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“A Cavity Everywhere”: The Postponement of Knowing in “Corrie”

Using the tools of narratology and literary linguistics, I argue that Munro deftly foreshadows and prepares for the revelation her protagonist confronts at the story's conclusion: that she has been duped and exploited by her married lover. The foreshadowing is effected by the insertion of, in the words of Judith Maclean Miller, “bits and pieces of information that appear here and there, floating through the telling of the story, many of them unspoken, coded, resonating through silences.” I conclude my essay with a discussion of the three different endings of “Corrie,” which appeared in three different publications: I suggest that the differences reveal much of Munro's narrative strategies.

In what I believe is one of the most insightful essays on Munro's fiction, Judith Maclean Miller observes that in the many “mystery stories” Munro writes, nobody “pulls all the clues together at the end”; in fact, “there are not even really clues, just bits and pieces of information that appear here and there, floating through the telling of the story, many of them unspoken, coded, resonating through silences” (43). In stories like “Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You” and “Open Secrets,” which Miller explores in the essay, there are striking details for the attentive and diligent reader to glean and reflect on, like the “small bottle of a strange liquid” in Char's cupboard (*Something* 20), and the feathered hat Theo Slater strokes in alarming agitation, “as if he were pacifying a scared hen” (*Open Secrets* 153). These pieces of information are deftly placed, perhaps isolated or disarranged in the text, or made salient by an arresting trope or scheme, marked by an instance of unusual syntax. There are several dexterous means by which Munro encourages the reader towards some significant detail, and the reward will be, in reviewer Michael Frank's words, “a sense of excitement and surprise that comes when they finally grasp the pattern she has been working all along” (170).

The reader who approaches the conclusion of “Corrie” may or may not have expected the revelation in the final pages, but I believe Munro does provide several clues, reasons to suspect the motivation and honesty of the deceiving male protagonist. When Corrie finally realises she has been thoroughly duped and exploited by her lover, she feels “a cavity everywhere, most notably in her chest” (“Corrie,” *Dear Life* 173). Most readers would, I imagine, feel sympathy for the victim, but might also wonder why the realisation took so long, for there are ubiquitous cavities in her lover's flimsy, hastily concocted fraud. These are discernible in the many passages of intradiegetic focalization, and traceable in various instances of foreshadowing and dramatic irony that permeate the story. It is with how Munro traces the treachery on the other side of Corrie's dalliness that this essay is concerned, and I draw on the disciplines of literary linguistics and narratology in my analysis.

Like the female protagonist Stella in “Lichen,” Corrie Carlton is initially presented as an object of the male gaze. In the very first scene, at the dinner table where she sits with her wealthy father and his invited guest, an architect engaged to repair the Anglican Church tower, she is at the mercy of two captious evaluations delivered by male characters (“Corrie,” *Dear Life* 154-6). The first is conveyed in the opening lines, in her

father's pseudo-jocular, derogatory assessment of what he considers are his daughter's dwindling marital prospects. He reminds the architect, Howard Ritchie, of the dangers of having "the money concentrated all in the one family" (154) while bemoaning the fact that Corrie is fast becoming unmarriageable because she is in her mid-twenties. The second judgement on her is revealed via free indirect discourse, when Munro switches from external focalization to internal, enabling the reader to share Ritchie's thoughts. His judgement on the woman is quite vicious, like that of the character David on Stella, in "Lichen." In his eyes, Corrie is plainly "Not a soft woman. Not much meat on the bone" and although he acknowledges she may have a "quick tongue," he expects her to "have a conventional mind" (155). He concludes that she is "A spoiled rich miss. Unmannerly" (156). The irregular sentences, informal idioms and emotive descriptors are all markers of Free Indirect Speech, a device sustained for some length to leave the reader in no doubt as to the character's unflattering opinions. Corrie is swiftly evaluated in negative terms.

In the space of three pages of narrative, then, the female protagonist's appearance, intellect and demeanour are subject to a hypercritical, objectifying male gaze. It is worth noting, too, the recurrence, in this opening scene, of vocabulary associated with the marketplace, a patriarchal marketplace where women are spoken and thought of as commodities, "*as utilitarian objects and bearers of value*" (Irigaray 175, italics in the original). Corrie's father warns of the dangers of "money concentrated" in one family, clearly suggesting his daughter should be attracting the wealth of her social peers. The narrator implies Carlton has considered his dinner guest as a suitor for his daughter, but he is "already *equipped* with a young wife and family, as [he] had immediately found out" (155, emphasis added). The word "equipped" conveys the sense of a necessary acquisition. Further use of free indirect discourse at the end of the opening scene consolidates the impression that Ritchie sees marriage in the same light: he concedes that, as compensation for Corrie's faults, "there was money, and to some men that never became tiresome" (157). Ritchie's reductive observation is, of course, weighted with dramatic irony, foreshadowing as it does his deceitful exploitation. One could argue, moreover, that in his speculative surmising about Corrie's future, he ironically identifies himself when he imagines that "[s]ome creepy fortune hunter was bound to snap her up" (157). This unconscious self-characterisation struck me as humorous.

The reader's sympathies are aligned with Corrie at the outset, for Munro presents her as the object of dismissive appraisal. It is reasonable, furthermore, to argue that the writer works to ensure the character of Howard Ritchie does not endear himself, for, by the use of FID, she draws attention to some unattractive attitudes and opinions he holds about women. At the end of the narrative, when Corrie and the reader come to terms with the revelations of Ritchie's lies and his systematic theft, few readers, surely, would be taken aback.

That Ritchie tends towards indirection is evident in how he reacts to Corrie's lameness, which he alludes to in a circumlocutory, insensitive way. Indeed, the first exchange of conversation between the two, when Corrie leads Ritchie on a walk down to the river behind her house, could serve to illustrate how Grice's Co-operative Principle, fundamental to normal communication, can be flouted. As she walks ahead,

[H]e was able to see what he hadn't been sure of before. She was lame in one leg. "Isn't it a steep climb back up?" he asked.

“I’m not an invalid.”

“I see you’ve got a rowboat,” he said, meaning that as a partway apology. (156)

In his discussion of conditions governing conversation, and its context, Grice points out that most talk exchanges “do not consist of a succession of disconnected remarks” but are characteristically “co-operative efforts [where] each participant recognises in them, at least to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes” (26). Grice argues that the co-operative principle is further governed by particular maxims that he distinguishes as those of quantity, quality, relation and manner. These amount to what linguist Katie Wales describes as a “kind of sincerity principle” encapsulated in the advice, “Say what you mean and mean what you say” (84). Interlocutors should make their contributions as informative as necessary, and they should strive to be truthful, relevant and clear. The maxims of both relation and manner are contravened in the passage from Munro’s story. The inference Ritchie makes, that Corrie is lame, does not need to be expressed at all, for it is irrelevant in the context, since the woman has led her companion down to the river and presumably intends to walk back up. Ritchie’s subsequent apology is described by the narrator as “partway,” not entirely sincere, rather oblique.

The indirection suggested in this first exchange of conversation is confirmed soon afterwards. Corrie flies off to Egypt on holiday, sending to Ritchie’s place of work facetious postcards, to which he “*did not intend* to reply but he did.” On her return, he “drove to her town for an *unnecessary* inspection of the church steeple” (158, emphasis added). This information is conveyed by the external narrator, but in the narration are faint traces of the focalized male protagonist’s attitude towards Corrie, one not marked by affection or respect: he drives to the house aware that she has returned from Egypt, “but not knowing whether she would be at home or off on some other jaunt” (158). The noun “jaunt,” originally referring to a “tiring journey,” is now used only ironically, according to *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1441), and the phrase “some other jaunt” strikes me as flippancy, even sardonic. That it is chosen in preference to a neutral description like “another trip” suggests the character’s resentment. It is an example of “the speck of characterizing vocabulary” (Ferriss 179) which helps the reader to distinguish between instances of intradiegetic and extradiegetic focalization when they are blended so subtly in narrative. As Per Winther observes: “Sorting out which passages are rendered through the perspective of the narrator vis-à-vis that of one of the characters can mean a lot for the interpretation of a text” (205).

After they have begun their affair, Ritchie assures Corrie he is not “a regular seducer,” adding that, as testimony to his virtue, he was brought up in a religious household, and “still believed in God, to some extent” (159). This fact is kept “secret from his wife” as she might mock him, “being very left-wing” (159). By Munro’s textual arrangement, punctuation and lexical choices, the sincerity of this declaration is subtly undermined. The denial of serial seduction is succeeded by two statements that betray Ritchie’s disingenuousness: the comma after “God” somehow qualifies the already tentative belief he professes to hold, while the disclosure that he keeps this belief secret from his partner weakens his claim to trustfulness. The excuse he offers for his secrecy – that his left-wing wife would mock him – is not convincing, either.

In the account of the supposed blackmail letter Ritchie’s deviousness emerges clearly, via those “clues that are not even really clues” (Miller 43). It is worth noting the care Munro takes to accord considerable importance to the character of the supposed black-

mailer, Lillian Wolfe, before Ritchie invents her role in his scheme. The reader learns first of all that she has carried out numerous chores in the Carlton house, as their maid, but has lately left to find a “city job,” encouraged by Corrie, who has given her money for typing lessons so “she could better herself” (159). Munro lets us know Corrie thinks the girl is “too smart” for housework and tells her so. Immediately preceding the male protagonist’s account of her as blackmailer, the narrator provides evidence of Lillian Wolfe’s reliability and her smartness; she is thus presented favourably, as someone deserving of encouragement. With regard to narrative continuation, she is a character the reader would expect to encounter again after her first brief appearance. In *Narrative Progression in the Short Story*, Michael Toolan asserts that evoking a central character early in the action is a key feature of narrativity; the evoking is achieved initially by identifying the character, then mentioning him/her several times, by proper name and by subsequent pronoun reference (114–5). Thereafter, of course, character indices emerge, in discourse, as well as in the diegesis. Given the narrator’s positive depiction of Lillian Wolfe in the narrative’s early stages, it is strange, and hard to accept, that she should suddenly turn out to be a cunning blackmailer, unmasked, moreover, by a character whose portrayal is less than affirming.

I wonder why Munro changed this character’s name for the version collected in *Dear Life*. In *The New Yorker* version, published on October 11th, 2010, and also in the version of “Corrie” included in *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories* 2012, she is called Sadie, which is usually an informal version of Sarah. The hypocoristic¹ name sounds quite homely: perhaps Munro considered the changed name more sophisticated, better suited to a young woman her employer thinks too smart for domestic work. At any rate, she is given a whole new personality, when Ritchie decides to implicate her in his scheme.

The extradiegetic or external narrator explains that Ritchie is reunited with Lillian (having met her when visiting Corrie), when she appears as a maid at a dinner party to which Ritchie and his wife are invited. This account quickly becomes a passage of intradiegetic focalization, in which the reader can infer more of the subject’s motivation. Corrie is told that the dinner party takes place at the home of “some newly important people in Kitchener,” (*Dear Life* 159) and the fact that Ritchie should so specifically describe these hosts sustains the impression of him as a social aspirant, who views people from an instrumental perspective. Moreover, it becomes clear that he had not, initially, planned to tell Corrie about the occasion “because he hoped it would become unimportant” (159). In the two earlier versions of “Corrie,” the main clause preceding the above reads: “Howard did not tell Corrie about the dinner right away” (*The New Yorker* 96; *PEN/O* 397). In the passage in *Dear Life*, however, the assertion is qualified: “Howard said that he had not told Corrie about the dinner party right away” (159). By the insertion of the reporting clause, “Howard said,” Munro indicates that the version of events belongs to Ritchie, and does not have the authority of extradiegetic narration. Charles May observes, in his online short story blog, that “Munro makes a minor change in the *Dear Life* version to remind us that Ritchie’s story is the only account we have” (January 7, 2013).

The passage of free indirect discourse incorporates the reported imaginary written words of the character Lillian Wolfe, Ritchie’s blackmailing maid. The remarkable

1. Hypocoristic is a linguistic term for a pet name, an endearing or euphemistic name.

passage in which these different discourses are clustered reminds me of the telephone booth scene in "Lichen," where David tries to call Dina, and, in excited agitation while waiting for the connection, invents voices he might use, and a wonderfully comic polyphony ensues (63-4). Here, the male protagonist invents written words in a non-existent letter he claims has been sent by Lillian Wolfe to his office address. It contains, he explains, her intention to tell his wife of the affair. This he presents as a question: "Would his wife be interested in getting this information?" He embellishes the account with a reference to the "silver-fox collar" on his wife's coat, a detail he says Lillian Wolfe has particularly noted (*Dear Life* 160).

The ellipsis Munro inserts after this account of the letter serves to draw attention to Corrie's initial, condescending scepticism about Lillian's ability to recognise such detail, to which Ritchie insists "I'm sure" (160). This certainty is instantly undermined by the clamorous admission that "He had burned the letter at once, had felt contaminated by it" (160) which Munro isolates in a paragraph. Now any attentive reader would ask a couple of questions at this point: why would someone immediately destroy such a threatening letter, when there is a co-accused involved? And how is Ritchie able to recall specific, strangely eccentric details when the letter is instantly destroyed? The disclosure that the letter has been burned is another cavity in this character's credibility.

Munro encourages the reader to suspect Ritchie believes the blackmail scare sufficient reason for ending their affair. This she does by means of free indirect discourse – the thoughts – of her female protagonist, from whose perspective events have so far been unseen. Now, in the aftermath of Ritchie's shocking disclosure, Corrie tentatively proposes acceding to the blackmail demands with her money, fearing his reluctance:

For what if he said no? No, I can't let you. No, it's a sign that we have to stop. She was sure that there'd been something like that in his voice, and in his face. (161)

The above is a blend of what she is thinking, and what she imagines her lover might say, judging by his expression and the tone of his voice. The use of the past perfective, in "there'd been" indicates she is recalling how he looked and spoke *before* her offer to pay. By making Corrie the subject of focalization, Munro allows the reader to sense not only the woman's uncertainty but her needy desperation.

Once Ritchie agrees to her suggestion, he "was able to speak practically and he remembered another thing from [Lillian's] letter" – the money had to be in bills, not checks. This casually remembered detail strengthens this reader's suspicion of Ritchie's duplicity, especially when the narrator explains that "He spoke without looking up, as if about a business deal" (162). The complex subordinator, "as if," introduces another comparison a little later in the narrative, when the narrator describes how the twice yearly payment becomes a ritual to the couple. Ritchie accepts the bills from Corrie with a "sigh of acquiescence, as if he had been reminded of a chore" (163). By repeating the same syntactic construction, and by choosing analogies similar in meaning, Munro emphasises how the male protagonist regards the arrangement as nothing other than a banal transaction. And it is a business transaction, of course, as the allusions to changes in his circumstances, and his fortunes suggest.

The narrator makes overt reference to these changes in the account of how Corrie fills her time in the years after her father's death. His shoe factory had been taken over, then finally closed, and her plans for a small industrial museum on the site came to nothing, because she had not sought permission from the owners. The narrator ex-

plains that “[if] Howard had not taken his family to Europe the previous summer, when she embarked on this project, he could have looked at the agreement and she would have been saved a lot of trouble” (165). Exactly how news of this European trip is conveyed is interesting. The conditional subordinate clause is placed at the start of the sentence, preceding a second subordinate clause before the matrix clause appears; the initial clause is thus fronted, and its import is further enhanced by the commas marking the clause boundaries. The pauses they create ensure that the reader is made aware of the European holiday and also of the consequences contingent on its being taken. There are several subsequent pieces of information the reader can infer as evidence of the greater financial comfort Ritchie and his family enjoy: a holiday to Spain, a “birthday surprise” for his wife, a move from Kitchener to Toronto (165), the summer cottage in Muskoka (171), and these encourage the impression that Corrie’s payments are supporting her lover’s successful, solidly respectable family life.

Corrie’s world, the narrator implies, seems narrower, more humdrum, despite her wealth, and, tiring of living in her “big and empty house,” (164) she decides to occupy herself with reviving and administering the town’s library. The couple meet less often, choosing to stay overnight in motels, where the chance of detection has apparently grown less of a threat, as the external narrator explains. As in the opening scene of the narrative, when Ritchie critically assesses Corrie, free indirect discourse emerges to express the male protagonist’s pre-emptive strategies should they meet anyone in these locations: “He could have introduced her as a cousin without making any impression – a lame relation he had thought to drop in on. [...] And who would have gone after a middle-aged mistress with a dragging foot?” (166). The disrespectful vocabulary is reminiscent of the pejorative tone evident in Ritchie’s first appearance. The sentences that follow these musings are a curious blend of discourses, intradiegetic focalization and the voices of imagined witnesses to the couple’s liaison, expressed in the informal, speculative utterances typical of gossip:

Nobody would have stored that information up to spill at a dangerous moment.
We met Howard up at Bruce Beach with his sister, was it? He was looking good. His
cousin, maybe. A limp?
It wouldn’t have seemed worth the trouble. (166)

In the polyphonic passage, the first sentence stands out for me. It is a significant clue for the reader to mull over. I believe it can be interpreted as an inadvertent refutation of the existence of any blackmailer, expressed with unknowing irony via the free indirect thought of the focalized protagonist. The sentence can be read, in the context, as a statement of incredulity, that anyone would be foolish enough to think the couple lovers; the second, more literal meaning accords greater prominence to the pronoun “nobody,” discounting the possibility of *any* person likely to extort with “that information.” That person does not exist; s/he is a *nobody*.

The narrator recounts how Corrie reads in the local paper of Lillian Wolfe’s untimely death at the age of forty-six; how she reacts with astonishment, and, restless with curiosity, shuts her library to watch the funeral-goers as they head back after the service to the church hall. She is spotted as she walks by, and invited into the gathering. There she learns how Lillian was cherished and adored by her fellow church members, one of whom is Lillian’s last employer, a woman wearing a “string of modest genuine pearls” (170) who tells Corrie how Lillian had always spoken highly of her. This scene performs

several functions in Munro's narrative aesthetic: it works as a rich slice of social documentary, depicting how the small Canadian town puts on "its best show of liveliness" for the funeral ceremony (168); it is important in terms of narrative dynamism, for in the substantial detail of setting, and the numerous instances of dialogue, it considerably slows the pace, so that Lillian Wolfe's popularity in the community, indeed, her saintliness, can be unequivocally established.

It is interesting, moreover, in terms of what it reveals about the character of Corrie. What puzzles me about this scene is how unanimous the funeral-goers are in their surprise at Corrie's absence from the service. This reaction suggests that Lillian Wolfe, no doubt grateful for the typing lessons, must have regularly and widely extolled her former employer's qualities. That Corrie, without pausing or checking, should have believed the maid capable of blackmail seems like a profound misjudgement of character. It is noteworthy, too, that although Corrie seems to be known and welcomed at the reception, she herself "couldn't think of anyone's name" and makes no attempt to establish any connections (170), not even with Lillian's recent employer, whom Corrie, it is suggested, would consider her social equal. Individual members of the church community are identified by items of clothing: "the greeting person's flowered dress" (169); the "woman with the teapot," the "lady with the pearls" (171), the disembodied details suggesting their distance from her world and experience.

The warm affirmations evident in this scene provide a stark contrast with the anxieties and doubts that characterize the succeeding one, when Corrie considers the implications of her new-found knowledge about Lillian Wolfe. In vain she tries to compose a letter to Ritchie, telling him in a fit of forced jubilation that the "days of the Blackmail are over," before reflecting on the "queasy feeling, the never-quite-safeness" of the payments that "had made her unhappy" (170). But even as she agitates over the timing of Lillian's death, whether it would have obviated Ritchie's collection of the August payment, Corrie still does not contemplate the possibility she has been deceived.

Munro postpones the realisation, inviting the reader to wonder why the protagonist continues to resist the truth. The epiphany – when she does at last recognise and acknowledge the terrible deception – is sudden, coming to her in her sleep, and it is dramatically presented:

There is no news to give him. No news, because there never was any.

No news about Lillian because Lillian doesn't matter and she never did. (173)

A high proportion of the words in the passage above, more than a quarter of them, express negation. The certitude of the negation is intensified by schemes of repetition, such as anaphora and anadiplosis, and by a preponderance of monosyllabic and mainly functional words. These devices make the sentences sound starkly final, unassailable in their dismissal, recalling, for me, the earlier statement, "Nobody would have stored that information up to spill at a dangerous moment." Agency is discounted in both instances: there is no blackmailer; Lillian was and is of no relevance.

Munro uses free indirect discourse to enable the reader to see how Corrie introduces herself to "this new idea" – the idea of her lover's long sustained deception and her own complicity in it – and how she deals with it. She feels "a cavity everywhere, most notably in her chest," but has to introduce herself anew to "the current reality," with the briefest letter to Ritchie (173). Charles May opines that, at this point in the narrative, the reader might reasonably ask why Corrie does not just leave her man when she realises

she has been deceived. He argues that, if Munro's story were "a novel about a real-life situation," this kind of question would be appropriate (*Critical Insights* 6). He maintains, however, that the story is not about "such issues" since Munro's work is "not a realistic novel" but is, rather, "about the affair as a universal, classic phenomenon that survives on secrecy and time" (7). What kind of criteria does May think require to be met in the depiction of the "paradigm of a woman" and the "paradigmatic married man having an affair"? (7) I do not accept, first of all, his insistence on the distinctions between short and long fiction, nor do I wish to be discouraged from regarding the character of Ritchie as a deceiving "cad" (May's term) or the character of Corrie as misguided and needy. I find it difficult to think of either in terms of abstract paradigms, representative components of some "classic phenomenon." As an engaged and attentive reader, I do want to "get inside the head of the man to see him scheme [and] inside the head of Corrie to see her suffer" (May, *Narrative* 241), in order to understand more fully the character's motivation in this particularly terse, cryptic narrative. In my own research on Munro's work, I have always set great store by reader response, reader engagement, reader empathy, welcoming the insights of like-minded academics who study and analyse what exactly it is in her fiction, in her use of "certain kinds of language and not other kinds, that is instrumental in the reader's sense of emotional immersion" (Toolan, *Narrative* 211). Why do Munro's fictive lives seem to me "so authentic, so subtle, so *felt*"? (Frank 169, emphasis in the original). A perusal of the numerous responses to Charles E. May's online comments on "Corrie," in particular on how the story ends, reveals the extent to which readers have become engaged with the characters, reflecting on the nature of the lovers' relationship, and on each partner's commitment to it in the aftermath of Corrie's discovery.

There are *three* different endings to the story which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 2010. A second ending is found in the version of "Corrie" anthologized in *The PEN/O Henry Prize Stories* 2012, and a third ending concludes the story collected in *Dear Life*. The changes that Munro effects in these three different endings tell us much about her narrative strategies. In discussion of these three endings, I argue that the presentation of Corrie in the latest is more positive, in keeping with the generally affirmative nature of the whole collection.

In the earliest version of the story, Corrie believes she is capable of "shaping up another possibility" (*The New Yorker* 101) after her discovery, but the possibility is limited to saying and doing nothing about what she has learned: she will resign herself to continuing to pay the money, reasoning that what she and Ritchie have, namely their affair, "demands payment" which she can afford. The last sentence of the *New Yorker* version has Corrie descend "gingerly" to her kitchen, "making everything fit into its proper place" (101). Corrie thus accepts not only her guilt, but the burden for it, and is content to allow her lover to reap the benefits of an outrageous deceit. The fact that she proceeds "gingerly" suggests that she does not feel very confident about the strength of the new reality she is shaping. In the second version of "Corrie," Munro makes her ending decidedly more ambiguous. Again there is the mention of "shaping up another possibility" (*PEN/O* 409) but what is shaped appears far from certain, and the instances of modality in Corrie's musings are notable. She thinks she "could say a thing that would destroy them" or she "could say right now, what does it matter?" She "supposes" that one day there "will have to be an end" to their affair, but, significantly, she

accepts that “if what they had – what they have – demands payment she is the one to pay” (409). As in the *New Yorker* version, there is reference to the need to make payment – to atone for her guilt, her feelings about the “never-quite-safeness” (*Dear Life* 172) of the affair’s continuance. Once more, Munro employs the image of “making everything fit into its proper place” with her protagonist descending gingerly into the kitchen, but then suddenly, she has her think, in the middle of her breakfast, of escaping. The eight concluding sentences of the story are brief and irregular, a mixture of questions, exclamatives and reaction signals to her thoughts, arranged in a blocked formation that looks like a set of instructions in some desperate emergency. The last three lines read:

Fly away, why don’t you, right now? Fly away.
What rot.
Yes. Do it. (PEN/O 409)

I doubt whether many readers would believe Corrie capable of flying away at this point. The fact that she is considering flight can be taken, maybe, as an indication of her anger, but it is not any kind of solution, not when there is no sign of explanation, or, more importantly, any justification for the flight. The desultory nature of her thoughts suggests that no firm decision will emerge from them.

I believe the *Dear Life* ending leaves Corrie in a much stronger position in her relationship. The reference to her “shaping another possibility” is gone: what follows after her introduction to the “current reality” is radically different. How Munro presents the final image of her protagonist, as she confronts the truth, and decides on how to deal with it, is stylistically distinctive, for the sentences are elliptical, even telegraphic, conveying impatience, and anger. She sends “[t]he briefest note, the letter tossed,” informing Ritchie of Lillian’s death, marking it “[s]pecial delivery, who cares?” (*Dear Life* 173). The fact that she takes less care shows she has grown bolder, and is prepared to take risks, like the prospect of not hearing from Ritchie again. But she does receive a reply, intended to reassure, “All well now, be glad. Soon.” The final sentences of the narrative read: “So that’s the way they’re going to leave it. Too late to do another thing. When there could have been worse, much worse” (173).

The irregular syntax, the paucity of content-bearing words and the deliberate vagueness of reference create the ambiguity that often characterizes the endings in Munro’s stories. What, if anything, does the pronoun “it” refer to? It could be taken as a direct reference to the business of the regular payments, which will cease, when, by contrast, in Munro’s earlier versions of the story they continue to be paid. It is possible to read the word “it” as a substitute for the lover’s relationship, but that interpretation is undermined by the acknowledgement that “there could have been worse,” the “worse” being understood as the ending of the affair. It makes greater sense to read “it” as the kind of completely empty or non-referring pronoun one finds in idioms, where “it” just means current circumstances, or “life in general” (Quirk *et al* 349). Lillian Wolfe’s death has wrought irrevocable changes for Corrie, exposing not only Ritchie’s deception, but making her confront her self-delusion: there is no palliative for such an outcome, as it is “too late” for remediation. The conclusion, then, can be understood in terms of acceptance, the acceptance of compromise Corrie has to reach to avoid what *would* be worse.

By revising her ending of the previous versions of “Corrie” I believe Munro strengthens her female protagonist’s position in the relationship with her lover. She is now equipped with much greater knowledge, and who knows what bargaining powers

she can wield with this knowledge. There is in his brief, optimistic response to Corrie's note evidence that Ritchie is accepting a new context for their affair, freed from the burden of deceit. He will continue the relationship, because he needs her. Another reason why this conclusion is the most satisfactory of the three endings is that the question of any kind of payment for pleasure is removed, and the partners are on an equal footing, with each harbouring the same secret.

The reader is presented, for most of the narrative, with a female character weakened by inadvertence and ingenuousness, in thrall to a man whose systematic fraud has sustained his comfort and status. From the outset he is portrayed as an opportunist, whose integrity and motivation are suspect. I have argued in this essay that Munro encourages her reader to examine the authenticity of the character and his persuasive lies. This she does in "Corrie" by carefully inserting clues for the attentive reader to discern and mull over; for instance, she accords salience to textual segments so their import can be reappraised; she chooses words that are ambiguous or incongruous in their contexts, and thus invites another interpretation; she shifts the perspective to make space for the external narrator's authoritative comment, and, more potently, she allows the uninterrupted flow of free indirect discourse in which the male character undermines his own credibility. Corrie's knowledge is postponed until the final pages of the narrative, but what she now knows about her lover may well sustain and protect her – "a pause, a lost heartbeat, a harsh little break in the flow of the days and nights as she keeps them going" ("Lichen" 55).

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