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Alice Munro's Legacy: The "Finale" of *Dear Life*

In the four final pieces of her latest (and possibly last) book – *Dear Life*, Alice Munro returns to the stories of her childhood that informed her early writing, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) in particular. This essay offers an analysis of the "Finale" as an example of legacy writing, and especially what might be viewed as its subgenre: a writer's legacy.

In a life as intimately intertwined with writing as Alice Munro's has been, the decision to stop writing is a matter of life and death, which perhaps explains the tentativeness of her declarations concerning retirement. Despite her superior narrative skills and her right to make decisions about her life, Alice Munro does not usurp the divine, or at least priestly, power to bind and to loose on earth or in heaven. Thus instead of making definitive statements, she says "probably" and "maybe." Nevertheless, her latest book, and especially its four final pieces form a legacy of her life, her final autobiographical endeavour that supplements the academic and personal accounts of the two acknowledged biographers: Robert Thacker and Sheila Munro, respectively, as well as her own 1981 memoir "Working for a Living" (which is also part of *The View from Castle Rock*). Robert Thacker disclaims being an "official biographer," even though he admits that his book "benefited enormously from its subject's cooperation" (572). Sheila Munro admits that the idea of her mother's biography came from the subject herself, but the memoirist had to find an appropriate form and tone that followed emotional logic, rather than strict chronology (261-3). Although ostensibly slim in comparison with the two semi-official biographies and unadorned with visual material, the sketches in Munro's latest book, "not quite stories" and yet reminiscent in both form and content of some of her earlier narratives, constitute – as I would like to argue in this essay – the four cornerstones of both writing life and life writing. In this sense, they become a form of a writer's legacy, highlighting such faculties as heightened perception, altered states of mind, receptiveness to voices, and instinctive love of life.

Legacy

Alice Munro has been threatening to retire since 2006, but at that time her long-time editor, Douglas Gibson, dismissed the news with the claim that "Alice is a born writer, and she's not going to stop writing" (n.p.). He was right, as he gladly recounts in his own essay. Within the six years following her first official goodbye to the writing life, Munro published *Too Much Happiness* (2009), *New Selected Stories* (2011), and her latest *Dear Life* (2012). Commenting on her interview with the *National Post* in June 2013, however, Douglas Gibson no longer felt he could disclaim her rather tentative protestation "I'm probably not going to write anymore" (Munro, "Interview with Mark Medley" n.p.). On that occasion she justified her decision with a claim that "[i]t's nice to go out with a bang" and then gave the additional explanation: "Not that I didn't love writing, but I think you do get to a stage where you sort of think about your life in a different way. And perhaps, when you're my age, you don't wish to be alone as much as a writer has

to be” (“Interview with Mark Medley” n.p.). In the interview which replaced the Nobel Lecture, Alice Munro referred to her retirement as “a decision that I wanted to behave like the rest of the world” (“Nobel Lecture” n.p.) rather than living alternately in two worlds: the “secret” world and the “normal” one. In a short conversation with Adam Smith, following the announcement of the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature on 10 October 2013, Alice Munro admitted, however, that the great honour “may change [her] mind” about retirement (“Telephone Interview” n.p.).

Despite the joy and the spontaneous declaration expressed in the interview with Adam Smith, *Dear Life* remains Alice Munro’s latest book and thus a farewell to her readers. What gives the book its sense of finality is the last part which follows the first ten stories and especially the title “Finale,” which is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the ending of some grand artistic endeavour: an opera or a concert. This title is not mentioned in the table of contents, but it appears in the text itself, following the story entitled “Dolly.” The word “Finale” precedes a brief note which explains the authorial intention and defines the genre of the texts: “The final four works in this book,” Munro writes, “are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life” (*Dear Life* 255).

What is most striking in these four pieces is their preoccupation with early life. While intense interest in childhood and youth was obvious in Munro’s early volumes, such as *Dance of the Happy Shades* or *Lives of Girls and Women*, the prominence they are given in her latest works is puzzling. Does life and life’s work indeed come full circle from childhood to childhood? Does old age become almost one with infancy, both stages in life being equally ambivalent: either gravely underestimated or else pathetically overestimated? Munro’s vivid recreation of early life raises other inevitable doubts as well, very much like those occasioned, for example, by Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*: is it possible at all to reconstruct in old age not only people, objects, and landscapes with such accurate detail, but also names, one’s innermost past anxieties and desires and one’s state of consciousness? What is truth and what is invention in such accounts? Munro’s interest in early life or her view of childhood as the time of intense experiencing of the world is by no means exceptional among ageing authors. One can find it also in Henry James’s late autobiographical texts which, like Munro’s “Finale,” do not bring the reader much further than the author’s early adulthood.

It is doubtful that Alice Munro intends to inscribe herself in the age-old but basically amateurish tradition of legacy writing, or writing down of deathbed thoughts, which in Anglophone cultures dates back at least to the sixteenth century. But viewing her final pieces from this perspective seems nevertheless justified by the context of her conscious and emphatic leave-taking. The tradition of legacy writing has indeed been revived during the past few decades in numerous books and on websites addressed to a very wide readership and offering practical advice on how to keep diaries as a form of therapy and as a heritage passed on to posterity. The revived tradition of legacy writing does not hinge any more on the different status of male and female authors. Old age and disability are instead the main causes of marginalization experienced by men and women alike. Like the sixteenth-century legacy writers discussed by Jennifer Heller in *The Mother’s Legacy in Early Modern England*, Munro is, however, aware of gender distinctions when pronouncing her last words intended for the public.

In her book Jennifer Heller studies "formal, social, and personal dimensions of the genre" of the mother's legacy that "emerged in late sixteenth-century England and flourished in cycles through late seventeenth" (2). She admits that legacy writers differ widely in terms of social status, religious belief, and age. By the same token, their "legacies take a wide range of forms, including letters, prayers, translations, dialogues, family histories, and collections of precepts" (2). Heller points out further what all legacy writers have in common despite their diversity: they "adopt an explicitly maternal voice," even though they acknowledge that giving advice is basically "a masculine activity" (4). Thus, when fashioning themselves as advice-givers, legacy writers upset the accepted hierarchy of gender roles. At the same time they are careful to "create a newly configured form of authority out of existing early modern discourses [humanist arguments, biblical models, and discourses of biology], even though those discourses did not generally sanction feminine power and knowledge" (4).

None of the genre characteristics distinguished by Heller apply fully and without qualification to the pieces included in Alice Munro's "Finale." One can hardly claim that "they feature a maternal voice, they are written to children, they are cast as deathbed advice, and they provide religious counsel" (Heller 2), even though elements of this definition are present in Munro's stories in a typically fragmented, inverted, and distorted manner. A female infant, child and teenager do appear in her final pieces, the maternal voice is heard at different stages of the narrator's life, and death looms large, taking away or threatening the young as well as the old. Munro dispenses, however, with deathbed advice and straightforward religious counsel, even though the last words of "Dear Life" (and therefore of the "Finale") savour of both: "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do – we do it all the time" (319).

Heller characterizes legacy writers as "liminal women," who "[w]ithout exception [...] describe their texts as their last words" and for whom "the deathbed is a rhetorical platform" (5). The "act of composition" is thus a response to fears experienced by a writer who views herself as "a dead woman among the living" (qtd. in Heller 5). The author need not be "literally dying," but "the logic of final words makes concrete the writer's beliefs and wishes," drawing on various traditions, such as the *ars moriendi* and the *danse macabre* (Heller 5). If the legacy writer fashions herself as a dying mother, the reader is cast as a vulnerable child in need of both motherly counsel and spiritual consolation. Even though elements of the *danse macabre* may be detected in the "Finale" in Sadie's alleged posthumous wink and in Mrs. Netterfield's investigation of the narrator's home, even though Sadie's juvenile words of wisdom appear in retrospect as a form of legacy and the mother's retelling of old stories may be seen as related to the *ars moriendi*, Alice Munro does not assign roles to the speaker and the reader. In her "Finale," the mother's legacy is embedded in the daughter's narrative, and the legacy is thus always someone else's.

In the following sections I discuss each of the pieces in the order of their appearance in the book, pointing to the motifs and elements that may be viewed as legacy writing. In an interview with Stefan Åsberg, Alice Munro says that she "worked in a way that comforted and pleased [her]self more than in a way that followed some kind of idea" and that she would like readers "to find not so much inspiration as great enjoyment" (n.p.). She wants "people to enjoy [her] books, to think of them as related

to their own lives in ways" (n.p.). The enjoyment she offers in the four final pieces of *Dear Life* seems, however, for both the author and the reader, to rest on the belief in the ethical responsibility for one's life and writing alike, especially in view of the inevitable end of both.

Perception

"The Eye" tells the story of a five-year-old girl who is confronted with what seems to her a sudden appearance of younger siblings, a baby boy and, a year later, a baby girl. Munro expertly captures the anxiety of the child who, on the one hand, suddenly begins to receive less attention than before and, on the other, becomes subject to aggressive socialization at home. Her mother tries to teach her not only to express but also to feel emotions that the child does not experience, such as love for her younger brother and sister, shyness in relation to Jesus, and fondness of Red River cereal ("The Eye" 258). The girl is thus taught to overcome her natural sense of jealousy and rivalry with her siblings, and to appreciate both spiritual and bodily nourishment that is no longer embodied, but instead recommended, by her mother. The first turning point in the girl's life comes with the discovery of the dissociation of her feelings from their depiction offered by her mother. The way her mother describes her feelings is a misinterpretation at best and manipulation at worst. In an attempt to avoid conflict, however, the girl resolves to give up speaking her mind and correcting her mother. She also acquires the habit of making or confirming claims that she does not identify as her own (262).

The relationship between mother and daughter (a prime theme of Munro's fiction) is then complicated by the appearance of the third party. It is worth noting that at this stage the siblings do not yet count as parties. The mother's territory shrinks when Sadie comes to work for the family. Sadie's age remains a mystery because, as the narrator admits, "I didn't make easy judgments about ages then. People were either children or grown-up and I thought her a grown-up. Maybe she was sixteen, maybe eighteen or twenty" (260-1). Sadie is certainly younger than the girl's mother, and thus she stands between the two. The mother withdraws to take care of the babies and Sadie spends a lot of time with the family's eldest daughter, filling the girl's life and imagination completely. She is all the more fascinating as she also has a life outside the house; Sadie is a celebrity in the local radio station, where she "play[s] her guitar" and sings not only "the opening welcome song" (258) and the "Good-bye" song, but also other songs "that were requested, as well as some she picked out herself" (259). Sadie is a celebrity, but a local one. The radio for which she sings her sad songs "about loneliness and grief" (259) is just a local station, and Sadie who speaks local dialect (e.g., "youse" [260], a substandard equivalent of the pronoun "you," usually referring to more than one person) is just a country girl. Dances are a big part of her life, too, but unlike other girls, she goes there "[b]y herself and for herself" (262), she pays her own way, and returns home alone (262). The dancing arrangements in the establishments she frequents vary between the town and the country (261-2), an observation which suggests that Sadie inhabits a liminal space between two worlds: the urban and the rural. She is a boundary-crosser in other ways as well: she seems suspended between childhood and adulthood, submissive femininity and masculine independence.

The main lesson the young girl gleans from her relationship with her mother is that it is impossible to see eye to eye with an adult, which encourages her to develop the stra-

regies of evasion and mimicry. The triangulation of the mother-daughter relationship with the arrival of Sadie brings with it the next lesson about the possibility of creating a world of one's own around a voice that has interesting stories to tell and sings sad songs on the radio. It is not necessary, as the girl is relieved to find out, to see eye to eye with others. It is no wonder that the girl's parents are worried and then hopeful that things will change for the better when school begins. The girl is not quite sure what exactly they are talking about and the reader is not sure if they are talking to her or over her head.

The reader actually shares the girl's disorientation as one day she is being transported somewhere in her mother's car. She is dressed as if for school, but they arrive at a house that "has no driveway or even a sidewalk. It's decent but quite plain" (264). The narrator admits eventually that the young protagonist knew where she was going. The reader may hence assume that her fear of "any dead body" (267) was the reason why the girl preferred to be unaware and to feel confused. She knows there is a coffin in the room, but blaming her lack of experience, she chooses to take it for "[a] shelf to put flowers on [...] or a closed piano" (268). The protagonist eventually overcomes her fear of a dead body and looks at Sadie in snatches, peeking at her with one eye at a time for a brief moment (269). It is no wonder that employing this strategy (a prototype of the literary point-of-view technique), she notices a movement of Sadie's eyelid. She is not surprised. Nor does she report the discovery. She accepts the playful wink as a message that "was completely for me" (269). However, in the final sentence of the account, the narrator already announces that she will soon cease to believe in such "unnatural display" (270).

Alice Munro recreates the child's way of looking at the threatening liminality of a dead person (present and absent at the same time, ostensibly lifeless, but perhaps also still alive in some sense) and shows that perception is selective, always fraught with distortion and illusion, especially if coloured by emotion, and particularly if it is a basic emotion, such as fear. The frightened girl casts furtive glances at the corpse, looking with one eye at a time. The way she is looking allows her to see movement where none is to be expected. The imagined eye contact creates a kind of illusionary and elusive secret bond that turns the girl into a liminal figure, too. The death of Sadie coincides with the end of her own preschool interaction with her social environment. At the funeral, her perception, a cornerstone of later writing, is not yet quite the schooled (private) eye and no longer merely an element of the children's game of "I Spy."

Altered States

The second narrative, "Night," is set during the time of war. Although the protagonist is not directly affected by the military conflict, the reference to it intensifies the sense of gloom and oppression, and the fear of death. As usual, pain strikes the protagonist not only at night, but also during a blizzard (271). Her appendix is taken out in hospital, and along with it a growth which her mother calls just that (272-3). The girl recovers gradually, but her life changes; she cannot sleep at night. The way she used to tease and enrage her younger sister Catherine, who was sleeping in the bunk bed below hers, was anything but loving (274), but at fourteen, instead of childish pranks, she begins to contemplate far more threatening possibilities during sleepless nights, such as "[t]he thought that I could strangle my little sister, who was asleep in the bunk below me

and whom I loved more than anybody in the world" (277). Her driving force, as she imagines it, might be just an attack of madness. It becomes a habit for her to leave her bed and the house on tiptoe and to walk outside until dawn.

On one sleepless night, she gets a sense "that there was somebody around the corner" (280). She turns around and sees her father sitting on the stoop and smoking. They begin to talk and the girl confesses her fear of the possibility of being moved to strangle her little sister. Her father takes it all in calmly and admits that "[p]eople have those kinds of thoughts sometimes" (283). There is neither mockery nor alarm in his voice, and he effectively plays the role a psychiatrist would be expected to fulfill today. He puts an end to her problem by telling her at daybreak what she needed to hear then and soon forgot (284). The narrator admits in an afterthought that her father was not given to splitting hairs, and, as is all too obvious, he had other real economic and family disasters to face (285).

One might argue that the threat of death (signalled in the story by pain, anaesthetics, and double surgery) becomes internalized by the teenage protagonist, whose fear of death manifests itself in visions of inflicting death on her unsuspecting sibling. The only person with whom she can discuss the problem is her father, and that only in the liminal space of the stoop and at daybreak. The climactic exchange between father and daughter has significant and far-reaching implications. For one thing, the narrator discovers that living one's life means coming to terms with altered states of consciousness. For another, her father's analytical and therapeutic effort emerges as an antecedent to her own narrative art.

Voices of Love

"Voices," the third piece, describes the ritual of going to dances. The reader knows already from the first story in the "Finale" batch that going to dances may end badly, especially if the woman goes there alone. The arrangement described in this piece seems unorthodox enough as, instead of going with her husband, the mother takes with her the eldest daughter. On one such occasion, the girl is ten years old and goes with her mother to a dance in "one of the altogether decent but not prosperous-looking houses on our road" (288). The girl cannot help noticing a woman whose appearance can only be couched in a set of startling juxtapositions: "old and polished," "heavy and graceful," "bold as brass and yet mightily dignified" (292). She does not realize yet that the woman is known in town as "a notable prostitute" (292).

Once the mother notices the prostitute, she decides to leave and requests that her daughter collect her coat from a bedroom upstairs. On the stairs, the girl witnesses "an urgent sort of communication" between two soldiers and a young woman (294). The observant young protagonist smells the young woman's perfume and the soldiers' cigarettes. As she rushes downstairs, she notices that the young man "kept stroking her [the woman's] upper leg. Her skirt was pulled up and I saw the fastener holding her stocking" (296). When reporting the events to her husband, the mother does not mind the soldiers, but she does object to the presence of the old prostitute and "one of her girls" (295). In contrast to her mother, the daughter is not outraged. She remembers the young men's voices, probably English voices, which were kind and comforting. Later she keeps imagining in her "not yet quite erotic fantasies" (298) that she might be their addressee.

Although death is not present in any straightforward manner in "Voices," the story shares certain motifs with previous pieces that make this threat appear imminent and tangible. Sadie (in "The Eye") seemed to like dances as much as the protagonist's mother likes them in "Voices." War was mentioned as a parallel to the protagonist's health problems in "Night." In "Voices" war is signalled by the presence of English soldiers, who are on the point of leaving, though still lingering on the stairs. Their voices may resemble Sadie's voice on the radio. Both Sadie's and the soldiers' voices become literally disembodied. In both cases the departure may (or does) amount to death.

The narrator seems to imply that living one's life consists of hearing voices, even though the meaning of words may be incomprehensible, and even though the words may be meant for others. The narrator intercepts, implicates herself in the lives of others, sharing their emotions in the liminal space of the staircase and of her memory long afterwards.

Love of Life

The final piece in the "Finale" has the same title as the whole book: "Dear Life." It is a rather rambling account of various events, places, hopes, and disappointments. The narrator recollects her way to school, her acquaintance with a prostitute's daughter, her mother's ambition to play golf, and her parents' shared hope for success in the fur industry, her own attempt to see country life in the idealized manner of Lucy Maud Montgomery's novels (305), and the history of the house in which they lived. Names are dropped and forgotten, loose ends in the narrative are not even provisionally tucked in because, as the narrator explains, "this is not a story, only life" (307). Although in previous narratives of the "Finale," the protagonist's parents tend to be described separately, in this one both appear in turn: her father as a farmer and foundry worker, and her mother as a story teller.

Two puzzling stories of "a crazy old woman named Mrs. Netterfield" (310) figure prominently at the end of the piece. Both are narrated by the mother and both seem to illustrate the old woman's madness: first, her aggressive behavior with a delivery boy who brought her groceries, and then her inspection of the house where the narrator's family lived. At that time the narrator was an infant and Mrs. Netterfield was a threatening presence. The narrator's mother recollects her dread of the woman and especially one episode when she managed to take her baby inside the house and hide just in time, but still fearing intrusion.

Many years later the narrator discovers that the "mad" woman had actually lived in that house before her own parents had moved in, and during that frightening visitation, she was probably inspecting her former property, just as the narrator is doing in a symbolic sense when writing her account. The narrator pieces together all the versions of the story she heard from her mother (315), and eventually finds a conclusion on her own, which she also finds by chance, so to speak. She happens to read a local paper published in her home town, and in it she discovers a letter and a handful of poems by a woman whose maiden name was Netterfield. Through a paradoxical inversion which is only possible thanks to the magic of writing, the stranger's life becomes familiar, in fact, identical with her own. Eventually, the poems read in a paper parallel or even echo the narrator's own past experience (317), and Mrs. Netterfield's frightening presence becomes an analogy to the "powdery yet ominous smell" of the protagonist's mother

in “The Eye,” and to the protagonist’s own fear of her urge to strangle her sister in “Night.”

Especially in view of a real or imagined danger, life becomes dear. A young mother runs to save her child, young soldiers linger on the stairs with a prostitute, daughters publish reminiscences of their parents’ and their own past lives. Being “touched by the wing of mortality” (272) is a distinction and a crucial motif in the four texts of the “Finale.” The deathbed perspective emerges as a privilege, rather than a threat. There are no literal deathbed scenes in the “Finale” pieces, and death is conceptualized instead as a winged being, whose half-secret, ambivalent presence encourages a declaration of love addressed to life: one’s own and that of others, despite the monstrosity inherent in living.

Cornerstones

Alice Munro’s house of fiction has at least four cornerstones indicated in the final pieces of *Dear Life*. These are faculties that artists share with children: heightened perception, altered states of consciousness, receptiveness to voices, and an instinctive love of life. Apart from the centrality of childhood, and very much in keeping with this mode of cognition, the four pieces of Alice Munro’s life writing are strikingly devoid of references to her own writing life. They do not describe the struggles of a prospective writer as do, for example, such stories as “Heirs of the Living Body” (*Lives of Girls and Women*, 1971) or “The Office” (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968). In the “Finale” it is always other people who speak, sing songs, write poems, leave legacies of their lives, and the narrator, holding on to her status of a young, wide-eyed child, fashions herself as a receptacle for and a dispenser of other people’s stories.

The “Finale” may well be read as a companion piece to the earlier auto/biographical text “Working for a Living,” which first and foremost pays homage to the quiet heroism of Robert Laidlaw. By the end of his busy life, the father managed to surprise his writing daughter as an author of reminiscences and contributor of stories to “an excellent though short-lived local magazine. And not long before his death he completed a novel about pioneer life, called *The Macgregors*” (Munro, *The View* 167). An extensive quote from her father’s piece entitled “Grandfathers” appears at the end of her own reminiscence: it is a scene she could have only imagined of her father as a boy among his elders, a mere observer, and like herself in the “Finale,” a receptacle for other people’s stories: “That is where I feel it best to leave them – my father a little boy, not venturing too close, and the old men sitting through a summer afternoon on wooden chairs placed under one of the great benevolent elm trees that used to shelter my grandparents’ farmhouse” (170). In the “Foreword” to her strongly auto/biographical volume – *The View from Castle Rock*, Alice Munro insists that “[t]hese are *stories*” (n.p.). By the end of her writing career, introducing the four final pieces of *Dear Life*, she prefers the vague expression, “not quite stories,” to indicate the inextricability of life and writing, and the fluidity of self and other.

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