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What Is In the Picture (and What Is Not): Canada, Women, and Autobiography in the Work of Geraldine Moodie, Eva Hoffman and Alice Munro

"I am looking at two pictures."

So the American journalist Janet Malcolm begins an autobiographical piece that appeared in *The New Yorker*'s "Personal History" department, under the title "Six Glimpses of the Past: Photographs and Memory." Malcolm's mistrust of the autobiographical is acknowledged from the start: her "six glimpses" offer up an ambiguous or contradictory measure of the past. "Autobiography," she writes, "is a misnamed genre; memory speaks only some of its lines. Like biography, it enlists letters and the testimony of contemporaries in its novelistic enterprise" ("Six" 23). The novelistic in the autobiographer's "enterprise" may not be merely things made up (though we do not rule this out) but the introduction of outside voices and the use of cultural artifacts—letters and photographs—that might be interpreted in a variety of ways. Malcolm is overt about what is added to memory, and how this supplements it. Her essay also explores what is subtracted or hidden in an autobiographical portrayal. Similarly, in the work of the early Canadian photographer Geraldine Moodie, in the memoiristic writing of Eva Hoffman, and in Alice Munro's fiction, we meet varieties of self-portraiture that resist our efforts to read time and place. The self-portrait that each artist creates contributes to our heightened awareness of what is in the picture and what is not.

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The self-portrait is a photographer's most directly autobiographical work. In it, pose and comportment, the surrounding objects and the decorative touches, all compound to offer a narrative of the self. Geraldine Moodie, among the earliest Canadian women to own a photographic studio, appears to have taken few such portraits—at least this is the impression left by the work that has been preserved in a variety of Canadian and British museums and archives. Three notable self-portraits exist from the last five years of the nineteenth century, when she maintained studios in Battleford and Maple Creek, Saskatchewan. The most commonly reproduced of these, and the most telling for our purposes, is dated 1895–96, and so belongs to her Battleford output. In it, Moodie strikes a pose that is somehow familiar—she is turned to one side on an armless chair, resting an elbow on a side table, her hand lightly raised to her chin, which rests on thumb and fingers. Her dress is dark—in black and white one cannot confirm whether its sheen includes a shade of blue or green—and fully draped and voluminous so that her legs and feet are entirely covered. In the same way, her neck is wrapped to the chin. Moodie's face is turned away from the camera, with eyes and mouth set in what might be called a faraway look. A perusal of late Victorian poses in self-portraits reveals that male subjects, most famously Oscar Wilde, chose versions of this pose when they visited the photographic studio.

A few things, distinctively Moodie-esque, can be recognized. An animal skin underfoot—in some reproductions the leg of the animal is also pictured—suggests the prairie hunting and trading economy of the North-West Territory of Canada. On the side table there is a framed photograph on a stand. Although the Battleford self-portrait is not a direct advertisement of the subject's photographic skills, it may be subtly so. Also, one would have had to be in the know to appreciate how the self-portrait was taken. One of the purposes of the voluminous dress is to hide Moodie's left hand in its skirt, where she is most likely holding a hand release cable. The faraway look may, in part, be aided by the use of a mirror—entirely outside the frame—where Moodie could study her pose before operating the hand cable to release the shutter. In this, the self-portraitist is almost a magician, a prestidigitator, in a way that led critics to critique the "automatism" of photographic art, and to raise the importance of mechanical aspects on the "agent's conscious control" and the "responsibility for the salient features of the photograph" (Wilson 55). Yet, even with the rarity of Moodie's use of the self-portrait—possibly signaling her awareness of its limited economic utility for a photographer bent on copyrighting her work for sale—we have in the Battleford photograph a distinctive autobiographical work that makes use of features found in more conventional autobiographical texts. The place of the self-portrait in Moodie's surviv-

ing work points to a set of issues one might categorize as the *problems* or *contingencies* of the genre more broadly. These will provide a guide, in this essay, for a contrasting discussion of Eva Hoffman's memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, and of the work of Alice Munro in her final collection, *Dear Life*.

Fig. 1. Self-portrait of Geraldine Moodie, Battleford, SK, 1895–96. Glenbow Museum NC-81-10. Public domain

In a discussion of photographic self-portraiture, Dawn M. Wilson highlights how "in this art form, an artist self-consciously and self-critically explores her relationship with the medium in which she portrays herself" (56). Exactly this possibility arises in Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, though one might add that elements of her exploration remain, to a degree, unconscious and unselfcritical. In Munro, however, the author's "relationship with the medium in which she portrays herself" is hidden, its motivations obscure: the components of *Dear Life* move subtly, and almost imperceptibly, between fiction and autobiographical writing.

Moodie's Battleford self-portrait might be seen as an emblem or template for the challenges and complexities raised by autobiographical portraiture and its reception: what is *in* the picture is carefully arranged; what is *outside* is available only to the diligent searcher; clues to *what is not in* the picture are spread about like the bric-a-brac in a cabinet of curiosities; and then, more troublingly for the devotee of faithful telling, there are the elements which the portraitist introduces unconsciously, unknowingly. The variety of possible outcomes is great and richly surprising. One might add that certain readers or viewers of certain tellings of the self bring with them something especially useful—knowledge, experience, a certain refined biographical sensitivity—which helps them read a self-portrait with heightened care.

Geraldine Moodie's Wildean pose suggests to the viewer the subject's social and artistic importance, and additionally, the competitive and ambitious characteristics more commonly expected of men of her time. The mix of materials in the fore- and background intimate that this artist exists in a culture with potential for *métissage*—the backdrop of pressed leather or tin is the height of urban craftiness, while the fur at Moodie's feet reflects the trapping and trade wealth of the prairie, where her husband's North-West Mounted Police commission has brought her. Although no photographs of the interior of Moodie's studio are in circulation, newspaper reports from the time tell us that it was located near Battleford's Presbyterian Church, and was fully outfitted:

> Mrs. Moodie has just added a number of improvements to her photographic studio making it complete in every detail. She can now take pictures from the carte-de-visite to 11 by 14 inches; can do enlarging and copying, and take interiors by flash-light. Hand-painted backdrops and the best material procurable for the work are a guarantee that all sittings will be satisfactory . . . The studio will be open every Saturday afternoon and at other times by appointment. (qtd. in Close 144)

A bit of the life of the studio comes into view: starting on Saturdays, then by appointment, the subjects of Moodie's work arrived to have themselves inscribed on the large glass plate negatives used at the time. Her studio portraits from this period include those of Cree chiefs and their families,

singly or in groups. Difficult to categorize, they are at once intimate and personal, while exhibiting some of the ethnographic tendencies employed by other, generally male, photographers of the time. More unique are a set of much-reproduced photos Moodie took of a Cree Sun Dance—or Thirst Dance, as it is sometimes called—in the outlying area near Battleford in 1895. Here, her photographic oeuvre is overtly historical, as she is reported to have been one of the first white settlers allowed to photograph such an event (Hatfield 77). Moodie's photographs of the Sun Dance have an epic feel, with their broad landscapes and the crowded interiors of the pavilion dedicated to ritual dancing. The settler's camera captures the scene, sometimes with the turned backs and heads of unwilling subjects. In these photos Moodie's camera is intrusive; in the studio, in another professional mode, she could apply energy and commitment to developing some form of a relationship with those whom she photographed.

The oeuvre associated with Moodie's Battleford years—self-portraits, portraits of local Cree Chiefs, of the Sun Dance, and of customers from among the town's population—might be seen as a whole autobiographical life's work. The oeuvre reveals a great deal about the artist herself, though, as with the self-portrait, the viewer must apply a variety of tools to tease out a more fulsome self-portrait, beyond the image which she gives us: full-skirted, hand hidden in the dress's folds.

In 1895, settlement on what would soon be called the Saskatchewan prairie was a work-in-progress as far as the Canadian authorities were concerned. Moodie's access to both her studio clients and occasions like Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell's visit to the area were secured by her reputation as well as by her husband's network of NWMP contacts (J. D. Moodie was himself an amateur photographer, whose work, judging from what has survived, was without the artistic merit of Geraldine's.). An inventory of Moodie's work could be viewed as an authoritative report on the progress of the settlement of the West. Included in this are a series of photographs she took of Battleford's "Native Industrial School," a large institution housed in what had been the territorial government's official building. Dated unreliably between 1891 and 1896, these show "the woodpile, windmill, and garden," "threshing activity," and a "Group of Native children posed with two non-Native adults on the verandah" of their home institution (White 16–17). The historical record of these early Residential School lives is a contribution shared between Moodie and other photographers, including a D. Cadzow, who competed with her in town (Close 143). Moodie's photographs of the Industrial School make use of a wide angle and present a range of subjects, all shown in miniature, from a distance. The outcome of these photos is rather like that of Cadzow's images; the subject matter rendered both photographers bureaucratic and unartful.

The unusualness of Moodie's studio—woman-run and placed in the further reaches of Canadian settlement—helps us keep our eye on the private narrative beneath or alongside the official one, assured by her husband's position as an NWMP Inspector. Her assertive use of copyright reveals her attention to a professional audience, whom she expected to purchase postcards and portraits bearing her images. The photograph on the stand by Moodie's elbow in her self-portrait might be, as we would call it today, product placement, a late-nineteenth-century form of subliminal advertising. A return to the self-portrait at this point reveals new details. The sitter's disposition, in many ways conventional, hyper-feminized in its choice of dress and carefully coiffed hair, is in fact a picture of a vanguard figure: a woman in independent control of powerful new technologies, which will contribute to the development of a modern economy and will supplant not only the British Victoriana of her photographic backdrops, but the ancient plains economy of hunting and trapping. In light of all this, the faraway look in Moodie's eyes is no romantic throwback, but a determined view forward, into the future and things yet unseen in the Canadian territories.

Part Two: Reading Canada Backwards

In her westward movement from the Ontario home—landing in Lethbridge, in Calgary, in Maple Creek and Battleford—Geraldine Moodie's accomplishments place her in what we might call the vanguard of settlement activity. Through her camera's lens she sees possibility: an independent career, a way of seeing the settler and Indigenous cultures of the plains, which provides momentum and economic gain. In Eva Hoffman's much-heralded memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Canada is the fallback place, a site of exile and loss, which stands between her youthful years in postwar Kraków, Poland (her book dubs them "Paradise") and her adult career as a writer in America (heroically positioned as "The New World"). Canada, specifically late-fifties Vancouver, is her family's place of emigration in 1959. The few years she spends there with her parents and younger sister are marked as an interregnum, even nullity, something to escape and forget. This part of Hoffman's self-portrait has been largely ignored by critics and reviewers (the bulk of them American) with the exception of an astute Canadian critic or two, as if the particularity, even oddity of Hoffman's Vancouver section was not worthy of comment, a kind of aside to take on face value. Yet the discoveries made via close reading reveal the aims and challenges of autobiographical writing.

I approach Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* autobiographically, through the prism of coincidental experience, which includes my own personal knowledge of Vancouver, alongside that of my mother's youthful years in the city. Hoffman, born fifteen years after my mother, in 1945, spent her early years in postwar Kraków, whereas my mother's mother took her from central Poland to Western Canada in 1935. They share a Polish Jewish birth and emigration to the Canadian West. Because my mother left her Polish village as a four-year-old, she carried with her few memories: the taste of the local ice cream and her father's high leather boots as seen beneath their home's dining table. The true crossover takes place in Canada, in Vancouver, where Hoffman's parents chose to settle, lured to the city by a Polish Jewish resident willing to sponsor them. The year was 1959. My mother's life in the city followed her sojourn on the southern Saskatchewan prairie. Her father's work as a religious functionary and family connections brought them to Vancouver in 1945. Starting with these details, I am an idiosyncratic reader of Hoffman's autobiography, who brings to bear on the book a wealth of personal and ancestral experience, as well as expectant enthusiasm. For me, Vancouver is laced with intimacies, discoveries, and inheritances. It is, certainly, mine, though not in the way that it was my mother's city. In *Lost in Translation* I find pleasures of recognition, but also displeasure, caused by Hoffman's way with place and time. Here I enter what might be this essay's contribution to the broader concern of autobiography: a zone of autobiographical reading and writing centered on Hoffman's presentation of Jewish Vancouver in 1959 and the early 1960s.

I should admit at the outset that I find the first ninety pages of Hoffman's memoir wonderful; there we get the particularities of postwar life in Communist-era Kraków; the irony of living in a largely undestroyed Renaissance city, with its Catholic Polish national heritage under a Soviet-modeled regime. Add to this the experience of her parents' wartime survival, the loss that haunts them, but propels them into new versions of themselves in the late 1940s and 1950s. They are, in their way, heroic figures: Jews re-establishing their lives in a capital of destroyed Jewish civilization and culture. Hoffman has a remarkable sense memory, as she recalls rooms and talk and streetways, the color of Kraków at dusk, and the quality of candlelight in the city's remaining active Temple on a High Holiday visit. She is like a sensitive machine, detecting the ripples and rises of her childhood and adolescence, the quality of its Polishness, its vague but still guiding Jewishness, its immediacy characterized by the times.

I read Hoffman's heartfelt portraits of her native country with relish and trust; I want to know her Polish memories, to savor and learn from them. But *Lost in Translation* makes a distinctive writerly shift when the

narrator leaves Poland to embark on a shipbound move to Canada. Here, for the first time, I rebel as a reader and busy myself correcting her. These corrections are not uniquely about the city of my mother's early years. The passages set in Canada, mostly in Vancouver, are presented under the title "Exile," as they rightly should be. They begin in central Canada, in Montreal, where the Hoffmans board a train west. This is not the archetypal Jewish immigrant experience, since the bulk of arrivals from Eastern Europe stayed in the big central Canadian cities rather than choosing travel for days to the Prairies or the West Coast. Once the Hoffmans are on their way, it only takes a page and a half for Canada to become a mirage, an unknowable fact, and a thing to get wrong: "The train cuts through endless expanses of terrain, most of it flat and monotonous" (100). Compared to the detailed and careful telling in the book's early pages—the interiors of 1950s Krakow apartments, for instance—this is brush-off writing. True: once they arrive in Manitoba, the Hoffmans will experience flatness, and, if you like, the monotony of the Prairies, but first comes the otherwise varied landscape of Quebec and Ontario, for a good long time, and after that the mountain ranges of southern Alberta that provide a gateway to British Columbia's interior. Even these landmarks the young Hoffman rejects: these "peaks and ravines" "hurt" her eyes and "hurt her soul . . . I recede into sleep" (100). So, it's off to *that kind of start*, I think, one of *those* portrayals of the country. We need the Vancouver tableau to create a clearer sense of what, autobiographically, will be done with the Canadian West Coast.

Hoffman's Vancouver is even more warily read by me, the child of a mother whose home it was in the postwar period. For her family it was a step up, offering a larger and established Jewish community, a more cosmopolitan city. Her father was a *shoichet*, a ritual slaughterer at the abattoir on Prior Street in the east end, who also shouldered other ritual, educational and religious duties to make his way. This kind of position in a Canadian Jewish community, which was beginning to profit from postwar prosperity and options for assimilation, was no piece of cake, however kosher. By the time my mother arrived in her teenage city, she was thoroughly Canadianized: her language, her comportment and habits, including reading *The New Yorker* and cigarette smoking, were all comfortably modeled on North American norms. Her father's willingness to teach her religiously and Jewishly, just as he did with his two sons, had been successfully rejected. She was her own person, with all the female challenges that entailed.

Hoffman's teenage years are marked by her unreadiness for Vancouver, for Canadian teenagerhood, as well as for a particular kind of local Jew that she took to be representative of the community. A "Duddy Kravitz community of Polish Jews," (102) she calls them, employing Mordecai

Richler's archetypal, satiric, Montreal-focused novel to characterize an entire group in a different locale. Somewhat like the overdetermined flatland of the approach to the city, they have been Duddy Kravitzed, rendered versions of the one Canadian Jewish type with which the average North American reader might be familiar. The Jewish Vancouverites whom Hoffman remembers are, to a one, go-getters, acquisitive successes, the women intensely remade as Canadian conformists, seemingly living to put out food and teach their daughters proper comportment. The houses in which they live are all of one type, in an unnamed neighborhood, their suburban sleekness and newness suggesting the newly built Oakridge district. This settlement of third resort for Vancouver Jews was fully removed from earlier, quite different options, first in the ethnic Strathcona district (hard by the abattoir) and then on the solidly working-class streets south of the Vancouver General Hospital. The first dismally suburban house that Hoffman visits is a "one-story structure surrounded by a large garden" with such "pruned and trimmed neatness" that she is "half afraid to walk in it. Its lawn is improbably smooth and velvety . . . and the rows of marigolds, the circles of geraniums seem almost artificial in their perfect symmetries, in their subordination to orderliness" (101).

This kind of scenario repeats in the Vancouver section of *Lost in Translation*. If there is an ethnographic reading of mid-century Jewish Vancouver, this is its limit. A few other settings allow for difference, but without varying the portrait of Vancouver Jews. There is a passing mention of the "army and navy store," located in a shopping district on the edge of the city's east side, where Jews (including the Jewish owner of the Army & Navy stores) maintained a variety of businesses, trades, scrap yards and tailoring outfits, but Hoffman evades these details (135). Eva and her sister walk along Main Street, with its "sprawling parking lots, patches of narrow, wooden houses," where the window fronts of stores "mesmerize" with their "unfamiliar objects" (134). This is another missed opportunity, as this part of town is written off as "a ramshackle, low-built" area, "a no place, thrown up randomly, without particular order or purpose" (134). Yet one of its purposes was to provide a locale where Jewish businessmen and women, somewhat unwelcome in what might be called the *whiter* parts of the city, could set up shop, acquire property, and enter the Vancouver economy. The bulk of these Jewish businesses were owned by families who had come to the city decades before Hoffman, as part of an earlier immigration pattern, although they shared similar ancestry. Hoffman is unwilling to recognize this territory as ethnically Jewish, but the street's "ramshackle" character raises the specter of class. The Main Streeters are losers—their "no place" is not only an ethnic no-go zone for Hoffman's youthful self, but an economic lacuna, the "wrong-side-of-town" to end

up on (134). Any number of things remain unspoken, possibly unspeakable, in these accounts, which relate to Main Street and the unnamed, heavily Jewish West Cordova. The more carefully one reads this rendering of Vancouver, circa 1959–60, the stronger one's sense is of it being coded, strictly controlled: an autobiographical site of resistance and forgetting.

A contrasting portrait to those noted so far is found in the delicately rendered section where Hoffman is taken under the wing of a well-off Jewish family who own a mill and live in a Victorian mansion full of things that Hoffman's newcomer parents cannot imagine acquiring. The Steiners inhabit a house that "overlooks both the sea and the mountains of Vancouver's harbor" (111). There are no "mountains" in the city's harbor, though there are steep rises from the waterways that enter the city, and one might have been able to see water and the far-off coastal mountains from a home in the West End or West Vancouver, but Hoffman leaves the locale of the Steiner house unverifiable. There was a Rosa Steiner in Hoffman's late-fifties Vancouver, born in Vienna rather than the Polish birthplace offered the woman of that name in *Lost in Translation* (110).[1] It could be that Hoffman leaves out or alters key defining features consciously. Quite simply, the Steiners represent a singular kind of Vancouver Jewish success, having brought with them from Europe refinement and high culture, which they maintain through the efforts of Rosa Steiner, Hoffman's patron and almost god-mother. This is the one example of Jewish life in the city that is not resolutely, and grubbily, suburbanized, à la *Duddy Kravitz*, as the Steiners' home is an alternative to pink bungalows surrounded by neatly trimmed lawns and the ever-present "long-finned" cars (140).[2]

What is telling for me—as with the Moodie self-portrait—is what is not here, what is not in the picture. Certainly, in postwar Vancouver there were successful Jewish families, those whose fathers had made their way as businesspeople or professionals. The larger group that Hoffman met through her parents is a small subset of "Polish Jews, most of whom came to Canada shortly after the war, and most of whom have made good in junk peddling and real estate . . ." (102). This contingent has rather little to do with the earlier, more varied, largely working-class Jewish community who populated not the bungalowed, newly built streets of suburban Oakridge, but an older, stucco-housed area positioned above the rougher, working-class streets of the industrial False Creek flats. Some postwar arrivals in Vancouver, some of them orphans, were Holocaust survivors, but these are not mentioned in *Lost in Translation*. Notable in the postwar years was a compendium of

[1] See https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/9ZZX-111/rosa-steiner-1923-1993.

[2] The Steiner profile parallels, uncannily, the much better known Koerner family, who had an important cultural, musical and philanthropic impact in postwar Vancouver.

old-worldish, not fully assimilated Polish-Jewish families, who did not necessarily own a car (most of their homes had no driveway). Among these, the men rode to work on a bus or streetcar, while the women shopped on foot or by public transport at the nearby kosher butcher and at the variety of Jewish-owned shops on Cordova and West Hastings, not far from the "army and navy store" (where they might also have found a thing or two). By the 1950s this community had modern synagogues of the kind that Hoffman finds alienating, as well as a Polish-style "*Beit Hamedrish*," the final holdout of Eastern European custom and Jewish learning and prayer, where the good, hopeless fight against assimilation—against driving big cars and going to restaurants on Saturdays, as Hoffman reports doing—was being mounted. Ironically, Hoffman's portrait of a ride to the White Spot with friends, which she detests for its slovenly offering of parking lot food, was exactly the kind of rebellion sought by the children of old-world parents. It was part of the mainstream Canadian experience they desired. Still, home they came afterward, to say goodnight in Yiddish to *tate* and *mame*.

The picture provided by Hoffman, purportedly a wide-angle view of the city's Jewish lives, is warped, with many ambiguities and false leads. While one would not call it fictional, it is certainly in no way representative of the time and place. What is it then, exactly, and why is Hoffman's Vancouver so singular, so Hoffmanized? She gives us a few possible answers to this question, to the issue of how autobiographical telling becomes what it does. One such answer surfaces not far into the Vancouver section. It is motivated by a reference to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. "Of course," Hoffman writes,

> memory can perform retrospective maneuvers to compensate for fate. Loss is a magical preservative. Time stops at the point of severance, and no subsequent impressions muddy the picture you have in mind. The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia—the most lyrical of feelings—crystallizes around these images like amber. Arrested within it, the house, the past, is clear, vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and by its stillness. (114–15)

It is fitting that Hoffman uses that Polish artifact, amber, to account for this process, and we might illustrate her point with the image of an amber ring or necklace, so commonly available in the great central market square of Hoffman's fiercely remembered Kraków. But the contrasting point made in these remarks about the breaks in one's life highlights the impact of such a fracture, as it creates a fully lived and remembered past, crystallized in memory so that nothing after it is sharply felt. Nothing, Hoffman seems to suggest, after the break, was worthy of being cast in something so lovely as amber. The one section in *Lost in Translation* that

offers Vancouver in anything resembling amber tones is the portrait of the Steiners, who have "semiadopted" the newcomer Eva (110). Almost all else is rank, funky, failed. Even the synagogue that Hoffman remembers—most likely the Beth Israel on Oak Street—is styled, inappropriately, as a "cheery amphitheater" rendered as a "secular space" (145). In Hoffman's telling, it's faux, fake, of no account.

I confess that until the opportunity arose in this essay to explore the autobiographical impulse in the work of women artists, I avoided Hoffman's book. I read her portrayal of Kraków when it appeared in *The New Yorker* and admired it. Yet the tone of the Vancouver section repelled me, and I rejected it. When my mother was alive, and a source of recollection of what it could mean to be a young Jewish woman in Vancouver in the late 1950s, it did not matter. Who needed to grapple with the skewed particularities of Hoffman's remembered coastal city? But motivated by a consideration of women's autobiographical work, I feel this misrepresentation of time and place differently. It calls for something to be said about the city's Jewish lives and streetscapes, which might convey two generations of Jewish Mount Pleasant families of the postwar era. Their own assimilation and challenges were other—maybe no less daunting, but other—than those presented in *Lost in Translation*. Their lives are an absent, perhaps even hidden part of the record of postwar Vancouver, the wonderful coastal city in the mist, which Hoffman, exiled, could not love.

The problematic form of telling which I have outlined in Hoffman's memoir is not limited to her rendering of Jewish Vancouver, but extends further, to an overall portrait of her Canadian years. A key to this portrait is offered near its end, with a consideration of a theme in the book's title—being "heard" in a newly adopted language. "Because I'm not heard," Hoffman writes,

> I feel I'm not seen. My words often seem to baffle others. They are inappropriate, or forced, or just plain incomprehensible. People look at me with puzzlement; they mumble something in response—something that doesn't hit home. Anyway, the back and forth of conversation is different here. People often don't answer each other. But the mat look in their eyes as they listen to me cancels my face, flattens my features. The mobility of my face comes from the mobility of the words coming to the surface and the feelings that drive them. Its vividness is sparked by the locking of an answering gaze, by the quickness of understanding. But now I can't feel how my face lights up from inside; I don't receive from others the reflected movement of its expressions, its living speech. People look past me as we speak. What do I look like, here? Imperceptible, I think; impalpable, neutral, faceless. (147)

This is a long, oddly worded paragraph. Its language is unnatural; and the use of the word "mat" seems to be a mistake or a typo. A pressing autobio-

graphical challenge related to what can be remembered comes into view—the elaborateness of Hoffman's portrayal of her characteristic interactions from thirty years before seems forced. Her face, her voice, and those of her interlocutors from back then, rear up grotesquely. They would have had to have been recorded, caught on film or noted down in a diary, for this kind of detail to be recoverable. Apart from this, the paragraph's final two sentences point in a revealing direction, toward the proverbial deconstructive thread which, when pulled, reveals a pattern of unspoken meaning.

Canadian critic Sarah Phillips Casteel offers a provocative and possibly singular reading of this aspect of Hoffman's memoir. She points to a likely key to the relationship between self-presentation and the author's response to her parents' wartime experience:

> A marked silence about the prewar past is maintained by her parents; the disconnect between her parents' pre- and post-war life is so great that Hoffman describes the war as her parents' "second birthplace." Hoffman herself perpetuates her parents' silence. The word "Holocaust" does not appear until 250 pages into the book, and the Holocaust is always confined to the margins of the narrative. (293)

From this, Phillips Casteel suggests, Vancouver cannot help but be a place obscured by willful silences. It is the place where Hoffman's parents,

> the keepers of memory, reside, and so no escape from memory is possible here. Thus it is Vancouver that becomes the locus of Holocaust memory, or to be more precise the place where the problem of this memory becomes most palpable. As the immediate scene of exile, and more profoundly, as a signifier of Holocaust memory and postmemory, Canada takes on a supremely negative valency. (293)

Phillips Casteel's insight echoes my own impression of what is not said about actual Jewish Vancouver in the late 1950s. Both what is seemingly trivial—shopping on Main Street—and what is obviously crucial in the author's relationship to her parents' wartime experience, steer the portrait of Vancouver in troubled directions. Hoffman belongs to what Marianne Hirsch has called the "generation of postmemory," who carry their parents' wartime recollections almost as if they were their own.

It is worth noting that Hoffman was in fact an over-achiever in her Vancouver high school years, and she was, ironically, eminently perceptible. Her voice appeared on local radio, and her success at a variety of musical and essay-writing competitions led her photograph to appear in local newspapers. Hidden away in digital archives one finds the pixyish face of 16-year-old Eva Wydra, being lauded by her community for her varied accomplishments. She received her own byline in a 1962 edition of Vancouver's *Jewish Western Bulletin* for an essay she delivered prior to joining

a "United Nations Youth Pilgrimage" in New York City (this alongside a Koerner Foundation grant to study music in Colorado, as well as a Vancouver School Board scholarship to study drama and music in Stratford, Ontario) (Wydra); while in the spring of 1963 she played "several piano selections" at a U.J.A. event honoring an Israeli independence fighter at the Hotel Vancouver ("Top program"). Eva Wydra, the *Jewish Western Bulletin*'s editor's note tells its readers, had been in Canada "only three years" after arriving from "her birthplace in Poland." The archive provides a contrasting portrait to that offered in *Lost in Translation*—of a youth whose compatriots would not hear her.

Another source that provides contrast with Hoffman's self-portrait is the record of Vancouver streets provided in the Kodachrome color photographs of Fred Herzog from the years 1959 and 1960. The colorful clash of signs, of urban architecture, of crowds and finned autos at street corners, tell a counternarrative to Hoffman's 1960-era "raw town," whose downtown is said to consist

> of a cluster of low buildings, with some neon displays flashing in the daytime, which hurt my head because I'm so unaccustomed to them. There are few people in the commercial area, and even fewer on the endless net of residential streets . . . (134–35)

This discovery of fault lines and contradictory versions in Hoffman's Vancouver portrait leads us back to Janet Malcolm's acknowledgement of the challenges found in autobiography. Malcolm is interested in the genre's overlap with fiction, its need for outside sources, other than memory, as well as the psychological barriers that interrupt faithful recovery: "Do we ever write about our parents," she asks, "without perpetuating a fraud?" (23) Every writer plays her own hand in response to the challenges that Malcolm raises. In Hoffman's case, the need to look backward at Kraków, and forward to something—anything else—led Vancouver to take on the look of something seen through a jiggled kaleidoscope, or a screen of wavering curtain lace: anything but a pair of unguarded youthful eyes.

Part Three: Alice Munro's "Finale"

In her early masterwork and only novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, Alice Munro is overt, at book's end, about the ins and outs of writing autobiographical fiction. It is in the final pages of the novel, dubbed "Epilogue:

The Photographer," where her protagonist and alter ego, Del Jordan, famously takes stock of the novel that she has begun to write. "Nobody knew about this novel," she says. "I had no need to tell anybody" (228). What Del keeps to herself (but Munro reveals to her readers) is the process of transmogrification—the making up and making over that goes into the novel "in [her] mind," which she "carries . . . everywhere" (238). One family in Jubilee, Del's small hometown in southern Ontario, becomes her model, or template, "transformed for fictional purposes" (231). Uncannily, the place remains itself, and yet is altered: "For this novel I changed Jubilee, too, or picked out some features of it and ignored others. It became an older, darker, more decaying town . . ." (231). Once fictionalized, it lay "close behind the one [she] walked through every day" (231). These changes mirror those applied to Vancouver in *Lost in Translation*. This is early Munro, published in 1971, when the writer was forty years old. Yet it is ground that she would return to throughout her career, in some ways challenging readers and critics to engage with the lingering question of the autobiographical character of her fiction. From a readerly view, this question may be seen as pointless. However one encountered her stories—in her own collections, anthologies, *The New Yorker* or Canadian journals—the question of an autobiographical impetus seemed moot. What is the point, really, of knowing, while reading, if one encounters intense remembering, elemental creation, or some mixture of the two? Is not the true experience of reading removed from any discernment with regard to this dividing line?

Still, over the course of Munro's long career the critics did not leave these questions alone for long. Sometimes Munro was coaxed into this territory in interviews, and although she was not overly detailed in her account of how her fiction embraced autobiography, she was at times less resistant to admitting an entanglement of the two, as if this relationship might be taken for granted. In an early 1980s interview she characterized herself as a "writer who uses what is obviously *personal* material—and I always say as *opposed* to straight autobiographical material" (Struthers 17, emphasis in the original). However, this distinction is blurred in the same interview as she calls one story, "Privilege," a "most personal story" (it is "about a school I went to and things that happened there") while another, "The Office," is said to be "about my most autobiographical story" (21, 23). These allowances are tantalizing in what they reveal, but may also operate as red herrings, heading the reader off from a consideration of other work that might share the same "personal" or "autobiographical" motives. An unexpected contribution to this topic is the memoir published by Sheila Munro, the author's daughter, under the uncomfortable title *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with*

Alice Munro. One wonders how the mother felt about her work and life being twinned and set up like mirroring subjects, though Sheila Munro's acknowledgement page does include her appreciation of her mother's "willingness to talk . . . about her life and work with complete candor and honesty" (266).

One section of Sheila Munro's account stands as a complementary text to Eva Hoffman's; that is the section describing Alice Munro's years in Vancouver, in her twenties, as a young mother, trying to sell her first stories. This was in the 1950s, and, like Hoffman, Munro was not taken with the place. "I hated it so much," Munro is quoted as telling a reviewer, "I've never been able to do much with it fictionally" (S. Munro 33). Though Alice Munro's husband worked downtown for Eaton's, the family chose suburban enclaves, first in North and then West Vancouver, parts of the city that many long-time residents rarely visit. Munro's sense of her own displacement was in part rooted in the disconnect between domestic life and her heartfelt goal of writerly accomplishment and success. It is this personal—or, if you like, autobiographical—tension that is at the center of "The Office," a story from Munro's West Vancouver period, which her daughter Sheila presents as family history. Her father, in favor of his wife's creative goals, found the "office," or writer's enclave on Dundarave, the neighborhood's shopping and commercial strip. "Ironically," Sheila Munro adds, "The Office" was "the one story" her mother was able to complete there (89).

The Nobel Prize, which Munro won in 2013, brought the autobiographical underpinnings of her fiction to the fore. A detailed biographical portrait by Canadian academic Robert Thacker—author of *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*—appears on the Nobel organization's web site, which has the effect of magnifying details and directions in a writer's life that highlight the links between life and story. Parallels are most readily found between Munro's ancestral background and her renderings of a southern Ontario family, its home life and links with its community, bound to a place with its own distinctive customs and social hierarchies. This is an aspect of Munro's oeuvre that might be called a personal mythology—something rather difficult to differentiate from autobiographical patterns, itself perhaps a pointless task. Like other authors of literary masterworks with far-reaching personal mythologies—James Joyce, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson or Flannery O'Connor—Munro exhibits a fierce rootedness in place, in the everyday habits, the voice and the character of its people, linked with a heightened attention to the texture of everyday life, from the color of the sky at dusk to the morning dust along the roadside. Here is Munro, via her creation Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, in an extended reverie drawn from the fact of her move, with her moth-

er, from the family's rural home to a house "in town." One finely tuned world, marked indelibly by time and place, is given up for another. One would happily quote the full page, but here is something concise and still a world in itself:

> The house we rented was down at the end or River Street not far from the CNR station. It was the sort of house that looks bigger than it is; it had a high but sloping roof—the second storey wood, the first storey brick . . .
>
> Yet it was a house that belonged to a town; things about it suggested leisure and formality, of a sort that were not possible out on the Flats Road . . . Going home from school, winter afternoons, I had a sense of the whole town around me, all the streets which were named River Street, Mason Street, John Street, Victoria Street, Huron Street, and strangely, Khartoum Street; the evening dresses gauzy and pale as crocuses in Krall's Ladies' Wear window; the Baptist Mission Band in the basement of their church, singing *There's a New Name Written Down in Glory, And it's Mine, Mine, Mine!* Canaries in their cages in the Selrite Store and books in the Library and mail in the Post Office and pictures of Olivia de Havilland and Errol Flynn in pirate and lady costumes outside the Lyceum Theatre—all these things, rituals and diversions, frail and bright, woven together—Town! (66–67)

This provides an opposing experience and rendering to Hoffman's impression of the imperceptibility, the "no place" character of 1950s Vancouver (134). Del's wartime town flares up, remarkably, as wholly felt and seen. Here we return to the (perhaps unanswerable) questions: what is it precisely that we are reading, and why should this matter? The tangled recognition of the differing possibilities is only tantalizing in biocritical contexts: a readerly relationship with Munro requires no answer to either question. So it was a surprise when Munro stepped into the fray in 2011 in her favored venue, *The New Yorker*. Under the ambiguous heading "Personal History" she published a part of what would appear in the concluding section of her last collection, *Dear Life*. The *New Yorker* piece begins this way:

> 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. (40)

In *The New Yorker*, "Dear Life" is illustrated by a 1930s-era studio photograph with the cutline "Alice Munro, at the age of two or three, in her hometown of Wingham, Ontario" (Sheila Munro has the same photo in her memoir, with the caption "My mother at around three years old" [149]). In the Canadian edition of the 2012 volume titled *Dear Life* there is no corresponding childhood photo. Somehow the magazine editors finagled it out of Munro (one can only imagine the interesting editorial correspondence

that this generated). The *New Yorker* piece is one of four collected at the back of the book that shares the title *Dear Life*. The grouping is headed by the title "Finale," followed by the author's note:

> *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 they are the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life.* (255, italics in the original)

Each proposition in this note undercuts itself, or deals its own ambiguity, aspects of which are deepened by the pieces themselves. Munro calls the four pieces of writing under discussion "works," a non-generic term; they are "not quite stories," though in one of them, "Dear Life," the author tells the reader forcefully that what she is recording "is not a story, only life" (307). The autobiographical ballast, or potential, is lightened by the proposition of something called autobiographical "feeling," which can be said to be wholly undefinable—a literary feature yet to be caught in the wild to be studied. The status of fact and departure from it is similarly unverifiable. The biographically minded reader will find, via an Internet search, that the local family name employed in "Dear Life"—Netterfield—was common in Wingham. Yet the narrator's sister's name in "Night" is Catherine, not that of Munro's own sister, Sheila.

What is the reader offered in these uniquely positioned four works: "The Eye," "Night," "Voices," and "Dear Life"? They are oriented toward the teller's mother and are limited in time—from the narrator's birth till her early adolescence. The landscape, its built culture and character, is crucial to all four, though in this case Munro neither calls the place a made-up name, such as Jubilee, nor the name of her birthplace, Wingham. Autobiographical "feeling" somehow excludes place names as it does the names of relatives and the narrator's own name. Artifacts of the period are plentiful—Red River cereal ("The Eye" 258), the *Saturday Evening Post* (260), and the foundry-made stoves that her father comes to manufacture late in his working life. But a reader encountering these "works" in a language other than English would look hard to discern where, exactly, they take place; the word Ontario does not appear, and Canada (along with Toronto) does only once (259). Vancouver, the hated place, is there, late in "Dear Life." "After I was married," Munro writes, "and had moved to Vancouver, I still got the weekly paper that was published in the town where I grew up" ("Dear Life" 316). A number of Wingham papers failed prior to Munro's years in Vancouver during the 1950s, and any number of papers from Huron County might fit the bill for what was one of the writer's pre-Internet resources. There, on

her B.C. doorstep, via cross-county mail, came the local news, obituaries, births, weather, and all else that a writer would need to fill in the picture from far away.

What happens in these four "works" in Munro's "Finale" is narrative, but one hesitates to call it plotted, a word that carries with it the quality of being consciously ordered, composed of items drawn from various sources. Munro instructs us in how to understand what she is telling us in the work called "Voices," which recounts an outing made by young Alice and her mother to an evening dance "in one of the altogether decent but not prosperous-looking houses on our road" (288). It is a dual portrait—mother and daughter in action, meeting up with the peculiarities of their surroundings, each in her own way. In this piece the action centers on the appearance, at the party, of a pair of local prostitutes, the senior of which is decked out in an unusual "golden-orange taffeta" dress (292). The dress causes Munro to offer a rare allowance of what "Voices" is: "I think that if I was writing fiction instead of remembering something that happened, I would never have given her that dress" (292). This sentence, set off in its own short paragraph, seems to operate as a key, or code for how to read "Voices." It may be that it is a less tangled work, less prone to hedging its bets than the author's note that introduces it. Yet we cannot determine if this short passage fully accounts for what is offered in "Voices," with its wonderful depiction of wartime in what we take to be Wingham, the air force men who have come to the dance party along with a pair of local prostitutes—one young and out of sorts, the other sporting marcelled hair and a taffeta dress too brazen to be made up.

"Dear Life," the last piece in Munro's four-part "Finale," ends on a point of remorse, if not guilt:

> 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 behaviour, 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. (319)

Munro's mother died in 1959, in the later stage of her sojourn in West Vancouver (she and Eva Wydra were hating the city that same year). There is a further detail of the fact-is-stranger-than-fiction variety at the end of the *New Yorker* version of "Dear Life." There, Munro concludes:

> When my mother was dying, she got out of the hospital somehow, at night, and wandered around town until someone who didn't know her at all spotted her and took her in. If this were fiction, as I said, it would be too much, but it is true. (47)

Because the September 2011 *New Yorker* publication precedes the book edition of *Dear Life* by less than a year, Munro cut this quickly, but it still haunts the final pages of her last book—like a missing limb.[3] Did she decide that it was somehow *too personal* (though one would not in this case be able to say *too autobiographical*) to appear in the less ephemeral book publication? Maybe here we arrive at a clear definition of these contrasting terms that have reverberated in Munro's consideration of her own work: autobiography is what happened, while the personal brings with it all the attendant feeling—remorse, embarrassment, shame—that autobiographical writing can evade and refuse to declare. Her mother, loose at night and caught by a stranger, was too personal; her remorse over not attending her mother's funeral was not. One aspect of this story was in, then out, while the other was retained as a preferred ending.

Like Geraldine Moodie's photographic oeuvre, the autobiographical writing of Eva Hoffman and Alice Munro betrays the gaps, coded presences, and evasions common to such artistic renderings. Janet Malcolm provides us with a contrasting example in her examination of the autobiographical writing of Alice B. Toklas, the lifelong partner of Gertrude Stein. An undercurrent in Malcolm's examination of autobiographical writing by both women is their avoidance of recognizing themselves as Jews. A most revealing excision in the case of Toklas includes her ancestral connection to a line of rabbis in prewar Poland, and her own youthful visits to this cradle, one might say, of her family's past. Almost by mistake, not long before her death, Toklas tells a friend of "her trips to Poland, when she was a child, to visit her paternal grandfather. This grandfather was the rabbi of Ostrow, a small city near Kalisz, the cradle of the Tykociner . . ." (Malcolm, *Two Lives* 195). Here a whole other "past" enters the picture, otherwise repressed, dispensed with, not so much as a form of autobiographical forgetting, but full-scale resistance that one might recognize as part of Malcolm's notion of autobiography as a "novelistic enterprise." Her view of the genre proves true in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, where so much of late-fifties Vancouver disappears and is replaced by something wholly personal, even novelistic. With Geraldine Moodie's work, the rarity of the self-portrait effects something similar—the artist, for the most part, remains outside the frame of reference, while controlling it, as seen in the instance of the rare self-portrait, with a hidden hand. Alice Munro's oeuvre is a greater puzzle, where issues of the personal, the actual, the non-factual and the fictional pull us in the direction of reading without knowing—or even caring—how to unravel these tangled threads.

[3] Elements of this excised passage appear in the much anthologized "Peace of Utrecht," from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968).

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