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The Progress of Writing in Alice Munro's "The Office"

Tracy Ware

"'How's the writing progressing?' he said, with an air of putting all our unfortunate differences behind him" (Munro, "Office" 66).[1] So says Mr. Malley, an annoying and intrusive landlord, to the narrator of "The Office," who is hoping to gain from her rented office the independence that will enable her writing to flourish. One of their "unfortunate differences" lies in his assumption that her writing is like his building model ships: "People need an occupation for their nerves. I daresay you're the same" (63). For both the narrator and the author of "The Office," however, writing is rarely relaxing or straightforward since it usually involves painful self-scrutiny and extensive revision with no guarantee of improvement. As Robert McGill explains, "Alice Munro's fiction challenges any inclination her readers may have to attribute development to individuals, regions, or humanity as a whole. Repeatedly, her stories question the notion that a person who grows older necessarily grows wiser or more mature" (136). From this compelling perspective, the trajectory of Munro's career "mirrors an approach to life and art that her stories recurrently, if implicitly, advocate: namely, one of return and revision. At the same time, Munro's stories caution readers against assuming that such return and revision will necessarily bring improvement" (137). In this essay, I examine three kinds of revision: first, the nervous self-revision that dominates the mental life of the narrator and prevents her from finishing her manuscript; second, the changes that Munro made to "The Office" between its first publication in 1962 and its revision in *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968; and third, her return to this material three decades later in "Cortes Island" (1998). Her commentary on "The Office" establishes the narrator as a younger Munro whose willingness to confront her doubts suggests the promise that the story leaves unfulfilled. Munro told J.R. (Tim) Struthers in 1981 that "I don't think you ever know that because your technique has changed it's actually more effective or more appropriate. You think it is, but this

is something the writer can't judge" ("Real" 12-13). Despite these concerns, I follow Ajay Heble's deft account of the status of "The Office" in Munro's career: noting that "the creation of stories and legends" is "not only the privilege of a writer," Heble writes that, "In this meditation on the nature of story-making, Munro anticipates stories like 'Material,' 'Home,' and 'The Ottawa Valley,' by writing about a person who uses another person's life as the material for a fiction" (192-93n11; also see Osachoff 75). My study of Munro's revisions will demonstrate that it is the second version of "The Office" that anticipates the later stories, thereby supporting the traditional scholarly preference for the final revision of the text. With "Cortes Island," however, we might remember Munro's skepticism about the idea "that you progress from one book to the next and that you do different things, you open up new areas of your own consciousness and for your readers, and that it's supposed to be a kind of step-ladder. It seems to me just an enormously chancy thing every time" ("Real" 12). "Cortes Island" returns to the problems of the young female writer, but now it is the woman who lives on the floor above rather than the landlord who interrupts and threatens her, and the narrator is less troubled about her right to represent others. The story looks back at "The Office," but without the self-consciousness that appears in the ending of the earlier story, as if Munro had grown to accept the "enormously chancy thing" of writing, even when that writing retains an autobiographical dimension.

"The Office" first appeared in September 1962 in *The Montrealer*, a magazine that also published "Dance of the Happy Shades," "An Ounce of Cure," "Boys and Girls," and "Red Dress — 1946," as well as "Remember Roger Mortimer," Munro's appreciation of Charles Dickens's *Child's History of England*.[2] All five stories appeared in *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968, and "The Office" was soon anthologized, first in Alec Lucas's *Great Canadian Short Stories* (1971), and then in Susan Cahill's *Women and Fiction: Short Stories by and about Women* (1975), before it appeared in Edward Peck's *Transitions II: A Source Book of Canadian Literature* (1978), for which Munro provided a commentary identifying the autobiographical origins. If that commentary is not always fully considered in recent criticism, it is perhaps because, as Vanessa Guignery indicates, "the parallels between Munro's life and those of her early protagonists in *Dance of the Happy Shades* have already been well documented, both by critics and by Munro herself. The reluc-

tance may also be explained by the fact that one always feels on slippery ground when dealing with such words as 'real,' 'autobiographical,' and 'true'" ("Balance" 7). Her caution is usually appropriate,[3] but Munro maintains that "The Office" is "one story whose beginnings I can talk about fairly easily," for "It is the most straightforward autobiographical story I have written" ("On Writing" 259). Even as she describes the story's origins "in 1960 or 1961, in Vancouver," however, she distinguishes herself from the narrator: both faced "the usual problem of women trying to work at home," but Munro had "a bit of money — I think it may have been from the sale of 'Dance of the Happy Shades' to *The Montrealer*, or it may have been from a sale to *Tamarack Review*, either way it would have been a hundred dollars — and I rented an office in the shopping centre near where I was living" (259). These details remind us that she was already a successful if not yet a celebrated author with a small income and thus a financial independence that the narrator lacks. As Munro remembers her inability to write the novel that she had planned, she increases her retrospective distance: "I had huge ambitions, as most young writers do, and the problem of reconciling these ambitions was far greater than the problem of working at home" (259). In contrast, the narrator says only that she writes fiction and finds questions about her writing excruciating to answer.

The narrator never reaches Munro's blunt self-criticism: "[T]he fact that [the landlord's intrusions] interrupted not my writing, but my painful, sweating, desperate non-writing, made them even more unwelcome than if they had halted temporarily a comfortable flow of words" (259). Her next comment establishes the narrator as her younger self: "Perhaps I should have put that into the story. I think I didn't because I couldn't face it at the time" (259). Because the commentary comes long after events to which the narrator is all too close, it records a literary achievement that the narrator cannot yet imagine: "And then it started to happen, the real small miracle, when something, someone, starts to live and grow in your mind and the story makes itself" (259). "It took about three weeks (maybe less)," Munro continues, before adding that "I stayed in the office four months and never wrote another word, but I did get my first ulcer" (261). Contrary to what recent critics such as Corinne Bigot and Catherine Lanone argue, the narrator shows no sign of writing the story that we are reading and no interest in "revenge."[4] "The Office" is lived but not written by the narrator, with Malley on

her mind, not on her page. Munro says that the point of the story is "the landlord's clamorous humanity, his dreadful insistence, which has to get the better of that woman seeking isolation. It is also, but rather incidentally, about a woman's particular difficulties in backing off and doing something lonely and egotistical. And just as the landlord had to break in on the woman in the story, the story had to break in on me and my grand design, but of course I didn't know what was happening, then" ("On Writing" 261-62).[5] It is Munro, not the narrator, who draws the parallel between the landlord's interruptions and the structure of the story that interests recent critics such as Eva Mendez.[6] Munro knows that even her "most autobiographical" work is "a little bit rearranged and pointed up to make a story" and that it could still be revised: "I'd like it more open, less pointed, even less contrived; I would like it to seem all artless and accidental, which means that I have adopted another fashion" (261). Because her fiction is always more than a record of her life, her revisions are determined more by aesthetic concerns than by an impossible desire for accuracy. As Munro said in 1972, "the kind of remembering I mean is what fictional invention is; but I wanted to show . . . too that it is not quite deliberate" ("Colonel's Hash" 183). The narrator is not yet up to that insight, but she recognizes the limitations of her perspective.

Although her career was considerably more advanced, Munro shared with her narrator what Ildikó de Papp Carrington calls "a sharp conflict between dependence and ambition" in women's writing (141; see also Thacker 173-74). Munro told Graeme Gibson that "The detachment of the writer, the withdrawal is not what is traditionally expected of a woman, particularly in the man-woman relationship. Most women writers I know are very ambivalent this way. There's the desire to give, even to be dominated, . . . and then of course the writer stands right outside this, and so there's the conflict right there" (250). So there is more to the narrator's "difficulties in backing off and doing something lonely and egotistical" than Munro's commentary implies in the phrase "rather incidentally." Her daughter Sheila goes further:

> Perhaps the point of the story is that women writers must fight against some hostile presence that is censoring them and not giving them permission to write freely. Virginia Woolf has written [in "Professions for Women"] about this sense the woman writer has, of the shadow of the Angel in the House — the Victorian ideal of a

> woman who is self-sacrificing, good, and pure — peering over her shoulder, forcing her to write in a conventional, constricted way. What you must do, she says, is first kill the Angel in the House and then tell "the truth of your own experience as a body" [Woolf 241]. Woolf did not think she had succeeded in this second task, and she did not think any woman writer had yet succeeded, because the obstacles were so tremendous. I think my mother was struggling with these challenges when she was writing "The Office" — how not to tell the nice, conventional, moral story and, in its place, how to tell the truth of her experience as a woman. Of course, she did succeed brilliantly later on, but it was very, very hard work to get there. (90)[7]

Renting an office in the first place is part of this struggle, as are the narrator's attempts to get free of Malley, whose condescending remarks evoke the stereotype described by Woolf. Despite the gravity of those conflicts, however, the narrator is capable of ironic self-deprecation, as in the opening: "The solution to my life occurred to me one evening while I was ironing a shirt. It was simple but audacious. I went into the living room where my husband was watching television and I said, 'I think I ought to have an office.'" She then concedes that "It sounded fantastic, even to me" ("Office" 59). As Linda Collinge-Germain observes, the narrator presents gender distinctions "with irony and perhaps somewhat self-derisively since she accepts her conventional role, impassively ironing a shirt (her husband's) while he watches television in the next room" (66).[8] Along with the irony comes a debt to Woolf, noted at least as early as 1977 (Allentuck 343), and recently elaborated by Bigot and Lanone, who call "The Office" "a variation on Woolf's classic opposition between domestic space and a room of one's own, updated as a rented office" (27; see also Cleju; Mendez).

Woolf's influence is most palpable in the narrator's explanation to her husband:

> A house is all right for a man to work in. He brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work *exists*. He is not expected to answer the telephone, to find things that are lost, to see why the children are crying, or feed the cat. He can shut his door. Imagine (I said) a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them. A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that

> is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offence against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She *is* the house; there is no separation possible. ("Office" 60)

That sounds unusually political for Munro, until we remember that the narrator is not quite Munro. Asked about morality and politics by Alan Twigg, Munro responded, "I couldn't write that way if I tried. I back off my party line, even those with which I have a great deal of sympathy, once it gets hardened and insisted upon. I say to myself that's not true all the time. That's why I couldn't write a straight women's lib book to expose injustices. Everything's so much more complicated than that" (216). The least important complication in "The Office" is the autobiographical one: as Sheila Munro notes, her "father was the one who came up with the idea of my mother renting an office" (89), unlike the husband in the story, who says only "Go ahead, if you can find one cheap enough" ("Office" 61). The more important complication is that the narrator is conflicted. Although her exemplary female writer contemplates "a country that is not her husband's or her children's," she cannot imagine shutting her door on them ("why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them"). Divided even in what she imagines, she finds it difficult to summon the resolution that she desires: "But here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer. That does not sound right. Too presumptuous; phony, or at least unconvincing. Try again. I write. Is that better? *I try* to write. That makes it worse. Hypocritical humility. Well then?" (59). She does not tell her husband what she admits to herself: "And I was not even sure that I was going to write in it, if we come down to that. Maybe I would sit and stare at the wall; even that prospect was not unpleasant to me. It was really the sound of the word 'office' that I liked, its sound of dignity and peace. And purposefulness and importance" (60). Keeping her doubts to herself, she "launched instead into a high-flown explanation" (60).

Carrington notes that "no sooner has the narrator explained all the highly convincing reasons for the frustrating fusion between her and the house than she suddenly admits that sometimes a rather frightening separation *does* occur" (140). The admission comes in a parenthetical memory: "At certain times . . . I have opened the windows and felt the house shrink back into wood and plaster and those humble elements

of which it is made, and the life in it subside, leaving me exposed, empty-handed, but feeling a fierce and lawless quiver of freedom, of loneliness too harsh and perfect for me now to bear" ("Office" 60-61). To admit her access to such freedom, however, would bring her need for an office into question, so the narrator does not go beyond noting "how the rest of the time I am sheltered and encumbered, how insistently I am warmed and bound" (61). At the risk of straying from the story to the author, I would add that Munro herself was skeptical about the need for "a room of one's own." In a CBC Radio interview with Tina Srebotnjak in 1990, Munro said that, though she sometimes envied the private spaces traditionally available to male writers, at other times she looked at such spaces and thought "What a burden!" Her lack of privilege actually "made it easier" for her to write. Canadian readers might think of Bronwen Wallace's "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," in which the speaker finds her subject in the "countless gritty details / of an ordinary woman's life" that interrupt her attempted tribute to Woolf (51), assumed to be beyond such mundane concerns.[9] Alina Cleju notes that something similar happens at the end of "The Office": "The loss of the office — that supposedly creative personal space — paradoxically turns out to be the perfect inspiration, compensating for her former unaccomplished writing attempts. Thus, the former uncreative physical space of 'The Office' becomes a highly creative textual space" (42). As I argued earlier with reference to Bigot and Lanone, however, it is not the narrator but Munro who realizes her inspiration.

The narrator might not finish her story, but her doubts and qualifications suggest that she is on the right track, for they are characteristic of the writer's interior life, as Munro understands it.[10] Think of the narrator's abrupt reversal in "Chaddeleys and Flemings 1. Connection": "But surely none of this mattered to me, none of this nonsense about dessert forks? Was I, am I, the sort of person who thinks that to possess such objects is to have a civilized attitude to life? No, not at all; not exactly; yes and no. Yes and no" (12). Uncertain that her desire for an office "was something that could be accomplished," the narrator of "The Office" says that "I could almost more easily have wished for a mink coat, for a diamond necklace; these are things women do obtain" (61).[11] Like the words *yes* and *no* in the passage from "Connection," the phrase *almost more easily* reveals that interior candour has its limits in Munro. Could the narrator ever be satisfied with mink coats and

diamond necklaces? Almost. She seems to be more confident in her description of Malley's wife: "She had the swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension, that speaks of a life spent in close attention on a man who is by turns vigorous, crotchety and dependent" (62). But her doubts return: "How much of this I saw at first, how much decided on later is of course impossible to tell" (62). So memory shades into "fictional invention." Similarly, the narrator qualifies her description of Malley's portrait: "Here again, it is probably hindsight on my part that points out that in the portrait there is evident also some uneasiness, some lack of faith the man has in this role, a tendency he has to spread himself too bountifully and insistently, which for all anyone knows may lead to disaster" (62-63). We never know if such passages correspond to the narrator's writing as well as her thoughts, but her caution is important in either case. We tend to trust narrators who understand their limitations, but how far can such awareness go? A.E. Christa Canitz and Roger Seamon argue that their uncertainty is what makes these narrators compelling: "Munro (like others) writes fictions that lack the finality of certainty and seem closer to 'unsorted life' than the legendary nature of most tale-telling, whether of people or nations" (79) — or landlords. The narrator of "The Office" tries to be honest with herself, but it is impossible to reconcile her detailed account of Malley's appearance with her claim that "I did not look at him. I had not planned, in taking an office, to take on the responsibility of knowing any more human beings" (64). It seems to be harsh to accuse her of irresponsibility, but the ending reveals that Malley is her inescapable subject, though she might have been slow to realize it. In contrast, Malley seems to be free of self-doubt, though we do not know his private thoughts. The narrator "brooded with satisfaction on the bareness of [her] walls, the cheap dignity of [her] essential furnishings, the remarkable lack of things to dust, wash or polish," but he is so convinced that the office is "an uncomfortable place for a lady" that he repeatedly intrudes with his office-warming gifts (64).

Malley might seem like what Beverly J. Rasporich calls a "small-minded" bully (32), but the narrator is unable to break with him decisively, in part because she has internalized the traditional values that demand angelic patience with men and in part because, as James Carscallen notes, "she finds him rather intriguing" (218). Thus, she is eager to hear the story of the chiropractor who previously rented the

office: "I assumed a listening position, my hands no longer hovering over the keys. If cowardice and insincerity are big vices of mine, curiosity is certainly another" ("Office" 66). Her writerly interest makes her ambivalent, but she nonetheless makes various attempts to be free of Malley. Like Juliet in "Chance," who summons for the first time the nerve to break off an unwanted encounter with a stranger, only to learn that he then killed himself (56-62), the narrator of "The Office" regrets her own forcefulness when her blunt language and carefully rehearsed "cold voice" receive this haunting if ungrammatical response: "The effect was devastating enough to shame me. 'I certainly wouldn't dream of bothering you,' he said, with precision of speech and aloof sadness. 'I merely made these suggestions for your comfort. Had I realized I was in your way, I would of left some time ago'" (65). Malley soon returns, however, with his question about the progress of her writing. She recognizes differences that cannot be put behind them, but she must also deal with the differences within him: he looks like a successful businessman in his portrait, but he moves with "a sigh, a cushiony settling of flesh, a ponderous matriarchal discomfort" (63-64); he is what Magdalene Redekop calls a "mock matriarch" (49) when he fusses over the narrator, but his understanding of writing seems "so wistful, so infantile, that it struck [her] as [a] waste of energy to attack it" ("Office" 67). For Redekop, "The kaleidoscopic reversals expose the patterns of family behaviour as human constructs open to change" (49). Such insights eventually helped Munro to escape the stereotypical attitudes of her era, as Redekop suggests, but "the shadow of the Angel in the House" continues to fall on the narrator of "The Office."

When the narrator discovers that she cannot avoid "the responsibility of knowing any more human beings," she experiences what Naomi Morgenstern calls, in a discussion of "Meneseteung," "the very interruption of the sovereign subject that constitutes a call to ethics" (80). She cites Emmanuel Levinas on the "ethical moment": "A face is imposed on me without my being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it, that is, without my being able to cease to be held responsible for its wretchedness" (92-93n13). As long as Malley remains civil, the narrator of "The Office" cannot escape his call: "I tried once to interrupt, with the idea of explaining that I had made provision for an area in my life where good feelings, or bad, did not enter in, that between him and me, in fact, it was not necessary that there should be any feelings at all; but

this struck me as a hopeless task. How could I confront, in the open, this craving for intimacy?" (66). Unable to discard his gifts, the narrator keeps the hideous teapot and tends the hated house plant, uncertain "what else to do" (67). Her bewilderment increases as the unwanted gifts continue: "I despised myself for submitting to this blackmail. I did not even really pity him; it was just that I could not turn away, I could not turn away from that obsequious hunger" (67). She even imagines that she is his ideal auditor: "[H]e was revealing his life to me in the hope that I would write it down. Of course he had probably revealed it to plenty of people for no particular reason, but in my case there seemed to be a special, even desperate necessity" (68). When Malley becomes more threatening, however, their "personal encounters" end (71). The ethical demands return in very different ways in the two endings of the story, the 1962 version suggesting the narrator's lingering attachment to traditional ideas of a woman's duty and the 1968 version using metafiction to inquire into the writer's responsibility to her subject.

Before the story reaches its ending, both characters gain a dubious sense of advantage in a conflict that would be difficult for either to explain to a disinterested observer. A brief triumph occurs when the narrator looks through her window to find Malley reading her work. When he leaves abruptly after pretending to be cleaning up, her reaction dramatizes her divided feelings: "I did not say anything, but found myself trembling with anger and gratification. To have found a just cause was a wonder, an unbearable relief" (69).[12] We can sympathize with her anger, but what is the wonder, and why is the narrator relieved? The answer must be that discovering Malley snooping in her office enables her to reinforce her commitment to it and all that it symbolizes: she might doubt her literary abilities, but she is confident in her new opposition to him. Previously, she "weakly longed to be rid of him" (68), but now she begins to lock her door. When Malley defeats that strategy by accusing her of "carryings-on" with other artists, she feels an anger that she cannot express:

> My anger was delayed somehow, blocked off by a stupid incredulity. I only knew enough to get up and walk down the hall, his voice trailing after me, and lock the door. I thought — I must go. But after I had sat down in my own room, my work in front of me, I thought again how much I liked this room, how well I worked in it, and I decided not to be forced out. After all, I felt, the struggle

> between us had reached a deadlock. I could refuse to open the door, refuse to look at his notes, refuse to speak to him when we met. (70)

This passage gives the only indication that her writing has been progressing after all. The narrator has not been staring at the wall; she has been writing despite the interruptions. As the battle with Malley turns from "personal encounters" to his increasingly "virulent" notes, their "relationship passed into something that was entirely fantasy" (71). In their final encounter, also his point of maximum delusion, she sees "another face, remote and transfigured, that shone with the cold light of intense joy at discovering the proofs of sin" (71). Those "proofs" are the obscene drawings on the walls of the toilet for which he blames her and her friends. Instead of killing Malley, as the narrator briefly fantasizes, she concedes victory: "If this stupid thing had not happened, he would never have won. But he had" (73). What has she lost if she is finally free of Malley? What has he won if he is "not himself," as his wife tells the narrator (73)? Munro eventually recognized that the office was no solution, but the narrator leaves with regret and "an absorbing depression" (73).

The answers to these questions suggest the stakes of the conflict, which differ greatly in the two versions of "The Office." In the 1962 version, this passage comes after the narrator describes Malley's life as a "series of calamities":

> Elements of melodrama multiplied. And yet, I would occasionally think, as I sat trapped by the lazy, endless, obscurely pleading flow of words, and yet this is a life, somewhere under all these fancies and alibis there is some truth; who could ever find it? That someone should find the truth of his life, and explain it to him, was that what he really wanted? It would take such cunning and patience to do that. It would take more; it would take love. And it would not be worth it. Not for any task like this had I left my own flesh and blood and shut myself up between four white walls.

The narrator sounds decisive in her rejection of Malley, but she wavers in the next paragraph.

> And sometimes when I was dulled and weakened I even thought: perhaps this is what a woman is for. Perhaps I am being paid back for having wanted a place to be alone and for having wanted to do something. A woman does not do things, she is told them; listen-

> ing, reflecting, she gives men and children the reality of their lives. Would he impose on a man like this? Not likely. (*Montrealer* 21; cf. *Dance* 68)

Fearing that she is "being paid back" for trying to become a writer, she seems ready to abandon her struggles, at least when "dulled and weakened." Malley never says that "A woman does not do things, she is told them," but perhaps "the Angel of the House does."

The narrator returns to her despondency in the ending. Instead of vacating the office with relief, she thinks of renting another space:

> I have not found another office. I think that I will try again soon, but not yet. I will wait at least until that picture has somewhat faded that I see so clearly in my mind, though I never saw it in reality — Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way at the toilet walls, stooping with difficulty, growing short of breath, arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust. By this time, of course, I have hit upon another explanation of what happened to those walls, but the thought of Mr. Malley puffing and labouring to get them clean is no comfort to me. It is only another face of that dreary riddle which I made up my mind not to see, and which I am part of all the same.
>
> It is true that love is needed, or something. (*Montrealer* 23)

Munro might doubt that revisions are always improvements, but it is hard to imagine anyone preferring this version, vulnerable to her critique of the endings of most of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*: "There's an awful lot of very, very important words in each last little paragraph. . . . It was the way I felt that you made a story most effective. And now, I would go back, if I could rewrite most of those stories, and I would chop out a lot of those words and final sentences" ("Real" 9). There is a hint of self-recognition in the suggested affinity between fiction in general and Malley's "bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust," but it is overwhelmed by the narrator's reversion to her earlier feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Her imaginary picture of Malley brings "no comfort," and there is no point in her writing differently or in explaining "what happened to those walls" if she thinks that she should not be writing at all. In her revision, Munro removed the reference to the "dreary

riddle" that Malley poses, along with the last sentence, which promises an epiphany by opening with "It is true" before collapsing into the vague phrase "or something." It is Munro, not the narrator, who makes that phrase conclude the story. The narrator is thinking of things other than how to achieve closure, and only her reference to finding another office implies that she will continue to write. Otherwise, this ending makes it unlikely that she would ever proceed to write a story like "The Office."

For Charles Baxter, the epiphanies that made James Joyce's *Dubliners* so memorable have become all too predictable: "The mass production of insight, in fiction or elsewhere, is a dubious phenomenon" (47). Recognizing that many great short stories follow Joyce's example, Baxter refuses to agree that "a character's experiences in a story have to be validated by a conclusive insight or a brilliant visionary stop-time moment. Stories can arrive somewhere interesting without claiming any wisdom or clarification, without, really, claiming much of anything beyond their wish to follow a train of interesting events to a conclusion" (52; see also Hovind 115). In her revision of "The Office," Munro moves from a strained epiphany to the more tentative closure of what may be her first explicit metafiction. As Struthers noted in the first study of this topic, "We recognize that we are reading not just complex psychological fiction but fiction that investigates itself, self-referring fiction, stories about storytelling — metafiction" (103). He is thinking of stories such as "Tell Me Yes or No," "Winter Wind," and "The Ottawa Valley," all from *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974). "The Office" was not born as this kind of metafiction but achieved it through the "'rupturing' effect" (Cobley 173) of the revised ending.[13] Haunted as before by the picture of Malley cleaning the walls, she connects his delusions to her writing, making her self-criticism explicit and indicating for the first time that she may be thinking of writing about him: "While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him" (74). That revision changes everything. And, if Malley is her inevitable subject, then why not agree with Ailsa Cox and Christine Lorre-Johnston that "This paragraph foregrounds the story's self-reflexivity; the story the narrator is writing is the story we have now finished reading" (185)? The problem is that nothing implies that the narrator is actually writing at this point: as Tim McIntyre argues in relation to "Material," "in the absence of any evidence that readers are to believe this story was written by the narrator, 'the skillful manipulation of words and phrases'

[Heble 85] . . . must on some level be attributed to Munro, not the narrator; otherwise, every first-person story could be understood to operate at a metafictional level as a tale written by its narrator, rather than as a representation of a character's voice" ("'This'" 163). Bigot and Lanone assume that the narrator writes the ending when they argue that "Words are a weapon which the narrator may not have mastered in oral conversation, but which she definitely wields as a writer" (124). In my reading, the narrator is as far from verbal war as she is from the "inspiration" that these critics imagine her achieving (123; they cite Cleju 42). As Redekop explains, Malley's "activity ('arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust') is seen as a mirror reflection of her activity ('While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him')" (49). The difference is surely that she knows that she is trying to write fiction, whereas he takes his "legends" for truth ("Office" 71). For that reason alone, this story must be distinguished from autobiography, even if it is based upon Munro's experience. It would have been easy for Munro to have the narrator return home with her new insights and begin typing her story, but the ending is far from triumphant. Munro insists that using "real lives" as "material" for fiction involves an additional responsibility: "[T]hen I not only have to look at the inadequacy of the way I represent them but my right to represent them at all. And I think any writer who deals with personal material comes up against this" ("Real" 28). For Bigot and Lanone, however, a vigorous style trumps ethics: "The story ends on a light, ironic note of triumph. . . . The rhythmical final line, with the alliteration in 'r,' stresses both 'right' and 'rid,' slaying the intruder's ghost with a flourish" (124). Assuming that the story confirms a right that it does not desire, they give the ending a force that Munro was beginning to question.

How did criticism go from the ethics of metafiction to a sense of revenge? The surprising answer is that Redekop might be responsible for both the blindness and the insight of recent criticism. She says that the narrator "does get her vengeance, of course, by writing this story and thus nurturing [Malley] back with a vengeance" (50), but otherwise she knows better. Noting that the obscene drawings in the toilet stall might be a parody of the "writing on the wall" in the Book of Daniel, she observes that "this writing seems to be laughing at the narrator" (49). For Redekop, "The Office" is "about the failure of story" (50)

and not about either Munro or the narrator regaining control: "The self-representation in this little sketch questions any idea of art as final mastery. Nobody has the last laugh. Munro succeeds by a conscious failure and in this way her reproduction stands in sharp contrast to Mr. Malley's self-portrait in the 'gilded frame' ["Office" 62]. This self-reproduction is that of somebody who watches — she watches herself in the act of watching the landlord watching her" (50). Redekop's one reference to "vengeance" is in contrast to her profound understanding of Munro's self-reflexivity: Munro "shows the male figure to us as her reproduction and by this reversal we see, not his evil power, but her power. The story, after all, is about class as well as about gender. What we have is a diffusion of malevolence and power and a demonstration of the way in which we all live inside the 'gilded frame' of the patriarchy" (50). Read in these terms, the ending confirms Redekop's larger point: "At the deepest level of Munro's writing is her constant awareness that a writer, in the act of writing, is *using* people" (131). That reading differs radically from the one provided by Bigot and Lanone in which "the writer who has been made to flee regains control . . . by imagining the frustration of Mr. Malley as he erases the parodic writing on the wall (a mock biblical motif as well as an obscene graffiti), and cannot quite compose a satisfactory plot; on the contrary, the dispossessed narrator is capable of achieving revenge by composing this word-picture, and by extension, the entire story we have just read" (129). Far from composing an image of Malley, the narrator is waiting for the one that haunts her to fade. The ideas of "the parodic writing on the wall" and of the narrator's "revenge" come from Redekop (49), though she is not cited, and her emphasis on Munro's self-criticism is conspicuous by its absence.[14] The author's agency is assigned to the narrator, said to have a control that Munro's fiction often exposes as illusory. As Munro told Struthers, using "personal material" in "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960) taught her that "writing was about something else altogether than I had suspected it was, that it was going to be less in my control and more inescapable than I had thought" ("Real" 21). The revised ending of "The Office" suggests that the narrator might be on her way to achieving such insights, but she is not there yet.

Cox and Lorre-Johnston are more convincing in their assertion that "The conflict between artistic dedication and maternal duty is ultimately irreconcilable, as ["The Office"] demonstrates, and as Munro's

regretful comments may be taken to imply" (184). Citing her various biographers, they recognize that the story reflects a "painful and frustrating period in Munro's writing life" (184), but they argue that "Munro's response to the clash between art and living is to embrace an approach to storytelling that incorporates disruption at its source" (185). Although they minimize what Munro calls the "dissatisfaction with art" ("Real" 28) that leads her to metafiction, they find a new way to argue that "The Office" anticipates her later work:

> If the narrator's anxiety derives at all from ethical concerns about using real people as models for fictional characters, this is overshadowed by the stronger suggestion that the distractions they provide might generate a different kind of storytelling. . . . As a fragmented, elliptical genre, the modern short story is able to build seemingly random digressions into an image-based structure. Its resistance to closure means that the incomplete, contradictory and 'never quite satisfactory' are more easily assimilated than in the conventional novel. (188)

They also blur the differences between the narrator and the author when they say that "The narrator conceals which type of fiction she is writing, just as she hides 'the manuscript' from Malley ["Office" 70], but the reader might wonder if, like Munro, she is trying to write a novel" (188). This reader would insist that the narrator is also unlike Munro, but it is only a matter of emphasis. Ultimately, Cox and Lorre-Johnston know that it is Munro's agency that matters: "By coming to terms with insurmountable circumstance, Alice Munro develops an aesthetic based on distractions, digressions and interconnections, an aesthetic that finds its perfect expression in the short story genre" (189). Their point holds even if Munro herself has no such understanding of the short story, as she revealed to Twigg in 1988: "I've never known why I've chosen the short story form" (216). Exploring questions that Munro avoids but that her fiction raises, Cox and Lorre-Johnston have valuable things to say because they are more flexible than some of the other recent critics of "The Office." They understand that the ending "communicates uncertainty and hesitation" and that "turning experience into stories entails a provisional reworking of intractable material" (185, 188).

What McGill calls Munro's pattern of "return and revision" (137) is exceptionally important in *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), in which, as Catherine Sheldrick Ross writes, "Underneath a reading of

the current story are the contours of previous readings of earlier stories, in which some of the material is handled but with variations" (786). "Cortes Island," she continues, "seems to have swallowed up 'The Office' as just one element among many" (786). Once again an aspiring young woman writer's frustrations are compounded by an intruder, this time Mrs. Gorrie, who lives above the basement suite that the narrator and her husband, Chess, rent from Mrs. Gorrie's son. Again we have a struggle with repressive social attitudes, but this time the narrator takes a longer view: "Chess and I both came from homes where unmarried sex was held to be disgusting and unforgivable, and married sex was apparently never mentioned and soon forgotten about. We were right at the end of the time of looking at things that way, though we didn't know it. . . . So having a place of our own and a bed of our own where we could carry on as we liked seemed marvelous to us" (123). Despite the changing sexual attitudes, however, the narrator is referred to as a "little bride," a term that she finds an "unforeseen insult" (117, 123). Among those who use the term is Mrs. Gorrie, who torments her with unending advice: "She told me things that had to do with my future, . . . and the more she talked the more I felt an iron weight on my limbs, the more I wanted to yawn and yawn in the middle of the morning, to crawl away and hide and sleep" (120). In this way, the story recalls "The Office," and this narrator is even more painfully uncertain of her literary ability, filling and then destroying notebooks. To make things worse, she eventually finds out that Mrs. Gorrie has been reading her discarded work.

When the narrator attends to Mr. Gorrie, a stroke victim with limited speech and mobility, she discovers that the Gorries moved to Vancouver from Cortes Island after a suspicious fire killed her first husband.[15] She is more sympathetic to Mr. Gorrie than to his wife, but their relationship ends when the narrator and her husband move. When they meet other couples with similar experiences, they "would tell about our crazy landlady. Paranoia" (144). Their difficult future is heavily foreshadowed: "Every move we made — the rented house, the first house we owned, the second house we owned, the first house in a different city — would produce this euphoric sense of progress and tighten our connection. Until the last and by far the grandest house, which I entered with inklings of disaster and the faintest premonitions of escape" (119). If Thacker is right that "the grandest house" is the one

on Rockland Avenue in Victoria that Munro disliked (*Alice Munro* 486), then this story is more cryptically autobiographical than "The Office," which never depends on external information. Otherwise, the similarities between the stories throw the differences into relief, chief among them the narrator's lack of guilt about arranging the Gorries' lives into stories, though their lives are even more *grotesque* than Malley's, to use Chess's word (137). Why does the later story avoid the metafiction in "The Office"? The narrator had "erotic dreams" of Mr. Gorrie until she "used him up," but she never says if that involved writing fiction (145). McIntyre argues that the ethical questions raised in Munro's work of the late 1960s and 1970s "remain live questions, and if Munro appears to have become less interested in demonstrating the ethical risks of writing over her career, the reason for the absence of this ethical angst could be less that she has figured out how to negate these risks and more that she is resigned to taking them" ("Ethics" 172). She is also resigned to the idea that her writing changes without necessarily progressing. As Munro said in her commentary on "The Office," "I think if I were doing it now I'd write it differently. That doesn't mean it might be better, just different" ("On Writing" 261).

Author's Note

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Notes

[1] I cite the *Dance of the Happy Shades* version unless otherwise indicated.

[2] According to Robert Thacker, when Gerald Taaffe became editor of *The Montrealer* in 1960, he read a "slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts (it was over a foot high, he recalls) and found just one piece he wanted to publish — a story called 'Dance of the Happy Shades'" (*Alice Munro* 162). After going to extraordinary lengths to identify the author of this unidentified typescript, he encouraged Munro to submit more work. As Thacker observes, only *The New Yorker* and *The Tamarack Review* published more of Munro's work than *The Montrealer*. Taaffe "recalls her later stories commanded his top rate ($150 to $200), a sizable portion of his monthly editorial budget and a fee he also paid to such better-known writers as Norman Levine and Mordecai Richler. Thus the five Munro stories and personal essay

that the *Montrealer* published between 1961 and 1965 are a reflection of Taaffe's enthusiasm. He paid Munro as much as he could and ran the stories as she sent them, without editing" (65). Munro might have revised "The Office" when she sent it to Earle Toppings of Ryerson Press on 14 March 1967 for possible inclusion in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Thacker, *Alice Munro* 184-85; Thacker, "Re: Munro's Editors"). Thacker notes that the sixteen-page typescript of "The Office" in the Munro Papers in the University of Calgary Archives is close to the version in Munro's first collection ("Re: Munro's Editors").

[3] According to Thacker, Munro "submitted *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) to her publisher under the title 'Real Life,' and 'Material' [1973] . . . was called 'Real People' in an earlier manuscript. . . . ; 'True Lies' was one of the titles considered for *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978)" ("So Shocking" 153).

[4] Reading the ending as if it were written and not merely suffered by the narrator, Bigot and Lanone argue that "the dispossessed narrator is capable of achieving revenge by composing this word-picture, and, by extension, the entire story we have just read" (129). In contrast, Linda Lamont-Stewart emphasizes her "frustration" at being unable to "rid her mind of the image of the man washing lipstick off the bathroom walls" (119).

[5] Alina Cleju silently omits both the first sentence and the phrase "but rather incidentally" when she quotes part of this passage, ignoring Munro's reference to the landlord's "clamorous humanity." She argues that Malley "exemplifies the still immature Canadian conceptualization of the artist in general and of the woman artist in particular" (40-41). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, artists such as E. Pauline Johnson and Sara Jeannette Duncan had achieved an international success that belies Cleju's comment. See Fiamengo; Gerson.

[6] For Mendez, "The narrator is enabled to tell her story not by suppressing the disruptions challenging her authority, but precisely by allowing an adversary position to interrupt her narrative and simultaneously fuel its plot, driving it toward its dramatic climax" (249). Like Cleju and Bigot and Lanone, Mendez does not sufficiently distinguish the author from the narrator, who does not tell her story in this sense.

[7] Without citing Sheila Munro, Cleju notes the pertinence of Woolf's concept of "The Angel in the House" (35).

[8] Later she argues that the narrator "speaks to say what she wants, and what she wants is to have a place to practice her unconventional profession: writing, in which she will, reflexively, have a voice. This 'room of her own' will allow her to have a 'voice of her own'" (69). Not only does she rarely speak, but also the narrator is less certain than Collinge-Germain implies.

[9] Wallace was one of the first to register Munro's importance, arguing in 1978 that, "In exploring male-female relationships, Munro does not deny that women suffer, that women are vulnerable, but her women have as well a sense of strength and power that has to do directly with the fact that they do not deny any part of their experience or reject any part of themselves" ("Women's Lives" 58).

[10] Thacker notes "the various shifts, doubts, and re-explanations" that constitute Munro's "unassailable moral integrity" ("Go Ask" 166). He cites Blodgett (151).

[11] The appeal of stereotypes is more pronounced in the earlier version: "I could almost more easily have wished for a mink coat or one of those emerald and diamond necklaces I have seen advertised, at Christmas time, in *Vogue*; these are things women do achieve" (18).

[12] Her diction is even stronger in the first version: "To have found so righteous a cause for casting him off was a wonder, an unbearable relief" (21).

[13] Paul Cobley refers to "an entire body of narrative characterized by rupturing which is known as 'metafiction.' The designation is apt because the prefix 'meta' is used to refer to levels of narrative which lie 'after,' 'behind' or 'outside' the supposedly main narrative" (173).

[14] Redekop's book is listed in the "Books with Chapters or Sections Devoted to *Dance of the Happy Shades*" (157), but her comments on "The Office" are not cited. Cox and Lorre-Johnston cite Redekop at length (183).

[15] Thacker notes that Munro's source for this incident also inspired "The Love of a Good Woman." In Munro's words, "A man and woman disposing of her lover's body. This happened on an island off the B.C. coast — they put him in his own boat and towed him out into open water. . . . The sudden switch from sex to murder to marital cooperation seemed to me one of those marvelous, unlikely, acrobatic pieces of human behavior" (qtd. in *Alice Munro* 479).

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