

“AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN FEELING BUT NOT IN FACT”:
THE FINALE OF ALICE MUNRO’S *DEAR LIFE*

MAGDALENA ŁADUNIUK

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

ABSTRACT

Alice Munro has always been known for reworking personal material in her stories. On numerous occasions she openly admitted to adopting some of her real experiences into her fiction, yet at the same time she declared that her writing remains fictional, not autobiographical. However, the writer’s attitude seems to have changed with the publication of *Dear Life* (2012), supposedly the last book in her career. In the note preceding the last four stories in the collection, she suggests that they might constitute her autobiography.

This article discusses “The Eye,” “Night,” “Voices” and “Dear Life” in relation to Munro’s biography. It reflects on the narrative techniques the author uses to create the impression of authenticity and autobiographicality in the stories. It also aims to answer the question whether they should be indeed classified as Munro’s autobiography.

Keywords: Alice Munro, autobiographical pact, autobiography, *Dear Life*, fictional pact

Introduction

Although there has always been an aura of concealed self-portrayal and personal history in Alice Munro’s stories, for most of her career the author attempted to draw a sharp line between her life and her fiction, even though the similarities between the two were often striking. It is no secret that the history of Munro’s ancestors was frequently fictionalized by the writer in the stories such as “Chaddeleys and Flemings,” “Ottawa Valley,” “The Stone in the Field” or “Changing Places.” Then, it cannot be denied that “Working for a Living” is actually a memoir, in which Munro tells a story of her parents and pays tribute to their hard work and resourcefulness. On the other hand, in the same book “Working for a Living”

comes from, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), generally regarded as the collection of Munro's historical and autobiographical stories, the author asserts in the foreword that "these are stories" – fictional stories – one may add. Munro has been often asked about the presence and significance of autobiographical elements in her works. In her famous essay "What Is Real?" she voices her irritation over people who ask her such questions, as they "really don't understand the difference between autobiography and fiction" (1982: 223). She declares that her writing is fictional, even though some elements she uses are "real" (1982: 224). However, the writer's attitude seems to have changed with the publication of *Dear Life* (2012), supposedly the last book in her career. In the note preceding the last four stories in the collection, she writes:

The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe that they are the first and the last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life. (2012: 256)

These final four pieces constitute a first-person narrative, starting when the future Nobel laureate is five years old and ending when she is about thirteen. While adopting the adult perspective, Munro speaks there about her childhood in the part of Wingham known, in Munro's childhood, as "Lower Town," her difficult relationship with her parents, and the sentiment she has for the place she used to live in. "The Eye" tells a story of a five-year-old Alice forced by her mother to attend their maid's funeral. The child is terrified at the prospect of seeing a dead body, yet she obeys her mother and even looks into the coffin. "Night" revolves around Alice's insomnia, nightmares and her night escapades outside the house. "Voices" is about Alice and her mother going to dances organized in a nearby house. The fun is spoiled by the presence of a local prostitute, whom Alice's mother would not tolerate. Finally, "Dear Life" is an account of life on a farm, growing up in Wingham, and Alice's relationship with her parents, especially after her mother is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. All four stories strike the reader as very personal writing, a kind of authorial confession and a disclosure of long-concealed feelings.

However, the question is whether *Dear Life's* finale should indeed be treated as Munro's autobiography. The author does not use this term, she only suggests that the four stories are in some way inspired by her own life. Thus, the categorization of these texts can be very problematic. Scholars have identified and named hundreds of sub-genres within the life-writing (Shen and Xu 2007: 45), autobiography being only one of them. Moreover, even the term *autobiography* itself has become very elusive and difficult to define; "its connotations may cover documentary facts and poetic truths, or neither, or any mixture of truths, lies, pretenses, illusions, delusions, cross-purposes, and other complications. What the

term may mean largely depends on one’s expectation, personality, flexibility, intentions, and wisdom as a self-reflective writer, critic, or reader” (Stich 1988: ix). There is not one, absolute and all-encompassing definition of autobiography.

The other problem with labeling Munro’s stories as autobiographical is that, as stated by Paul John Eakin, “autobiography is nothing if not a referential art” (1992: 54). Thus, reading autobiography involves an awareness of “the textual and extratextual worlds” (Shen and Xu 2007: 46) – both the text itself and the knowledge about the author’s life. In autobiography, the author refers to reality outside the text, the reality that is usually unknown, or only partially known to readers. Munro’s readers obviously do not have access to her real life, they are unable to verify whether the events described in *Dear Life* are facts or fiction. They can only trust the author’s declarations about the authenticity of her writing.

Philippe Lejeune, one of the leading critics in the field of autobiography, attaches great importance to such author’s declarations. Similarly to Eakin, he claims that judging only on the level of analysis within the text, there is absolutely no difference between autobiography and other sub-genres of life writing, or even fiction (1989: 13). Lejeune declares that the distinction can be pronounced only by the *autobiographical pact* – a specific contract between the author and the reader included in the text, a clear affirmation of the identity between the author, the narrator and the protagonist (1989: 14). Thus, the *autobiographical pact* allows readers to assume that the author and the narrator-protagonist are one, that the facts and events described in the text are identical to those from the writer’s own life. This way of understanding helps to establish the status of a text as an autobiography. In contrast to the *autobiographical pact*, the author may make with the reader the *fictional pact* introduced by either “obvious practice of non-identity” or “affirmation of fictitiousness” (Lejeune 1989: 15). Then, the text should not be read as an autobiography no matter how much it resembles the author’s real life experience. In other words, according to Lejeune, in the case of life writing, the generic status of a text depends substantially on the type of contract between the author and readers.

However, the contract proposed by Munro in the introduction to *Dear Life*’s finale is ambiguous. Her statement that the last four stories are “autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact” (2012: 256) seems to embrace both the autobiographical and the fictional pacts at the same time. On the one hand, she encourages reading the finale as the story of her early life, on the other she declares that some of its elements are fictional. She uses the adjective *autobiographical*, yet she confesses that the stories are only “the closest things” she has to say about her life (2012: 256) and not the most authentic. Interestingly, Munro made a similar statement in 1971, in a short note placed on the copyright page of *Lives of Girls and Women*, when she wrote: “[t]his novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact” (2001: iv). However, then it was meant to serve as a

disclaimer, a declaration that characters from the book are not modeled on Munro's neighbours, family or friends. In *Dear Life*, the almost identical statement is used to perform a completely different function – it adds to the book's authenticity and attracts attention to the autobiographical elements in the stories.

This article discusses "The Eye," "Night," "Voices" and "Dear Life" in relation to Munro's biography. It reflects on the narrative techniques the author uses to create the impression of authenticity and autobiographicality in the stories, or "not quite stories" as Munro calls them (2012: 256). It also aims to answer the question whether they should be indeed classified as Munro's autobiography. The paper is divided into two parts to emphasize two main focal points of the stories – place and people.

Place

In Munro's fiction place has always been very significant, and deeply connected with her rural roots. In 1973, Munro told Jill Gardiner that when she first started writing, setting meant more to her than people (Valdes 2006: 86). In her literary career she has created in the stories dozens of towns or even smaller settlements, the great majority of them set in the area where she grew up – Huron County, the part of Ontario which is now often referred to as "Alice Munro County (. . .) a mythic place, a literal place made magical by its rendering in Alice Munro's fiction" (Thacker 2011: 463). As Robert Thacker, Munro's biographer, observes, "her writing derives almost wholly from that 'little stretch' along the Meneseteung / Maitland River, from the surrounding Lower Town, from Wingham and Huron County more generally" (2011: 46). The author confirms her affection for this region, for instance as she says: "It means something to me that no other country can (. . .) I am intoxicated by this particular landscape. I am at home with the brick houses, the falling-down barns, the trailer parks, burdensome old churches, Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire. I speak the language" (Merkin 2004: 1). In *Dear Life's* finale, Munro comes back to that place which served as an inspiration for her fictional locales. She writes about her old family house and the town of Wingham, where she spent her childhood.

Munro creates an impression that she is able to recall her hometown in the smallest detail. She claims to remember the exact look of the lawns outside her house, or point out where the elm trees and where the oak trees grew (2012: 278). In one of the interviews she explains that "[i]t's interesting what happens as you get older because memory does become more vivid, particularly distant memory" (Awano 2013: 184). At the beginning of "Dear Life" she brings back her memories and writes:

I lived when I was young at the end of a long road, or a road that seemed long to me. Behind me, as I walked home from primary school, and then from high school, was the real town with its activity and its sidewalks and its streetlights for after dark. Marking the end of town were two bridges over the Maitland River: one narrow iron bridge, where cars sometimes got into trouble over which one should pull off and wait for the other, and a wooden walkway, which occasionally had a plank missing, so that you could look right down into the bright, hurrying water. I liked that, but somebody always came and replaced the plank eventually. (2012: 299)

A reference to such apparently insignificant details as the missing plank, or a broken doorknob mentioned later in the stories, shows the author’s attachment to the place. Her memories are very personal; they refer to objects hardly noticeable to other people, or the places she perceived in her own, unique way. Munro’s hometown is not just any Ontario small town, it is “made up of specific physical and cultural geography, the surrounding society populated by the people Munro knew, or knew of, and infused with the culture she herself came to own, embody and understand” (Thacker 2011: 46). And although it is not certain if, after over sixty years, Munro would indeed be able to remember her old house and its vicinity with such astounding precision, her meticulous descriptions have the power to convince readers. No matter what the bridge really looked like, or which door was actually out of order, Munro’s emotions towards her hometown, her longing for that place make it seem authentic.

Munro’s concern with the authenticity of feelings (as opposed to facts), precedes the publication of *Dear Life* by precisely 30 years. In “What Is Real?” published in 1982, the author reflects on her writing process:

So when I write a story I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. This is the hard part of the explanation, where I have to use a word like ‘feeling,’ which is not very precise, because if I attempt to be more intellectually respectable I will have to be dishonest. (1982: 224)

In this fragment the author admits to relying on her emotions more than on any “intellectually respectable” means. She constructs her texts around a “feeling,” not around characters or events. Interestingly, the structure Munro writes about is designed by her to resemble a house which “encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way” (1982: 224). This metaphor relates to the manner in which Munro thinks about her stories, yet it also demonstrates the instinctive link the author makes between an image of a house and people’s emotional sphere.

The feelings Munro has for her family house are notably exposed in the passage, when as an adult person, she reads the local newspaper. She no longer lives in Wingham, yet she still has a subscription to its press. In the newspaper, she

finds a poem, written by a woman, who also used to live in Wingham in her childhood. In the rather tacky text, the woman describes the “grassy hillsides”, “wild blossoms”, “the shade of maples” or “a clear river” that she now misses in Portland (2012: 316-317). While reading the poem, Munro instantly recognizes the places mentioned in it. She realizes that the woman must have lived in the same house she and her family occupied some years later. According to Thacker, Munro’s parents bought the farm in June 1927 (2011: 41). Several families had lived there before, yet Munro has always thought of it as “her own.” She never imagined anyone else growing up in the same place, seeing the same landscapes and sharing the same emotions. She is astonished with her new discovery: “as I read I began to understand that she was talking about the same river flats that I had thought *belonged to me*” (2012: 316, emphasis mine). She finds it difficult to accept someone else there. “That was our bank. My bank (. . .) Our house” (2012: 317-318) – she writes.

This experience helps her realize, how meaningful that family place has been for her. She seems not to be fully aware of it until somebody attempts to “snatch” it from her. As Munro writes in “Dear Life”, she came across the poem in a newspaper at the beginning of her literary career when she was busy with her own “invariably unsatisfactory writing” (2012: 318). Although it is not verbalized in the story, this experience must have influenced her and her writing. It could have been the moment when she comprehended for the first time how important Wingham had always been for her. Catherine Sheldrick Ross has observed that at the beginning of Munro’s career her stories were “connected with imitation” (1992: 58), yet in her late twenties the author “made a breakthrough to a more personally risky kind of writing” (1992: 58). The newspaper incident described in “Dear Life” illustrates this moment of Munro’s breakthrough, the moment when her hometown started to play a vital role in her fiction; it became an inspiration and an “intimate, if not claustrophobic setting” (Foran 2009) for many of her stories. Thacker notices that “[w]hile Munro has maintained for some time that her various fictional towns – Jubilee, Dalgleish, Hanratty, Logan, Carstairs, Walley – are not models of Wingham, there is no doubt that Wingham’s geography, economic bases, demographics, and cultural ethos have been shaping presences in her fictional imaginings” (2011: 43). Emotionally, Munro seems to never have left Wingham. As Małgorzata Poks rightly observes, “[p]aradoxically, while Munro’s literal escape from Wingham enabled her to be a writer, it was her imaginative return to the small farming town that gave her the master theme of her writing” (2015: 177).

Munro’s symbolic return to Wingham intensifies the atmosphere of autobiographicality in *Dear Life*’s last four stories. The author not only comes back to her hometown and the family house, but most importantly she goes back in time to the moment when she was still a child. The stories’ main plot revolves around

Alice’s life only up to the time when she is about thirteen years old. By evoking childhood memories, Munro succeeds in making her writing more reliable, as children are generally perceived as innocent and authentic, in contrast to adults. Alice-the character presented in *Dear Life* is a sensible girl who excels at school and respects her parents. Alice-the writer is an adult person with all her imperfections and shortcomings. Thus, readers instinctively tend to believe the child Alice more than they would believe the older one.

People

Siblings

Since *Dear Life*’s four final pieces deal with Munro’s childhood, it is natural that their major part is devoted to young Alice’s relationship with her family. Actually, they are about the relationship with her parents, since the author chooses not to give much information about her siblings. As Thacker has noticed in reference to the author’s older stories, “Munro has largely left her siblings out of her fictionalized memories” (2011: 52). In real life, Munro had a five years younger brother William, and a six years younger sister Sheila, yet in the latest stories she only mentions them briefly. As she reveals in *Dear Life*, the birth of her siblings clearly unsettled her happy life of a “sheltered, cherished only child” (Ross 1992: 34). In “The Eye” Munro writes: “When I was five years old my parents all of a sudden produced a baby boy, which my mother said was what I had always wanted. Where she got this idea I did not know (. . .) Then a year later a baby girl appeared, and there was another fuss but more subdued than with the first one” (2012: 257). As the final four stories progress, William almost disappears, while Sheila seems to play only a minor role.

The sister, whom Munro for some reason calls Catherine in *Dear Life*, reappears for a brief moment in “Night.” The author admits that due to the significant age difference, she did not have much in common with her younger sister. The girls shared one room, yet they probably did not share many interests. Alice mentions some pleasures she had with Catherine, like storytelling or dressing up, but at the same time she asserts: “I don’t mean to say that I was entirely in control of her, or even that our lives were constantly intertwined. She had her own friends, her own games” (Munro 2012: 274). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Alice in the story loved her little sister. When she starts to be afflicted by murderous thoughts at night, she is truly terrified: “The thought was there and hanging in my mind. The 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” (Munro 2012: 277). Given the small amount of information Munro provided about her sister before, this sudden declaration of love may strike one as surprising. Especially

because this is the last mention of Catherine in *Dear Life*.

Catherine appears as only one of many peripheral characters in the stories, yet actually her presence plays an important role in discussing the generic status of *Dear Life*'s finale. By calling her sister a false name, Munro deliberately commits an "obvious practice of nonidentity" (Lejeune 1989: 15), unacceptable in autobiographies. Thus, she reminds her readers that, as she stated in the introduction to the finale, the last four stories are not necessarily "autobiographical in fact." At the same time, she blurs the distinction between fact and fiction as she uses the two interchangeably. Catherine from *Dear Life* has many features of Munro's sister Sheila (age, being the youngest child of three, sharing one room with an older sister), yet the different name suggests that not everything about her is real, and that she should rather be treated as a fictional character. As observed by Carol L. Beran, Munro's stories "are set up in such a way to make the reader question what is real, which reality is the reality, or whether we can speak of reality at all" (qtd. in Daniels 2006: 94). The author gives her readers the chance to perceive Catherine and Sheila as one and the same, as two separate beings, or as a blend of an authentic and a fictional person.

Parents

Much more place in the collection's finale is devoted to Munro's parents – Anne and Robert Laidlaw. Unlike the passages referring to the author's siblings, those portraying her mother and father are exhaustive and seem to be factually correct. The couple moved to Wingham in 1927, shortly after they had been married. They bought a "property of just under 5 acres with a barn and a brick house built on a higher ground above the surrounding flood-prone areas known as Lower Town" (Thacker 2011: 41), and undertook a new venture – fur trading. From their daughter's report in *Dear Life* one can sense that the Laidlaws were quite well off in the 1930s. They, for instance, owned a car and could afford hiring a maid. However, soon the war came, which affected the fur market and badly afflicted their business. Moreover, in the 1940s fashion trends started to change and the demand for fur decreased. The Laidlaws' enterprise started to falter. In "Dear Life" Munro reminisces: "our business dried up again, and this time it never came back. My father pelted all the foxes, then the mink, and got what shockingly little money he could for them" (2012: 309). Robert Laidlaw was then forced to take up a night job in the foundry to support his family. What is worse, it was also the time, when his wife started to show the first symptoms of Parkinson's disease.

Mother

The figure of Munro’s mother “haunts her fiction like the most persistent and poignant of ghosts” (Merkin 2004: 1). The first time the writer tackled mother material was as early as in 1968 in the story “The Peace of Utrecht” from her debut collection *Dance of Happy Shades*. A few years later, in “Ottawa Valley,” described by Coral Ann Howells as “the most unashamedly autobiographical of all Munro’s stories” (1998: 24), the narrator says the words that sound as if uttered by Munro herself: “The problem, the only problem is my mother (. . .) she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same” (Munro 2004: 196). The mother has indeed “stuck” to Munro, as her presence pervades many of the writer’s later stories, such as “Winter Wind,” “Spelling,” “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” “Friend of my Youth” or “The Progress of Love.” She occurs as either strict, demanding, insensitive, artificially sophisticated and yearning for luxuries beyond her reach, or incapacitated by Parkinson’s disease, a burden for a young daughter.

Alice’s mother, her difficult relationship with the daughter and her later struggle with the incurable illness, constitute the central part of the last four stories in *Dear Life*. As recollected by Thacker, Annie Clarke Chamney (she became “Anne” only when she married and moved to Wingham) was born on September 12, 1898 (2011: 33). Raised on a farm in Scotch Corners, she was the third child of four, and the only daughter. After completing the local school and the high school in Carleton Place, she decided, despite her parents’ objection, to continue her education. In 1916, through what Munro calls “her own desperate efforts” (qtd. in Thacker 2011: 33), Chamney borrowed money from a cousin and entered the Ottawa Normal School to train as a teacher. After graduating she taught in several schools in Ontario, then Alberta, and then went back east in 1925. During her time teaching at Bathurst she made a trip to Huron County to visit her Code relatives and there she met Robert Laidlaw. She saw her future in that man and the fur trading he was occupied with. As Munro later on began to suspect, her mother was looking for something more than a life as a farmer’s wife, and believed he could make it possible (Thacker 2011: 33-36).

References to her mother’s aspirations for a better life can be found throughout the collection’s finale. For instance, the author recalls finding an old, yet never used golf bag. She wonders what plans her mother might have had: “She must have thought that she and my father were going to transform themselves into a different sort of people, people who enjoyed a degree of leisure. Golf. Dinner parties” (Munro 2012: 305). She also brings back the memories of Mrs. Laidlaw’s “gloved hand” (2012: 264), “ladylike voice” (2012: 265), or “festive dress” (2012: 289). She points out that her mother “used to wear an afternoon

dress, even if she was only washing things at the sink” (2012: 312). Young Alice could sense that, because of such “eccentricities,” her mother was not well liked by the rather unsophisticated local community. In “Voices” she recalls:

I think people found her pushy and overly grammatical. She said things like “readily” and “indeed so.” She sounded as if she had grown up in some strange family who always talked that way. And she hadn’t. They didn’t. Out on their farms, my aunts and uncles talked the way everybody else did. And they didn’t like my mother very much, either. (Munro 2012: 287)

Thus Alice was often ashamed of her mother and the sophisticated behaviour, which the young girl found inappropriate at that time. The country life had taught her by then that standing out is never appreciated, especially if you are a woman. She says:

Whatever she [mother] said, it did not sound quite right. I wished then for my father to be there (. . .) he understood that the thing to do was never to say anything special. My mother was just the opposite. With her everything was clear and ringing and served to call attention. (2012: 290)

Decades later, in the interview for *The New Yorker* magazine in 2012 Munro confesses: “I was brought up to believe that the worst thing you could do was ‘call attention to yourself,’ or ‘think you were smart’” (Treisman 2012). Anne Laidlaw wanted for her daughter something completely different.

“Dear Life”, the final story in the collection, shows this strained mother-daughter relationship from a new perspective. No longer a child, Alice revises her attitude towards her mother. She becomes interested in Mrs. Laidlaw’s past, tries to understand her decisions and the manner of being. She writes: “Sometimes my mother and I talked, mostly about her younger days. I seldom objected now to her way of looking at things” (2012: 310). The bond between the two tightens when the mother develops the Parkinson’s disease. At the beginning it shows only as a little shakiness, yet it develops with time and finally leaves Mrs. Laidlaw almost unable to communicate with her family. There is only one person who always understands her. As Munro reminisces: “I could always make out what she was saying, though often, after her voice got thick, other people couldn’t” (2012: 315).

The final story appears to be Munro’s way of coming to terms with her mother. In the first three stories from *Dear Life*’s finale, similarly to the author’s earlier fiction, the recurrent mother figure poses as someone who constantly tries to show she does not fit in a small-town community and has higher aspirations. She is domineering, self-concerned and proud, often ridiculous in her strivings. Munro has tried to rework and reshape the same mother-daughter story many

times, yet it has always lacked an “elegiac sense of reconciliation at the end” (Howells 1998: 24). In “Dear Life” the writer finally seems to discover the source of her mother’s problems and ceases to judge her:

Perhaps she had convinced herself that certain boundaries were not there. She had managed to get herself off a farm on the bare Canadian Shield—a farm much more hopeless than the one my father came from – and she had become a schoolteacher, who spoke in such a way that their own relatives were not easy around her. She might have got the idea that after such striving she would be welcomed anywhere. (2012: 304)

Munro’s mother presented in “Dear Life” bears a close resemblance to the author’s earlier fictional female characters. The chase after a better life, confinement by social rules, disappointment – a typical Munro woman displays all the features of Anne Laidlaw. “Her fault was that she did not look like what she was. She did not look as if she had been brought up on a farm, or as if she intended to remain at one” (2012: 312) – Munro writes about her mother, evidently the model for many of her fictional characters. However, the acknowledgment and recognition of her mother came too late. Anne Laidlaw was already dead, when her daughter truly appreciated her character and achievements. Many years later Munro wrote: “the person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available” (2012: 319). *Dear Life* ends with a bitter note; Munro’s touching, very personal confession, a literary way of apologize:

I did not go home for my mother’s last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. 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. (Munro 2012: 319)

Conclusion

In the introduction to the finale Munro writes that these four pieces “are not quite stories” (2012: 256), which suggests they should not be treated as a mere product of her imagination. In *Dear Life*’s finale, the author often juxtaposes literary fiction with reality presented in her last works. When at some point she mentions one of the neighbors, she explains: “he does not have any further part in what I’m writing now . . . because this is not a story, only life” (Munro 2012: 307). She asserts that she would not make any changes only to make her memoirs complete in a literary manner and thus more attractive for a reader. For instance, in “Voices,” as she describes one of the characters, she claims: “I think that if I was writing fiction instead of remembering something that happened, I would never have given her that dress” (Munro 2012: 292). As a writer, she also sees how

surprisingly unliterary reality can be. As when, almost at the same time, the family fur business goes bankrupt and Mrs. Laidlaw is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease: "You would think this was just too much. The business gone, my mother's health going. It wouldn't do in fiction" (Munro 2012: 309). At the first glance, these passages confirm the authenticity of Munro's stories. Yet, at the same time they remind us that, as a crafty writer, she is aware of all the techniques used to mislead readers and to create and an *impression* of reality; she knows how to use them, and perhaps she does so. Lejeune alerts that "[a]ll the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel [story], and often have been imitated" (1989: 13).

Moreover, Munro does not try to conceal that not everything in the finale is based on facts. She also admits that some of her memories may be distorted. In the stories she adopts an adult perspective, which sheds a different light on her childhood. She asks questions that never came to her mind when she was a child, or she notices problems that seemed unimportant 70 years earlier. For instance, when she speaks of the appendix surgery she underwent in her childhood and her, probably very expensive, stay in hospital, she admits: "I don't suppose it ever crossed my head to wonder how my father was going to pay for this distinction" (Munro 2012: 272). As a child she was only concerned with the extra vacation from school she had then. At another point, when Alice and her mother are invited to a dance, the adult Alice wonders: "were the refreshments really as lavish as I remember? With everybody so poor?" (Munro 2012: 291). She also mentions that she "lived (. . .) at the end of a long road, or a road that *seemed* long to [her]" (2012: 299, emphasis mine). These and many similar statements question the reliability of Munro's memories, especially given the fact that the action starts when Alice is only 5 years old. Although dozens of years later she claims to be able to recall some details with an amazing precision, she is evidently unable to remember all the facts or events she experienced. Thus, she chooses not to introduce the last four stories as her autobiography. She alerts readers that the stories (or "not quite stories") are "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact" (Munro 2012: 256). This statement may suggest that *Dear Life's* finale is not Munro's actual autobiography, but a set of fictional stories with "bits of what is real" (Foran 2009). Some of the events described in "The Eye," "Night," "Voices" and "Dear Life" might have taken place, yet some of them could be fictional.

However, in the interview for *The New Yorker*, Munro says something contradictory to her statement from *Dear Life*. She claims: "I have used bits and pieces of my own life always, but the last things in the new book were all simple truth" (Treisman 2012). It is hard to judge which of Munro's statements should be treated as more valid – that from the book or that from the interview. And perhaps, typically for Munro, they are both true in some way. In the same interview Munro reveals that she does a lot of "fooling around with stories" (Treisman

2014); it can be said that she does a lot of fooling around with her readers as well. She never gives straightforward answers. In *Dear Life*'s finale, she once again puzzles her readers by blurring the line between reality and non-reality, between autobiography and fiction. Yet, Munro's emotions enclosed in the last four pieces, especially nostalgic longing for the place and people she had lost, are so convincing that it is hard to believe that they might be not real.

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