

# Reflections on B.W. Powe's Notion, the Locale Where We Read a Text Changes How We Interpret the Text and How It Affects Us: A Probe and a Dialogue

Robert K. Logan et B. W. Powe

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## Reflections on B.W. Powe's Notion, the Locale Where We Read a Text Changes How We Interpret the Text and How It Affects Us: A Probe and a Dialogue.

Robert K. Logan  
University of Toronto  
[logan@physics.utoronto.ca](mailto:logan@physics.utoronto.ca)

B. W. Powe  
York University  
[bpowe@yorku.ca](mailto:bpowe@yorku.ca)

### Introduction

In Part 1, largely drafted by RKL, but containing important contributions from BWP, is a probe and a dialogue that explores BW's observation that the locale/environment in which we read a text changes how we interpret that text and how it affects us. This is an idea that BWP developed in his tribute to Alice Munro, the full (and expanded) text of which can be found in Part 2. Part 1 is a dialogue in the sense that it contains material from BW, that emerged in the frequent conversations we had in our email exchanges. Where I make use of ideas he shared with me, I will treat them as quotes indicating BW as the author of those quotes. To him I credit what is of value in this probe and as for me I take full responsibility where this probe might not fully hit the mark.

In the article "*A Tribute to Alice Munro in May 2024*" B.W. Powe wrote:

You know—weird thing—I didn't read her closely for a long time. Then I began reflecting on her writings when I was living in Spain. Suddenly, there, reading her when I was far away from Canada, the power of her stories and the style she embodied burst over me, occupying my thoughts...When I read her in Canada, she seemed a realist writer, reporting on lives in small town Ontario. When I read her in Spain, the hermetic side of her work struck me in my rootless state: I saw and felt the strangeness, how intensive her observational stances were —her narrators standing by, always outside (alone in their thoughts and contemplations) yet recording without blinkers or screens, illuminating how people and their worlds don't and can't abide or comprehend realities.

Powe described how his reading and interpretation of Munro was influenced by the locale in which he read her stories. This suggests that there is a figure/ground relationship between a text and the environment or locale in which the written work is read. Here are quotes from BWP's previous writings and his emails to me that elaborate on this insight of his and represent his contribution.

### B.W. Powe's Reflections and Elaborations of His Notion that Locale as Environment Changes How We Read and Interpret What We Read

In an email to me BW wrote:

*Where we read changes how we read.*

*Locale becomes context—a co-creator with the text.*

*And locale becomes subtext: perception is altered by where you are; and sometimes this happens without the reader being fully aware of the transforming process (and the transforming city-or-landscape).*

*Also, locale becomes a kind of intertext: influences from here and there, from where you are and from what you remember and project, imagine and recreate, at the same time.*

*It's an example of complexity dynamics.*

*Some of these ideas appear in my James Joyce talk, which I gave last spring online at the Bloomsday Festival Conference. I've been working on a short book version, tentatively to be called James Joyce in the Currents (BWP's email to me, Bob Logan, on Jun 6, 2024, at 12:25 AM)*

I believe that he has revealed a new principle in his “Tribute to Alice Munro,” and in his above email to me, about how the interpretation of the content of a medium is interpreted through and in the locale in which it is accessed. This insight enriches McLuhan’s two aphorisms that “the medium is the message” and “the user is content.”

BW described how the experience of reading the short stories of Alice Munro in Cordoba, Spain, was different from reading the same same stories in Ontario, Canada. In an email to me he said about his “Tribute to Alice Munro”: “This is a piece that is, between the lines, about the ground of reading—how locale changes perception, reception.”

I believe BW in these remarks put his finger on something very interesting and important, namely how locale affects how we interpret the content of a medium.

We are familiar with McLuhan’s perceptions that “the medium is the message” and “the user is content.”

McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” is the percept that independent of its content a medium has certain subliminal effects beyond their content.

McLuhan's “user is content” is the provocative percept that the users’ experiences and opinions affect and transform the perception of the content of a medium.

Perhaps we can expand McLuhan's two one-liners, “the user is content” and “the medium is the message,” to suggest, as BW has proposed, that not only is it the user’s past experiences and opinions that affect their appreciation and/or interpretation of the content [“the user is the

content”], and not only does the medium by which they access the content [“the medium is the message”] affect what they read, but there is also a third element. ... “The locale colours the interpretation”... this affects how readers interpret the content of a medium and how that content affects them; namely, the locale where the user accesses the content of a medium. In other words the effect of the content of a medium depends on three factors in addition to its content:

- i. the medium itself (“the medium is the message” by McLuhan);
- ii. the opinions, attitudes and past experiences of the user (“the user is content” by McLuhan) and
- iii. where the content is accessed (“the locale colours the interpretation” as described by BWP).

Yes, I’m suggesting that BW’s insight ranks in importance with two of McLuhan’s most famous one-liners. Further, I suggest that Powe’s insight incorporates McLuhan’s figure/ground relationship. Powe’s notion that “locale creates context” is an example of that dynamism. The figure of what is read and its interpretation is affected by the ground/locale in which it is read. In other words the locale is the ground in which the figure of the text and its interpretation or effect operates. Put another way, the locale is the ground that affects the figure of the text, and especially the reader’s interpretation of that text and its impact on that reader.

In a paper I wrote entitled “Figure/Ground: Cracking the McLuhan Code (Logan 2011),” I suggested that “figure/ground was central to his [McLuhan’s] approach to understanding media and their effects.” To support this thesis I quoted a passage from a letter McLuhan wrote to a friend:

My writings baffle most people simply because I begin with ground and they begin with figure. I begin with *effects* and work round to the *causes*, whereas the conventional pattern is to start with a somewhat arbitrary selection of ‘causes’ and then try to match these with some of the effects. It is this haphazard matching process that leads to fragmentary superficiality. As for myself, I do not have a point of view, but simply work with the total situation as obvious *figures* against hidden *ground* (Molinaro; McLuhan; Toye, 1987, 478).

What BW has done is to make use of McLuhan’s figure/ground methodology where a text, or more accurately a reader’s interpretation of a text, is the figure and the geographic locale of where the text is read is the ground.

Communication entails a medium, a user and a locale. All of these affect the content of the communication and its effect on the user, as these phrases, “the medium is the message,” “the user is content” and “the locale is the context,” form a gestalt.

### **Expanding Powe’s Notion That Locale Changes the Interpretation of What We Read to Include the Time of Day As Another Factor that Effects the Interpretation of a Text**

When I first shared these musings with BW by email one evening, just before retiring for the

night, I ended my post with the remark: "I will review this material in the morning and see what makes sense by the light of day." The next morning when I returned to my work on this project, I realized that I had inadvertently expanded and transformed BW's notion that locale works as the ground of the interpretation of text to this new notion: *the time of day may be a factor contributing to the ground of interpretation*.

BW engaged space or locale in his tribute to Alice Munro; but in his Post-Script to his Munro Tribute he engaged time, suggesting that it also affects the interpretation of one's reading. So, both BW and I, by different routes, arrived at the same conclusion: namely, that in addition to locale creating a context, the time of day must also create a context affecting the interpretation of a text. However, neither of us think that the time of day is as important a factor as locale affecting that interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

BW applied McLuhan's notion of figure/ground suggests that the geographic locale where one reads a text affects the interpretation of that text. The text and its interpretation are the figure and the geographic locale is the ground. The time of day, like the geographic locale, can also affect the interpretation of the text but not to same degree as the effect of the place, the surround.

## **Part II**

### **B.W. Powe's Tribute to Alice Munro on Her Passing, May 13th, 2024 By B.W. Powe**

And now I'm meditating on Alice Munro's passing. She left us at age 92, after a long period in dementia.

One of the greatest short story writers. I've wanted to say something about her for years.

You know—weird thing—I didn't read her closely for a long time. Then I began reflecting on her writings when I was living in Spain. Suddenly, there, reading her when I was far away from Canada, the power of her stories and the style she embodied burst over me, occupying my thoughts.

Alone on a train, going from Barcelona to a town outside the city, reading *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, not comprehending the Castilian and Catalan spoken by other passengers, her words and sentences, her voice and characters became uncannily vivid, somehow lucidly enigmatic. What did this mean?

When I read her in Canada, she seemed a realist writer, reporting on lives in small town Ontario. When I read her in Spain, the hermetic side of her work struck me in my rootless

state. I saw and felt the strangeness, how intensive her observational stances were—her narrators standing by, always outside (alone in their thoughts and contemplations) yet recording without blinkers or screens, illuminating how people and their worlds don't and can't abide or comprehend realities.

She was one of The Watchers—one who sees, hovers close. Her hermetic undercurrents: she never moralized, never appeared to prize style above all; the situations and conditions of lives came to her without ideology, didactic agendas, transcendental imperatives or religious creeds, satiric demolitions, or lyric exaltations. And yet she saw, and saw more, and contemplated and caught many lives unfolding.

The short story was her fragment of the splendor; but the form's strict practice and condensations meant much had to be omitted, or hidden, including any reference to that splendor.

When I was in Cordoba, I imagined a debate between Alice Munro and Don Quixote: The Watcher talking to the Mad Knight of Sorrows.

Who's to say what's real? Suffering imprints us with what we call reality; and the imagination provokes us into figuring there must be a transcendental or idealist purpose, somewhere. This would be the crux of the Munro-Quixote debate. A writer from historical time arguing with a mythic character.

One who records illusions, one who champions illusions.

They could express and counter how the observer changes the observed, and how the observed changes the observer.

One saying, "Here are false hopes", one saying, "A false hope is at least something..."

Maybe both would say, "Show me your despair, I already know about love..."  
I could never imagine anything but a stalemate in their argument.

Munro evaded large metaphysical questions in story collections with titles like *The Moons of Jupiter*, *Dear Life*, *The Progress of Love*, and *Something I've been Meaning to Tell You* that appear to suggest the presence of those questions. Still the poetic spirit, in the ambiguities between the lines of her stories, seemed to me to be speaking of them.

I said in Canada she's understood to be a realist; but when I continued to read her in Spain—where she's also taken to be a realist—I sensed the mythic implications in the crucial small scale of the lives she envisioned. The ordinary doesn't become miraculous in her writings. The ordinary becomes an intensified locus of the inexplicable, a place where our inner lives are describable but finally unknowable. The Watcher recognizes and documents how our notions of the real are wounds. Her writer-surrogates acknowledge how detached they are from...life, and yet implicated in it.

To this day I prefer reading Munro in Spain (and primarily in Andalusia, the southernmost province). This is because in another place her accomplishments seem even more memorable. Her stories, where vastness and scale implode (compress), become microcosms of an uncovering, and we witness people living in their thwarted, secretive conditions. She

invites us to quieten our roaring selves, to concentrate on details and gestures we miss. The Watcher sees the turmoil of the surface and the lives within surging, leaving their traces in poised fictional expressions.

And we should recognize this sublime paradox: her seemingly real town, based on Wingham, in southern Ontario, her keenly sketched people, belong to fictive domains. She imagined it all, all of them—the historical locales and the locals themselves were subsumed into her imagining. This means her stories (always condensed to the point of almost becoming splinters—moving toward abrupt glimpses) endure in the mythic dimension where her town aligns with Flaubert's Yonville, Joyce's Dublin, Borges' Buenos Aires' streets, Hemingway's Michigan lakeside towns and Paris arrondissements, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Dinesen's Ngong Hills, Ferrante's Neapolitan suburb, Cohen's Montreal, Atwood's downtown Toronto, and Carson's El Camino. We'll remember the town and the people because Munro dreamed them well and then wrote and revised them into being. In this way, her creations will, and must, stay ahead of her interpreters and biographers.

Munro with McLuhan, Frye, Cohen, Carson, and Atwood—the central imaginative poets and storytellers, mythographers, and Watchers of our climate...

And with our world environments overheating to extinguish us one day—burn us down, burn us out—I propose Munro's collections should be set in protected sites. Like cairns. So that future entities (whatever the hybrids of AI and flesh may be) will find her work. When they do, and they've learned to decode her nuanced writing, they could read deeply into her stories' brevities, and be altered by their depths. They would surely find how they show our humanity in the way it once thrived, before the extinction or before the digital transfigurations of being, in our bewildering complexities, in our gasps of living and inwardness.

The fascination with her enigmas. How her books can be easily absorbed in the immediacy of reading, when we respond to her agile and surprising stories, and yet never can we reach complete understanding. And why should we? The strangeness is all.

### **Post-Script to A Tribute to Alice Munro** **By B.W. Powe**

Once I met Munro at Albert Britnell's Bookstore on Yonge Street in downtown Toronto. Briefly. I'd been asking the bookseller about Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, which had just been published. I wanted to know how it was selling at the store. I knew his books had long languished in overlooked or forgotten margins. She said, "This one's doing well."

Then I turned around and saw Munro. Very affable. She said she knew McCarthy's books, admiring his strange eloquence and harrowing honesty. Sometimes I think she said "stranger," not strange. And then she was gone.

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