" way, outside the conditions of their production and reception. They have a material being, in that the signifier is a material entity. The "object" of a study of the text as process must be everything -- Munro's text and her time and place, my own text, and the conditions in which it takes shape. This is very disturbing, in that the ideology of this text's "content" appears to conflict with that of its form, beginning and ending with an objective closure, narrowing the "object" of study, and enacted in a removed voice denying its own socially situated subjectivity.

Blau Du Plessis' "For the Etruscans" enacts its socialist-feminist subversion of the traditional form of theoretical discourse. Blau Du Plessis juxtaposes theoretical questioning with evocative prose, challenging the binary oppositions between life and art, emotion and thought, theory and practice, daily life and esoteric ideas, by inserting her subjectivity into her essay as that which constitutes the endless dialectical movement between such seeming oppositions. This is not to center authority in

individual subjectivity. Rather, a combination of theoretical argumentation and the author's emotional response to it enacts the historical materialist contention that a subject's affinity with an idea is always informed by her social context. While Blau Du Plessis joins other socialist-feminist theorists in admitting her doubts and her vulnerability, Jameson's totalizing approach is virtually always enacted in an objective and highly confident tone.

Following "For the Etruscans," I would assert the need for a critical form that gestures to itself as symbolic act:

> A both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions; linked to personal vulnerability and need . . . vision that embraces movement. . . . This is not a condition of "not choosing," since choice exists always in what to represent and in the rhythms of presentation. (276)

The value I perceive in Jameson's study is its complex expression, on a cognitive level, of "a both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions." Yet its form tends to imply an autonomy of mind able to master all contradictions.

Jameson observes that the reader should not expect of his study "that explanatory projection of what a vital and emergent political culture should be and do which Raymond Williams has rightly proposed as the most urgent task of a Marxist cultural criticism" (10). As Terry Eagleton contends, "it remains unclear quite how the relations

between that project and the one realized in [Jameson's] book are to be conceived" ("Idealism" 65). Following Balibar and Macherey, I would suggest that the former project should strive to "begin to produce real transformations, practical effects, either in the means of production of literary texts and art works, or in the manner in which they are socially consumed" (Qtd. in Kuentz, 92). What is to be challenged is the quietism of such consumption, in which the contemplation of an aesthetic "object" is seen as an end in itself. In different ways, The Political Unconscious, Writing beyond the Ending, and this present study may reinforce such quietism at the same time as they challenge it.

As Kuentz observes in "A Reading of Ideology or an Ideology of Reading?":

> Literary criticism is ready to welcome any new "method," as long as it demonstrates its ability to encircle more closely the privileged object of the text. The given plurality of approaches is the necessary correlate of the unity and uniqueness of that object, the text, and of its objective, a reading. The variety of methods only serves to confirm the existence of a center which is at once both the origin and conclusion of research. (86)

It is for this reason that Raymond Williams, while still writing about "literature" among other things, now refuses the title of literary critic.1 The text understood as

"process" provides an arbitrary entry point into what is ultimately an examination of and strategy for social change. One of the things to be challenged is the compartmentalization of knowledge, a strategy of containment through which objects of study appear "knowable" without reference to ideological perceptions. Any method which appears to account too fully for a "text," even when it itself purports a decentered conceptualization of texts, may rewrite it into the very coherence which, in the terms of quietistic aestheticism, determines its separability.

Jameson suggests that all critical interpretations imply theoretical abstractions suggestive of ideological positions or master narratives, and that the analyst or writer of fiction has a "libidinal investment" in her/his narrative. I would like to suggest that whereas Jameson's critical practice seeks libidinal gratification through a "cognitive totalization," Blau Du Plessis's Writing beyond the Ending finds such gratification through an "affective totalization." Her critical narrative, with its expression of the affective aspect of reader reception, is perhaps more fully suggestive of its own status as a socially symbolic act, of its use in "confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self" (212), as her opening quotation from Williams' Marxism and Literature puts it.

Blau Du Plessis' critical practice is similar to Künstlerromane by women writers, which she describes as taking their cue from "the artisanal experience, in which the object is made for use and has its existence in the

realm of necessity, as an expression of ties or needs" (104). The fictional art works "are carefully built to end what Theodor Adorno calls 'the pure autonomy of mind' in the relation of art to culture" and challenge "the view of the artist as a separated, isolated genius" (104). Blau Du Plessis incorporates "high theory" into a study which remains accessible to the non-specialist. Her work thus leaves itself open to challenges that it sometimes tends towards a psychological-expressivist or ethical criticism. It uses words such as "love," "need," "anger," and sometimes tends towards a humanism which as Jameson observes reinforces "the categories of bourgeois individualism, and its anthropological myths of human nature" (153). Blau Du Plessis' frequently "humanist" vocabulary, however, is always woven into an analysis of formal style and of authorial "intention," understood not as an ideal or pre-discursive act of willing, but as something immersed in the particular experience of that author within her family and society, as not in the full conscious control of an author, and as an after-the-fact critical construction to be developed from both a narrative's semic structures and biographical material.

The Political Unconscious and Writing beyond the Ending, taken together, express the double sense of the socialist-feminist project as a position within a conflict and as a projection of "what an emergent political culture might be and do." While both works gesture to and express the duality of this project, each tends to "contain" its

respective emphasis through exclusion of the other. Writing beyond the Ending (although to a far lesser degree than "For the Etruscans") gestures to the concept of criticism as a social activity with its own immediate "use" in the transformation of practical consciousness. Yet its optimistic and utopian vision can reinforce the sense of such a process as sufficient unto itself, at the same time as it expresses the vital potential of a social vision of decentered authority. The Political Unconscious expresses "criticism as tool" in the conceptual construction of the "object" of conflict. Yet it can serve to reinforce the reifying perception of theory and criticism as not themselves engaged in a process of lived relations.

The above contentions suggest a contradiction for which no clear resolution is presently possible. That which gestures to the materiality of its own process moves away from the idealistic reduction of dominant and oppositional ideology in clearly defined theoretical assertion. Yet it is this very reduction which enables a more overtly material political praxis, in the workplace, in armed struggle, and in challenges to state laws and institutions. The mass solidarity required for such praxis depends on, among other conditions, an acceptance of common principles from which strategy may be developed. The tentative homogenizing of the "object" of confrontation makes action possible. As earlier suggested by Williams, speaking of the social in fixed forms is both necessary and problematic. Terms of analysis, taken as guides to and questioning of praxis, must

at some point be taken as terms of substance and yet not solidify into such fixed modes of conceptualization that they come to claim their authority in representing all situations independent of specific and changing historical contexts, and that they exclude as unimportant anything for which they cannot adequately account.

Blau Du Plessis' celebration of the ultimate inability of discourse to reduce the living is welcome and provocative, and yet does not give enough recognition to the urgency of the need that it attempt to do exactly that. In any case it is not even a question of its "attempting" to do so, since all conceptualization inevitably depends on reductive strategies of containment.

Blau Du Plessis' idealism relates to her concept of the female aesthetic, theorized on the basis of the middle-class woman's position in the social structure. The importance of the particularity of this position becomes obscured as this concept, in the movement of her prose, slides into one which appears to encompass the experience of all women. Consider this passage from "For the Etruscans:"

> Insider-outsider status will also help to dissolve an either-or dualism. For the woman finds she is irreconcilable things: an outsider by her gender position, by her relation to power; may be an insider by her social position, her class. . . . Doubled consciousness. Doubled understandings. How then could she neglect to invent a form which produces this incessant, critical, splitting

> notion. To invent this form. To invent the theory for this form.
>
> Following the "female aesthetic" will produce artworks that incorporate contradictions and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text. (278)

A woman may be an insider. Yet what is "female" in her aesthetic is apparently determined by her being one at the same time as she is an outsider. The female aesthetic, posed as "solution" to an imposition of dominant meanings by a hierarchical social organization, is always already an expression of the continued existence of this very problem.

How is a changed consciousness to relate to the potential violence of confrontation? It is this troubling question which Writing beyond the Ending tends to skirt. The preservation of a concept of a "literary object," in spite of a tone and vocabulary which express a sense of the text as process, enables such avoidance. The preface emphasizes that "this reading and arrangement of meanings claims no privilege, finality or neutrality. It is one -- but one culturally necessary -- production of possible meanings" (ix). Is it possible to disclaim both neutrality and priority, without contradiction? Assertion which claims or desires to renounce its own priority or "aggression" can imply the possibility of occupying a space of innocence, free of the will-to-power of ideological bias. Such a space does not exist. If Blau Du Plessis' "arrangement of meanings" refers to a primarily aesthetic exploration, the

renunciation of privilege does not constitute a problem in which much is at stake. But if it refers to what is ultimately a totalizing analysis of social process, capable of extending to the concept of armed conflict in, say, anti-colonial struggles, an analysis whose very purpose is to construct strategies for mass action, then it must indeed be willing to assert its own privilege. Since Writing beyond the Ending expresses a will to pose a revolutionary challenge to dominant authority, it should not negate its own complicity with the will-to-power implicit in such a challenge.

Jameson's three concentric frameworks, expressions of different "sets" of the reading mind towards a transformed "object," recognizes both the necessity for and problems of the reductive violence of the critical act. The second horizon allows for the construction of a mirage of clarity of the sort which enables action within conflict. The third "refragments" the object of study into a process of continuous change which offers to subvert the very grounding assumptions operated by the critical subject, whose consciousness is itself determined by social being. The reflexivity of a negative dialectic engenders a "painful 'decentering' of the consciousness of the individual subject" (283). As Jameson observes, "it should be stressed that the process of totalization outlined in our opening chapter offers no way out of this 'labour and suffering of the negative'" (284).

My study's aim -- to ask, not what the text "means,"

but how it "works," to read it not as an object, but a process -- itself involves an investment in a binary opposition. The suggestion of how a text works always already implies what it means. In the very attempt to do the contrary I will reify Munro's text, as my language will pretend to "capture flux." Such reification enables me to realize the formal requirements of literary-critical discourse, whose strategies of containment generally include a removed voice implying that theory is not "a social activity engaged in the life situation of consciousness," and an opening and closure asserting that such a thing as a literary text as a separable thing-in-itself exists in the first place. The "irrationality," or ideological construction, of rational discourse, will be explained in the logical terms and forms of rational discourse. The content of my study's form thus contradicts its own governing assumptions.

Endnote

[1]See Williams' argument in "Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis" for "historical semiotics," the "analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production" (65).

Chapter III

The Ideology of Realism: A Critique of Munro's Aesthetic

This chapter will critique a particular ideologeme -- the grounding of authority in sensory perception and the felt experience of the individual -- informing the concept of realist narrative as representation, as a transparent window onto "the real." Certain manifestations of realist narrative, and humanist interpretations of it, tend to project a model of "Life" as a universal essence untouched by the conflicts of historically particular societies. This model is at one and the same time both ideological and utopian, in that it functions as an aesthetic compensation, as a symbolic gratification of the alienated self's desire for social connection.

My critique will be situated in the context of a very general introduction to Munro's work and social background. I will consider several interviews with Munro and critically examine her perception of her aesthetic and her place in the social world. Examples of humanist critical interpretation of her work will be critiqued. A connection of realist narrative with dominant ideology and a naturalization of social reality will be qualified by Rachel Blau Du Plessis' observation that women writers have used this form to subvert and critique traditional narrative and social conventions. I will consider two passages from Munro's fiction which consider concentration on a physical world which is "just itself" as a compensation for unfulfilled desire.

The contentions above will be related to Munro's social experience as a woman writer from a working class background in rural Ontario. I will suggest that Munro's stated refusal of the role of social critic is informed by a reifying conception of intellect and by a wish to avoid the visibility attendant upon explicit social dissent.

There is a contradiction apparent in Munro's perception of her narratives as on the one hand transparent representations of lived experience, and on the other hand systems of control. Particularly in interviews conducted in the 1970s, Munro reveals a humanist understanding of realist representation as able to present an objective picture of life. (The formal structure of some of the short stories in The Progress of Love, Munro's latest collection, and certain of her statements in more recent interviews, suggest to me that her present understanding has changed significantly.) As the quotations to follow will attest, this understanding is informed by a conception of a fairly rigid opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. Sensory perception, sight in particular, is seen to enable an objective look at things as they are. Such a "picture," in order to retain its objectivity, must be seen as ideally separable from any intellectual construction of "meaning" around it, for it is here that a suspect subjectivity is seen to make its entrance. I will suggest that the above understanding achieves something very important for Munro, that is, protection from having to defend the intellectual and ideological positions and the emotional interests that are

always already there in any attempt to represent the social world. Narrative as a socially symbolic act is indeed, as Munro recognizes in contradiction to her own aesthetic, a "way of getting control."

Lives of Girls and Women, as Munro acknowledges, is "autobiographical," although not in the expressivist sense that it gives immediate access to the real life lived by the young Alice Munro. I will sometimes refer to its protagonist "Del," and to other Munro characters, by enclosing "their" names within quotation marks. This indicates an attempt to avoid the expressivist criticism which, understandably, once provided a major alternative for feminist critics in reaction against formalism. Characters are rhetorical functions produced by a reader's interaction with the language of Munro's text. The language of psychological-realist analysis with which I will sometimes describe these functions provides a kind of critical short-hand for my own imaginative production of these characters and for what I think Munro is trying to suggest.

"Del" calls herself a "chameleon" who "soaked up protective coloration wherever it might be found" (166). By contrast, her mother "Addie's" differences from prescribed social norms frequently emerge in vocal and confrontational social critique and non-conformist behaviour, that is, in a visibility which "Del" finds extremely threatening. "Del" and "Addie" as two dissenting subjects have very different responses to their environment. One of "Del's" responses is the creation of narrative.

Alice Munro was born in 1931 in Wingham, Ontario, and grew up on a fox farm near this town. She studied at the University of Western Ontario for two years. She then married and moved to Vancouver and Victoria, where she lived for almost twenty years, raising three daughters. In 1972 she returned to south-western rural Ontario, the setting of a majority of her stories. She remains there at present because she feels deeply tied to this society, even though she recognizes that due to her writing she is not very popular there. Further study of Munro's work might suggest the enormous influence that Munro's relationship with her mother has had on her fiction, her aesthetic, and her perceptions. This "personal" history can be related to the bourgeois ideology of individual self-creation so prominent in the society of Munro's childhood. In "The Ottawa Valley" (contained in the collection Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You), the narrator confesses an inability to produce a clear "snapshot" of her mother. I would contend that in this story Munro confronted contradictions to her documentary aesthetic which informed later changes in her narrative form. Significantly, the possibility of producing the "snapshot" is related to a desire for a clear demarcation of boundaries around the identity of the perceiving subject.

Munro has published six collections of short stories: Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), Lives of Girls and Women (1971), Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974), Who Do You Think You Are (1978), The Moons of Jupiter (1982), and The Progress of Love (1986). Although she herself

classifies Lives as a novel, she can understand why many critics do not, because she writes on "a single string, a tension string . . . [not] as some people say a true novelist does, manipulating a lot of strings" (Gibson 258). B. Pfaus states that Munro believes Lives is a novel because

> the sections, while inter-linked by having the same character throughout, are with the exception of two, not self-contained units that can stand completely on their own. . . . [T]he sections are too long, . . . too lacking in an essential tension to be classified as short stories. (46)

Munro says of this work that

> it could be called an autobiographical novel . . . most of the incidents are changed versions of real incidents. . . . [T]he emotional reality, the girl's feeling for her mother, for men . . . it's all solidly autobiographical. (Metcalf 58)

Munro gives her protagonists Del and Rose (from Who Do You Think You Are?) a class background similar to her own. Del's father runs his own fox farm. Rose's father repairs furniture and her step-mother runs a small store. In both labouring and running small businesses, these protagonists' parents have a borderline class position. Del and Rose have the resource of intelligence with which to achieve a distance from their past conditions and escape the more brutal manifestations of social violence they observe other women exposed to. Interviewed by J.R. Struthers, Munro stated that the story "Privilege" in Who Do You Think You

Are? is "a story about a school I actually went to and things that happened there" (21). In this story, Franny McGill is raped by her brother in the entryway of the Boys' Toilet as the schoolchildren observe. "The use Shortie was making of her, that others made, would continue" (27). Franny had a face that appeared to have been "smashed" and

> was white, long, shuffling, fearful, like an old woman. Marooned in Grade Two or Three, she could read and write a little, was seldom called on to do so. She may not have been so stupid as everybody thought, but simply stunned . . . by continual assault. (27)

Munro focuses the reader's attentions on her protagonists' strategies for survival and advancement.

Munro's family experience bears extraordinarily marked similarities to that of the Brontë sisters as discussed in Terry Eagleton's Myths of Power:

> They were . . . placed at a painfully ambiguous point in the social structure. . . . They strove as a family to maintain reasonably "genteel" standards in a traditionally rough-and-ready environment. They were, moreover, socially insecure women -- members of a cruelly oppressed group. . . . And they were educated women, trapped in an almost intolerable deadlock between culture and economics -- between imaginative aspiration and the cold truth of a society which could use them merely as "higher" servants. They

> were isolated educated women, socially and geographically remote from a world with which they nonetheless maintained close intellectual touch, and so driven back on themselves in solitary emotional hungering. At certain points in their fiction, indeed, that loneliness becomes type and image of the isolation of all men in an individualistic society. And as if all this were not enough, they were forced to endure in their childhood an especially brutal form of ideological oppression -- Calvinism. (8)

Placed at the heart of a staggering number of contradictions, these women sought resolutions in the socially symbolic act of narrative.

As a fox farmer, Munro's father was both owner and worker, ambiguously placed on the border of the petty bourgeoisie, a class described by Marx as "contradiction incarnate." The mother character presented in those Munro stories which she claims as her most autobiographical is highly concerned with the maintenance of "genteel" standards, education and culture. In the interviews to be considered shortly, Munro speaks of her early fascination with books, her loneliness and imaginative aspiration, and her "escape" into making stories. She grew up in a rural Ontario area whose ideological formations were strongly influenced by the fatalism of the Presbyterian faith.1

The ideology of individualism found a major locus in religious institutions, as Max Weber observes in The

Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The Presbyterian influence in Ontario contributed to a dominant ideology whereby people are perceived to "get what they deserve," poverty and social exclusion being blamed on the victim. Munro's texts inscribe the considerable value her society ascribes to self-control, to the denial of emotional need and human interdependency.

In Lives, set from the 1940s to the 1950s, a female protagonist comes of age during a period of global political upheaval and massive movement of women into and out of the paid labour force. Munro's writing career began in the period of a post-war consolidation of a new world economic order.

. . . . .

J.R. Struthers' numerous interpretations of Munro's work contain the most explicit of the frequent critical contentions that Munro's narratives are 'pure' documentation. He writes of "Munro's characteristic adoption of a straight, documentary style, her absolute rejection of the tendency of many photographers to manipulate images. . . . [I]n prose fiction, she presents a still photograph . . ." ("Alice Munro and the American South" 198). Even more sophisticated critiques, such as John Moss's, often imply a concept of the writer as an objective subject using language as a transparent window onto the object. These depoliticizing concepts of the subject and of language inform a humanist criticism which takes the incidents depicted in Lives as signifiers for "universal" truths found in the

context of a monumental time.

John Moss contends that Munro's "particular heightened realism -- exact, direct, haunting -- is her means of making the truth so palpably self-evident that the reader, the critic, is hard pressed to discover arguments to be pursued or explanations to be given . . . ("Introduction" to The Canadian Novel: Here and Now 9). As Michael Ryan observes, the principle of self-evidence is "the very ground of ideology" (2).

John Metcalf interviewed Munro in 1972. She says that "a rather traditional kind of writing is suited to whatever I have to express" (62). Considering the stories in Dance of the Happy Shades, Munro observes that those which tend towards pattern or formula stories, the "least real," are those she considers the least successful. In terms of vision, the writers who have influenced her "are probably the writers of the American South . . . Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers . . ." (56).

Munro states that she is sympathetic to feminism, but "not active because I'm not a political person. . . . Maybe I should be active but I don't have enough energy to stand off in any other directions" (59). A married woman writer "is no longer a completely unbiased observer. She has something to defend. . . . You live within a certain framework that is pretty hard to question because if you start questioning it too far you may be in big trouble" (59). (The words "no longer" interest me here because they imply the possibility of an unbiased position.) Asked if

she is frightened by the tendency of women writers to lead a-typical lives, Munro responds, "It does frighten me because I'm a fairly security-demanding person" (59). She feels there is probably a contradiction in many women writers between an ambitious self and "the woman who is passive, who wants to be dominated, who wants to have someone between her and the world. And I know I'm like this" (59). These sentiments are reiterated in Graeme Gibson's interview with her.

Asked why, in Lives, the father and brother of the protagonist Del "seemed to disappear somehow," Munro says, "my interest was shifting so much to the mother . . . I couldn't deal with both parents. I have a fairly narrow focus . . . " (59). She also suggests that this reflects societal separation of male and female roles. In Chapter Four, I will suggest the significance of the "absent father" and/or the peripheral role of a father character so often apparent in Munro's fiction.2

In her prose, Munro strives for "an emotional exactness . . . an exactness of resonance" (56). She contends she is "not a writer who deals in ideas" (56). She observes that she is not satisfied with the epilogue of Lives, where she was "trying to deal with something fairly complex" (60). This section contains a consideration of narrative forms and their relation to lived experience, a consideration that might well be said to deal with "ideas". Similar considerations are also extremely important in the content and structures of the sections "The Flats Road" and "Heirs of

the Living Body."

The duality Munro sets up between ideas and intuitive perceptions is again apparent in Graeme Gibson's interview with her, published in 1973. In her description of her subject matter and of how she approaches writing, she uses many terms which have connotations of the "natural."

In answer to Gibson's question of whether writers "know" something special, Munro states a preference for the term "see." "I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life. . . . It seems to me very important to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are" (241). The duality suggested here between intellect and an intuitive perception of things as they are or "surfaces," does not account for the active production of all perception of the "real" through the dialectical interaction of the object, an ineradicably social language, and a subject situated in a specific historical context. In any case, a great many examples from Munro's fiction blatantly contradict her assertions that she is not a writer who deals in ideas, as is mentioned above in response to particular sections from Lives. In "Age of Faith," Del presents an argument against traditional Christian beliefs which takes up several pages and is of considerable intellectual complexity. (Interestingly, Munro agreed with Metcalf's contention that this was the weakest section of the book.) Throughout Lives and Who Do You Think You Are?, numerous rhetorical passages critique female socialization and societal and literary perception and

representation of women.3

What may be considered "intellectual arguments" in Munro's fiction are often of immediate emotional importance to her women characters, and thus Munro is in some way rejecting a duality between abstract theorizing and personal experience. However, her statements suggest that it is possible to exclude or divide the cognitive from perception. Such suggestions appear to be informed by a conflation of ideas with consciously held and systematically formulated philosophical and ideological frameworks.

B. Pfaus observes that Lives, "typical of all of Munro's writing, sets out to investigate the nature of reality; Real Life was in fact the original title intended for the book" (48). Helen Hoy also makes this contention. To pursue an investigation of "the real" while contending that one is not posing intellectual arguments seems questionable. Hoy and Pfaus, like Munro, appear to posit a "monumental time" in which the real as a non-historical entity precedes a representation which is understood as a discovery rather than as a discursive construction. Thus Hoy considers Lives "an exploration of the realities of evil, death, religion, sex and art" (110). Her arguments following this statement would appear to shatter the implied essentialist nature of the "realities" she lists by suggesting how Munro's characters perceive them differently through particular visions or "worlds" of perception correspondent with their social situation. Yet she contends that "the insufficiency of many of these worlds lies in their dis-

regard for life's complexity, their allegiance to either romanticism or empiricism at the expense of the other" (110). This implies that "life's complexity" is encoded in a vision that harmoniously blends "romanticism and empiricism" and recognizes a metaphysics of essence.

Munro informs Gibson that her writing "may be a way of getting on top of experience . . . but it's control by hindsight in a way . . ." (245). She says that when she is writing, "I don't think of it as my image. I am so far gone that I think of it as the image, as a kind of revelation . . ." (254). She sees her technique as being very conventional. "I can't write about states of mind. . . . I can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture" (257).

The conventions of realism accord well with Munro's sense of having an intuitive approach to her work, as can be seen in Terry Eagleton's explanation of Roland Barthes' position:

> It is one of the functions of ideology to 'naturalize' social reality . . . .
>
> In Barthes's view, there is a literary ideology which corresponds to this 'natural attitude,' and its name is realism. Realist literature tends to conceal the socially relative or constructed nature of language: it helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of 'ordinary' language that is somehow natural . . . gives us reality 'as it is' . . . . The sign . . . is seen

> rather as a translucent window onto the object . . . .
>
> The sign as 'reflection,' 'expression' or 'representation' denies the productive character of language . . . . [The healthy sign is that] which gestures to its own material existence at the same time as it conveys a meaning . . . . (Literary Theory 135-6)

Interestingly, the latter "double sign" is frequently found in Munro's work, which evidences a fascination with the production of meaning and the "arbitrary" connections of words with the signifieds they would name.4

With reference to Barthes's ideas about realism, it can also be said that, as Rachel Blau Du Plessis observes in Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers, realist form can and has been used itself to "denaturalize" social reality. Narrative can disrupt traditional standards of "plausibility" through development of characters, plot sequences, or narrative outcomes. Many novels with female protagonists are structured according to the conventions of the romance plot, within a genre that remains one of the most successful of literary commodities. In bracketing a romance plot within a plot of individual quest, Lives continues a twentieth-century narrative strategy with which women writers have challenged the social conventions of the sex/gender system. But it can hardly be considered as ground-breaking in this regard.

Much of my interest in Lives is in regard to its success as a "bestseller," both in terms of what this may indicate about historical changes preceding the 1970s, and in terms of how its conventions work to manage social contradictions. As Raymond Williams contends,

> it is of the essence of a convention that it satisfies an assumption or a point of view, so that the work can be made and received . . . . [T]he reality of conventions as the mode of junction of social position and literary practice remains central. (Marxism and Literature 179).

I would observe that I am not concerned to rate Lives according to any scale of "literary" value.

J.M. Bernstein remarks that biographical form and self-recognition are accepted mediating devices between the web of lived experience and the formal structure of realist novels, and that these devices can relativize "the world to the self and meaning to identity" (150). (In Chapter Six I will suggest that while the realist novel has rightly been viewed as a bourgeois form, women writers' novels must be seen in relation to the difference in women's experience.) These mediating devices or conventions contribute to the structuring of Lives and many other Munro narratives, although in The Progress of Love I detect that Munro is questioning them and moving toward refusals of closure, making different ideological affirmations through the suggestion of what Rachel Blau Du Plessis terms a "communal protagonist."

Gibson questions Munro about the woman writer's relation to society, and about her own motivations for writing. As in the Metcalf interview, she mentions the loneliness and isolation of her childhood and adolescence:

> I always realized that I had a different view of the world, and one that would bring me into great trouble and ridicule if it were exposed. I learned very early to disguise everything, and perhaps the escape into making stories was necessary. (246)

Perhaps realist conventions also provide Munro with a certain type of disguise. That the adult Munro is still sensitive to "ridicule and trouble" is suggested in the Metcalf interview, where she describes herself as a security-demanding person, a married woman who has something to defend. In claiming to represent the surface of things, or what is there, rather than to present a critical and interested interpretation of the social world, one can bow out of having to defend an intellectual position. The claim that one is not taking an intellectual position is itself an intellectual position involving a particular reifying definition of intellect.

. . . . .

Two passages from Munro's fiction explicitly consider perception of an object world of unquestionable solidity as compensation for unfulfilled desire. In a passage from Lives, it is also of interest that the protagonist considers her emotional pain in terms of a mind-body division:

> I looked at these lovers lying on the graveyard grass without envy or curiosity. As I walked into Jubilee I repossessed the world. Trees, houses, fences, streets, came back to me, in their own sober and callous importance. This is first a blow, then an odd compensation. And already I felt my old self -- my old devious, ironic, isolated self -- beginning to breathe again and stretch and settle, though all around it my body clung cracked and bewildered, in the stupid pain of loss. (199)

This division between an ironic isolated consciousness central to the self and a pain which exists but is "elsewhere" will be considered in Chapter Six, as the imaginary resolution formally enacted in Lives.

In "Simon's Luck," from Who Do You Think You Are?, Rose drives frantically across Canada in order to end obsessive behaviour stemming from a preoccupation with the possibility of having a genuinely fulfilling relationship:

> She had driven all night . . . . She sat at the counter looking at the usual things there are behind café counters -- the coffee-pots, the thick glass dishes they put ice-cream or jello in. It was those dishes that told her of her changed state. She could not have said she found them shapely, or eloquent, without misstating the case. All she could have said was that she saw them in a way that wouldn't be possible to a person in any

> stage of love. She felt their solidity with a convalescent gratitude whose weight settled comfortably into her brains and feet . . . . [I]t seemed the world had stopped being a state where she might meet [Simon], and gone back to being itself. (174)

The desire for stasis, weight, objectivity, presence, is contradictory in that it is a desire to be without desire. The closing pages of Lives, shortly to be considered, suggest that realist narrative may be seen as an act undertaken to realize this desire.

Attaining "desirelessness" is an act of self-control, informed by the premise that wisdom lies in the accommodation of self to world. This premise is an ideologeme "susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation" (The Political Unconscious 87). Its repeated presence in Munro's narratives corresponds to a fatalistic vision in which women must not expect to have their emotional needs met. But as everyone must manage some accommodation to their environment, is this not just common sense?

Munro's statements imply a definition of "ideas" similar to that which, as Raymond Williams observes, has traditionally been given for "ideology," a "relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a 'world-view' or a 'class outlook'" (Marxism 109). In "Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis," Williams observes that in

contemporary cultural criticism ideology has instead become understood as "the condition of all conscious life" (63). Gramsci's concept of hegemony has informed a recognition that lived consciousness cannot be equated with a formally articulated system of meanings abstracted from it. Instead, the concept of hegemony:

> sees the relations of domination and subordination . . . as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living . . . of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. . . . It is a lived system of meanings and values . . . which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. (Marxism 110)

The concept of the realist writer as documenter implies a pre-given state in which the subject objectively perceives the object world as it is. In the passages from Lives and Who? just considered, the condition of being in a passionate relationship or being in love is seen to disrupt or pervert an implied "normal" state of perception prior to it. Yet if this state, or rather the perception of being in this state, is seen as an achieved condition, which the subject must work to attain, then such a condition cannot be accorded a "natural" status.

In "Simon's Luck," Munro has the adult Rose consider that "The most mortifying thing of all was simply hope . . ." (172). A reader reconstructing the experience from which "Rose" formulates this statement, might well be led to the different perception that what is more mortifying is a social environment in which "hope" is perceived in such a manner. A protagonist who would make the latter observation might then respond to it with anger and an attempt to criticize and change existing conditions and participate in the formation of an alternative community.

I have previously quoted Munro's statement that the story "Privilege" is about actual events that happened in her school. Rose observes the "savagery incalculable" of the school (25). The response to Franny's public rape is significant in relation to the concept of hegemony:

> Big boys were around them, hollering encouragement, big girls were hovering behind, giggling. Rose was interested but not alarmed. An act performed on Franny had no general significance, no bearing on what could happen to anyone else. It was only further abuse.
>
> . . . Rose told people these things, in later years . . . and they were true, but the effect was off-balance. Her schooling seemed deplorable. It seemed she must have been miserable, and that was not so. She was learning. She learned how to manage in the big fights . . . . (28)

It is not surprising that a child learning to survive in

such an environment would not enter into an active protest which would immediately situate her at the focus of general hostility. Neither protest against cruelty nor unalarmed interest in it may be seen as pregiven or natural propensities of the human subject. Such responses must be learned within a particular social environment.

In Chapter Six I will contend that a scene in which the young protagonist observes her suffering with what might be termed "unalarmed interest" bears a correspondence to how the formal conventions of Lives would enact the imaginary resolution of self-containment or self-creation. The self that suffers may be relegated to an elsewhere by an ironic, isolated consciousness that objectifies this "otherness" of an emotional self that is not properly itself, thus situating it within the broader object world to be perceived "just as it is," as a static presence, being without meaning.

The closing of Lives of Girls and Women betrays an interdependency between metaphoric "images," which would produce significance and "lists," which would document physical detail, as devices for the "capture" of a reified social world, of "Life" with a capital "L":

> People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable -- deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.
>
> It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee. Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig . . . writing his

history, I would want to write things down.

I would try to make lists. A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main street and who owned them, a list of family names . . . A list of the titles of movies that played at the Lyceum Theatre from 1938 to 1950 . . . Names on the cenotaph (more for the First World War than for the Second). Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in.

The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking.

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together -- radiant, everlasting. (210)

The metaphor of the deep caves produces a static or transcendent significance -- life is manifested in the ordinary but is essentially mysterious -- which must, however, somehow be seen as informed by "lists" of precise historical and physical detail. The degree of abstraction required to produce a transcendent significance empties out the immense complexity of historical detail presented in the narrative, as these details become "nothing but" signifiers for such a signified. "Concrete" or explicit presentation of historical and physical detail cannot in itself produce what may be seen as the "ultimate" object of social realist

narrative -- "every last thing . . . held still and held together . . ." -- for only a transcendent significance or idea can give this living, changing social world the weight of a static object, an object or presence with which the individual can merge, escaping "the most mortifying thing of all" -- hope or desire stumbling against the "experience of necessity" that is history.

Helen Hoy observes that Munro's frequent use of oxymorons, ironic juxtaposition, and especially paradox "helps to sustain Munro's thematic insistence on the doubleness of reality, the illusoriness of either the prosaic or the marvelous in isolation" (101). This use is exemplified in what might be said to be Del's "epiphany statement," that "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable -- deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210). This statement is only paradoxical in terms of an essentialist concept of "reality," a concept both perpetuated and subverted in Lives. The apparent unity of "people's lives" is broken down when Del is seen as considering two things -- signifiers (people's acts and words), dull and simple, and signified, amazing and unfathomable. The problem of how "signifiers" can be attached to a meaning is both underlined and circumvented by attaching them to a signified that is "amazing and unfathomable." The term "paradox" becomes the means of achieving a closure of the question of how significance is arrived at, through a double move. To suggest that reality is essentially mysterious is to arrive at a final significa-

tion in the very act of acknowledging that this cannot be done. The "essential" nature of the real having purportedly been found, the consideration of ideological assumptions implicit in constructs of reality is effectively foreclosed.

Jameson observes that the great realist novelists are "shepherds of Being":

> Their evocation of the solidity of their object of representation -- the social world grasped as an organic, natural, Burkean permanence -- is necessarily threatened by any suggestion that that world is not natural, but historical, and subject to radical change. . . . The realists themselves are necessarily engaged in a host of containment strategies, which seek to fold everything which is not-being, desire, hope, and transformational praxis, back into the status of nature; these impulses toward the future and toward radical change must systematically be reified, transformed into "feelings" and psychological attributes, the properties and accidents of "characters" now grasped as organisms and forms of being. (194)

As the above passage from Lives suggests, the subjective/objective division operated in Munro's concept of her aesthetic leads to a contradiction. "Representation," enabled by a documentation of physical detail, depends on the existence of an essential structure to be documented. Yet in order to "reproduce" this structure's "nature," it must produce a transcendent concept.

Munro's protectiveness of her situation has, no doubt, much to do with the conditions in which (as she informs Gibson) she began writing, conditions in which "in order to survive it's necessary to be very good at making things with your hands, and always to think practically" (246). "In the community where I grew up, books were a time waster . . . and so if even reading is a bad habit, writing is an incomprehensible thing to do" (246). As a woman artist from a working-class background, subject to distrust while sensitive to the material conditions productive of it, Munro must have experienced a wealth of contradictions in her life. Her affection for and understanding of working-class people is much apparent in her work.

Munro's response to Gibson's question as to whether the writer has any responsibility to society is highly revealing:

> I never think about this at all. I have all my life just thought about doing my work and sort of surviving in society. Now this is a very selfish point of view perhaps. I don't feel anything about responsibility as a rule, but I think this is partly because I grew up having to feel so, so protective about this whole thing, about writing, and then you know I married young and I was a suburban housewife in the '50s, and I went through the whole thing again, of having to be very, having to protect the real thing I did, so that I

> suppose I function as if I were cut off from society, and I'm always even rather surprised when, well, when a book is published, that it exists, when people say I read your book. (249)

More recent interviews reveal that Munro has gained greater confidence.

Harold Horwood's interview with Munro, published in 1984, suggests a relationship between the way her work takes shape and her separation of her political attitudes and her writing. Horwood asks her if she thinks in terms of characters and plots when beginning a story. She responds that she does, although she doesn't necessarily have a plot in advance:

> I have some idea where the story is going. But usually I'll start the story with an anecdote or something like that, a sort of kernel of the story, and sometimes when I've finished the story that won't seem very important at all. . . . Every story seems to be different in the way it imposes itself on me. (130)

She says that she does think she is a feminist although "Of course everybody defines it differently." Horwood asks her if she has a political commitment to women's liberation:

> I feel I have certain duties as a citizen. This all comes to me sort of at second hand. The first things I think about are personal life and being a writer. Then I will get hold of issues, usually when they are brought to my attention, and I will

> think yes, I support that. For instance, I am interested in supporting things like homes for battered wives. I see things like that are terribly necessary and important, but I would separate the financial and personal support entirely from my writing. In fiction I not only don't think of feminist politics, but of the class struggle, or anything else; I think of what is going on <u>in</u> my story and that is all. (133-4)

In her own life, as in the worlds of her fiction, Munro apparently perceives a well-defined separation between personal life and the political. Her sense that her stories impose themselves on her, that she doesn't think of anything else but what is intrinsic to them, seems to imply that they are somehow "discovered" rather than constructed, pulled out of an imaginary realm which accurately reflects "the real."

Interviewing Munro in 1981, J.R. Struthers asked her if she distrusts "fictionalizing":

> Yes , . . . what I most admire is where the fictionalizing is as unobtrusive as possible, where there has been as strong an attempt, as honest an attempt, as one can make to get at what is really there. But I'm not so naive as to suppose that even this, of course, is not trickery. (6)

She says she was enormously moved by James Agee's <u>A Death in the Family</u>, in which "the technique just seems to me transparent" (7):

> There's a . . . lack of making something special

> happen, which is what I mean when I'm talking about not fictionalizing, dispensing as much as possible with this "Here I've got to make something special happen," which is usually the point where you most manipulate reality instead of letting it dictate by itself what is going to happen in the writing. By reality I don't mean the reality I see. I mean the reality you feel. (7)

She says that if she could rewrite the stories in Dance of the Happy Shades, which have "an awful lot of meaningful final sentences," "I would chop out a lot of those words and final sentences . . . just let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up . . ." (9). This new approach, she contends, would not necessarily improve the stories, "that is just the way I feel now."

Throughout the interview Munro suggests that she works according to what she "feels":

> I don't think about anything at all . . . . I have no ideas or theories about it that I can ever put together . . . . I don't proceed from any thinking about writing, which may have something to do with the books that influenced me. (14)

These are books from the American South, "books that reached me on a more than emotional, almost mystical level . . ." (13). As Munro has observed, the society of the American South was in many ways like her own. (The influence of Calvinistic strains of Protestantism, and the superceding of

agrarian production by industrial production which eroded the traditional forms of rural life, constitute two of the most significant similarities.) Its women writers, like herself, were critical inheritors, deeply bound up with their society while in many but not all ways marginal to it, in terms of the social privileges accorded by race, class, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Munro's "felt" responses appear to have accorded closely with those of women writers speaking from an insider/outsider position in a society with ideological formations similar to those of rural Ontario. Munro's vision has a literary tradition, legitimating or "naturalizing" its narrative conventions. However, these must once have appeared a new way of "thinking the world."

Munro states that in her first-person-narrator stories, she has not very often "assumed a <u>persona</u> a long way from myself" (23). Struthers observes that Munro has referred to <u>Lives</u> as an "episodic novel." She replies that:

> I started writing it as a straight novel. . . . [I]t wasn't working for me. . . . I just went back and started tearing it apart and putting it into these little sections. . . .
>
> So it had to be done like that in order to be told to me in a way that interested me most. I guess that's why I can't write a novel. . . . You don't feel the tension . . . this pulling on the rope to get to the other side that I have to feel. (15)

I would contend that this statement suggests Munro experiences her narratives as symbolic acts. The short story or a novel written in episodes may be seen to allow for a more concentrated generation of the semic oppositions symptomatic of social contradictions, and thus for a more satisfying sense of "resolution."

Both the Metcalf and the Struthers interviews indicate Munro's wariness of academic critics and philosophical formulations. Such wariness is understandable. Struthers has repeatedly been concerned with simplistic equations of her writing with photography and with a precise formulation of the literary influences from which he has implied Munro's narratives "originate." Many other academic critics (as will be detailed in Chapters Four and Five) have implied that her work originates in and encodes a universal and precisely conceptualized metaphysical vision. She voices a common feeling of not having learned much about literature at university. I would suggest that Munro's distrust of philosophical formulations is based on an association of these with the institution of the university. Unfortunately, a highly justifiable critical perception of this institution very often functions as a catalyst for a wholesale rejection of theoretical understanding. While I would certainly contend that some people's experiential understanding may be far more insightful than the theoretical understanding of certain others, the claim of knowing through intuition can function to foreclose all consideration of the received assumptions implicit in one's "intui-

tions." The critical formulation of another's or of one's own "assumptions" is an abstraction that is not to be confused with a transparent representation of a subject's lived consciousness. It is necessary because we can and must think critically about our own and other's felt responses, in relation to the social conditions in which they emerge.

Endnotes

1In Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, Margaret Atwood considers the legacy of "the Calvinist God" in Canadian literature's concern with "Guilt, guilt and more guilt" (139).

2See "The Peace of Utrecht" in The Dance of the Happy Shades, "The Ottawa Valley," "Winter Wind," and "Memorial" in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, and "Royal Beatings," "Privilege," and "Half a Grapefruit" in Who Do You Think You Are?.

3Lawrence Mathews' essay provides a long list of rhetorical outbursts in Who Do You Think You Are?.

4See pp. 37-8 of "Heirs of the Living Body," where Del examines a "day-ud cow," and pp. 187-8 of "Spelling" in Who Do You Think You Are?.

Chapter IV

The Accommodation/Dissent Opposition in Lives: The Naturalization of Authority

> "I was paralyzed by this reasonableness, the arrangements so simple and familiar and taken for granted, the reassuring face of insanity" (Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women).

Fredric Jameson argues that oppositional character groupings facilitate the semic organization of narratives. An individual character can represent one of the two terms of a binary opposition or antinomy, or the conceptual attempt to work out or resolve this opposition. A system of antinomies is "the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of something quite different, namely a social contradiction . . ." (83). This chapter will examine the semic functions of Addie, Del, and Del's father, in Munro's working out of the antinomy of dissent and accommodation. I will critique Lives' narrative manifestation of what Jameson terms the ideologeme of "ressentiment." Lives recontains political meanings in the semic code of individual identity by repeatedly "rewriting" Addie's ideological pronouncements and assumptions, taking them as signifiers for the nature of her personality. Such rewriting is effected through the manner in which the text uses implicit standards of reference to build in or guide an intended reception or interpretation of "Addie." I would argue that by discrediting Addie, the narrative voice of Lives repeatedly affirms the wisdom of accommodation of self to world. This will be related to Blau Du Plessis' analysis of how the individual quest-plot, operated by women writers to delegitimize the

romance plot, is problematic in its tendency to affirm that female self-realization is purely a matter of individual initiative. Thus it works to deny the limitations which women face as a group.

I will also contend that "Age of Faith" works to contain what I will characterize as the "repressed" of Lives within a meditation on the essential nature of being. This "repressed" is that an apparently reasonable acceptance of things as they are is not an adequate solution, because power works through its naturalization under the guise of reason. To oversimplify, "Del" corresponds to accommodation and "Addie" to dissent. Yet Munro's text is not merely concerned with discreditation or containment of the mother. Rather, the complexity with which the mother's positions are both presented and rewritten may serve to focus the reader's attention on the very desire for containment, and the way textual containment strategies offer to contradict themselves.

While Del is not ultimately willing to accommodate herself to traditional female roles, her own "dissent" involves a private working through of her options for self-realization, and an affirmation of her own future ability to "escape" these roles. The "world" to which Del would accommodate herself must thus be one which still allows for her self-realization as an individual. The validity of the adoption of an accommodating persona is thus based on the assumption that there is nothing so objectively limiting that it cannot be accommodated. "Del" as a striving subject

and as point of view is the textual standard by which we observe the measurement of objective limitations. This particular standard can function to underwrite an implied universal standard -- that "in general" social limitations to self-realization are surmountable.

By having her protagonist choose "quest" (the implications of a "quest" plot will be developed further shortly), Munro poses an imaginary resolution to social contradictions. "Addie's" observations of objective limitations to women's self-realization threatens to question the viability of this solution. This threat is "recontained" (although not fully so, and therein lies the interest and complexity of Munro's text) by Del's rewriting of Addie's pronouncements and behaviour, that is to say, by Munro's operation of a version of what Jameson theorizes as the ideologeme of "ressentiment." As I will suggest below, "accommodation" is thereby privileged, although this privileging becomes ambiguous. It becomes apparent that there are two terms by which Lives' narrative voice judges the viability of accommodation -- in terms of strategy, which is motivated or interested, and in terms of logic or apparently objective reasoning. In due course I will suggest that when the accommodation/dissent opposition between Addie and Del is considered in terms of an alternative character grouping -- Del's father and Addie -- the narrative voice's privileging of accommodation is further contradicted.

As Jameson observes, the ideologeme of "ressentiment" has been used to "explain" the phenomenon of revolution and

political militancy by way of an ahistorical psychology. Given the realist novel's frequent concern with individual psychology as "source" of ideas and actions, the novel form may be seen to facilitate the operation of this ideologeme. Political uprising is seen to have its source in "the destructive envy the have-nots feel for the haves" (201). In a "secondary and more esoteric" use:

> ressentiment can also explain the conduct of those who incite an otherwise essentially satisfied popular mass to such "unnatural" disorders: . . . Nietzsche's "ascetic priests," the intellectuals par excellence -- unsuccessful writers and poets, bad philosophers, bilious journalists, and failures of all kinds -- whose private dissatisfactions lead them to their vocations as political and revolutionary militants . . . .
>
> What is most striking about the theory of ressentiment is its unavoidably autoreferential structure. . . . [George] Gissing resents [his character] Richard, and what he resents most is the latter's ressentiment. . . . [T]his ostensible "theory" is itself little more than an expression of annoyance at seemingly gratuitous lower-class agitation, at the apparently quite unnecessary rocking of the social boat. . . . [T]he theory of ressentiment . . . will always itself be the expression and the production of ressentiment. (202)

Addie is an isolated figure with no constituency, and is far from a full-fledged militancy. Her ideas appear to correspond to a political program of educational reformism. She writes to newspapers criticizing established social organization and proposing reforms, and is an anomaly in terms of the enclosed rural space of Lives' setting, in which her dissatisfactions are perceived as indicative of her personal eccentricity. Addie's dissent, as read by Del, appears to reflect upon her own frustration at the limited channels through which she can realize her ambitions. Her aspirations are contradictory, as at various points she both aspires to "genteel" standards and denounces the practitioners of them. Del perceives Addie as "reading in" persecution to the situations of others, due to bitterness at the limitations of her own life.

Socialist feminist theorists have been concerned to suggest that political judgements can indeed be "misplaced," or overdetermined in a manner whose understanding entails recourse to a politicized psychology.1 However, the reinterpretation of political judgements as misplaced necessarily implies yet another allegory of history which in its turn is overdetermined or marked by the particular experience of the interpreting subject.

Of interest here is the manner in which Lives' rewriting of Addie's pronouncements offers to contradict itself. Munro has stated that in Lives, "the girl's feeling for her mother . . . [is] all solidly autobiographical" (Metcalf 58). I would contend that "Del" resents "Addie," and "what

she resents most is Addie's ressentiment." If judgements which stem from personal resentment are perceived as misplaced, then Del's judgements about Addie's judgements are themselves suspect.

A further problem with narrative inscriptions of "ressentiment" is that they must evoke those very narrative "raw materials" or social contradictions that they are concerned to contain:

> Fern's style of singing, though admired, was regarded in Jubilee as being just a hair's breadth from showing off, and sometimes children did screech or warble after her, in the street. My mother could take this for persecution. She would construct such cases out of the flimsiest evidence, seeking out the Jewish couple who ran the Army Surplus store, or the shrunken silent Chinese in the laundry, with bewildering compassion, loud slow-spoken overtures of friendship. They did not know what to make of her. Fern was not persecuted, that I could see. Though my aunts . . . would say her name in a peculiar way, as if it had a stone in it, that they would have to suck, and spit out. And Naomi did tell me, "That Fern Dogherty had a baby." (121)

This passage appears to invite the reader to join the narrative voice in the perception of Addie's excesses. J.M. Bernstein observes that ironic tone and comment in narrative establishes "between author and reader, a community of the

undeceived . . . whose authority is the authorial separation of appearance and reality which only the knowing can recognize" (161).

Children sometimes warble after Fern. We may well assume that this particular behaviour, which only happens "sometimes," is relatively innocuous. That Addie defines it as persecution would then establish an incident of the excessiveness of her judgements. From the specific example given, the reader moves to a general assertion that Addie is capable of constructing cases of persecution out of the "flimsiest evidence." The validity of this assertion is then seemingly reinforced by an image of Addie patronizing Jewish and Chinese families who "did not know what to make of her." Is it her patronizing manner that engenders this bafflement, or is it the "fact" -- implied by the movement of this passage -- that the case of persecution Addie has constructed around them is based on the flimsiest of evidence? If the particular "cases" Addie acts on are to be read as "imagined," are we to read this imagining as evidence that the town seldom has "real" cases of persecution?

Lives is set in a time during and shortly after the Second World War. While Munro critics often contend that Munro's fascination with life is comprehensive, unlike religion, romance and sexuality, war seldom engages her interest. (Del's experience within the former "areas of life" leads her to an extended consideration of their relation to her own place in the world and to her percep-

tions.) Munro came of age during a time of global confrontation, economic upheaval, racism, and the rise of fascism. The Second World War is present by its relative absence in Lives, testimony to the social contradictions this text would contain.

In what context can we read Jubilee's Jewish couple as not persecuted? In the context of one particular case in Jubilee that Addie has imaginatively constructed? In the context of what we can imagine about what their lives might be like in WASP rural Ontario? Or in the context of the holocaust? Why do the Chinese run the laundry, and why are they described as "shrunken and silent"?

Addie's political perceptions, represented in the particular situations establishing their misplacement, are taken as signifiers for the nature of her personality. However, they inevitably evoke the need for implicit standards of narrative reference in order that their authority be discredited. Thus explanation outside the bounds of individual psychology is always already there in a narrative containment of the subject with political impulses. In Lives such standards of reference, which are necessarily ideological, frequently remain ambiguous.

In the opening of "Epilogue: The Photographer," Del characterizes her mother's statement that Jubilee is "rife with suicides" as "dogmatic." There were "not really so many; I was probably closer to the truth than she was" (202). Del's standard of reference for her judgement is, in this case, apparently the "statistical average" of suicides

-- a social norm which functions to underwrite an implied universal norm establishing what counts as "many."

Munro's repeated presentation of a Del/Addie opposition begins to generate new terms in the conceptual working out of this opposition. "Accommodation" breaks down into two terms -- I will call them "meaning" and "use" -- which offer to contradict each other. As "meaning," accommodation is represented as reasonable in itself, based on the objective assessment of a situation. The apparently logical refutation or rewriting of Addie's pronouncements then functions to question the reasoning engendering dissent. However, the text at the same time suggests that Del's tendency towards accommodation is motivated. Its "use" is concealment and safety. Thus the accommodation/dissent opposition comes to appear as underwritten by another textual assumption -- that difference (the difference of an ambitious, intellectual or dissenting female subject) is dangerous, and that concealment is thus necessary:

> One day she came to the school, representing the encyclopedia company, to present a prize for the best essay on why we should buy Victory Bonds. . . . She wore a terrible mannish navy blue suit. . . . I fixed my eyes on the sweater of the girl ahead of me. . . . She was so different, that was all, so brisk and hopeful and guileless . . . thinking herself a success. For two cents she would have launched into her own educational history. . . . People gave me sly and gloating

> and pitying looks. Suddenly I could not bear anything about her . . . and most of all her innocence, her way of not knowing when people were laughing, of thinking she could get away with this.
>
> I hated her selling encyclopedias and making speeches and wearing that hat. I hated her writing letters to the newspapers . . . about local problems or those in which she promoted education and the rights of women and opposed compulsory religious education in the school. . . . [Others] were full of long decorative descriptions . . . and even contained references to Owen and me . . . that made the roots of my teeth ache with shame. Other people than Aunt Elspeth and Aunt Grace would say to me, "I seen that letter of your mother's in the paper," and I would feel how contemptuous, how superior and silent and enviable they were, those people who all their lives could stay still, with no need to do or say anything remarkable.
>
> I myself was not so different from my mother, but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were. (67-8)

Del resents what she characterizes as her mother's "innocence." Yet other passages in Lives suggest that it is not that Addie does not "know" that people are laughing, but that she does not care. In "Princess Ida," she states that

"Shyness and self-consciousness are luxuries I could never afford" (57). "Addie" as function threatens to challenge the code -- that concealment is necessary, since difference is dangerous -- by which Del organizes her behaviour, and which gives Lives much of its dramatic tension.

Significantly, the above passage does not indicate any dual perspective between the young Del of the remembered events, and the narrating voice whom we might imagine as in a position of sufficient distance to comment upon her childhood perceptions, to see Addie again in a different manner. The dual nature of the narrative "I," which might well allow for a metacommentary, can thus function as an implicit validation of a past perspective. The young Del's interpretive code is "naturalized" by virtue of this absence of reinterpretation from a presumably more sophisticated vantage point.

The last sentence of the above passage contains a glaring contradiction. Precisely through the importance Del attaches to concealment, she is very different from her mother. If Del hates her mother, and considers that she is not so very different from her, the reader may well receive this passage as an inscription of self-hatred, a quality which perhaps further establishes the differences between "Addie" and "Del." Del's characteristics may be seen as disempowering. Yet her assumptions inform an ideological reading of the world which allows for an imaginary resolution of social contradictions. Addie situates the "problem" in massive, long-term change. Del situates it within the

subject. In Del's terms, the potential for social exclusion is surmountable by the individual will to control behaviour or disguise difference.

The passage which closes the section from which Lives of Girls and Women takes its name indicates that Addie's opinions are threatening to Del, not merely because they "make visible" her family's differences and thus threaten her potential belonging within a community. They also suggest the objective limitations upon female self-realization. Here, Munro gives a detailed presentation of Addie's reading of the world, and Del's rewriting of it, in terms that suggest, on the one hand, that this rewriting is motivated or "interested," and on the other hand, that it constitutes a logical refutation of Addie's assumptions. Addie tells Del:

> "There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. . . . You will want to have children, though."
>
> That was how much she knew me. " . . . use your brains. . . . Once you make that mistake, of being -- distracted over a man, your life will never be your own. You will get the burden, a woman always does."
>
> "There is birth control nowadays," I reminded her. . . . [I]t was she herself who had publicly embarrassed our family, writing to the Jubilee

> Herald-Advance that "prophylactic devices should be distributed to all women on public relief in Wawanash County . . . ."
>
> "That is not enough, though of course it is a great boon and religion is the enemy of it. . . . It is self respect I am really speaking of . . . .
>
> I did not quite get the point of this, or . . . I was set up to resist it. I would have to resist anything she told me with such earnestness. . . . Her concern about my life, which I needed and took for granted, I could not bear to have expressed. Also I felt it was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness . . . and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experience and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same. (147)

"Del's" rewriting transforms Addie's social and historical analysis into an allegory of archetypal or essential female identity, and then dismisses it. Yet Munro presents Addie's position with such length and complexity that Del's rewriting may well be read as doing considerable violence to Addie's pronouncements. What may easily be read as Addie's suggestion that it is up to the women of the age to actively transform their conditions, translates into the

need for a woman to take precautions as an individual. Given that Addie is willing to proudly take on the experience of publicly asserting her unpopular views, that we are to read her as chiefly advocating "carefulness and self-protection" seems questionable. Munro appears to be focusing attention on the motivation for, and the viability of, Del's dismissal of Addie's pronouncements. This viability has come to appear ambiguous.

Addie's advice is not that "being female made you damageable" in some essential way, but that being female in a particular (and transformable) social context necessarily entails the potential for being burdened with the labour of child-care and domestic work, a labour which may preclude or limit other choices. Through her protagonist, Munro maintains the freedom to choose. This imaginary resolution has at one and the same time the transformative power of a real act -- the development of consciousness -- and the potential to suggest a utopian dismissal of the objective limitations to individual praxis.

Del's resolution has a counterpart in the formal organization of Lives, which brackets a subverted romance plot within a quest plot. Significantly, Lives contains many incidents suggestive of the "objective limitations" of unwanted pregnancy. Naomi gets pregnant and "has to" get married. It is rumoured that Marion Sheriff was "in trouble" and that this engendered her suicide. Madeline, very young and without economic resources, has a child. Fern is regarded with suspicion, perhaps due to rumours that

she once bore a child. "Del" however does not get pregnant during her sexual relations with Garnet, even though it appears from the text that she has not used contraceptives.

The historical conditions of possibility for Lives as a symbolic act are suggested by Blau Du Plessis:

> When women as a social group question, and have the economic, political, and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the "couverte" status, and their access to vocation, then the relation of narrative middles [traditionally the locus of female quest] to resolutions will destabilize culturally, and novelists will begin to "write beyond" the romantic ending. (4)

Blau Du Plessis observes that women writers used the new ending of a female individual's quest, once contained and subordinated as a narrative middle or secondary plot, to delegitimize the marriage plot. The marriage plot was a narrative convention or accepted contract buttressed by social conventions, including, notably, religion as the residual ideology of a feudalist age modified for a continuing hegemonic function within capitalism. Women writers' use of the quest plot as a delegitimation of the romance plot is problematic because of the historical function of this plot in affirming a bourgeois ideologeme -- that vocation and social situation are purely matters of individual choice and initiative -- which once, however, served a role in the overturning of aristocratic privilege. Because

of women's historically later and still incomplete possession of at least their own labour power as an exchange value, the female quest plot remains a delegitimizing and revolutionary strategy within feminist narrative. Yet, as Blau Du Plessis observes, many feminist writers came to be dissatisfied with the imaginary resolutions of narratives of individual quest, and have now taken up both narrative strategies suggesting collective quest, and activist strategies in which cultural artifacts are not seen as ends in themselves but as constitutive parts of a social process.

. . . . .

Choice of characters to receive greater or lesser narrative emphasis functions as a strategy of containment. In Lives, Del's father receives progressively less attention. Munro observes that "my emphasis, my interest was shifting so much to the mother that I had to be able to deal with her alone. I couldn't deal with both parents. I have a fairly narrow focus or something so the father tended to sort of fade away" (Metcalf 59). As earlier suggested, father characters are frequently an absent presence in Munro narratives. Their absence both indicates the social relegation of the labour of childcare and nurturance to women, and contributes to narrative treatments of the mother-child relationship which tend to focus on the antagonism between mother and daughter. Feminist theorists have observed that interpretation of the mother-child relationship in isolation from a historical and ideological analysis of gender relations, of socially maintained

differentials of power between men and women, can easily engender a mother-blaming which contains the "problem" of this relationship within an ahistorical allegory of female psychology.2 Munro's family narratives do not simply "omit" consideration of the patriarchal presence, but frequently gesture to both the distance of fathers from family relations, and the correspondent terms of their own textual containment strategies.

The father does not fully "fade away" in the reception of Munro's text, since the very limitation of the number of scenes in which he is depicted make such scenes resonate with a sense of the unsaid. Much of the power and complexity of Munro's prose is due to her willingness to gesture to a context in which its central textual codes of understanding may be seen as inadequate.

Del's father, as I read Munro's portrayal of him, is similar to the narrative voice of Lives in his inclination to suggest the wisdom of accommodation of self to world. As mentioned in Chapter Four, in "The Flats Road" he discourages Addie from taking action to separate the child Diane from an abusive mother, arguing that "You're in trouble from the start when you interfere with other people's families" (18) and that "You may be right but that doesn't mean there's a thing you can do about it" (18). In "Heirs of the Living Body," he discourages Addie from criticizing his relatives' and community's traditional Christian assumptions about death and heaven. He embraces her, as Del watches:

> I used to wish sometimes for this very thing, to see my parents by look or embrace affirm that romance . . . had once caught them up and bound them together. But at this moment, seeing my mother go meek and bewildered -- this was what the slump of her back showed, that her words never would -- and my father touching her in such a gentle, compassionate, grieving way, . . . I was alarmed, I wanted to shout at them to stop and turn back into their separate, final, unsupported selves. I was afraid that they would go on and show me something I no more wanted to see than I wanted to see Uncle Craig dead. (41-2)

Elsewhere in Lives, Del resents the assurance with which her mothers asserts her dissenting views. Yet here she is "alarmed" by the temporary faltering of this assurance, by the sight of her mother potentially accommodating herself to traditional authorities. If, as I have suggested, the father's reading of his world bears a correspondence to that of Lives' narrative voice, then this alarm at the practice engendered by such a reading when effected from a position of authority indicates a narrative ambivalence about the validity of its own terms of explanation, by which the mother is so often presented as unreasonable.

This ambivalence toward the concept of reason is dramatically encoded in a passage from "Age of Faith," a description of a dream which I read as a narrative metacommentary on Lives' own terms of explanation, and as a figure

for the "political unconscious" it would contain:

> I was used to things being killed. Uncle Benny went hunting, and trapping muskrats, and every fall my father killed foxes and sold the pelts for our livelihood. Throughout the year he killed old and crippled or simply useless horses for the foxes' food. I had had two bad dreams about this. . . . Once I dreamed that I went down to my father's meat house . . . [where] he kept parts of skinned and butchered horses hanging on hooks. . . . I looked inside and found, not unexpectedly, that what he really had hanging there were skinned and dismembered human bodies. The other dream owed something to English history, which I had been reading about in the encyclopedia. I dreamed my father had set up an ordinary humble block of wood on the grass outside the kitchen door, and was lining us up -- Owen and my mother and me -- to cut off our heads. <u>It won't hurt</u>, he told us, . . . <u>it'll all be over in a minute</u>. He was kind and calm, reasonable, tiredly persuasive, explaining that it was all somehow for our own good. Thoughts of escape struggled in my mind like birds caught in oil, their wings out, helpless. I was paralyzed by this reasonableness, the arrangements so simple and familiar and taken for granted, the reassuring face of insanity.
>
> In the day I was not so frightened as these

dreams would suggest. (95)

I read Del's second dream as a figure for the "repressed" of Lives -- that a presumably "reasonable" acceptance of things as they are is not an adequate solution, because power works through its naturalization under the guise of reason.

It may well be objected that, since "Age of Faith" treats power relationships very explicitly, my characterization of this recognition as "repressed" is misplaced. In the text preceding this dream, Del's father prepares to shoot the family dog, Major, after Major kills the neighbour's sheep. After her dream, Del pictures her father undertaking this act:

> I did see again the outline of that reasonable, blasphemous face. It was the deliberateness I dwelt on, deliberate choice to send the bullet into the brain. . . . [I]n this choice and this act, no matter how necessary and reasonable, was the assent to anything. Death was made possible. And not because it could not be prevented but because it was what was wanted -- wanted, by all those adults, and managers, and executioners, with their kind implacable faces. (95)

"Age of Faith" ends with a metaphysical speculation as to the nature of a God whose being would not contradict the nature of the social world. "Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith?" (96). This speculation contains the previous narrative material within an ultimate focus on death, power, the human condition, and religion as forms of

being.

Such a focus is reflected in much critical analysis of Munro's work, and of "Age of Faith" in particular. Eileen Dombrowski contends that here, as elsewhere in Lives, Munro is presenting "a fundamental opposition to death" (25). Miriam Packer claims that Del comes to recognize "human vulnerability, need, humility" (139). Rae McCarthy Macdonald observes that Del "cannot shut her eyes to the looming outer chaos . . ." (204). The organization of Lives into relatively self-contained sections, in which Del is seen to engage with particular "areas of life" such as death, religion, love, sexuality and aesthetics, facilitates the easy extraction of a particular "theme" from any section and the related characterization of Munro as a metaphysician of life. While Munro's numerous repetitions of the word "reason" in "Age of Faith" suggest to me that this section is an "unconscious" textual working out of the concept that meaning or reason is socially constituted, its closure would "order" the preceding narrative material within a consideration of the executioner's power as a form of being, indicative of the essential nature of things. This formal structuring engenders my characterization of the text's recognition of authority as socially constituted as "repressed."

The "father" and the "Del" of Del's second dream may both be seen to encode accommodation. The duality of the terms by which the text measures the viability of accommodation, as wisdom and as strategy (and by which the signifi-

cance of the second term of measurement is frequently subordinated), is here more fully underscored, as these terms are not simply both articulated, but are opposed.

It is "reasonable" that Del's father should shoot the dog, as the family attachment to Major is a value which is considered as naturally subordinate to the value of property generating livelihood. Del as an adolescent female serves no direct or highly valued role in the production process. The source of her own value must be seen to be outside the measurement of value in terms of the family as a productive unit. In terms of Munro's awareness of the social subordination of affective values to the value of production, the father's portending execution of Major bears a correspondence to his willingness, in Del's dream, to execute her, her mother and brother.3

In those instances where the text privileges accommodation, dissent is interpreted as gratuitous or unreasonable. When Del is seen to be "paralyzed by reasonableness," accommodation is presented as at once reasonable and unreasonable, thus underscoring that the terms by which such semic equivalences are affirmed must be contextual, ideological, and in relation to differently situated interests.

Endnotes

1See Rachel Blau Du Plessis' "For the Etruscans," Sheila Rowbothams's "The Women's Movement and Organising for Socialism," and Susan Griffin's "The Way of All Ideology."

2See Wini Breines and Linda Gordon's "The New Scholarship on Family Violence" and Louise Bernikow's Among Women.

3To deflect the possibility of a humanist misreading of this analysis, I would observe that it does not imply any moral reprimand to "Del's father," who is a textual function, nor does it situate an "origin" of social conflict in the personal cruelty of individual men.

Chapter V

"The Flats Road": Narrative Conventions and the Ideology of Aesthetic Distance

> " . . . we were in a house as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea, in the middle of a tide of howling weather" (Alice Munro, "The Flats Road").

"The Flats Road" and "Epilogue: The Photographer," the first and last sections of Lives, attempt to work out a semic opposition between the ordinary and the fantastic. This opposition appears in terms of the "lived experience" of different Munro characters, and in terms of a consideration of the relationship between realist narrative form and less "plausible" melodramatic forms. Seen in the context of an essentialist view, both forms appear to "contain" something essential to the experience of life. While one is apparently inadequate without the other, realist form is privileged as the only narrative structure adequate to an ultimate containment. Therefore it must somehow absorb the apparently contrasting form within itself, and advance a means of conceptualizing this appropriation.

This chapter will firstly examine how "The Flats Road" attempts to realize the latter appropriation. Secondly, I will suggest the perpetuation of quietism in humanist criticism's rewriting of Lives (and other Munro narratives) into an allegory of universal and eternal structures of being. While this criticism accepts the concept of "text" and "life" as organic wholes, Munro's text may be fragmented into conflicting codes. In "The Flats Road," Munro subverts the very essentialist position she sets out to advance by deflecting attention to the motivations for containment and

to how formal strategies work to affect it. This raises questions as to the "natural" status of realist narrative conventions, such as the narrative voice of Lives, which the reader is invited to imagine as that of an adult Del objectively representing scenes from her youth. I will contend that the "distance" of this narrative voice constitutes an imaginary resolution to the social contradictions symptomized in the ordinary/fantastic semic opposition. It answers the question of how to contain narrative material signifying "the fantastic" -- violent family conflict and child abuse -- within realist narrative and the "ordinary" life it would document, while at the same time maintaining its "unreality." Melodrama and the fantastic are "real," but are mistaken for the entirety by the melodramatic narrator or narrative construct, who/which is unable to place them in a broader context, to name them as parts within a whole. The "distanced" artist can do this.

The analyses of J.R. Struthers and John Moss exemplify a humanist affirmation that clarity of vision, in life and text, is the product of disinvolvement. The great or "true" artist is then only she/he who is able to achieve such disinvolvement. However, a meta-fictional code in "The Flats Road" suggests that the relative "safety" of the artist, which would enable an apparently "full" containment of the real, always already depends on a narrative management or exclusion of the anxieties present in a society divided by class and gender.

Munro says that she writes on a "tension string" --

indicating that her narrative subject matter has a primary focus, an incident, problem or question from which a narrative form takes shape. The question of which narrative form is best able to convey lived experience is central to the formal structure of Lives. Barbara Godard has called Lives "an encyclopedia of narrative from the joke and gossip to history and epic" (54). In what may be called a "competition for containment" among narrative forms, the realist form in which Del narrates and Munro writes Lives is apparently the victor, as it is able to introduce and comment on all these forms within the context of its own conventions, while remaining more "plausible."

Yet as Nancy K. Miller affirms in "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," the "plausible" is an ideological construct. Miller quotes her own translation of Gérard Genette's observation in his "Vraisemblance et motivation:"1

> The relationship between a plausible narrative and the system of plausibility to which it subjects itself is . . . essentially mute: the conventions of genre function like a system of natural forces and constraints which the narrative obeys as if without noticing them, and a fortiori without naming them. (343)

The convention or strategy of containment which enables Lives to make its argument for realism is the narrative voice of the autobiographical bildungsroman/künstlerroman.

Narrative voice works to divide the appearance and the reality of the acts and perceptions of other characters, and of that character whom we are invited to imagine as the "voice's" younger self. John Moss observes that:

> Del seems always to be watching her life unfold from a third person vantage point, even while living it. This is undoubtedly an effect of the adult narrator who has a supra-contextual perspective as she re-lives the past, but is also part of Del's nature, this clarity and objectivity with which she sometimes sees herself, that sets her apart, that marks her as an artist in the making. ("Alice in the Looking Glass . . ." 54)

The epistemological problematic of the "supra-contextual perspective," a problematic which ensures that the act of reading and producing a text is inevitably ideological, is here both suggested and skirted through the attribution of an artistic nature to Del.

Lives of Girls and Women, as a process, has many different beginnings. One of these is the cover of its McGraw-Hill Ryerson paperback edition, which appears to have a particular group of consumers in mind. A blurred photographic image of a couple standing in a field, suggestive of the eternal mysteries and wonder of romance, provides the background for a quotation from Cosmopolitan magazine telling us that this "wonderfully female piece of fiction" is about a girl's growing up. "The Flats Road" opens the work with an image of the protagonist catching "juicy

adolescent" frogs to be put on Uncle Benny's fishing hook.

The first character introduced is Uncle Benny, "the sort of man who becomes a steadfast eccentric almost before he is out of his teens" (2). He works for Del's father, who runs a fox farm, and is not her uncle, or "anyone's." Such small details as Del's observation of Benny's "title" suggest Munro's fascination with the ability of names to establish social ties. Munro frequently introduces and develops characters with a detailed physical description of their bodies, clothes, homes, and the work they do, and by introducing readers to their individual styles of story-telling:

> In all [Uncle Benny's] statements, predictions, judgments there was a concentrated passion. In our yard, once, looking up at a rainbow, he cried, "You know what that is? That's the Lord's promise that there isn't ever going to be another flood!" He quivered with the momentousness of this promise as if it had just been made, and he himself was the bearer of it. (2)

Benny's style of storytelling reflects his reading material -- the Bible and tabloid magazines -- "choice" of which is no doubt influenced by his class position.

What Del enjoys best about Uncle Benny's place, a country shack cluttered with junk valued "for its own sake," are his piles of tabloid magazines, which feature outrageous headlines:

FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS

> WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY
>
> VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS
>
> SENDS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL (4)

Del's marathon reading sessions of these papers lead her to a question:

> I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness. But the nearer I got to our house, the more this vision faded. Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown-spotted leaves, should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband's torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girlfriend in South Carolina? (5)

Only after posing this question does Del enter into an extended description of the people and places of the town of Jubilee and its environs. Munro's "tension string" has thus been drawn. The diversity of Del's observations in "The Flats Road" is given form, as these observations appear to refer, either directly or obliquely, to the question of the "credibility" of particular narrative styles.

"Del" discerns many borders of class and sensibility throughout her society. Her house is <u>at the end of</u> the Flats Road, a fact her mother Addie emphasizes to distinguish between Del's family and the eccentric population of the Flats Road, who, unlike Addie, do not "dignify" their

poverty with propriety of manner. While people like Uncle Benny, Del's father, and the bootleggers and "idiots" of the Flats Road appear permanently situated both physically and psychologically, Addie strides proudly into Jubilee and makes sure its more established citizens take note of her. Later on, says Del, "she was to find she did not belong in Jubilee either" (6).

Accompanying her mother on walks, Del begins to learn about the possibilities and problems of interacting with people from a variety of social strata. Such border-crossing repeatedly figures as a central subject in Munro's narratives.2 Her protagonists, notably Rose and Del, are generally able to operate many of the various "languages" or behavioural codes of different gender and class groupings, while those with whom they interact are frequently limited to one code.

"Del" introduces her mother:

> She was on the side of poor people everywhere, on the side of Negroes and Jews and Chinese and women, but she could not bear drunkenness, no, and she could not bear sexual looseness, dirty language, haphazard lives, contented ignorance; and so she had to exclude the Flats Road people from the really oppressed and deprived people, the real poor whom she still loved. (7)

This is followed by a contrasting picture of her father:

> My father was different. Everybody liked him. He liked the Flats Road, though he himself hardly

> drank . . . though he believed in work and worked hard all the time . . . . [W]ith any man who wore a shirt and tie to work, he could not help being wary, a little proud and apprehensive of insult . . . . (7)

Del's father deflects Addie's attempts to challenge the "reality" of the fantastic stories Benny tells in their home.

Benny responds to an ad in his tabloid newspapers for a "lady desiring a housekeeping position," and with comic speed is soon married to Madeline, whom Addie considers is mentally deranged but will fit in well on the Flats Road. From what we hear of Madeline, it seems that she comes from a poor family very anxious to be rid of her. She is apparently still a teenager, and has a little girl, Diane. Stories of Madeline are passed around on the Flats Road, and soon Benny begins to tell them himself:

> She had thrown a kettle through the window because there wasn't any water in it . . . cut up his green suit . . . said she would set fire to the house, because he had brought her the wrong brand of cigarettes. (15).

Del's curiosity leads her to Uncle Benny's, where Madeline threatens her with a stove-lid lifter. J.R. Struthers sees this scene as revealing the emerging "artist" in Del, as she is both involved in the action and standing apart observing it. Madeline's rage "was not immediate":

> She needed time . . . to reassemble her forces.

> Not that there was any possibility, from the first moment she saw me, of anything but rage. That or silence seemed to be the only choices she had. (15)

Struthers' "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in Lives of Girls and Women" explains Del's reaction here -- "impersonal, distanced, and observant" (33) -- with a quotation from James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

> The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood . . . finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak . . . . The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. (215)

The conventions of Lives invite us to imagine that this work is narrated by a "mature" Del looking back on her younger self. But from where and when does this voice emerge? The reader is not given any explicit indication of the context from which the "mature" Del speaks. Yet, in contrast to Struthers' assumption of the naturalness of a supra-contextual perspective, Munro's story will be seen to ultimately gesture to something suspect about this perspective.

As "The Flats Road" is concerned with how conventions which would order "the real" draw selectively on "historical sources," refining such material into a "depiction" which is more properly an interested interpretation, this story may

be said to be "about" the very strategies of containment which it operates.

Uncle Benny, coming to Del's house to work, brings along Diane, Madeline's eighteen-month-old daughter:

> She would never talk to anyone but Uncle Benny. She was suspicious of toys, cookies, milk, anything we offered her. . . . Touched or cuddled, she submitted warily, her body giving off little tremors of dismay, her heart beating hard like the heart of a bird if you capture it in your hand. (16)

When Madeline disappears, taking Diane, Del's father tries to persuade Benny he is well rid of her. Addie interjects, sensing that it is really Diane Benny is concerned about, and suddenly understanding that Madeline beats Diane. Addie energetically outlines the legal possibilities for finding and helping Diane.

She considers taking action herself, but is restrained by her husband:

> "You're in trouble from the start when you interfere with other people's families."
> "Just the same I know I'm right."
> "You may be right but that doesn't mean there's a thing you can do about it." (18)

A similar kind of "dialogue," interiorized within a narrator's thoughts, is also found in "Boys and Girls" and "The Shining Houses" from Dance of the Happy Shades. In the latter a young suburban housewife is troubled by her

husband's and her new community's concerted effort to force the removal of an old woman's long-time home, perceived as an eyesore, from their new development. In the course of trying to reconcile their determination and her dissent, "It occurred to her that they were right, for themselves . . ." (29). She decides that the old woman will not really be "touched," and that her husband and neighbours "are people who win, and they are good people" (29). "There is nothing you can do at present but put your hands in your pockets and keep a disaffected heart" (29).

In "Boys and Girls," the young protagonist contributes to the escape of a horse she has grown attached to. Her father and brother recapture the horse and slaughter it. "I was on Flora's side, and that made me no use to anybody, not even to her" (125). This story's association of a particularly "female" sort of dissent with powerlessness is marked.

Del's father's comments in "The Flats Road" are "reasonable" in the context of his society. The protagonists of "Boys and Girls" and "The Shining Houses" come to make an external voice of reason "internal," policing or tempering their own dissent in response to it. Munro's stories, interestingly, often feature a dissenting subject perceiving the situations of others more marginal than she.

The social position of women writers as both "critics and inheritors;" as only "(ambiguously) nonhegemonic," and how this relates to the formal structure of women's narratives, is of central concern in Blau Du Plessis' Writing

beyond the Ending. In Lives and Who Do You Think You Are?, the individual quests of the protagonists, as generated from the problem of how to live with the critic/inheritor position, brackets narrative consideration of the "fantastic" stories of others' lives. This works as a strategy of containment for the textual codes suggestive of the "arbitrary" or transformable aspect of the critic/inheritor position. (I would contend that many of the narratives in The Progress of Love evidence a profound change in Munro's aesthetic and in her social understanding, although I cannot develop this contention here.)

In Lives and in "The Flats Road," the more "ordinary" life of the protagonist as inheritor is apparently depicted for the reader to "see." The fantastic details of other women's lives come before us as always already in the form of stories. The conventions of Uncle Benny's melodramatic storytelling, initially conceptualized as incredible, are reconsidered through the appearance of Diane and Madeline in "The Flats Road," and through the "referent" of the bruises seen by the narrator. That Uncle Benny's tales are fantastic apparently does not exclude the possibility of their somehow having their own realism.

Uncle Benny's final narrative in "The Flats Road" concerns his frustrated search for Diane in an alien Toronto whose urban codes he is incapable of reading. Del's response to the telling of this story affirms the validity of Benny's narrative conventions:

> So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's

> world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could . . . 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. (22)

Benny fatalistically accepts "Life," apparent to him as an ahistorical good/evil dualism. As his fantastic tales and his tabloid magazine stories have come to acquire a certain "plausibility" by the end of "The Flats Road," the reader may receive the text as implying that determinations of what constitutes "plausibility" are not ideal, but emerge from different social experience and the way in which it is imaginatively represented/lived in consciousness.

As "The Flats Road" concludes, Del considers the security of her own home, and the final "stories" constructed about Madeline:

> After a while we would all just laugh, remembering Madeline. . . . We laughed to think how she carried on. . . . Uncle Benny could have made up the beatings, my mother said at last, and took that for comfort; . . . Madeline herself was like something he might have made up. We remembered her like a story, and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause.

"Madeline! That madwoman!" (23)

Within the conventions of "The Flats Road," Madeline's activity is the "historical" source for the final stories constructed about her. These stories are selective, leaving out the bruises Del's family has seen on Diane, structured according to the conventions of the "humorous anecdote" narrative form.

As Del's gothic construct in "Epilogue: The Photographer" has a use to her, so do the final stories told about Madeline. These stories both entertain, and "explain" and "contain" Madeline. She is "named" as a "madwoman," situated in a universal category that apparently closes off the need to explain her behaviour further. Similarly, "The Flats Road" works to manage the social contradictions symptomized in its ordinary/fantastic or realism/melodrama semic opposition. The formal structure/argument of Lives offers a code in which Benny's narrative paradigm may be seen as less troubling, in that it is distorted, and containable within a "realism" that is not. Yet the fact that "The Flats Road" takes its own formal argument as a subject or "content" in its own right offers the possibility of another, contradictory reading. All textualization of the real takes place within a particular social context in which representations are interested, or "distorted" by the desires of the writing subject, and her/his need for imaginary resolutions.

Initially, the "tension string" of Munro's story is set up as an aesthetic argument about the "credibility" of

particular narrative paradigms. While Lives works to underscore its "probability" and Del's "credibility," "The Flats Road" itself suggests the process by which experience is selectively interpreted, presented in the context of narrative conventions, selection of which is motivated. Conventions can engender the sorts of "resolutions" that satisfy or comfort the storyteller and that can entertain as much as disturb her audience. Raymond Williams remarks that

> it is of the essence of a convention that it ratifies an assumption or a point of view, so that the work can be made and received. . . . The reality of convention as the mode of junction of social position and literary practise remains central. (179)

The interactions of conventions and "historical sources" as suggested in "The Flats Road" tends to establish conventions as social constructs ratifying "points of view." This contradicts critical perception of Munro's narrative as an authentic representation of "the real."

Such contradiction is significant because numerous Munro critics, taking Del's life as representative of the universal experience of being alive, tend to make "real life" synonymous with the disinterested perception they appear to image themselves as engaged in. The conventions they take to be plausible are those which correspond to their own ways of reading. Disinterested narrative "point of view" as a window onto the metaphysical structure of "Life" is a convention not seen to be a convention, a form

transcending form.

Phyllis Perrakis contends that Munro, "like Del in 'Epilogue,' wants to present a physical reality in such a way as to convey to the reader a metaphysical sense of how it feels to be alive" (5). J.R. Struthers states that "One reality which Del had learned to recognize was the everyday world. This is opposed to various false notions of reality" ("Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in Lives of Girls and Women" 46). What would the "everyday world" of someone like a Madeline or a Diane suggest about "how it feels to be alive"? Such feelings always find their context in historically situated subjects, and have no universality.

The narrator or "mature" Del as the "point of view" dividing appearance and reality corresponds to an inscription in the künstlerroman of the ideologeme of the "genuine" artist, through whom the reader may truly see the real. The artistic personality, Struthers observes, "like a God of creation, remains . . . invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent . . ."

Critics' identification with Lives' narrative voice apparently facilitates their easy access to the real.

John Moss observes that:

> Occasionally the illusions of critical objectivity crumble. Rereading Lives of Girls and Women, for me at least, has the effect of déja vu. A shortcut is taken between experience and memory which seems to bypass the act of perception.

> Munro's vision so readily assimilates with experience of my own . . . . Del and I both grew up in small South-Western Ontario towns, within a decade of each other following World War II. She, being fictional, continues the process in her world outside time . . . . ("Alice in the Looking Glass" 55; emphasis added)

The sentence I have emphasized indicates that Moss (in contrast to most other Munro critics) at least recognizes the source of an epistemological problematic inherent in Lives' narrative voice. In spite of the reductiveness of my formulation of this convention as an ideologeme, there is no ideal equation for the significance of the narrative voice of the autobiographical künstlerroman. Other inscriptions may, in contrast to Lives, stress the subversion of an attempt to document a remembered past experience by contextualizing its own act of perceiving, problematizing this within the narrative. In contrast to later Munro narratives, notably those autobiographical stories dealing with an ailing mother, such explicit problematizing is largely absent from Lives until its concluding pages.

Moss both acknowledges that he is "inside" Munro's time, and that he cannot therefore achieve objectivity about Lives, an illusion in any case, and yet places the fictional world "outside" of time because it captures universals:

> Filtered through our consciousness, a novel's reality before anything else contributes to our experience of ourselves. Criticism is the attempt

> to rationalize its complex subjective impact on an objective plane . . . . Lives of Girls and Women gives universals such convincing shape, such engaging particularity, that the invitation to confuse self and art is particularly attractive. And why not: providing one ultimately knows the difference. (67)

Self and art, confused but ultimately dividable, are presumably reconnected through their common articulation of the universal, that which rests outside of time.

Moss explains a passage from "Heirs of the Living Body" in Lives with the statement that "Death, typically at this age, holds a dark fascination for Del which she connects naturally with her knowledge of the processes of life, the dark areas of sexuality" (62). The "particularity" through which, apparently, Munro has shaped "the universal" -- the dark areas of sexuality -- is the experience of Mary Agnes, whom Del had heard had been stripped by a gang of boys and left lying in the mud, where "she caught bronchitis and nearly died" (36).

As Fredric Jameson contends:

> all "interpretation" in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code. . . .
>
> Yet to see interpretation in this way is to acquire the instruments by which we can force a given interpretive practice to stand and yield up

> its name, to blurt out its master code and thereby reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings. (58)

Moss consciously sets out to rewrite Munro's text into an allegory of "man"kind's experience. The "master code" of this rewriting is a humanism, with its myth of a timeless human nature, experiencing life understood as a universal process. As Roland Barthes observes, "the status of the bourgeoisie is particular, historical: man as represented by it is universal, eternal" (Mythologies 141). Universal man sees the universal significance of Death and Sex beyond or beneath their historical manifestations. Violence against women and children is merely an expression of one of the essences within the eternal.

Numerous Munro critics deploy concepts of "Life," "Reality," and "Human Nature" as synchronic structures characterized by dualistic essences such as "the ordinary" and "the extraordinary." Munro's artistic genius is found to lie in her perception of these essences, and her transformation of the chaos of experience into a holistic vision of the wonder and mystery of life. Catherine Ross contends that Munro deals with "fundamental human experiences" ("'At least part legend': The Fiction of Alice Munro" 122), and that her characters come to "appreciate the precious value of ordinary life" (123). Phyllis Perrakis observes that Del's "artistic fulfillment will come from transforming these quintessentially female experiences in such a way as to illuminate the extraordinary mystery and beauty that lie

at the heart of the ordinary" (6). Sandra Djwa states that Munro is asking

> 'Can art really get at life?' -- can it touch the impenetrable springs that animate human behaviour? She begins in Lives of Girls and Women with the metaphor of deep caves . . . the vast unknown psyche, overlayed with the mundane. (189)

Nancy Bailey contends that

> Munro's art is like a documentary photograph of the external world that shows why accommodation to it is difficult, which then enlarges to reveal simultaneously . . . an inner image of reality. . . . Munro continues to affirm the ancient role of the artist to connect. (118)

Robert Thacker observes that "Munro's narrative dialectics, then, by balancing one point of view against another, allow her to create her own 'clear jelly,' which presents a comprehensive understanding to her readers" (58). Flo, a character in Who Do You Think You Are?, is observed by John Orange "to understand that death is the mystery that makes all living and all life mysterious. It is no wonder we need our illusions" (96).

The comprehensive understanding, or total unification of vision, that these critics perceive in Munro's work, is an illusion based on the concept of some transcendent 'real' preceding and encompassing the mere particularities of history. As Pierre Macherey contends:

> Against this illusion . . . we must, on the

> contrary, affirm the incomplete, disparate -- and sometimes even incoherent -- nature of the literary work. Only then will we succeed in breaking the imaginary boundaries which close the "works" upon themselves, and which separate them from this "outside" which gives them their material conditions. We must understand . . . that their "outside" is inside them, that they are finally nothing more than this real process which separates them from themselves, which opposes them to themselves. (18)

The works "themselves" are, in one sense, marks on paper. The process of their 'concretization' by the reader or critic, necessitates that they can have no existence, in a "meaningful" sense, outside of time. They are always reproduced in a specific time and place, by a reader/writer reading and writing through the codes of philosophical and ideological assumptions.

Pierre Macherey and Raymond Williams observe that Georg Luckacs' apparently "materialist" reflection theory of literature is actually idealist. Luckacs, champion of realism, contended that when truly great writers "find that the artistic evolution of the characters and situations they have created enters into contradiction with their deepest prejudices . . . they will not hesitate for an instant to set aside these prejudices and convictions and describe what they really see" (qtd. in Macherey 13).3 This presupposes a view of the writing subject as able at strategic moments to

place her/himself "outside of time," outside of her/his socially-conditioned consciousness inevitably marked by the hegemonic reinforcement of certain ways of conceptualizing. It is not so different from the free, conscious and contained subject postulated by idealist philosophy, and denies the active process of a text's production and reproduction through subjects constituted by "language, world, history, the unconscious, differentiality, social relations" (Ryan 7).

The ranking of artists and literary works on a scale of greatness is not only a pointless exercise, but has long effected a massive exclusion of the significance of female experience and women's writing, an exclusion conducted under the name of objectivity. Brecht's denunciation of Luckacs and the horrific authoritarianism implicit in his assumptions must be continued from a feminist perspective.

The ultimate goal of my study is an affirmation of our capacity to act, to change the social conditions in which things such as family violence emerge. (As the authors of "The New Scholarship on Family Violence" remark, the prevalent American interpretive codes concentrate "on individuals maltreating children" [492], ignoring the significance of "a gendered society in which male power dominates" [493] and of "social and economic organization" [492].) The imaginary resolution of a narrative containment, as enabled by the distanced or objective consciousness, negates this capacity by implying "the real" as synchronic structure. Human behavior, understood within

such a structure, is explicable in terms of the various essences which are seen to motivate it.

"The Flats Road"'s closure -- "Madeline! That mad-woman!" -- may be (and may not be) read as a gesture to the selective and motivated act of closure, and thus to the absence of any further speculation from the "mature" protagonist or narrative voice. This suggests the disparity of Munro's symbolic act, as at once an attempt to present itself as non-interpretive, and as a consideration of how narrative effects interpretation. Thus it may be (and may not be) received as a deconstruction of itself. Most Canadian literary critics regard it as a transparent window onto "ordinary Life," or as an artistic construct which is situated completely outside the real and which reveals the essential mystery of the real, of art, and of the relation between the two. The reality which may be read in these interpretations is the social context they have emerged in.

Prior to the passage quoted as this chapter's epigraph, the text presents a verse of a song -- "Land of Hope and Glory / Mother of the Free" -- remarking that "that year we were singing such songs every day at school, to help save England from Hitler" (22). As Munro's text is concerned not to be received as interpretive, but only to present, apparently, the perceptions of the child Del, her brother is depicted singing this song as the section draws to a close. The "fantastic" has apparently been contained in Lives' realism. Yet the young protagonist's "ordinary" household was as small as a boat shut up against "a tide of howling

weather" (22).

Endnotes

1In his Figures II (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969): 74.

2See "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "The Shining Houses," "Images," "Thanks for the Ride," "The Time of Death," "Day of the Butterfly," "Postcard," "Sunday Afternoon" and "Dance of the Happy Shades" in Dance of the Happy Shades; "Material," "Executioners," "Memorial" and "The Ottawa Valley" in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You; Who Do You Think You Are?; "Chaddeys and Flemings" from The Moons of Jupiter; and "A Queer Streak" and "White Dump" from The Progress of Love.

3Macherey is quoting from Lukacs' Preface to the 1951 edition of Balzac et le réalisme français.

Chapter VI

"Baptizing": A Strategy of Delegitimation Becomes a Strategy of Containment --- The Individual Quest Plot Brackets the Romance Plot

> "I was free and I was not free. I was relieved and I was desolate. . . . Suppose I had let myself lie down and be baptized in the Wawanash River?" (Alice Munro, "Baptizing")

This chapter will interpret "Baptizing," the second-last section of Lives, and will suggest how Lives may be situated in an ongoing cultural revolution; it will also critique Jameson's failure to engage with feminism. As is so often the case in Lives, "Baptizing"'s narrative content suggests the motivation for the strategies of containment operated in its formal conventions, and an ambiguity about the viability of its imaginary resolution -- individual self-creation -- a resolution its formal conventions work to produce. The self that suffers is objectified, aestheticized and apparently contained by a dominant rational self which would situate it "outside" the more authentic being of detached perception. While this constitutes an investment in the bourgeois myth of the subject as monad, of individual self-creation, it is an investment which must be understood dialectically, as an oppositional struggle against patriarchy. Contemporary Western women writers' production of the novel of individual quest must be seen in relation to the ubiquitousness of the love story in past and present cultural production. From women's position, the context in which the bourgeois cultural revolution (which saw the historical emergence of the realist novel form) works to break up "the older tradition-oriented systems of caste and

inherited professions" (The Political Unconscious 249) is yet a contemporary context.

I will proceed by indicating, firstly, the focus of my critique of Jameson's study, a critique which will be developed further throughout this chapter in the course of my application of Blau Du Plessis' and Jameson's analyses to "Baptizing." Secondly, I will consider the significance of "Baptizing"'s placement within Lives, and then advance my contentions about it. Thirdly, I will relate it to women writers' strategies for "writing beyond the ending." Fourthly, I will consider Jameson's analysis of the novel as "the study and interrogation of value" (248) and as related to the rationalization of the production process. While my interpretation will draw on this analysis, I will indicate how its failure to consider gender politics seriously limits its relevance to contemporary cultural analysis. Lastly, I will interpret "Baptizing," detailing my historical analysis in the course of considering passages indicative of its structural movement and Lives' imaginary resolution. The shifts of focus in my dialectical analysis will indicate that the "object" of my consideration is not just the literary text, but the codes through which I would rewrite it.

In a contemporary age in which the state institutionalization of liberal feminism has only recently begun in North America, the problems with a totalizing approach can be suggested in relation to this observation of Jameson's:

> The fiction of the individual subject -- so-called

> bourgeois individualism -- had, of course, always been a key functional element in the bourgeois cultural revolution, the reprogramming of individuals to the "freedom" and equality of sheer market equivalence. (221)

The construction in the novel of a "central observational and psychic perspective" (222) relates to an ideology of the subject correspondent with an increased rationalization and compartmentalization of the labour process. The above passage, insofar as it assumes the historical particularity of the time of a "reprogramming of individuals," may actually be seen as referring more properly to male individuals at the same time as it implies a generic classification. While Jameson's theorization of the concept of non-synchronic development might provide the conceptual tools to address the reduction his vocabulary operates here, such considerations are not developed.

Aesthetic manifestations of the myth of the subject as an individual monad, like the modernist image, may be seen as both an effect of reification or increased rationalization within the productive process, and a utopian compensation for it. It is in Jameson's theorization of this kind of doubleness of the aesthetic artifact (which is not then to be mechanically placed into a historical slot, ideologically demystified and dismissed, as has been the case in much orthodox Marxist criticism, Lukac's work being an example) that <u>The Political Unconscious</u> may be seen to have achieved its status as a major new work in cultural criti-

cism. A critique of the subject as represented and conceptualized in bourgeois literature is one of the central aspects of the work. It is in terms of this critique that Jameson's obliteration of women's experience, or his own strategy of containment for the repression of the historical, is most apparent. Ironically, it is through this glaring absence that Jameson's central contention -- that the social experience of a member of a dominant class imposes structural limitations on that person's way of thinking -- receives its most profound support.

In "Baptizing," the second to last section of Lives, the ideologeme of individual self-creation, as formally textualized, constitutes Munro's imaginary resolution to the problem of unfulfilled desire, to the social contradictions attendent upon sexual oppression. Yet the solution reflected in the narrative voice of Lives -- to be the detached observer -- itself becomes a new problem, to be developed in "Epilogue: The Photographer" in the context of aesthetic considerations which conclude the work. In Chapter Seven I will interpret "Epilogue: The Photographer" and contend that Lives builds in a contradictory reading which subverts its imaginary resolution, or the content of its form.

The metafictional considerations of Lives' concluding section, which contains a textual representation of a narrative the young Del had constructed "in her mind," has encouraged many critics to read Lives as a künstlerroman. Yet the final events detailed in "Baptizing," which might be more aptly characterized as the culmination of Lives as a

bildungsroman, chronologically follow the scene in "Epilogue" which ends Lives. Genre types being social constructs and not ideal categories, the question pursued by J. R. Struthers and Phyllis Perrakis as to whether Lives is "in essence" a künstlerroman or a bildungsroman is not of concern. Rather, the fact that Lives has been taken to represent both these forms is of interest in relation to the content of form. The two endings of Lives are indicative of its dynamic movement between two different "objects" of consideration -- a "life," and the process by which a life might be textualized.

In "Baptizing," the young protagonist and her peers are at a time of choice. In their final year of high-school they must decide what kind of future to invest their energies in. This apparently "natural" life process (not possible in a pre-capitalist world where one is "born" into one's future, and not open to a significant number of women and then largely only to Western women until well into the twentieth century) allows an extraordinarily dense narrative working out of the consideration of value through the character as function, without disrupting the representational ideology that the character is neither constructed as a semic function, nor to be seen as such.

"Baptizing" presents "categories" of experience and value through narrative about the social rituals or "forms" in which such apparent content might be perceived. An immense variety of rituals are considered -- rituals of courtship, marriage, sex, religion, education, buying.

Particular characters are seen to invest in different rituals, and with the exception of "Del," appear to have little problem in limiting their choice and perceiving it as natural. Naomi enters commercial studies, and then works as a secretary, thereby putting herself on the road to marriage. Jerry concentrates his energies on studies for university scholarship exams and envisions a competitive immersion in scientific studies. Garnet joins the Baptist Church after doing time for violent assault. The text gestures to social forms as rituals or constructs, rather than as natural forms, in that the various rituals to be invested in are so divergent and contradictory, and constitute extreme compartmentalizations of value. Yet characters are presented as perceiving their own particular choice as so self-evidently the one choice to be made, the choice through which self-fulfillment at some point must follow. The adolescent Del's anxiety about the absence of a clear choice for herself may be seen to correspond to an anxiety which Lives as act works to manage -- fear about the impossibility of extracting some genuine content from such formal rituals.

This content -- the presence, transcendent meaning, or full connection which answers and fulfills desire -- is apparently found by Del in her moments of sexual intimacy with Garnet. The text's evocation of such connection, at the center of "Baptizing," first affirms that after Del's tentative exploration of various empty rituals, some reality has been found. Yet as the narrative unfolds further, this

"reality" which might be beneath or beyond social forms, and dividable from them, comes to be presented as the most "unreal" thing of all.

While the violent conflict in the climactic baptizing scene affirms the reality of history, the reality of patriarchy, the pain of desire refused is aesthetically managed in "Baptizing"'s concluding passages. I will contend that this management is both presented in this section as content, as something that the young protagonist "does," and operated through the text's formal strategies.

Blau Du Plessis observes that many of the narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers are directed towards a critique of the "natural" status of the social and narrative conventions of heterosexual romance and marriage.1 Munro subverts a romance plot by subordinating it to a quest plot. Through closure in an affirmation of a protagonist's will for self-realization, twentieth-century women writers reshaped the traditional form of the novel with a female protagonist. The structure of Munro's text suggests that she is "writing beyond the ending, taking ending as a metaphor for conventional narrative, for a regimen of resolutions, and for the social, sexual and ideological affirmations these make" (Writing beyond the Ending 21). Writing beyond the ending "produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised" (5). However, this production may itself suggest a new culturally mandated ending making ideological affirma-

tions.

"Del" attempts to overcome gender role restrictions by developing an observer/writer persona. Munro critics frequently ascribe the quality of genius to a Del who is seen as a metaphor for Munro. As Blau Du Plessis observes:

> The figure of a female artist encodes the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement. Using the female artist as a literary motif dramatizes and heightens the already-present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the ideals of striving . . . [and female] passivity.
>
> . . . Making a female character be a "woman of genius" sets in motion . . . conventional romantic notions of the genius, the person apart, who, because unique and gifted, could be released from social ties and expectations. Genius theory is a particular exaggeration of bourgeois individualism . . . . (84-5)

"Del" does not get the scholarship she hopes for, and the text does not explicitly affirm that she leaves Jubilee with the specific goal of writing. (I will later suggest a possible reason why the text does not make such an affirmation.) However, her ambitions and resources are apparent. That "Del's" creative ability and intelligence will help her release herself from social expectations affirms that her society offers <u>to some</u> a kind of freedom, defined in a particular way. Early pregnancy and marriage will not

constitute the ending of her story. Yet "Del's" observations of female experience in the society around her show Munro's uneasy awareness of, and sympathy for, the mass of women to whom Del's kind of escape is not open. As suggested in Chapter Five, Munro's text works to manage this anxiety.

In nineteenth-century novels by women, the romance plot and its closure in marriage was seen as an outer form in which all other female experience could be bracketed or contained. As Blau Du Plessis observes, women writers began to bracket a romance plot within a quest plot. The quest plot is frequently organized around choice of vocation, and it is often an artistic vocation which is chosen. To operate the romance plot as an internal and not a bracketing paradigm is to consider this "form" as a content in its own right, and to make its ideological nature apparent. However, the individual quest plot as a strategy of delegitimation itself became a strategy of containment. (While Blau Du Plessis does not use Jameson's term "strategy of containment," a similar concept is represented in her work under the name of "dominant script," a concept which is not theorized as extensively as Jameson's.) The movement of Writing beyond the Ending follows the changing terms of a romance/quest opposition in women's texts through to contemporary women's narrative affirmations of collective quest and a "communal protagonist," which in many cases involves a complete departure from realist narrative form.

Blau Du Plessis observes a pattern in Virginia Woolf's

later novels which, I would contend, is emergent in some of Munro's more recent short stories in The Moons of Jupiter and The Progress of Love:

> The communal protagonist is a way of organizing the work so that neither the development of an individual against a background of supporting characters nor the formation of a heterosexual couple is central to the novel. . . . The communal protagonist operates, then, as a critique both of the hierarchies and authoritarian practice of gender and of the narrative practice that selects and honours only major figures. (163)

Oppositional critique is to be perceived on the level of form as much as on that of explicit content. Woolf among others operates a narrative voice which does not, in contradiction to that of earlier realisms, appear to emerge from a central, objectivizing psychic perspective. Rather than affirming the solid permanence of the social world through extended representation of physical detail, this voice can suggest the possibility of a transformed social world, in its figurative expression of an "elsewhere" or space of meaning beyond the individual consciousness.

Munro's Lives, which concentrates so fully on the development of an individual, can only be understood in the context of an historical analysis that addresses gender as well as class differences. Jameson observes that particular economic developments constitute the conditions of possibility for the novel as "the study and interrogation of

value" (248):

> These are . . . the secularization of life under capitalism and the breaking up . . . of the older tradition-oriented systems of castes and inherited professions, as the combined result of the French revolution and the spread of the market system. . . . [T]he realm of value . . . can, for the first time, be isolated as a realm in itself and contemplated as a separate area of study. To say that value becomes a semi-autonomous object is to observe the way in which people (but mainly men) must weigh the various activities against each other and choose their professions. What we call private life or the new subjectivity of individualism is objectively simply this distance which permits them to hold their professional activities at arm's length; hence the originality, in the realm of the novel, of the "Quel métier prendre?" of a Stendahl, whose works explore, as it were, the atomic weights of the various professions and political regimes as alternate life forms. (249)

The exclusion of female experience in the above analysis is effected precisely by the use of the term "people," which purports to address it.

Interpretation of writing by Western women must, as does Blau Du Plessis', address the vital relationship between the aesthetic naturalization of romance as a trope for the sex/gender system and of bourgeois individualism.

The division between public and private life (seen as separate realms developing according to their own "inner logic"), and aesthetic/ideological representations of romance, marriage and the family as utopian sites of libidinal gratification, powerfully reinforce apolitical explanations of human dissatisfaction as emerging from and resolvable within, the "purely" personal sphere. Marxist cultural criticism must address the tremendous historical importance of narrative idealizations of romance and marriage as a process within cultural hegemony. The "Harlequin Romance" genre is frequently among the most successful of narrative commodities, and the love story as "bracketing plot" is ubiquitous in the literature, films, and songs of both "high" and mass culture.

Jameson's analysis does not consider the degree to which the family structure has compensated for the male individual's troubling experience of his expendability in terms of the "freedom" of sheer market equivalence. His critique of the myth of the subject as monad is inadequate if not related to Blau Du Plessis' analysis of Western women's very ambiguous relationship to this myth. I would contend that Lives invests in this myth. But this investment, emerging from female consciousness in the twentieth century, cannot be seen as mere repetition of a bourgeois ideology long since dominant.

It must be seen as at once progressive, as a reaction to patriarchy as "sexual feudalism," and regressive or working to maintain the "otherness" of economically margina-

lized, working class, and Third-World women and men, and of women and men not of the dominant white race. The context in which bourgeois ideology works to break up "the older tradition-oriented systems of caste and inherited professions" (the exclusive relegation of the labour of childcare and domestic work to women, as authorized by religious institutions, may be characterized as a caste system) must be seen, in terms of a structural uneven development, as yet a contemporary context. Further, the unique nature of the labour of childcare and nurturance, as it informs the social production of gender, must be considered.

It is only very recently that a significant portion of the "fifty-one percent minority" in the Western world has entered the process of a reprogramming into the sense of their individual freedom. The division of labour between men and women is still so marked that an emergent female investment in the myth of an individualist freedom will to some degree serve to alter that very myth by making its contradictions highly visible. The "freedom" of some individuals has always depended on the unrecognized work and restricted choices of particular groups within the social collective. In order for Western governments to affirm that they do see women as free individuals, able to compete in the public world, they have had to begin to address with hard cash, the public, collective responsibility for the caretaking of children. While I am not quite comfortable with the term "sexual feudalism,"2 the contemporary emergence in the United States of powerful right-wing Christian-

fundamentalist political groups, for whom patriarchal religion provides an ideological cornerstone, may be seen to accord a certain aptness to it.

Jameson's critique of past Marxist analyses of nationalism may be seen to relate to feminism as well. (This critique is in his final chapter, "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology," the import of which will later be suggested in detail in relation to "Baptizing.") He states that Tom Nairn, in The Break-Up of Britain, rightly observes that a lack of consideration of the deep appeal of nationalism:

> stands as "Marxism's great historical failure," blocked precisely by a practice of the traditional Marxist negative hermeneutic for which the national question is a more ideological epiphenomenon of the economic. (298)

An inability to grasp the immense Utopian appeal of feminism, which has a potential constituency of no less than fifty-one percent of the human population, also stands as "Marxism's great historical failure." Jameson quotes Nairn's contention that:

> The task of a theory of nationalism . . . must be to embrace both horns of the dilemma . . . in a way that rises above these "positive" and "negative" sides. . . . [Such] distinctions do not imply the existence of two brands of nationalism, one healthy and one morbid. . . . [A]ll nationalism is both healthy and morbid. (298)

As Jameson observes:

> Nor is this insistence on the simultaneously ideological and Utopian character of the national phenomenon a merely theoretical issue. . . . [I]t is increasingly clear in today's world . . . that a Left which cannot grasp the immense Utopian appeal of nationalism (any more than it can grasp that of religion or of fascism) can scarcely hope to "reappropriate" such collective energies and must effectively doom itself to political impotence. (298)

The Political Unconscious elsewhere distinguishes between two uses of the term "utopian." In a negative sense, this term refers to an idealistic vision of social transformation which fails to adequately consider the objective limitations blocking its realization. In a positive sense, which Jameson indicates through capitalization, "Utopian" refers to a perspective on the future which affirms the possibility and the desirability of collective unity. The cultural representations of group commonality to which movements have access have a profound emotional appeal which is not to be discounted. Rather, such symbolic representations function as powerful stimuli for political action, and/or in the production of mass consent to a dominant ideology. I accept Jameson's analysis in "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology," and consider it of profound import for cultural analysis.

It is in relation to the concepts articulated in "The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology" that my study formulates a

central question to be asked of "Baptizing." What is presented as a potential site or form in which Utopian longings might be invested? I will contend that "Baptizing"'s climactic scene turns upon a recognition of the central concluding contention of The Political Unconscious -- that it is the oldest Utopian longing of wo(man)kind which informs class ideology's hegemonic power. In the case of "Baptizing," this relates to a dominant male class and a subordinate female class. It is remarkable that Jameson's analysis, on the one hand, is centrally concerned with narrative as expression and management of Utopian longing or desire, and on the other hand, does not consider what may well be the most ubiquitous representations in cultural artifacts of proffered sites for the investment of desire and realization of utopia -- that is, heterosexual couple romance and passionate love. I would speculate that some aspect of Jameson's own personal experience informs this absence.

The intersection of psychological and political analysis, as it relates to the social conditions of the infant's relation to the mother's body, can begin to provide political explanations as to why so much human desire has been directed towards the finding of the one unique subject of the opposite gender, the very particular individual face, body or "soul," through which Utopia might be realized. Since a challenge to bourgeois individualism constitutes a major site for the Marxist critique of ideology, the tremendous hegemonic power of the mythology of the couple,

as compensation for the more painful aspects of the subject's sense of him/herself as an individual monad, must be very seriously considered. In developing this consideration, Writing beyond the Ending also suggests why contemporary female investment in individualist ideology must be seen as much more problematic than a prior historical stage of male investment. The female subject cannot expect the compensatory nurturance of a partner socially trained to address needs not met in the public world, and economically dependent upon the ability to fill that role. I will relate the conclusion of "Baptizing," and similar conclusions in the body of Munro's fiction, to the latter contention.

As Jameson observes, "the study of value is at one with . . . . the experience of its absence" (251) in a secularized society. Following Jameson, I will use the concept of rationalization (reification) as a mediating device for relating Munro's text to social sub-text:

> The moment of rationalization . . . is Weber's equivalent of Marx's notion of the universalization of equivalent labour-power, or the commodification of all labour. . . .
>
> The characteristic form of rationalization is indeed the reorganization of operations in terms of the binary system of means and ends; indeed, the means/ends opposition, although it seems to retain the term and to make a specific place for value, has the objective result of abolishing value as such, bracketing the "end" or drawing it

> back into the system of pure means in such a way that the end is merely the empty aim of realizing these particular means. (250)

The relevance of this understanding to "Baptizing" can immediately be suggested in relation to this section's opening passage:

> In our third year at high school Naomi switched to Commercial; suddenly freed from Latin, physics, algebra, she mounted to the third floor of the school where . . . typewriters clacked all day and the walls were hung with maxims preparing one for life in the business world. Time and Energy are my Capital; if I Squander them, I shall get no Other. The effect, after that of the downstairs classrooms, with their blackboards covered with foreign words and abstract formulae, their murky pictures of battles and shipwrecks and heady but decent mythological adventures, was that of coming into cool ordinary light, the real and busy world. A relief to most. Naomi liked it. (148)

"Baptizing" will be seen as working to manage the problems of the compartmentalization of knowledge and values and the pursuit of means which do not appear to have any meaningful end.

In depicting Naomi's "ascension" to what is socially affirmed as the real world, the world of "light," Munro humorously displaces the traditional aesthetic imagery of a transcendent spiritual realm, a realm to which humanist

studies have been seen to give access. The reifying rote-learning in Del's school is humorously critiqued throughout Lives. A humanist university education, tentatively held out in "Baptizing" as a potential "ending" for the young protagonist, will not prove to be a chosen solution. The question of why one might study about foreign words, battles, shipwrecks and mythological adventures, and how the school's "downstairs compartment" relates to its "upstairs compartment," is not something the school addresses. The "relief" most are considered to find in the business world may be seen to follow upon the fact that this world, at least, has found a self-confirming structure of "logic" to justify itself. "Time" and "Energy" are considered as abstract essences which through the process of a simple addition will lead to profit, also conceptualized in the abstract.

Munro's text both recognizes the appeal of this kind of logic, by counterpointing it with Del's anxiety about the determination of what to value, and underscores its absurdity through representation of what Naomi's "practical" choice leads to. Naomi gets an office job and enters into the pre-marriage rituals of the young working women who are her new friends, rituals including the systematic buying of household "stuff." Eventually a pregnant Naomi, about to marry someone she does not appear enthused about, observes that "I've collected all this stuff, I might as well get married" (195).

The extreme absorption of Naomi and her new friends in

beauty rituals is presented in the text as at once bizarre, and as everywhere affirmed as natural. "Del" was incapable of sustained attention to her appearance, although:

> everything from advertisements to F. Scott Fitzgerald to a frightening song on the radio -- the girl that I marry will have to be, as soft and pink as a nursery -- was telling me I would have to, have to, learn. Love is not for the undepilated. (150)

Here, that duality of the narrative "I" which the conventions of Lives encourage the reader to forget informs a movement between enclosure and release which exemplifies the subtlety of the ideology of form. Marketing, literature and popular culture are all linked into a hegemonic web of patriarchal ideology from which there is no apparent exit. Yet the anxiety of female enclosure is managed on the level of narrative form, as this web becomes a bubble of stupidity to be popped by the sharp wit and humour of the last sentence, which operates in the present tense. Depending on the predilection of the reader, the intelligent ease with which the bubble is popped perhaps confirms that the web was not ultimately much of a problem, as it has been surmounted with the taking of thought. The present tense of the last sentence corresponds to the "present" context from which we are invited to imagine the narrative voice as recollecting. The manner in which the reader, consciously or unconsciously, imaginatively fills in this context, informs how she/he reads Lives.

The motifs of threat, confinement, disguise, resistance, and a desire for escape pervade Lives, underscored by the ways in which the text suggests that there is nowhere to escape to. (I will shortly consider some examples.) Yet the very telling of the story indicates that "Del" has always already escaped, into a space of wisdom or reality from which the past may be ironically and humorously observed. Biographical form functions powerfully as a strategy of containment in Lives, as indicated by the humanist criticism which reads it in terms of a universal process of loss of innocence.

The winning of a scholarship as a ticket to a university education is tentatively suggested by the text as a possible "solution" for Del:

> I got A's in school. . . . They did seem to be tangible, and heavy as iron. I had them stacked around me like barricades and if I missed one I could feel a dangerous gap. (162)

These "iron A's," placed within an image pattern connotive of armed conflict, defamiliarize the traditional humanist understanding that in Western society knowledge is a thing of value in itself. This understanding serves to obscure the fact that there is such a thing as a politics of knowledge, and confers a powerlessness on humanist studies in the very act of affirming that their value lies in their "freedom" from a political means/ends opposition.3 Of interest in the above passage is the way in which the reader might decide to conceptualize the "inside" and the "outside"

divided by the barricades, and the terms of the conflict between them. I read the "outside" as the hegemonic reinforcement of a domestic female role, and the "inside" as potential access to a middle-class status which allows a female subject somewhat greater choice. I would contend that Munro's text conceptualizes the power of knowledge not ideally, as "access to truth," but historically, as access to a socially constituted means to power. The analysis to follow will suggest that, whereas knowledge within social institutions is textualized as a "defense" for the protagonist, Munro is aware that it is the narrative act that provides an offensive power.

"Del's" anxious encounters with various texts underscore that her confinement is not a matter of rural physical situation. The most urbane and respected of cultural authority affirms the very vision of the feminine to be found in pop psychology quizzes. An article by "a famous New York psychiatrist, a disciple of Freud," (150) is related to such a quiz. The young protagonist's desire to completely dismiss this article, and its affirmation of female self-absorption in personal trivia, is frustrated by her attraction to assertions such as the following:

> <u>For a woman, everything is personal; no idea is of any interest to her by itself, but must be translated into her own experience; in works of art she always sees her own life, or her day-dreams</u>. (150)

Such translation, considered to express the inferiority of

the "female" mode of thought, is precisely what prevents "Del" from the compartmentalizing of knowledge and value and the bracketing of ends in the pursuit of means, and what allows her to relate "high cultural" authority to "low" or mass culture while critiquing both.

Understanding in terms of allegory allows the insertion of the absent term of objectivizing and abstract knowledge --human desire. Things are taken to "mean" in terms of how they relate to human desire and the daily forms of social existence. While Munro's text encodes a profound ambivalence about the value of the protagonist's "daydreams" as at once a source of empowering insight and escapist wish-fulfillment, containing them within a realist form which wishes to place itself "beyond ideology" or subjective bias, through the function of Jerry the objectivizing position of apparently "impersonal" perception is linked to no less than the real prospect of nuclear annihilation.

"Del's" mode of thinking is opposed to "Jerry's." The two high-school friends share intellectual discussion and the experience of marathon study sessions in preparation for university scholarship exams. Munro's representation of the educational institution suggests that it is socially perceived as a site of competition for status. The town's naming of Jerry and Del as "freaks" suggests a working-class and rural subversion of the power associated with knowledge. What might be read as an exit for Del from subordinate female status would, from the perspective of the interpretive community which judges her a "freak," be seen as a

willing ascension to a position of dominance and privilege.

Jerry's mind was to the young Del "like a circus tent full of dim apparatus on which . . . he performed stunts which were spectacular and boring" (163). Yet:

> He was in touch with the real world, he knew how they had split the atom. The only world I was in touch with was the one I had made, with the aid of some books, to be peculiar and nourishing to myself. (165)

With a "curious insistent relish" (164), Jerry described the atrocities of the Second World War, which had finished shortly before the time in which the reader is to understand the events of "Baptizing" as unfolding. He envisioned a future technological transformation in the very terms of global conflict, and the advent of biological warfare. He:

> gave me a description of the Bataan death march, methods of torture in Japanese prison camps, the fire-bombing of Tokyo . . . all without a flicker of protest. . . .
>
> He was certain there would be another war, we would all be wiped out. (164-5)

The time in which Lives is set is the time in which Munro herself grew into adulthood.

The post-World War Two era was a time in which a new world economic order was consolidated. Multinational capitalism was upheld by a global American military presence, which powerfully drew on the absolutely legitimate condemnation of the atrocities of Stalinism to confirm its

own strange "logic." These atrocities of its enemy automatically rendered itself the pure embodiment of good and freedom as it allied itself with right-wing dictatorships. The increased rationalization of the production process, now to a heightened degree situated in the "elsewhere" of the Third World, was reflected in an extreme compartmentalization of knowledge in the Western world, an understanding of science, art and morality as separate spheres to be developed according to their own "inner logic." The mass of women who had entered every area of the paid labour force and maintained production during the war were "refeminized" in the baby-boom Fifties. Cultural representations of Woman as mother and sex object during the later decade found a powerful locus in television and film, as visual media began to displace the cultural centrality of the printed text and radio. A cold war ethic of distrust and competition, and a nuclear family structure suited to the need of the labour force to be physically mobile to an unprecedented degree, contributed to the subject's increased perception of her/himself as an individual monad. The emergence of late capitalism constitutes a condition of possibility for Munro's text, not merely in terms of the historical events it refers to, but in terms of "Baptizing"'s formal working out of the problems of understanding through compartmentalization and of the perception of self as monad.

The text of "Baptizing," having built up an overwhelming anxiety in relation to the protagonist's sense of

alienation from the compartmentalization of value so manifest around her, moves to the release of its center. This release, which Del most pointedly does not find with Garnet in any public context, comes in moments of sexual intimacy, and in her re-envisionment of them when alone:

> we would cross over, going into a country where there was perfect security, no move that would not bring delight; disappointment was not possible. Only when I was sick, with a fever, had I ever before had such a floating feeling, feeling of being languid and protected and at the same time possessing unlimited power. . . .
>
> The mouth closed frankly around the nipple seemed to make an avowal of innocence, defenselessness, not because it imitated a baby's but because it was not afraid of absurdity. Sex seemed to me all surrender -- not the woman's to the man but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility. I would lie washed in these implications, discoveries, like somebody suspended in clear and warm and irresistibly moving water, all night. (182)

This water image of perfect womb-like security, full envelopment, presence without differentiation, prefigures the climactic baptizing scene in which "Del," held underwater by Garnet, perceived that she was struggling for her very life.

Del's mother, outraged by her choice of Garnet, asked

her if she wanted to be "the wife of a lumberyard worker" (183). She did not, but recognized that something in his working-class experience did inform what she valued in him -- her ability to see, when with him, "something not far from what I thought animals must see, the world without names" (183):

> any attempt to make him . . . theorize, make systems, brought a blank . . . and superior look into his face. He hated people . . . talking about things outside of their own lives . . . trying to tie things together. Since these had been great pastimes of mine, why did he not hate me? . . . [H]e rearranged me, took just what he needed. . . . I did that with him. . . .
>
> . . . [W]ords were our enemies. What we knew about each other was only going to be confused by them. This was the knowledge that is spoken of as "only sex," . . . I was surprised . . . -- am surprised still -- at the light, disparaging tone that is taken, as if this was something that could be found easily, every day. (183)

Interestingly, the phrase "am surprised still" constitutes one of the rare instances in the text where the narrative voice explicitly differentiates between the doubleness of the narrative "I."

For many of the protagonists in Munro's fiction, passionate sex figures as what I would characterize as the privileged form in which Utopian gratification is to be

found or sought. I would contend that narrative has a Utopian content to be found in the "ends" around which texts organize the allegory of desire. The ideology of a text may be approached through such questions as whether closure implies Utopia as realized or as somehow realizable, what the proffered site of libidinal gratification is, whether the text suggests that there may be many such sites, and whether it conceptualizes particular sites as the "natural" or illusionary locus of gratification.

Lives' characterization of sexual intimacy evokes the profound sensuality of the infant, able to freely accept physical nurturance without defensive psychological barriers. In Writing beyond the Ending, the nurturance needs of an infant frequently figuré as that dangerous thing, the universal aspect of human "nature" which is referred to as a basis for the legitimation of a particular social vision. In "To 'bear my mother's name': Künstlerromane by Women Writers," Blau Du Plessis observes a "reparenting motif" in the texts she considers. This operates to both affirm that nurturance is a basic human need, and to critique social constructions of the role of motherhood. The division of labour along gender and class lines, the social definition of the individual woman/mother as ideal source of nurturance, and the primacy accorded to the heterosexual bond, are precisely the things which block the ability of female and male subjects to give and receive nurturance. Thus the locus of nurturance must be within collectivity, and for this to be possible, a radical restructuration of human

society would be necessary.

For many of the female protagonists in the body of Munro's fiction, sexual gratification is both passionately desired and almost never available, and is at best a tentative affair.4 Desire leads most often to despair or to enthralled, obsessive behaviour which protagonists rationally perceive as foolish or absurd and struggle to control. I think Munro's fiction goes through a long and tormented process of trying to dissociate libidinal gratification from the passionate heterosexual bond and relocate it within community. Blau Du Plessis observes that such a process characterizes twentieth-century narrative productions by women.

This process may be suggested through the thoughts of the protagonist of "Bardon Bus" from The Moons of Jupiter:

> It strikes me that misplacement is the clue, in love, the heart of the problem, but like somebody drunk or high I can't quite get a grasp on what I see.
>
> What I need is a rest. A deliberate sort of rest, with new definitions of luck. . . . You're lucky to be sitting in Rooneem's drinking coffee, with people coming and going, eating and drinking, buying cakes, speaking Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese and other languages that you can try to identify. (128)

Whereas certain narratives in The Moons of Jupiter (such as "Bardon Bus") and The Progress of Love (such as "White

Dump") indicate that the central problem protagonists face is the lack of an appropriate social site in which desire might be invested, Who Do You Think You Are? tends to conceptualize the "problem" as desire itself, as "passion" or emotional need.

Words, theorizing, trying to tie things together, have provided a vital defense for the young protagonist, a resistance to the containment of value demanded by both marriage and the pursuit of formal education. Yet such abstraction is textualized as at once a solution and a problem. It is a defense which seems to have confined her to an existence in the mind.

As suggested in Chapter Three, Munro's family experience bore many similarities to that of the Brontë sisters, whom Terry Eagleton observes were "driven back on themselves in solitary emotional hungering" (Myths of Power 8). Given these similarities, how might the great differences between their historical ages be reflected in the forms of their narratives? In spite of Munro's claims that she writes in a very traditional realist style, and is not an "intellectual" writer, Lives contains numerous metafictional passages, and evidences a repeated fascination with the "ideology of form," even as it would work to deny that its own form has any ideological content. It is marked how often various characters are presented in conjunction with particular types of texts or narrative forms in which they are seen to have a libidinal investment. The forms of the narrative paradigms considered appear to have a content in their own

right, as a character's affiliations with a particular paradigm is presented as something that will give the reader insight into that character's "personality." Lives' working through of the problem of desire is manifested repeatedly in a consideration of narrative conventions, always in relation to why a particular character's social experience informs her/his affiliation with particular narrative forms.

Uncle Benny is affiliated with the melodramatic. In "Heirs of the Living Body," Uncle Craig is affiliated with the dry, factual country history he is writing, and Aunts Elspeth and Grace, guardians of the status quo, continue an oral tradition of the parodic anecdote, rebuking social "deviancy" with ridicule. In "Princess Ida," Del's mother is affiliated with the encyclopedias she sells. Her investment in the imaginary resolution of positivism is presented as her reaction to her own familial history of oppressive definitions of the female role, and to her religious fanatic mother's affiliation with the Bible as informed by the experience of extreme poverty. In "Changes and Ceremonies," Miss Farris, who ends in suicide, is passionately involved with the romantic high-school operettas she directs.

In "Baptizing," after a disastrous experience of courtship rituals, "Del" decided she could not manage them. "Better Charlotte Brontë" (161). She read The Life of Charlotte Brontë and dreamt "a nineteenth-century sort of life, walks and studying, rectitude, courtesy, maidenhood, peacefulness" (161). But this kind of wish for retreat,

presented in the context of the stupor of her hangover, is seen as a humorous indulgence in an impossible dream of escape. In an earlier passage, we observe Del's libidinal investment in the opera Carmen:

> I loved most of all Carmen, at the end. Et laissez moi passer! . . . I was shaken, imagining the other surrender, more tempting, more gorgeous even than the surrender to sex -- the hero's, the patriot's, Carmen's surrender to the final importance of gesture, image, self-created self. (153)

The bourgeois ideologeme of self-creation is, I will contend, the imaginary resolution worked out in the form of Lives (and yet deconstructed in "Epilogue: The Photographer" in a final scene which breaks with the pattern in which, through the work, things are seen to signify -- that is, in terms of the chronological movement of an individual subject through various experiences and life choices). Del's connection with Garnet cannot be presented as a simple movement from privation to presence, as my earlier remarks might suggest. In representing Del's libidinal investment in Carmen, prior to her meeting with Garnet, the text has already begun to suggest that some presence or transcendence might be found in "privation" or self-containment itself.

On the one hand, the subject's sense of her/himself as an isolated individual consciousness can engender a painful sense of lonely entrapment, and an overwhelming fear of the "other" engendering the continual need for the construction

of defensive barriers. On the other hand, bourgeois ideology's myth of origin in the will of the individual subject provides the subject with a compensatory narrative of movement by which such a sense of entrapment might be negated. This is a narrative of conquest, of the unlimited power of the individual subject to move forward by sheer force of will, as the very motor-mechanism of progress. A skirting of the question of just what human progress might be taken to mean is effected through ideological representations which concentrate, not on the goal, but on the movement or "gesture" itself. (For example, the value of technology is seen in that it "saves time," while the question of "for what?" is not pursued.) The logic of individualism demands that the space of realization must always be conceptualized as "beyond," as eternally in the future.

Because of women's history of oppression as workers and confinement in the domestic role, it is only recently that a significant number of Western women have been able to fully invest in the myth of the striving subject. There are two twentieth-century periods in which Lives might be seen to find its context -- the forties/early fifties era which Munro recalls in Lives in terms of her remembered experience, and the late sixties/early seventies period in which she wrote the work. Both these eras saw a massive movement of women from middle-class and working-class families into the paid productive process.

To return to the "center" of what might appear to be a

"romance" plot, a disconnected subject appears finally to have found physical "presence," the world without names, a space infinitely better than the system-building individual consciousness. Garnet, swimming with Del in the river, began to talk about his assumption that they would marry. He told her she would have to be baptized into his church, and responded to her refusal to submit to this demand by repeatedly pushing her underwater with increasing force. Del was "too amazed to be angry. . . . [I]t seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play. . . . I meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever. . ." (197):

> Suppose in a dream you jumped willingly into a hole and laughed while people threw soft tickling grass on you, then understood when your mouth and eyes were covered up that it was no game at all, or if it was, it was a game that required you to be buried alive. I fought underwater exactly as you might fight in such a dream, with a feeling of desperation . . . that had to work upward through layers of incredulity. Yet I thought that he might drown me. (198)

How is a "game" to be defined? As so often in Munro's prose, this climactic paragraph organizes its description around paradox.

A game may generally be seen as something that brings pleasure, a process whose actions are divisible from social consequence. If so, then a game that could kill a player is

"no game at all." Or, perhaps a game may involve both pleasure and threat, enticing with the former to suddenly change to the latter. But the substance through which play is enacted in the dream -- soft tickling grass -- does not change from that which has brought a sensuous pleasure into some more obviously threatening implement. In a like manoeuver, water as a substance through which death might be effected has previously figured in the imagery of a Utopian pleasure in which the subject is immersed. The passage immediately prior to "Suppose in a dream . . ." -- "I had never really wanted his secrets or his violence or himself taken out of the context of that peculiar and magical and, it seemed now, possible fatal game" (198) -- does not, as it easily might have, ultimately divide the peculiar and magical game of pleasure from a potential fatal consequence external to it. As in the passage which follows it, this sentence's initial suggestion of a possible divisibility between the contexts of pleasure and threat, the "game" and the "real," is in the end subverted.

I would contend that Munro's play with the connotations of "game" expresses the dialectic of Utopia and ideology theorized in the concluding chapter of The Political Unconscious. This theorization constitutes a response to the justified critique of the tendency with Marxisms to instrumentalize or accord a structural functionality to culture. That the understanding of culture as a manipulating function of class interest can suggest a passivity on the part of the receiving subject further suggests the

problems of a theory that implies synchronicity. The gratification involved in the process of the subject's reception must be accounted for, because:

> if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are "managed" and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses -- the raw material upon which the process works -- are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them. . . . [S]ubstantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence. . . . [S]uch incentives, as well as the impulses to be managed . . . are necessarily Utopian in nature. (287)

A positive hermeneutic which addresses gratification must thus be practiced simultaneously with a negative hermeneutic.

The question then to be confronted is:

> how is it possible for a cultural text which fulfills a demonstrably ideological function, as a hegemonic work whose formal categories as well as its content secure the legitimation of this or that form of class domination -- how is it possible for such a text to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the narrower limits of class privilege which inform its more immediate ideolog-

ical vocation? (288)

The response must depend upon a refusal of a "separation between means and ends -- between Utopian gratification and ideological manipulation" (288). Ideology as class consciousness -- whether ruling class or otherwise -- itself embodies a Utopian impulse, and it is precisely this which gives it hegemonic power.

Consciousness of collectivity is not to be posited as an ideal or ahistorical reality, but emerges in the historical situation where members of an oppressed group begin to grasp their solidarity. The "mirror image of class solidarity" (290) among a dominant class emerges in response to this. Thus:

> all class consciousness of whatever kind is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity; yet it must be added that this proposition is an allegorical one. The achieved collectivity or organic group of whatever kind -- oppressors fully as much as oppressed -- is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves <u>figures</u> for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society. (291)

The above understanding is later related to Nairn's proposal for a theory of nationalism, as quoted earlier in this chapter.

A striking example of the dialectic of Utopia and ideology is to be seen in the Spring 1988 special issue of

Life, "The Dream Then and Now," which is entirely devoted to Black Americans. A K-mart Corporation ad -- "Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream . . . the American dream . . . the same dream" (68) -- concisely expresses the ideological equation by which this issue very skillfully works to "manage" its volatile subject matter.

Garnet's initial assumption, expressed "shyly," that Del will be baptized into the church, marriage and motherhood, may be read as a patriarchal ideology's expression of its means as the benign proffering of full entrance into the family of "man"kind. The temptations of belonging to the social body are powerfully reinforced by the social conditioning of physical desires to find what seems to be their "natural" expression within what has been called the "spermal economy" of marriage.

While dominant cultural representations of sexuality take the phallus as central signifier within their sign systems, I would claim that Munro's text describes female sensuality in terms closer to recent feminist textualizations of a decentered sexuality similar to the "polymorphous perversity" of the as yet ungendered infant.

One of the highly justifiable reasons why feminists have been wary of the appropriation of the Marxist vocabulary for ideological analysis is the unique form of representation to which patriarchal hegemony, as opposed to other ruling-class hegemonies, has access. The ideology of gender asymmetry finds an expression in representations of the body and physical desire which take the visible signifiers of

sexual difference, and primarily the phallus, as central to their semiological system. Since ideology works through the representation of social forms as natural forms, the desired transparency of the signifier in terms of the "natural" it would denote is nowhere so powerfully effected as in the phallic signifier, whose material referent is apparently "nature" itself. Further, the harnessing of the energies of sexuality as enticement for ideological adherence also exemplifies a qualitative difference between patriarchal and other ruling-class ideology. Because a potentially immediate and materially real gratification is proffered, patriarchy, unlike feudalism and capitalism, does not have to negotiate the difficult process of rationalizing a proffered delayed gratification.

Before the conflict between "Garnet" and "Del" exploded into the intensity of no-holds-barred physical struggle, it had mounted gradually in verbal argument and in physical interaction restrained by the desire that it might still be considered "play." The point of explosion is immediately preceded by Garnet's statements that "You think you're too good for it" and that "You think you're too good for anything. Any of us" (197). Male working-class anger thus transfers its desire to subordinate onto the female subject, in a process providing the catalyst to violent action. This may be taken to exemplify a further issue of contention between feminism and Marxism. Sexist actions expressing male power over the bourgeois women can and have been very effectively rationalized as challenges to class privilege.

Yet this kind of process can cut both ways, or rather, every which way, as is well exemplified in a work such as Alice Walker's Meridian, which adds the consideration of racial oppression to such a dynamic. This novel by a black American woman expresses the intense pain of the knowledge that oppositional ideology and the experience of oppression often function to justify, rationalize and fuel further oppression, and that anyone who would articulate this fact finds herself or himself in the midst of a hostile political controversy, in which various groups would situate the greatest and most reprehensible failure to admit privilege in other groups. This dynamic indicates both the problem and the value of the sort of expressivist criticism of realism to which the analysis in the above paragraph may be seen to correspond.

Reading realist texts as allegories of the workings of domination can help women to articulate the kinds of experience from which their anger derives. At the same time, the argument from experience as expressed through an expressivist reading of realism has long been exercised from vastly different points of view, including that of patriarchy. It is one thing for the singular examples provided by a text to be taken as metaphor for experiences understood within a historical process, and another when they come to stand for an Experience seen to express the most central, ahistorical essence of power dynamics.

"Baptizing"'s conflict scene strikes me as a brilliantly complex expression of the workings of power in a society

divided by gender and class. While "Del" appears to have found reality or Utopian gratification in sexual intimacy, the concept of a "reality" which might be dividable from social forms comes to be presented as the most "unreal" and dangerous thing of all. In the context of physical conflict, the young protagonist comes to a consciousness that has had to work upward through "layers of incredulity" -- a consciousness of herself as within the class "woman," regardless of any personal ability she may have to act outside the social determination of what that term encodes.

After her struggle, "Del" returned home, and several days later accepted that her "romance" was over. She looked in the mirror at her "twisted wet face":

> Without diminishment of pain I observed myself; I was amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all; I was watching. I was watching, I was suffering. I said into the mirror a line from Tennyson . . . . with absolute sincerity, absolute irony. He cometh not, she said.
>
> From "Mariana," one of the silliest poems I had ever read. (200)

She got out the want ads:

> after some time I felt a mild, sensible gratitude for these printed words, these strange possibilities. Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at last without fantasies or

> self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life.
>
> Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French. Real Life. (201)

As Catherine Ross observes about this passage, "whenever we think we are being told something about real life, the question keeps doubling back into matters of form" (57).

Ross compares Del to Margaret Laurence's Vanessa in A Bird in the House. Vanessa also boards a bus after a similar failure in romance. In light of this comparison, "boarding the bus begins to look like another literary convention" (56). I would contend that Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood are critically received by a generation of younger feminists today precisely because of their use of conventions of closure similar to the "boarding of the bus." The movement of their women characters is away from something (romance, marriage) but often not towards anything else, such as the community of other women or a sense of possibility in emergent social formations. This may indicate both the influence of the ideology of individualism upon women writers from stalwart puritan societies, and the historical constraints upon lifestyle possibilities for a particular generation of women. Margaret Laurence's Morag in The Diviners and Munro's Rose in Who Do You Think You Are? try with considerable pain and loneliness to be

whole "within themselves."

The projected chronological closure creates a rupture between that time in which Del's story unfolds and the time in which, literary conventions invite us to image, Del narrates or writes Lives. From where and when does this voice emerge? Munro has said that she has difficulty putting characters in a room without describing all the furniture. Yet the reader is not given any images of the space from which the "mature" Del speaks.

In Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, Who Do You Think You Are?, and The Moons of Jupiter, narrators frequently speak from a space they have arrived at after experiences not dissimilar to Del's in "Baptizing." A woman leaves her husband. A woman "gets over" a devastating relationship with a man. What is the point of arrival of these external and internal voyages? A re-integrated self, self-sufficient self, able to "command" the art of narrative and produce something whole and lasting by virtue of the very act of having experienced its loss? It would seem so. Munro's stories frequently end with her protagonists emerging from painful romances into the calm light of "sensibleness," where small daily pleasures regain meaning, and the self that suffered is distanced and contained in narrative. Victory emerges from defeat. Or, a displaced romance pattern emerges in realism

The "self-possessed" woman (frequently an artist) emerges as a telos of wholeness and integration. Yet this "ending," which means through its "use" in allowing protago-

nists to cope, itself becomes a beginning left behind in these stories. Protagonists wind their way through a circular pattern, as their ever-renewed search for intimacy leads again to fragmentation. The beginning which is always already there in the ending leads to questions as to why this version of the self, the distanced woman objectively narrating the story of herself as a subject suffering, should be considered the final, most advanced, "truest" self.

"I was watching, I was suffering" concisely expresses what I take to be the "imaginary resolution" to social contradictions enacted in the formal conventions of Lives. In addition, I would contend that these conventions encourage the reader to project a space of self-realization and gratification into the time beyond that represented in the story. I will first relate these contentions to my historical analysis, then discuss them in terms of Lives' content, and finally in terms of its form.

In the process of rationalization of the productive system, a means/ends opposition brackets off the end of human fulfillment, "drawing it back into the system . . . [as] the empty aim of realizing these particular means" (Jameson 250). Bourgeois ideology encodes a compensatory myth of fulfillment in its representations of the individual subject. The subject is conceptualized as free and self-created, and on her/his way to a proffered progress whose culmination is articulated in abstract terms and projected into the future. Because of Western women's very late and

still very limited entrance into the process of a reprogramming of "individuals" (but mainly men), bourgeois ideologemes as operated in modern and contemporary women's writing must not be dismissed as merely the facile repetition of ideological representations long since dominant, as would be the case within Jameson's second interpretive horizon. Rather, they must be taken as (ambiguously) oppositional expressions of revolutionary dynamism in the process of an ongoing cultural revolution, as a challenge to the "sexual feudalism" of patriarchy.

The centrality of biographical form in the realist novel has rightly been taken to correspond to bourgeois ideology's relation of meaning to the self and individual identity. This conception of meaning can be likewise perpetuated in an ethical humanist or expressivist style of criticism. However, certain manifestations of the realist novel form and humanist criticism remain oppositional when seen in the context of the uneven development of ongoing cultural revolution. These literary and critical forms are prevalent in the contemporary textual production of women, feminists, lesbians, and women of colour. I would affirm the continuing need to read, write and translate experience in terms of personal allegory, within the understanding that this constitutes an empowering act in what Raymond Williams calls "the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness" (Marxism and Literature 212), that this is not the only use of criticism, and that this process should gesture to its own problematic

tendency to perpetuate idealism and essentialism.

Consequently, I have often used an expressivist type of analysis, while enclosing the names of characters in quotation marks to gesture to the fact that the meaning suggested is not "right there on the page." Rather, it is something I have produced, as a female subject constituted by "language, world, history, the unconscious, differentiality, social relations" (Ryan 7). I hope this use of quotation marks indicates the proffering of a space for the reader's disagreement with my assumptions.

How is it possible for "Del" to be both one who watches and one who suffers, and to say a line from a romantic poem with both "absolute sincerity, absolute irony"? The split subject, like the aesthetic artifact, struggles to manage and resolve the pain of desire refused. This process, like the means/ends opposition of the process of rationalization, cannot be seen as a simple negation of desire, but is <u>itself</u> informed by that ubiquitous human desire through which we read the "absent cause" of history. It is expressive of <u>the desire to be without desire</u>, of the compensatory nature of the imaginary resolution. The subject may experience the sense of the "freedom" of individual self-creation, of self-containment, through her/his "reunification" of a fragmented and contradictory "being" by a dominant rational self. Pain is given its place within an aesthetic pattern, within conventions operated by a controlling rational self, which can determine that these conventions are "silly." Yet strangely, while the person suffering "was not [Del] at

all," this "other" who watched did so "without diminishment of pain." This pain is "elsewhere," apparently contained within the brackets of rationality, of realism, of the objectifying eye/I. I would contend that Lives' "realist containment" is a symbolic enactment and imaginary resolution, on Munro's part, of the social contradictions she herself experienced.

The text does not affirm that "the young Del" boarded a bus, went to the city, and became a telephone operator. Rather it suggests that "Del's" departure, and the life which follows it, may be imagined by the reader as mundane. Yet through form and content, Lives plays on the doubleness of two contradictory resolutions, the containment of desire enabling a relieving movement into the mundane, and the projection of a moment of gratification into the future.

Biographical form, with closure in a protagonist's emergence into adulthood, functions powerfully as a strategy of containment in Lives, as is evident in the humanist criticism that reads it in terms of the universal process of "loss of innocence." The connoted mundane ending affirms that realism is not wish-fulfillment, that a romantic burst of glory in closure is refused. Emphasizing the "mild, sensible gratitude" of the emerging adult rather than the "elsewhere" of an undiminished pain that might indicate the need to change social conditions, humanist criticism would "explain" the latter in the bracketing context of an allegory of the universal individual's life, an allegory of a movement from immaturity to maturity. Maturity is reached

through the realization that adolescent expectations of a resonant fulfillment are unrealistic.

Then again, "Epilogue: The Photographer" constitutes a second and different closure. Closure is a privileged space in terms of significance. Lives proffers two, one chronological and one formal. "Epilogue"'s "(re)presentations" of a Gothic "Del" had constructed in her mind, and its metafictional considerations, have encouraged critics to see Lives as a künstlerroman. Many imply something close to John Moss's contention that "the outcome of Del's story, her transformation into Alice Munro somewhere just beyond the closing pages, is understood" ("Alice in the Looking Glass" 60-1). It is easy to "read in" such a transformation. If Lives is the story of girl-becoming-writer, as "told" by her mature self, and is read intertextually with Munro's acknowledgements that the work is in many respects autobiographical, then the fact that the work comes before us as a printed text, bearing the name of a writer who has won the Governor-General's award for fiction for Dance of the Happy Shades, and bracketed with quotations from respected authorities praising its excellence, then the "closure" of remarkable success is everywhere to be read in Lives, from beginning to end. Yet at no time does the text explicitly state that "Del" became, or "is," a writer.

The "I" of Lives' point-of-view doubly watches, distances and contains the self that suffers. The "now" of this voice, and the process by which it would bridge the gap between "its" past and present, constitute an untextualized

"absent" presence to be imaginatively filled in by a reader, in a process that is ideological. In Munro's more recent work, the highly emotional experience of remembering one's youth and the inadequacy of words are seen to inevitably subvert any attempt to "represent" the past. It is not the objectifying eye and the transparent word which are affirmed, but the desire for them, a desire which the subject-in-history cannot realize. In Lives, the process of remembering is implied by form and excluded as content. The authority of the narrative voice, it seems, is to be understood as a given. This containing consciousness very rarely indicates that it also might be imaginable as a self that suffers. Its representations of a past time and place weave a hegemonic web around the "young" protagonist, which however has always already been left behind, punctured and escaped by the unified, rational, seeing "I."

. . .

I have contended that the form of Lives constitutes an investment in the bourgeois ideology of the subject as an individual monad. However, in Chapter Seven's consideration of "Epilogue: The Photographer," I will suggest that Lives, being like all texts "not itself" but a process, fragmented and contradictory, also subverts this investment. At present, I would observe that a female subject may well have considerable sympathy for this investment, which is an act of resistance to patriarchy. I would also stress that women's textual investments in the mythology of the subject as monad should be seen differently, since they are more

likely to gesture to the "excluded." The "free" female subject, unlike the "free" male subject, cannot to the same degree expect the compensation offered within the family structure. The male subject's sense of facelessness in terms of his sheer market equivalence and interchangeability, and his sense of isolation within individual consciousness, has been historically "balanced" by his individual authority within the family and his access to a partner socially trained to nurturance and economically dependent upon her subordinate role. Women enter this "freedom" without such compensation. Consequently, a text such as Lives both affirms individual "freedom," and gestures to the question, "what price freedom?"

Endnotes

[1]Among the twentieth-century texts considered are: Olive Shreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*; Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*; Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Orlando*, *Between the Acts*, *The Years* and *To the Lighthouse*; H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*; Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*; Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*; Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*; Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*; Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Alice Walker's *Meridian*; Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*; Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*; and the five volumes of Lessing's *The Children of Violence* series.

[2]This term may suggest a conflation of sexual oppression with feudal social organization, rather than the *analogy* it is intended to suggest. The King as "father" of his people, exercising an authority which he is seen to humanly embody by the will of God, bears a correspondence to the father in the patriarchal family. The latter's "emobidment" of authority is socially affirmed to be "natural."

As Blau Du Plessis observes, there is evidence to suggest that many women had greater economic power prior to the emergence of capitalism (2). Because of historical differences and differences of race and class, no theoretical model of sexual oppression can claim universal priority.

3See Gayatri Spivak's "Reading the World: Literary Studies in the 80s" and "The Politics of Interpretation."

4See "The Spanish Lady" and "Tell Me Yes or No" in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, "Dulse" and "Bardon Bus" and "Hard-Luck Stories" in The Moons of Jupiter, Who Do You Think You Are?, and "White Dump" in The Progress of Love.

Chapter VII

"Epilogue: The Photographer": The Illusion of Unity/Self-Containment in a Literary Text and its Interpretation

One way of describing "Epilogue: The Photographer" is as Lives' attempt to "see itself." It attempts to work out the contradictions which frustrate its documentary impulse and which preclude objectivity. I will consider two aspects of this section, while frequently using interrogative sentences to gesture to my own inability to make "objective" affirmations about "the text itself." Repeating yet again a common pattern in Lives, "Epilogue" takes a narrative form as a central object of consideration. The text represents a "gothic" novel the young protagonist had constructed in her mind, and which evidences an aggressive critical impulse. It had seemed to her to be "true, but not real." Does this construct, as contained within a narrative which encodes a considerable ambivalence about whether the reader is to receive it as "significant" or "insignificant," consitute a displacement of Munro's critical impulse?

The final paragraphs of Lives represent what seems to Del to be a "message," a signifier which is unreadable because she does not know the alphabet in which it appears to be encoded. What is the significance of such an ending in a "realist" novel? It need not be seen to represent any conscious intention on Munro's part. It might be read as a figural expression of that which renders disinterested mimesis impossible, and which contradicts the understanding of the individual as "self-created." While material

signifers do not have any natural connection to ideal signifieds, the manner in which subjects "connect" signifier and signified, or encounter words as "signs" is not "arbitrary" in some fundamental way. The sign is a cultural production, a production vitally informed by a subject's social experience.1 Consciousness is lived in language, and the transmission of language, of alphabets, is a fundamentally social process. Thus individual "self-creation" is an impossibility.

"Realism" remains a dominant mode in contemporary mass-cultural production. Representations in films, novels, and most significantly the media are received as objective, unconstructed, nonideological. In such a context it is of central importance that oppositional criticism repeatedly affirm that meaning is a historically situated production, and that such production is a site of conflict in a society divided by class and gender. Lives is not knowable "as a whole," or "objectively." Munro's own experience of sexual oppression, of the contradiction between, on the one hand dominant cultural representations of "woman" and traditional assumptions of her "natural" role, and on the other hand, her lived experience of her own desires and capabilities informs (in conjunction with the received assumptions a reader brings to the text) the diverse and contradictory readings it is possible to receive from Lives.

"Epilogue" opens with Addie's affirmation that "This town is rife with suicides" (202). The suicides of Miss Farris and Marion Sherriff are detailed. The former figures

in "Changes and Ceremonies," which I will later consider. Del recalls observing Marion's ordinary-looking photo at her high school. The town gossip was that she killed herself because "Some fellow got her in trouble and walked out on her" (203).

The "adolescent Del" saw that "the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel" (203). She chose to write it about the Sherriff family because "what had happened to them isolated them, splendidly, doomed them to fiction" (203). One of the Sherriff brothers died an alcoholic, while another was in an asylum. Her "novel" took shape only in her thoughts because "what I wrote down might flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel in my mind" (203). It inspired confidence:

> I carried it -- the idea of it -- everywhere with me, as if it were one of those magic boxes a favoured character gets hold of in a fairy story: touch it and his troubles disappear. (203)

The Sherriffs were transformed into the Halloways. Caroline Halloway

> came ready-made into my mind, taunting and secretive, blotting out altogether that pudgy Marion, the tennis player.
>
> . . . She bestowed her gifts capriciously on men -- not on good-looking young men who thought they had a right to her, not on . . . heroes . . . with habits of conquest written on their warm-blooded faces, but on middle-aged weary husbands,

> defeated salesmen, . . . even, occasionally, on the deformed and mildly deranged. But her generosity mocked them, her bittersweet flesh, the colour of peeled almonds, burned men down quickly and left a taste of death. She was a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones . . supporting the killing weight of men, but it was she, more than they, who survived. (204-5)

A mysterious photographer with "a wicked fluid energy" and "bright unpitying smile" came to Caroline's town and took frightening pictures:

> Middle-aged people saw in their own features the terrible, growing, inescapable likeness of their dead parents; young fresh girls and men showed what gaunt or dulled or stupid faces they would have when they were fifty. Brides looked pregnant. . . . [Caroline] offered herself to [the photographer] without the tender contempt, indifferent readiness she showed to other men, but with straining eagerness and hope and cries. And one day (when she could already feel her womb swollen like a hard yellow gourd in her belly, . . . he was gone. (205)

Like Marion, Caroline walked into the Wawanash River.

The emphasized prose underscores the melodrama of Del's story, and the tone of parody in the voice of the mature narrator looking back invites the reader to laugh at and dismiss this story as a charming example of adolescent

indulgence and artistic naivete. Yet there is considerable ambivalence in the text as to the "significance" or "insignificance" of this construct.

Catherine Ross contends that Del:

> realizes that it is not enough to write a work that is pure design: she must test the design against ordinary life and find the patterns inhering there. ("At least part legend: The Fiction of Alice Munro" 123)

Linda Lamont-Stewart compares Munro's Del Jordan and Clark Blaise's David Greenwood:

> Both begin writing with a romantic, escapist, unrealistic approach to literature; both finally learn that, to write effectively, they must imaginatively confront the real world. (115)

For these critics, "Del's" construct as placed within Lives signifies little more than a universal, the process of the "coming of age" of an artist. Munro's use of humour facilitates this reading. Yet the text also underscores that this construct has a use to "Del," that it is not merely its verisimilitude that is of significance, but how it works as an act.

"Del" returns to the "idea" of her story as though touching a talisman. In one of the scenes in which she does so, she and Jerry Story are out walking, mocked by the horns of passing cars:

> I did have a vision, as if from outside, of how strange this was -- Jerry contemplating and

> welcoming a future that would annihilate Jubilee and life in it, and I myself planning secretly to turn it into black fable and tie it up in my novel, and the town, the people who really were the town, just hooting car horns . . . never knowing what danger they were in from us. (206)

The terms "annihilate," "tie up," and "danger" connote a critical impulse that Lives works to contain.

Blau Du Plessis observes that the refusal of silence at issue in artistic creation is frequently expressed by women writers in "the motif of the embedded artwork" (85), and in the choice of women writers as protagonists with whom the author obviously identifies. It is of interest that the "artist figure" in Del's construct is a male photographer, whose photographs sardonically critique the process of social reproduction. How might this character/function be seen to relate to Munro's perception (in the early 1970's) of her work as comparable to that of a documentary photographer?

Blau Du Plessis describes an image in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook:

> At the bottom of a casket seen in a dream lies "joy-in-spite" or "joy-in-destruction," a gnome who is the critical sensibility animating the work of piercing normal politics, society, sexuality, and narrative. This joy in destruction is the muse of critique. (102)

The situation of "joy-in-destruction" in a muse rather than

"in" the artist both provides a means of distancing the artist's own aggression, and recognizes that the critical self must also confront her own compassion for and complicity with members of the society she critiques. To have a female character "offer" herself to a photographer as to a muse of critique provides the safety of situating "joy-in-destruction" in the masculine. The heroine both actively pursues it and yet is not identical with it. The "main thing" about Del's construct:

> was that it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day. (206)

Perhaps, in a "split-identification" in a story within a story, Munro enacted a displacement of a critical impulse which she found troubling, and which contradicted her aesthetic.

Jameson observes that "the dissociation of meaning and intellection from the immediate and the sensory . . . [is] what Barthes generalizes as the dominant feature of the experience of the modern par excellence" (233). He quotes Barthes' statement that "The pure and simple 'representation' of the 'real,' the naked account of 'what is' (or what has been), thus proves to resist meaning" (qtd. in The Political Unconscious 233).2 Lives' fascination with this dissociation is evident. Yet its closing passage resists the modernist "solution" of image production evident in:

> Conrad's own passionate choice of impressionism --

> the vocation to arrest the living raw material of life, and by wrenching it from the historical situation in which alone its change is meaningful, to preserve it, beyond time, in the imaginary. (238)

The utopian vocation of the image is evident in the ending to "Changes and Ceremonies," which like "Epilogue" considers a woman's suicide. This section might be received as indicating the ideological vocation of narrative. As is so often the case in Lives, this narrative considers a narrative paradigm, that of the romantic school operettas Miss Farris directs. The troubling connotations of the paradigm in relation to Miss Farris' suicide are "managed" within a valorization of the aesthetic artifact and its production:

> She sent those operettas up like bubbles, shaped with quivering, exhausting effort, then almost casually set free, to fade and fade but hold trapped forever our transformed childish selves, her undefeated unrequited love. (118)

The text has presented, prior to this, what it terms "pictures" of Miss Farris and concluded that "there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together" (118). It affirms that her suicide "was a mystery . . . without hope of explanation, in all insolence, like a clear blue sky. No revelation here" (118). "Revelation" has been relegated to the containment of meaning in aesthetic artifact and image, which would preserve a moment of utopian transcendence "beyond time."

The final pages of Lives represent the young protagonist's interaction with Bobby Sherriff, who is temporarily home from the asylum. That the text concludes with representations of a "madman" is of interest in relation to my understanding that textual production may evidence a "politically unconscious" perception of power relations. Bobby's nurturant concern for Del, and his "feminine" comportment, led her to consider it:

> Odd to think that he shaved, that he had . . . a penis in his pants. I imagined it curled up upon itself, damp and tender. . . . There must be some secret to madness, some gift about it, something I didn't know. (210)

Is the reader to connect "Bobby's" difference from gender norms, his "serving" Del food and praise, with his relegation to an asylum? What does society exclude to determine the centrality of its own sanity in a sane/insane opposition? Perhaps he symbolically encodes a latent recognition, on Munro's part, that gender is a social and not a natural production, and that the real is not a universal structure, but a site of power formations, formations which constrain her as a female subject. Why does Munro have her protagonist consider two women's suicides, and also affirm that "there were not really so many" suicides in the town? (202).

Bobby's conversation is presented at length:

> ". . . I went to college . . . . It was a sacrifice to send me. The Depression, you know how nobody had any money in the Depression. Now

> they seem to. Oh, yes. Since the war. They're all buying. . . . Fergus Colby . . . at Colby Motors, he was showing me the list he's got, people putting their names down to get the new Oldsmobiles, new Chevrolets.
>
> "When you go to college you must look after your diet. . . . Anybody at college tends to eat a lot of starchy food, because it is filling and cheap. . . . I knew a girl who . . . lived on macaroni and bread. . . . I blame my own breakdown on the food I was eating.
>
> " . . . I think all my own problems -- all my own problems since my young days -- are related to undernourishment. From studying so hard and not replenishing the brain." (209)

However reductive Bobby's interpretation may be, he understands thought in relation to the body, and his personal problems in relation to a historical period, the Depression. The post-World War Two period saw Munro herself come into adulthood.

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson observes that:

> non-Marxists and Marxists alike have come around to the general feeling that at some point following World War II a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth). New types

> of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture -- these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older society in which high modernism was still an underground force. (125)

Jameson relates these developments to cultural production that has become "incapable of dealing with time and history" (117).

Lives, as the production of this historical space, considers and operates a great diversity of narrative forms and devices. To consider this diversity is to follow Pierre Macherey in affirming "the complete, disparate -- and sometimes even incoherent -- nature of the literary work" (18).

As J.M. Bernstein has observed, biographical form and self-recognition are accepted mediating devices between the web of lived experience and the formal structure of realist novels. These devices can relativize "the world to the self and meaning to identity" (150). Traditional as the form of Lives may be seen to be, its final paragraphs break with the

pattern in which we have elsewhere observed things to signify -- the chronological movement of individuals through various personal events in their lives. Bobby takes Del's fork, napkin, and empty plate, and wishes her luck in her life. Then:

> 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 to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning -- to be a letter, or a whole work, in an alphabet I did not know.
>
> People's wishes, and their other offerings, were what I took then naturally, a bit distractedly, as if they were never anything more than my due.
>
> "Yes," I said, instead of thank you. (211)

Bobby's action might have been textualized as an image resonant with transcendent meaning presented for the reader to "discover." It is instead conceptualized as something which seems to be a signifier within a discourse the protagonist is not able to enter. Yet the text implies that Bobby's message might be readable, if the perceiver shared an understanding of the "alphabet" in which it was embodied. The transmission of an alphabet is a fundamentally social activity.

Why does the text conclude with a perception of an

inability to "read," for lack of a shared alphabet, a message sent by a "madman," who must have some "secret" or "gift," who interprets himself in relation to history and the material, who is "male" but not "masculine," and who has been relegated to an asylum? Why does he cause "Del" to consider that "There must be . . . something I didn't know?" (210). My own concluding affirmation must be that the interpretation of a "text" as a historical process, "meaningful" in its inseparability from the social totality, is to encounter it with questions. Totality "is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth" (The Political Unconscious 55).

Endnote

1Frank Lentricchia observes that in Derrida's Of Grammatology, "the sign as cultural production is quietly insinuated" (174).

2In "L'Effet de réel," Communications 11 (1968): 87.

Conclusion

As a woman writer from a working-class background in rural Ontario, Munro has been in a position to intensely experience the social contradictions of a society divided by gender and class. Her narrative subject matter includes such things as family violence, extreme poverty, rape, unwanted pregnancy, suicide, the despair and loneliness of independent women, the breakdown of marriages between partners from different class backgrounds, the anxiety of young girls encountering dominant social assumptions about gender roles, the difficulty of establishing the relevance of formal education to experience in society at large, and the comfort people take in writing, telling and reading stories. My study has often juxtaposed certain passages suggestive of the above subject matter with affirmations by various humanist critics which suggest that Munro's work provides a transparent window onto the real, and that the social world as representative of a universal structure of Life is unfolding as it is apparently destined to. I find these suggestions extremely disturbing, in relation to my reading of the social world and my reading of Lives. They perpetuate quietism, by implying the gratuitousness of anger and of political action. Most Munro critics understand social life and human psychology as reflections of the essential nature of Being, and interpretation of literature as an end in itself.

Such interpretations are common in contemporary North America. In the light of such a situation, as Spivak

observes, literary study should attend to the

> continuous crosshatching of ideology and literary language. Further, . . . such an activity . . . should slide without a sense of rupture into an active and involved reading of the social text within which the student and teacher of literature are caught. ("Reading the World: Literary Studies in the 80s" 677)

My opening chapters and my closing chapter have argued that the act of interpretation, being constitutively ideological, must be thoroughly problematized, to challenge dominant representations of the social world in media, narrative and film, which are read, according to received assumptions about the conventions of "realism," as objective reflections of things-as-they-are or things-as-they-are-destined-to-be. Lives is a contradictory and divergent process. It cannot be understood as a self-contained "object," but may only be taken to "signify" meaning in relation to the historical conditions of its production and reception.

As a socialist-feminist, I have rewritten Lives as an allegory of how the (ambiguously) marginalized female subject learns to survive and to accommodate herself to dominant authority even as she dissents from it. I have contended that Lives may be received as a "repressed" recognition of cultural hegemony, of the fact that power works through its naturalization under the guise of reason. The containment of this recognition within a meditation on the essential nature of being functions to invalidate social

critique through the use of a bourgeois ideologeme which situates the "origin" of such critique in the psychological makeup of an individual. Such invalidation allows the writing subject to establish an ideological precept which must appear as logically grounded if investment in the myth of individual self-creation is to provide a satisfying imaginary resolution to social contradictions. The fact that there are objective limitations to female self-realization is aesthetically managed, ambiguously negated.

Lives' formal conventions work to produce the resolution of individual self-creation. This involves an understanding of the subject as self-contained and unified by rationality, and as thus able to "contain" experience and personal suffering in an objective picture, produced from a position of distance outside the social determination of perception. While "Baptizing" presents the "self-possessed" woman as telos, "Epilogue: The Photographer" and Munro's later narratives subvert this closure by gesturing to the desiring subject's fundamentally social and non-unified being.

Drawing on Blau Du Plessis' analysis in Writing beyond the Ending, I have argued that a common narrative strategy of twentieth-century women writers involves the bracketing of a romance plot (a trope for the sex-gender system) within a plot of individual quest. Lives, like other twentieth-century novels by Western women which invest in the bourgeois ideology of individualism, must be understood dialectically. It is at once part of the progressive movement in

which bourgeois cultural revolution works to delegitimate the religious paradigms affirming that social role is foreordained, and on the other hand complicit with a dominant ideology which situates "origin" in the free will of self-contained individuals. Jameson's failure to consider how the social production of gender works to maintain bourgeois ideology, by projecting the family and the heterosexual couple as a Utopic site of libidinal gratification, informs a serious inadequacy in his Marxist proposal for cultural interpretation.

That narratives work to produce imaginary resolutions to social contradictions indicates something disturbing about the aesthetic act, which can powerfully facilitate a subject's psychological adaptation to social conditions as they are. It can effect readings of the world which imply that there is "nothing to be done." Munro critics have praised her highly for her artistic genius. She is indeed a very skilled writer. Contrary to other Munro critics, I would affirm that there is something in this skill which is profoundly troubling. Munro's use of strategies of containment works to "manage" her anxieties about a social world in which she experienced the realities of class and gender oppression, and in which she grew up on the "borderline" of social marginality. Lives evidences contradictions in repeatedly gesturing to the understanding that there is something suspect about narrative "strategies of containment." These can work to negate the understanding that we can or should act to change the social world. Failure to

consider change necessary often has to do with subjects' experiences in a bourgeois North American society in which one may be in "a house as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea, in the middle of a tide of howling weather" (Lives 22).

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