

# **“The Unavoidable Collision of Religion and Life”**

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# “The Unavoidable Collision of Religion and Life”: Scots Presbyterianism in Alice Munro’s Fiction

PILAR SOMACARRERA

People’s lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable — deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.

— Alice Munro (*Lives of Girls and Women* 277)

**A**LICE MUNRO’S WELL-KNOWN METAPHOR about people’s lives being like “deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” comes from her Scottish Calvinist upbringing. Calvinism, as Gertrude Himmelfarb points out, is permeated by a sense of the unquiet depths that lie beneath the human surface (52). Presbyterian theology, as conceived by John Calvin and John Knox, is an integral part of Munro’s fictional world, and lack of knowledge about this kind of theological background can be an impediment to arriving at full comprehension of many of her stories. Although Munro once said that religion is not a preoccupation of her characters (“Interview with Hancock” 215), I agree with Magdalene Redekop that the critique of patriarchal structure has led Munro deeper and deeper into old religious stories (*Mothers* 210). This essay builds on the work of critics such as Redekop and Karl Miller about Munro’s Scottish material. Redekop refers to the complex and contradictory image of Scotland that emerges from Munro’s fiction, peopled by fanatical Presbyterians (“Alice Munro” 23). Yet one should differentiate what Munro conceives of as Scots Presbyterianism (based on her own experience) and a deeper and more general view of the history of the denomination in Canada, since her Laidlaw ancestors belonged to a distinct group. In an interview with Chris Gittings, Munro provides some information about her religious background:

I grew up in the United Church because that’s what the Presbyterians had gone into here [in Canada], but my background was fully Presbyterian, and I found that the Presbyterian Church in Canada doesn’t arrive from the . . . established Presbyterian church

in Scotland. . . . It's a radical fundamentalist wing which came out here. There was something called the Glasgow Mission and they sent their own preachers out to Canada in say the 1840s, 1850s and those preachers preached against the Presbyterian church as it was already established here because they figured it was not nasty enough (laughter). And they founded Knox College in Toronto, and so what took over here in Canada was really a kind of fundamentalist Presbyterianism, very narrow and tough. ("Scottish Ancestor" 85)

Her view of Scots Presbyterianism in this interview is slightly partial since Munro does not mention the creation of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843 (in 1844 in Canada), which meant a radical response to the more moderate form of Presbyterianism embedded in the social hierarchies of Scotland. Furthermore, not all Presbyterians in Canada entered into the union of 1925 with the Methodists (all) and the Congregationalists (all) that created the United Church of Canada, as Munro herself notes in the story "Age of Faith" in *Lives of Girls and Women*.

Since the topic of Presbyterianism in particular — and of religion in general — in Munro's fiction is hugely important and expands beyond the scope of this article, I focus here on three of the collections in which it appears most prominently: *Lives of Girls and Women*, *Friend of My Youth*, and *The View from Castle Rock*. I aim to show how the Scots Calvinist doctrines of Munro's ancestors provide an essential framework for the intellectual questing of the protagonists and narrators of her stories. To this end, I explore how the stories scrutinize the dogmas of Calvinism summarized in the acronym TULIP: **t**otal depravation, **u**nconditional election, **l**imited atonement, **i**rrresistible grace, and **p**erseverance of the saints.<sup>1</sup> In addition, I offer an explanation of Munro's allusions to the Covenanters in *Friend of My Youth* in light of the history of the Scottish Reformation.

### A Phenomenological Theology: Faith and Reason in *Lives of Girls and Women*

In her second collection of short stories, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Munro addresses religious issues in the light of a phenomenological theology that Theodore W. Jennings defines as predominantly empirical, inductive, and philosophical (99). The phenomenological

approach in *Lives of Girls and Women* is reminiscent of David Hume's definition of belief in his *Treatise of Human Nature* as "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression" (qtd. in Noxon 64). This short-story cycle about the coming of age of a young woman (Del Jordan) and her problematic relationship with her mother (Ada) is set in the fictional town of Jubilee in Wawanash County (a fictional correlative of Huron County). As Coral Ann Howells recalls, the wilderness area of the Huron Tract was opened up for settlement by pioneers of Scottish, Irish, and English origin, among whom was Munro's grandfather, one of the Laidlaw brothers (6). A significant portion of *Lives of Girls and Women* is about religion, illustrated by the titles of the stories ("Heirs of the Living Body," "Age of Faith," and "Baptizing") and the names of places and characters. As Howells notes, "Heirs of the Living Body" is an image from Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1:12) describing the relationship among members of the Christian church (8), and "Baptizing" evokes the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Jordan, the protagonist's last name, is a correlative to that river, whereas the biblical referent of Jericho — where her lover, Garnet French, lives — is the town near the Jordan River visited by Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem. I will discuss these three stories — dealing with the notions of death, faith, grace, and God — jointly in order to come to an understanding of Del's personal religious epistemology, influenced simultaneously by the Scottish Enlightenment and Presbyterianism.

Ada's ideology consists of a peculiar combination of the skeptical-empirical philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment and Presbyterian sexual prudery and distaste for idolatrous rituals. Ada, a seller of encyclopedias (a job that unmistakably evokes the magnum opus of the French Enlightenment), is intent on transmitting her "Age of Reason" way of thinking to Del. Favouring a pseudo-scientific explanation of death as a transformation of the elements of the human body over the Presbyterian dogmas of "Heaven and Hell" (54),<sup>2</sup> Ada is convinced that "God was made by *man*" (117) and even argues with ministers. Del's search for God is more eclectic. Faced with the mystery of death, Del opts for an empirical methodology that would allow her to have "death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances" (51). She uses Thomas Aquinas's fifth way of design — appealing to the purposefulness of the universe — to justify the existence of

God. According to Del, God must exist “if all those atoms, galaxies of atoms, were safe all the time, whirling away in God’s mind” (110). She also tries to prove the existence of God by praying for a miracle to happen — to be exempt from using the sewing machine in the household science class (113). Although Del is expelled from the class, as she wished, she concludes that it was unlikely the result of God’s intervention. Her view of miracles is therefore akin to Hume’s argument that it is unreasonable to believe in testimonies of alleged miraculous events. His *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* containing the chapter “Of Miracles” is mentioned in Munro’s memoir “Working for a Living” as one of the books owned by her grandfather (*View* 135), so this text is likely to have been part of her education.

While influenced by the philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, Del’s religious ideas also conform to her Presbyterian background. Interestingly, her speculations about God and justification eventually lead Del to positions close to Antinomianism, a religious belief that started in sixteenth-century Germany holding that moral law is not binding on Christians and thus annulling the notion of sin: “The idea of God did not connect for me with any idea of being good. . . . I believed in being saved by faith alone, by some great grab of the soul” (111); “if He [God] had made everything the way He wanted it then nothing was to blame for being the way it was, and this more or less threw out, didn’t it, the whole idea of sin?” (120-21). Although Del acknowledges that “the question of whether God existed or not never came out in Church” (106), she offers a detailed — almost scientific — description of the four denominations in Jubilee: United, Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist. The rituals and arrangements in these denominations were projections of their social and political agendas. The United Church, the one Del belongs to, has a positive outlook, with its stained glass windows of Christ “performing useful miracles” and pews in “democratic fan-shaped arrangement” (104), suggesting the egalitarian approach of Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Her description of the Catholic Church responds to the prejudices against Catholics inherited from her Presbyterian family: “The Catholic church was the most extreme. . . . [I]t . . . dispensed peculiar services to Catholics, who seemed bizarre and secretive as Hindus, with their idols and confessions and black spots on Ash Wednesday” (103). Baptists “were extreme as well, but . . . in a slightly comic way,” and had a “vulgar cheerfulness” (103). Presbyterians

were full of “stubborn conviction” (104), intent on keeping the Sabbath, and well known for their sexual prudery, which led them to identify the Jubilee Gay-la Dance Hall with Sodom and Gomorrah (202). Her artistic inclination and penchant for ritual has led Del to attend services of the Anglican church in Jubilee, a minority church in Wawanash County because the area had been settled by Scottish Presbyterians: “The Anglican ritual still kept what the Congregationalists and Presbyterians had fearfully abolished — the theatrical in religion” (109). In fact, the Anglican Church was often considered a “posh” denomination because members of the Ontario establishment were often members.

However, by the end of “Age of Faith,” the protagonist moves away from rituals and evolves into a kind of deism disregarding obligations and the authority of any church, an approach to the supernatural close to Hume’s natural religion. Considering the possibility of the existence of God, Del wonders, *Could there be a God not contained in the churches’ net at all, not made manageable by any spells and crosses, God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith?*” (127). Her idea of divinity is constructed from both Enlightenment and Presbyterian ideologies, which reject miracles and the suffering of Christ for humankind.

The reasons for Del’s final denial of Presbyterian theology are developed in “Baptizing.” It is one of the longest stories in the collection (seventy pages) and can be divided into three sections encompassing four of the five points of Calvinism that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay: total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. The first section recounts Del’s escapades at the Gay-la Dance Hall, behind which “French safes scattered like old snakeskins” (203), the condoms an unequivocal allusion to the sin entailed by unmarried sex (total depravity). The second section of the story deals with Del’s sexually awkward relationship with Jerry Storey, the class nerd whose only aim in life is going to university. Her connection with him leads Del to believe that she has also been predestined to go to university, and thus at the end of the story she affirms that “her need for love had gone underground” (227). The last two points of Calvinism (irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints) are simultaneously illustrated and subverted in the third and longest section of the story, which deals with her sexual initiation with Garnet French, a “sinner” who has been in jail for drinking and fighting but converted

by a Baptist minister who visited him there. Del is more interested in Garnet's "dark side" than in "the regenerate Baptist" (241).

In relation to the next point of Calvinist theology (irresistible grace), in "Baptism" the narratives of salvation and sexual awakening run parallel at the revival meeting at which Del meets Garnet, as made explicit by the following stanza from a hymn by Mary B.C. Slade (1826-82):

*Into a tent where a gypsy boy lay  
Dying alone at the end of the day  
News of Salvation we carried; said he  
Nobody ever has told it to me —* (231)

Del's experience inverts the situation in the hymn, in which the collective speaker carries salvation to the gypsy boy, whereas it is a gypsy-looking boy (Garnet) who brings salvation to Del. At the touch of their hands, Del "felt angelic with gratitude, truly as if I had come out on another level of existence" (233). As the relationship between the two lovers evolves, sex is described in religious terms as "an act of pure faith, freedom in humility" (239), thus replacing religion in Del's system of beliefs. Garnet's influence quickly dismantles her Presbyterian notions based on the prevalence of the word (scripture): in their relationship, "words were our enemies" (242). Del soon starts to perceive and dislike the strongly patriarchal slant of her lover's view of religion — "he would lead a prayer, beginning in a firm mannerly voice, 'Our Heavenly Father'" (237) — and begins to ponder the equality of the sexes, suggested by some lines of Browning's poem "Andrea del Sarto": "*A common greyness silvers everything, / All in a twilight, you and I alike*" (237). Furthermore, as the preliminaries of sex are fulfilled and Del finally comes to experience orgasm, she notices that she and her lover have "come to another level — more solid, less miraculous, where cause and effect must be acknowledged" (251). Garnet — already determined to marry Del — decides that she has to be saved by baptism first (260), but, suddenly changing her mind about the relationship, she returns to her rational and phenomenological approach to religion and life and refuses to be baptized by him, thus resisting the "grace" that he wants to bring to her. Ironically, reversing the Christian ritual by which the catechumen, the Christian convert who is going to receive baptism, begins her life in Christ, by rejecting Garnet's baptism Del starts her "real life": "Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from

the mistakes and confusion from the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies, leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life" (265). She thus escapes the two lives for which she was predestined, that of "love" (marrying Garnet and becoming a wife) and that of "scholarship" (going to university, following her mother's ambitions for her), starting a new existence of her own, away from sexual love, learning, and religion. Just as her Humean approach to religion led her to distrust miracles before, Del has now ceased to believe in the "miraculous" grace of sex.

### Subverting Scottish Calvinist Theology: *Friend of My Youth*

As Gittings points out, in her collection *Friend of My Youth* (1990), Munro moves one step closer to the formulation of her personal Presbyterian theology by "grounding her narrative in Scottish Reformation history" (27). The collection contains two stories with explicit Scottish material, the title story and "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass," with the religious extremism of the Covenanters and their splinter group the Cameronians as a backdrop. Munro has acknowledged the Scottish border town of Selkirk as the setting for this second story ("Scottish Ancestor" 86), the site of the battle of Philiphaugh (1645) between the Royalist army led by the Marquis of Montrose and the Covenanter army led by Sir David Leslie. As T.C. Smout explains, Montrose's Highland army was defeated by Leslie's Covenanters (64), and the subsequent cruel massacre is recounted in Munro's story: "The Covenanters hanged all their prisoners. Right out there in the town square, under the dining-room windows. Then they butchered all the women and children on the field" (86).<sup>3</sup> As Munro's narrator seems to suggest in this passage, the Covenanters' attempt to liberate God's word from the dominant interpretive auspices of bishops soon became a tyrannical and self-righteous holy war waged in Scotland and England.

I will return to the significance of the Cameronians at the end of this section, but first I would like to pursue my argument that, like the stories analyzed earlier, "Friend of My Youth" follows the same pattern of endorsement and rebuttal of Presbyterian doctrine. Narratologically, it is a complex story about the life-long conflicted relationship between a mother and a daughter projected onto the embedded narrative of two Cameronian sisters (Flora and Ellie Grieves) who struggle to make their religious beliefs compatible with their sexuality. Like James Hogg's *The*



*Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, it features two different narrators. While in Hogg's famous book the two narrators (the editor and Robert Wringhim, the "justified sinner") are male, in Munro's story they are female and nameless: the frame narrator, a mature woman looking back at her mother's young life and the extreme views of her adolescent years (I will refer to the sixteen-year-old daughter as "the narrated I"), and the narrator's mother, whose voice is filtered by that of the mature daughter. Unlike the stories in *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Friend of My Youth" provides detailed information about the rites and theology of the Scots Calvinist group that it describes (the Cameronians or "Reformed Presbyterians") interspersed in the story and gradually focalized from the most external features to the intricacies of their doctrines.

Being "the only people in the school district who were of that religion," which forbade "card playing, dancing, movies, and, on Sundays, any activity at all that was not religious or unavoidable" (5), the Cameronians were considered eccentric ("some freak religion from Scotland") and thus alienated from the rest of the community. Their church was equally odd (especially compared with the churches described in *Lives of Girls and Women*): "Oh, that church, my mother said, having attended it once, out of curiosity — that drear building miles on the other side of town, no organ or piano or plain glass in the windows and a dodderly old minister with his hours-long sermon, a man hitting a tuning fork for the singing" (9). The mother was struck by the Cameronians' view of artistic beauty (stained glass windows or music) as a distraction. Whereas she — an Anglican whose "faith was easy" (12) and who was not intellectually curious — thought that the Cameronians had "a monstrous old religion" (12), the narrator has made some inquiries about their theological doctrine: "All the configuration of the elect and the damned, my mother must have meant — all the arguments about the illusion and the necessity of free will. Doom and slippery redemption. The torturing, defeating, but for some minds irresistible pileup of interlocking and contradictory notions" (12). This summary of the Cameronians' religious beliefs seems to encapsulate the lives of the narrator and her mother, who "believed [themselves] independent" (23) but ended up being doomed — the mother by her illness and the daughter by her incapacity to be fully redeemed from the sin of abandoning her mother. In addition, like the Calvinist theology of

the Cameronians, their lives were entangled by a web of contradictions confronting religion and life.

Furthermore, the stories of the narrator and her mother, and Flora and Ellie, revolve around the notions of total depravity and original sin. Many Christian denominations still believe that at the core of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve was sex, and therefore extramarital sex is strictly condemned: "God dealt out punishment for hurry-up marriages — not just Presbyterians but almost everybody else believed that. God rewarded lust with dead babies, idiots, harelips and withered limbs and clubfeet" (11). Ellie succumbed to sex before marriage and was punished by not being able to give birth, and it was fear of punishment that made Flora avoid normal sexuality. The Church of Scotland also imposed its own punishments on sexual sinners, which included public humiliation such as ducking (Reid 240). However, these rules were never applied to Robert Deal, the Scottish immigrant who arrived at the house of the Grieves and "*did it to Ellie*" (22). As Redekop notes, Robert Deal is possibly named after Robert Wringhim (*Mothers* 213), but his name also evokes another famous Scots womanizer, Robert Burns, who, unlike Deal, "suffered public . . . humiliation" (*View* 18) for being charged with paternity by local girls. Deal is an ambiguous character who first courts Flora and then has sex with Ellie, which precipitates his marriage to her, but he "never has a word to say" (21). Like Saint Joseph, the Virgin Mary's spouse, he is a carpenter, but unlike him he neither respects his vows to Flora nor Ellie's virginity. Just as Deal's sexual sin brings about the division between Flora and Ellie, so too sex is responsible for the rift between the narrator and her mother: "My mother grew up in a time and in a place where sex was a dark undertaking for women. . . . So she honoured the decency, the prudery, the frigidity that might protect you. And I grew up in horror of that very protection" (22). Nevertheless, avoiding sex did not protect her from illness, just as sexual sin did not stop Ellie from dying "firm in her faith" (16).

The second point of Calvinist doctrine questioned in the story is predestination. At first sight, Flora seems to be one of the elect, predestined for salvation. This conviction, according to the narrator, allows her to put up with being jilted twice yet remain "veiled in patience and humility and lighted by a certainty that events cannot disturb" (20). People, including the narrator's mother, believed that "she had behaved

like a saint" (8). However, when the narrator and her mother concoct different stories about Flora — the mother as a Presbyterian saint and the young daughter, the narrating "I," as a "Presbyterian witch" (20-21) — Flora eludes both versions and ultimately remains unknowable: she leaves the Grieves's farm and disappears from the story without leaving a clue about her destination. The fact that the ending does not reveal whether she continued to be a Cameronian or started a new life as a woman who "might go on holidays, . . . rent a cottage on the lake for a week, learn to swim, . . . or meet a man" (25) provides evidence of resistance against the Calvinist doctrines of irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints.

At this point, I need to return to my prior discussion of the Covenanters. Just as the reader cannot know what happened to Flora, so too interpretation of the final paragraph about the Cameronians remains elusive. According to Robert Thacker, Munro got the information about the Cameronians from a friend who had known some of them in the Ottawa Valley (434). In the story, the narrator's mother "could not say who the Cameronians were or why they were called that" (5), but the narrator has researched them:

The Cameronians, I have discovered, are or were an uncompromising remnant of the Covenanters — those Scots who in the seventeenth century bound themselves, with God, to resist prayer books, bishops, any taint of popery or interference by the King. Their name comes from Richard Cameron, an outlawed, or "field" preacher, soon cut down. The Cameronians — for a long time they have preferred to be called the Reformed Presbyterians — went into battle singing the seventy-fourth and the seventy-eighth Psalms. They hacked the haughty Bishop of St Andrews to death on the highway and rode their horses over his body. One of their ministers, in a mood of firm rejoicing at his own hanging, excommunicated all the other preachers in the world. (26)

Bearing no apparent connection with the topic of the previous paragraph — the relationship between the narrator and her mother — this passage finally provides the information that the Cameronians owed their name to Richard Cameron (1648-80), an extreme Covenanting preacher who got into trouble for preaching against the episcopate. As Isla Duncan explains, under its apparent disconnectedness, the passage addresses the daughter's ongoing preoccupation with her mother's story

(*Alice Munro's* 60). When she was a teenager, the narrated I treated her mother with the intransigence that the Cameronians used for Catholics, bishops, and kings. According to the conventicler minister Richard Law, the Cameronians "were not counsellable" (qtd. in Mitchinson 265); they did not accept any advice, just like the narrated I did not accept any advice from her mother. Referring to Cameron as "a field preacher," the narrator highlights the kerygmatic or preaching mode of Munro's narrative: both narrators preach their versions of Flora's story, but the dogmatic account of the narrated I, resembling that of the Cameronians, gives way to the more nuanced opinion of the mature narrator, who seems to have released her mother from the dogmatic image that she made of her as a teenager. The narrator merely presents historical information about the Cameronians without praising or criticizing them, in a way consistent with Munro's ambiguous attitude to the extreme religious convictions of the Covenanters, whom Munro is reluctant to condemn, just like her ancestor James Hogg (Redekop, *Mothers* 213).

### A Theology of Doubt: Scots Presbyterianism in *The View from Castle Rock*

So far analysis of the selected stories has illustrated that, as her career progressed, Munro gradually delved more deeply into the Presbyterian theology of her ancestors portrayed in her earlier stories. In "A Wilderness Station," she refers for the first time in her fiction to Reverend Thomas Boston (1676-1732), described by Karl Miller as Calvinist, miserabilist, strong on original sin, and famous for his books and sermons (18). He was a son of Covenanters, and the Scots Presbyterian tradition has always considered him "one of the most pious ministers in the land" (Fleming 89). The story has received abundant critical attention: Ildikó de Papp Carrington and Adrian Hunter have undertaken comparative studies of the text with Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Gittings has read it as yet another attempt to translate the religious beliefs of the old country into those of the new one, and Duncan has explored its epistemological roots (see "It Seems"). Following the Covenanting tradition, Boston was a preacher "who in the latter days of his infirmity preached the grandeur of God from his chamber window to a crowd of two thousand or so" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 204). The story records the doctrine of this minister as it appears in his book *The Crook in the Lot*, exhorting his parishioners "to receive

his blows as signs of his care and goodness for so they will prove to be" (198). Boston's simile — which provides the title for Munro's story — of the world as a wilderness, "*in which we may indeed get our station changed, but the move will be out of one wilderness station unto another*" (204), provides a suitable geographical and spiritual context for Munro's narratives about her ancestors' journey to Canada. The protagonist of "A Wilderness Station" — Annie Herron (née McKillop), a Presbyterian Scottish immigrant to Canada — is found to be perplexing by legal authorities (James Mullen, clerk of the peace) and religious authorities (Walter McBain, minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of North Huron) because she has a direct relationship with God without the need of a priest. As Gittings points out, McBain's tyrannical story of predestination and the omnipotence of God is challenged by Annie's usurpation of God (35).

This kind of appropriation of God has already been illustrated by the analyzed stories from *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Friend of My Youth* and is present in Munro's most Scottish volume, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006). In this collection, based on family letters, official documents, and the writings of Hogg, Munro tells the story of her ancestors who travelled to Canada on a sailing ship in 1818 and how their Presbyterian religious beliefs and values — "fortitude, self-reliance, hard work" (129)<sup>4</sup> — went along with them and shaped their lives in the new country. The autobiographical information that it provides sheds light on Munro's earlier Scottish fictions and on her career as a whole.

"No Advantages," the first story, offers further details about Thomas Boston and provides the background information needed to understand the rest of the stories in the collection. Resembling an essay, the text is divided into four sections, each of which is preceded by an epigraph. The first section is headed by a text dated 1799 written by a minister of Ettrick Parish in Selkirk County to the Statistical Account of Scotland describing the poverty and backwardness of the parish and attesting to the power of the Kirk in Ettrick during the first part of the eighteenth century. The second section, dedicated to Munro's ancestor Will O'Phaup, is announced by the epitaph on his tomb and the heading "MEN OF ETTRICK" (7). The third part is headed by the inscription on the tomb of Boston, buried next to Munro's ancestor at Ettrick Parish. And the fourth part, preceded by texts by James Hogg

and James Laidlaw, recounts the literary and historical connections of the Ettrick Valley.

Like a tourist guidebook, “No Advantages” begins with a geographical description of the Ettrick Valley and then focuses on William Laidlaw, known as Will O’Phaup, who, as inscribed on his tomb, was famous “for feats of frolic, agility and strength” (7) and his belief in fairies. Like other ancestors of Munro, O’Phaup was a contradictory man, “a near pagan, a merry man, a brandy drinker,” who nevertheless “believed in the strictures and hard hopes of this punishing Calvinist faith” (17). No less puzzling was Hogg’s cousin James Laidlaw, who left Scotland for North America at the age of sixty “when he was old enough,” as Hogg observed, “to have one foot in the grave” (20). The story also contains a section about the life and spiritual strife of Reverend Thomas Boston, whose books travelled to Canada in the trunks of Scottish emigrants next to those of Robert Burns and had a powerful influence on Scottish peasants:

Thomas Boston . . . is remembered now — if he is remembered at all — as the author of a book called *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, which was said to stand next to the Bible on the shelf of every house in Scotland. And every Presbyterian home in Scotland was meant to be a pious home. Constant investigation of private life and tortured reshaping of faith went on to take care of that. There was no balm of ritual, no elegance of ceremony. Prayer was not only formal, but personal, agonized. The readiness of the soul for eternal life was always in doubt and danger. (14)

The four states of Boston’s book — innocence; nature (which features the sinfulness, misery, and inability of humans’ natural state); grace; and eternity — encompass his stark Calvinist views, highly influential on the characters of *The View from Castle Rock*. As Tessa Hadley suggests, the Laidlaws, with their determination to leave written records of their lives, owe much to a Protestant tradition of agonized self-scrutiny, by no means reliably orthodox or complacent (18). Also typically Calvinist is the lack of distinction between private and public life. In the epitaph on Boston’s tomb, both his private character and his public labours were considered worthy of praise, as though there was no real distinction between them (14). No less harrowing than the absence of private life was the loss of ritual and ceremony brought about by the Scottish Reformation. Ritual alleviated fear and guilt, and its suppression meant

a tremendous and abrupt breach in a continuum that had lasted for centuries (Reid 248).

Boston was also known because of his affiliation with the Marrow Controversy. After he discovered a book titled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* authored by the English Puritan Edward Fisher in the house of one of his parishioners, he decided to republish it because it set forth clearly the gospel of God's free grace to all sinful people (Fleming 90). This book planted in Boston the seeds of Antinomianism, which, as stated in Munro's story, "proceeds logically from the doctrine of predestination and asks a simple, direct question — why, if you are from the beginning one of the elect, should you not be able to get away with anything you like?" (16). Expectedly, the establishment Church of Scotland did not like the book because it considered its style too bold and popular in comparison with the dry and prosaic treatises of the Dutch theologians so popular in Scotland. But the worst sin, as the narrator of "No Advantages" explains, was not that Boston wanted "to get away with anything he liked" but "the compulsion, the honourable compulsion, to follow where certain lines of reasoning led" (16). According to the narrator, it was because of "the stain of being a marrow-man, of following his own unavoidable thought" (19), that Boston was forced to remain for his pains in remote Ettrick. His fate demonstrates once again that having an inquiring and rational mind can clash with official religion.

Just as in *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Friend of My Youth*, in *The View from Castle Rock* sex outside marriage is one of the most blatant manifestations of human sin. This sin had to be punished, and Ettrick parishioners "were called up for those sins to sit on the cutty stool and bear their shame — usually for some sexual matter, solemnly referred to as Fornication" (17). Hogg and Burns, accused of fornication, were brought before the church authorities responsible for the enforcement of sexual discipline at the parish level. Munro's story also records how the elders of Presbyterian churches were vigilant regarding fornication: "An Elder in Burns's church records, 'Only 26 Fornicators since the last sacrament,' as if this figure is indeed a step in the right direction" (18). Here Munro attempts religious satire, just as Burns did in poems such as "Holly Willie" and "The Fornicator," in which he satirized the punishments imposed by the Kirk and their scant effects on parishioners.

Notwithstanding its sexually repressive aspects, Scots Presbyterianism also contributed to the rise of literacy in Scotland. The

narrator of “No Advantages” considers how the Church of Scotland emphasized literacy and education from its inception. Following Knox’s instructions, there was to be a school in every parish:

John Knox had wanted them educated so that they could read the Bible. And they read it, with piety but also with hunger, to discover God’s order, the architecture of his mind. They found a lot to puzzle about. Other ministers of Boston’s time complain of how disputatious their parishioners are, *even the women* (Boston does not mention that, being too busy blaming himself). They do not quietly accept the hours-long sermons but grab hold of them as intellectual fodder, judging as if they were involved in lifelong and serious debates. They are forever worrying at points of doctrine and passages of scripture that they would be better off leaving alone, say their ministers. (18)

Knox’s “intellectual approach to religion” (Reid 249), which led Scottish people to read the Bible, listen to sermons, and respond to them critically, prompted doubts among the faithful, which in turn led to questioning of the minister’s teachings. This theology of disputation and doubt eventually gave way to the divisions that characterized the Church of Scotland (“The result being that the Church is riven by divisions, the men of God are frequently at one another’s throats” [19]) and affected Scotland and Canada in the nineteenth century.

The title story provides some case studies of how Munro’s ancestors reacted to the Calvinist theology that they took with them to North America. Walter, James Laidlaw’s youngest son, keeps a diary of his journey to North America. He finds himself filled with doubts prompted by his reading of Boston’s *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* or listening to ministers preach on it:

The soul leaves the body at the moment of death. But from which part of the body does the soul leave, what has been its particular bodily location? . . . [H]ow can souls maintain themselves outside of bodies until the Day of Judgement and how on that day each one finds and recognizes the body that is its own and reunites with it, though it be not so much as a skeleton at the time. . . . But there are also some — he has learned this recently — who have studied and read and have come to the conclusion that there are no souls at all. (41)



These are complex questions to be asked by a young man with a limited education born in a remote village of Scotland. In a typically Scottish manner, Walter discovers that the only way out of these conundrums is through humour, as when he refers to the anecdote of a filthy fellow in Ettrick whose soul was expelled through his anus. Since preachers will not provide him with satisfactory answers to his doubts about the soul and the afterlife, Walter turns to the ideas of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, despite his conviction that they will end up in hell. One of these men was Hume: "Fat Davey he was called . . . because he was so fat that the table had to be cut away so he could sit down to his meal" (41). Hume was "some sort of scholar," after whose death in Edinburgh people waited in the street outside his house "to see if the Devil would come to claim him" (41-42). Like the Scottish philosopher, Walter is skeptical about Presbyterian theology, which he sees as contrary to empirical facts.

Mary Laidlaw provides another example of what Munro calls in "Age of Faith" "the unavoidable collision between religion and life" (126), pervasive in her stories about Scots Presbyterianism. An act of theodicy (trying to find a viable justification for God) is evident when Mary sees the "marvellous intelligence and imperious will [of her son James] which seem to her to come straight from Heaven" (49). Following Boston's doctrine, she is even willing to accept the blow of losing her child when she ponders that God might be "tempted to take His creature back, as if the world did not deserve it" (50). On the other hand, she struggles with a religion that had "always taught her that self-will comes from the opposite direction" (49). When James vanishes, Mary prays to God to bring her son back and even offers to renounce "her extreme and perhaps idolatrous, perhaps wicked love of another creature" (50). Her prayer "in a time of terror" (51) is a utilitarian response to religion that was not uncommon among the followers of Scots Presbyterianism — or of other Christian denominations. When James is found, "she gives no thanks but thinks what a fool she was and how she could not give up her love of him any more than stop her heart beating" (51), giving primacy to her maternal love over her submission to God's will, thus failing to be like her namesake, the Virgin Mary, who gave away her son for the salvation of sinners. Despite her "distant and stiff regard for religion" (80), after the doctor on board predicts that the child might become a preacher, Mary rejoices at the thought that he might be predestined for

“the most distinguished thing a man can be” (80-81), thus contradicting herself. Ironically, her fantasy of predestination for her child does not come true because the boy dies soon after arriving in Canada, illustrating, once again, the collision between religion and reality.

The third and final case on the disparity between faith and life in *The View from Castle Rock* is the story of William, the second youngest son of James Laidlaw, recounted in the story “Illinois.” Of all Laidlaw’s sons, Will is “the most contrary and most bitterly set against his father” (52), rebelling against him and his fatherland by going to live in Joliet, Illinois (near Chicago), where he eventually dies of cholera. Facing this misfortune, Andrew, his older brother, speculates whether his decision might not have brought about his premature death:

Andrew knew, of course, that a man was as likely to die of cholera in Upper Canada as in the state of Illinois, and that it was foolish to blame Will’s death on his choice of nationality. He did not do so. And yet. And yet — there was something about all this rushing away, loosing oneself entirely from family and past, there was something rash and self-trusting about it that might not help a man, that might put him more in the way of such an accident, such a fate. Poor Will. (110)

As Scott Hames points out, the alignment of Americanness with “loosing oneself entirely from family and past” positions Canadian rootedness as a kind of emotional loyalism, allied to a watchful skepticism about self and others (79). This attitude is typical of the kind of Scots Presbyterianism that the Laidlaws took to America with them. Andrew seems to align Will’s “choice of nationality” with predestination for an early death. His choice would have implied “trusting oneself” as opposed to consigning himself to God’s will — the behaviour prescribed by Presbyterian doctrine. Following a Calvinist interpretation, William’s death would have been provoked by a refusal to comply with patriarchal and divine authority.

## Conclusion

Alice Munro once described herself as working with “an extremely crazy Calvinism” (qtd. in Redekop, *Mothers* 211). But in the stories that I have chosen for analysis, she uses the rigid doctrines of Scots Calvinism as patterns for her fictions while offering a tolerant approach

to religion. Like her ancestor James Hogg in *The Brownie of Bodsbeck*, Munro exposes the inhumanity of narrow-minded religion yet asserts the humanity and deep misfortune of individuals who become trapped within these doctrines, like the Grieves sisters in "Friend of My Youth." In Munro's stories, the five points of Calvinist doctrine — especially predestination, salvation, and grace — are held up to scrutiny and shown to "collide with real life," as suggested in the title of this essay. The religious fanaticism represented by the Covenanters displayed the two faces noted by Arthur Herman (21). On the one hand, it was the enemy of individual liberty and thought; on the other, it attacked public tyranny, empowering individuals to defy authority. It is in the light of this double-edged nature of the Covenanters that the narrated I in "Friend of My Youth" should be understood. Although the passage describing the Cameronians is apparently about Flora's religion, it is also about the Janus-faced relationship between the narrator and her mother.

Close reading of the stories in light of the historical and theological frames confirms my hypothesis that Munro engages with religion to expose the repressive ideology imposed by the kind of Scots Calvinism portrayed in her stories. Its religious doctrines impede the Grieves sisters and the narrator's mother in "Friend of My Youth" from fully enjoying their sexuality and thwart Mary Laidlaw's maternal love when her child is lost. Some Scottish men (Burns and Hogg) were also shamed for their sexual transgressions. However, while the grim religion of Munro's Scottish ancestors might have "squashed their spirits" (*View* 126) and filled them with contradictions, the qualities of their religious upbringing — education, rationality, perseverance, and fortitude — empowered them to survive in the new country. When asked by Gittings if religion became a kind of substance abuse for Scottish immigrants to Canada, Munro replied that "it also may have kept them going. . . . It gave an enormous drama, though a difficult one, to your life" ("Scottish Ancestor" 86). If Scots Presbyterianism gave "drama" to the lives of Scottish immigrants to Canada, then it has also provided Munro with a rich philosophical tradition and a structural patterning for her fictions, which will be better understood if read through this lens.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See "The Five Points of Calvinism."

<sup>2</sup> Page references in this section are to *Lives of Girls and Women* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Page references in this section are to *Friend of My Youth* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth page references in this section are to *The View from Castle Rock* unless otherwise noted.

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