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A Comparative Essay on the Sociology of Literature: Alice Munro's "Unconsummated Relationships"

Silvia Albertazzi



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A Comparative Essay on the Sociology of Literature: Alice Munro's "Unconsummated Relationships"

Silvia Albertazzi

"Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first,
finds he can't, and then tries the short story,
which is the most demanding form after poetry.
And, failing at that, only then does he take up
novel writing."
William Faulkner

- 1 The major achievement of Alice Munro is to have conquered popularity and fame almost all over the world by dedicating her whole production to a rather unpopular and neglected genre: the short story. Short stories – and their longer cousins, novellas – are considered by publishers and booksellers the most difficult to sell literary products. Moreover, since the authors of fiction are preferably canonized for their novels, short stories, thanks to their brevity, find their way onto University syllabuses only as pedagogic devices, to be anthologised, read and discussed in the classroom as samples of an author's literary craft. According to Canadian critic, Joan McCaig:

The reasons for this neglect can be attributed to three factors. First, the short story has had a briefer history, as a literary form, than the novel, and thus has simply not had the time to achieve critical respect. Second, the short story is more popular than the novel, because of its marketability in magazines, and thus is deemed less worthy by critics, [...] Third, the formal properties of the novel more closely inscribe the ideology of the dominant culture, thus making it a more central form. (McCaig 86)

- 2 It is interesting to note that, to achieve her success, Munro had to challenge all these factors. First of all, she got critical respect for her short stories by disputing the very norms on which all the theorists of short fiction agreed, from Edgar Allan Poe onwards.

Then, she took the risk of being popular *and* highbrow at the same time, writing for Canadian feminine magazines at the beginning of her career, while seeking – and eventually obtaining – the attention of the sophisticated readership of *The New Yorker*. Lastly, through her favorite medium she has been able to convey a lucid and certainly not always politically correct view of men and women, defying not only the ideology of male dominant culture, but also that of female and feminist minority groups. Whilst the traditional short story is concise, its action occupies a very short span of time (actually, almost always it obeys the classical unities of time and space), its plot is very difficult to summarize, being often fragmented and made up with emotions and feelings more than events and deeds, Munro's stories are longish, their plots cover years and even decades and, even though they are mainly set in rural Ontario, they often relate the passage of the heroines from province to metropolis (and back). Moreover, though seeking the complicity of the reader through a sort of emotional stenography, that is to say the ability to inform the reader through implications and hints (see O'Faolain 144), like the short stories you find in classic collections and anthologies, Munro's tales, besides proposing visions and provoking emotions, succeed in establishing a link with their audiences, a sort of identification that, according to such practitioners as Frank O'Connor (see O'Connor 18), it is impossible to find with the characters of traditional short fiction.

- 3 Yet Munro's fiction highlights also the most peculiar characteristics of the genre, lyrical tone and fragmentation, turning them into her signature: that is to say, her ability to paint the everyday world with sharpness, and lucidity. This, I think, is what John Metcalf meant when he wrote to her:

Always when I read your writing I find it operates on me in very much the same way that poetry does [...] That there are levels of meaning and compression that are suddenly packed into something, yet, it always seems to flow very naturally from something acutely observed in the first place. (quoted in Martin 192)

- 4 The short story, which common opinion sees as a "feminine genre," because its shortness and fragmentariness allow women writers to scribble in their spare time, without having to sustain the long concentration required by the novel, is initially a forced choice for Munro. Yet soon it becomes a way to poetically explore subaltern life – be it the feminine universe, provincial life in Canada, or the lonesome reality of the terminally ill, and the outcasts. JoAnn McCaig reminds us that, as Gail Scott observes in *Shaping a Vehicle for her Use*, "a woman's life is never simple; she must put aside her writing to do a million other things. Indeed, her socialization has taught her to keep her mind so cluttered with details that it is often difficult for her to concentrate for whole days at a time in order to deal with a longer work like a novel. Then too a story is easier to sell than a longer piece" (McCaig 91). McCaig subsequently explains: "Distraction, interruption, spasm versus meditation, continuity, constancy. It is easy to see how the circumstances of many women's lives do not translate too well into the ideological form of the novel" (*ibid.*).

- 5 It is Alice Munro herself who caps the point:

I can't play bridge. I don't play tennis. All those things that people learn, and I admire, there hasn't seemed time for. But what there is time for is looking out of the window. (http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alice_Munro)

- 6 It is interesting to observe that, quite recently, Anne Tyler, another famous contemporary writer who was launched at the start of her career as the epitome of the scribbling housewife (even though she resented being referred to as such), used more

or less the same words when talking about her attitude towards writing. After considering that she had “no secret hobbies or extra-curricular activities at all,” she concluded that this happened because she was “too busy daydreaming” (quoted in Allardice). Much earlier, when she was still “an author 8:05 to 3:30,” she had stressed the same point using Munro’s very same image:

It seems to me often that I am sort of looking from a window at something at a great distance and wondering what it is. But I’m not willing to actually go into it. I would rather sit behind the windowsill and write about it. So all my curiosity has to be answered within myself instead of by crossing the street and asking what’s going on. (quoted in Michaels)

- 7 Yet, while Munro translates the fragments of the life she sees from her window into (hyper)realist short stories, Tyler weaves the same fragments into the complex tapestry of a novel, by way of “daydreaming” the stories they generate from. Both reclusive to the verge of misanthropy, both interested in *Lives of Girls and Women*, both marked by a past of housekeeping, childcare and almost secret writing, both great fans of Eudora Welty (whose influence they both acknowledge), both devoted to one place as the favorite settings of their stories (Western Ontario for Munro; Baltimore for Tyler), Tyler and Munro practice their craft in almost opposite ways, the former following the steps of Jane Austen, the latter treading in the wake of Chekhov. Therefore, confronting their different attitudes towards writing may help understand Munro’s world and her way of looking at it.
- 8 According to Frank O’Connor’s much quoted definition, “the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group” (O’Connor 18): neither heroes nor heroines, but a sort of atypical humanity, whose voice can be heard only by those who deeply know solitude and isolation. This applies without difficulty to Munro’s short fiction. On the one hand, women *are* a submerged population in a man’s world; on the other, Munro’s long experience of provincial life gives her that “intense awareness of human loneliness” (*ibid.* 19) which, according to O’Connor, constitutes the essence of modern short fiction. As McCaig observes:

To be a woman is to be a person whose material social relations define her as subordinate, inferior, and often inexplicable. “Unfathomable” is a word that Munro gives Del Jordan to describe the lives of girls and women; critical studies of Munro’s work bear such titles as Carrington’s *Controlling the Uncontrollable* and Miller’s *Saying the Unsayable*. Such descriptors reflect the contradictory positions of author (“control” and “say”) and woman (“uncontrollable” as well as uncontrolling, and “unsayable” as well as unsaying or silenced). (McCaig 64)

- 9 In Munro’s fiction provincial life appears a locus of change and continuity, whose “submerged population” is faced with the problems of identity and fragmentation characterizing today’s postcolonial (global) reality. “In small towns [...] you have no privacy at all. You have a role, a character, but one that other people have made up for you. Other people have already made your self,” Munro told an interviewer in 1990. Yet, if it is true that many of her characters try to escape from their provincial confinement, almost always paying a hard price in humiliations and defeats, it is even truer that her stories, dealing with the utter subjectivity of truth, describe our very inability to see ourselves through other people’s eyes, that is to say, to conform utterly to the mask other people have applied to our faces. “Everybody in the community is on stage for all the other people’ [...] There’s a constant awareness of people watching and listening. And [...] the less you reveal, the more highly thought of you are.” Munro said,

"There is a terrific isolation, but there are always attempts to bridge it [...]" (quoted in Rothstein). As McCaig wrote:

It is possible that in placing her work alongside that of the great regionalists of the American South, such as Faulkner, McCullers, Welty, and O'Connor, Munro believes that she will transcend her own Canadian-ness, and achieve "universal" authorial status. [...] Besides, it is one of the ironies of artistic life in a small cultural milieu like Canada that "Canadian is itself all too often equated with "inferior" or "provincial" and that a Canadian artist, whether a musician, actor, or writer, does not truly achieve what Foucault calls the author function until s/he is accorded international, particularly American, acclaim. (McCaig 42)

- 10 In the same way, though cherishing a urban setting for her novels, Anne Tyler privileges a town that, being rather small for American standards, allows the representation of all the drawbacks as well as the advantages of provincial life. For both authors, provincial setting is essential for the reflection on marginalized lives: to paraphrase Spivak, only in the province can the subaltern *see*, even at the cost of her integrity and respectability. Actually, Munro likes to say that her stories reflect the lucid vision of the survivor:

A subject race has a kind of clarity of vision and I feel that women have always had a clarity of vision which men were denied. And, in a way, this is a gift, it goes along with a lack of power: and I valued that very much – the value to be able to see clearly. (quoted in Wallace 53)

- 11 Tyler would probably agree with these opinions. Yet, instead of showing the strength of women through their sound (not to say cynical) acting in everyday life, she prefers to depict the weakness of men, their being helpless creatures, often on the verge of quiet insanity. In this way, while Munro's stories have been found depressive by some critics, Tyler's novels are even too light for some others' tastes. Yet in both cases, the authors adhere to the poetics of their favourite genres: since the short story catches the dramatic event, not the totality of human life, to illuminate a situation, a concise, essential and evocative rendering of a character's view is more valuable than many descriptive words. In short fiction, time is a global entity; it does not influence the action in a significant way because the fictional development happens at the crucial moment: the epiphany, as Joyce would say, of the story (see O'Faolain 144). Whilst in the novel the author strives to reach an identification between reader and character(s), in the short story a sort of complicity between them is sought for. Consequently, the short story does not propose a narrative complete with well-crafted facts, feelings, and dialogues, but on the contrary, it provokes emotions by telling unfathomable visions. This is what a reviewer, Nona Balakian, has described as "mov[ing] swiftly from the larger events to the evanescent turning point" (Balakian), referring to Munro's style.
- 12 Munro challenges the norms of her chosen genre, she changes the cards on the table, modifying the rules during the game. As a consequence, she has been judged "hard work," a wearing author, "because she chooses to add depth and width, to flash back and forward, to cross-reference to other stories, other incidents to tease with her little asides" (Keegan). To appreciate how Munro simultaneously uses and subverts the conventions of the short story, and to understand the manifold nuances of her lucid vision, it is worth having a look at the two stories that stand as turning points in her career: "The Peace of Utrecht" (1959), which is to be found in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), and "Royal Beatings" (1978) that, before being collected in *Who Do*

you *Think you Are?* (*The Beggar Maid* for the U.S. reading public), was the first story of Munro's to appear in the *New Yorker*.

- 13 Written shortly after her mother's death, "The Peace of Utrecht" is a strongly autobiographic piece centred on the relation between two sisters, Helen and Maddy, and their mother suffering from Parkinson's disease (like Munro's own mother). Munro explains:

I had a lot of conflict with [my mother] [...] because she had an ideal of good behaviour. She wanted her daughters to be successful but also she wanted them to be sexually pure. And ladylike [...] She wanted me to shine in a way I was not prepared to. [...] you were struggling with a sick person who, emotionally, holds all the cards. (quoted in Eidemariam)

- 14 Through a series of flash backs and interior monologues, the story relates the different attitudes of the two sisters towards their mother's illness, their humiliation facing their mother's strange behaviour and the "double-edged" shame they felt for it, a shame that, as Ailsa Cox says, is "a dialogic process [since] Munro's heroines are alternatively mortified by their mothers' behaviour and ashamed of their response" (Cox 24). Set in an utterly feminine universe - mother, two daughters, two spinster aunts - "The Peace of Utrecht" starts with the return home a few months after her mother's funeral of the sister Munro identifies with, Helen, the one who escaped, because she was unable to cope with the demanding reality of her mother's degenerative illness. As Rosemary Sullivan observes:

In "The Peace of Utrecht" [Munro] creates a world of women: the fierce, tragically egocentric mother, stubbornly feeding on her daughters; the timid spinster aunts steeped in the discretion and circumlocution that leads women to search every encounter for nuance and subtext; the sisters, resisting female rituals of emotionalism, yet pitted against each other. One sister saves herself at the cost of enormous guilt; the other, never having learned to demand a life for herself, is a victim. (Sullivan XV)

- 15 Referring to her experience with her own mother and its rendering in "The Peace of Utrecht," Munro confesses:

If I had been a different kind of woman, with more immediate warmth, instead of this inner fire, I could have been very helpful to her - not in physical terms, but in day-to-day communication, instead of leaving her alone. (quoted in Eidemariam)

- 16 Blaming her "inner fire" for her unwillingness to take care of her mother, Munro reinforces the idea of the writer as an outsider, whose sensibility is no use in "day-to-day communication". Actually, all her stories deal with faults of interaction, or better, with the impossibility of establishing valuable relationships for women who, like Munro, look at the world with outstanding lucidity, making no concessions either to sentiments or emotions.

- 17 In "The Peace of Utrecht," as in most of her short stories, the tone is colloquial, the narration in the first person and the present tense. It is as if the woman who says "I" were talking to a friend - or a group of friends - telling the events that befell her during her return home, and digressing to the memories that her coming home unveiled. Yet you will not detect hints of nostalgia or regret in the unfolding of past situations. The narrator looks back at her mother's terrible illness and at its unbearable consequences with dry eyes. For Munro, as for her narrative alter-ego, "[M]emory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories - and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories" (see Wikiquote). In this sense, whilst her personal experience is translated

into a story to be read by other people (e.g. the reading public) in a fictional version, inside that very story the main character tells "a somewhat different version" of her own mother's suffering to an unknown audience. Paradoxically, then, Munro's much praised lucidity comes from the ambiguity resulting from this double retelling of her own story. The version told by Munro is formulated to get our complicity. In her narrator's version, on the contrary, we find the unpleasant details that we would like to consider products of Munro's imagination are not inherent to her autobiographic experience. The stenographic convention which is at the basis of short story writing, whilst reinforcing its central role in the constitution of the reading pact, suggests in Munro the understatements, the implications and allusions of feminine talking. This technique is apparent from the very beginning of the story:

I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success. Maddy and I, though we speak cheerfully of our enjoyment of so long and intimate a visit, will be relieved when it is over. Silences disturb us. We laugh immoderately. I am afraid – very likely we are both afraid – that when the moment comes to say goodbye, unless we are very quick to kiss, and fervently mockingly squeeze each other's shoulders, we will have to look straight into the desert that is between us and acknowledge that we are not merely indifferent; at heart we reject each other, and as for the past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim. (DHS 190)

- 18 Descriptions and characterization are suggested through meaningful details, as though the author wanted to leave the task of portrayal and depiction to her reader. Yet the characters, with their overlapping subjectivities, seem to deny representation. In the case of "The Peace of Utrecht," illustration and characterisation are prevented and complicated by "the close identification between mother and daughter [which] confuses ego boundaries, making it relatively difficult for women to construct an autonomous self [...] The daughter's identity is inextricably bound to the maternal; Helen doubles for her mother in the dream. Yet the mother's inner self remains mysterious, and her image evades representation" (Cox 23). The critic Robert Martin explains:

She achieves thematic richness by establishing oppositions, incongruities and paradoxes, often breaking down chronological sequences or allowing the sophisticated adult to recall the freshness and vivacity of the child's experience in order to juxtapose such contraries as the strange and the familiar and the touchable and the mysterious, or alien. She develops a dialectical interplay that defines the relation between the contending opposites in a spiral movement that involves progress and retreat, affirmation and irony; to achieve this she typically places her protagonist between two forces or loyalties, and the resulting creative friction produces the dramatic developments and solutions that we see in *Del*, *Rose*, and others, who, being intelligent and imaginative, go through sea-changes like those undergone by Henry James's *Fleda*, *Strether* and *Maggie*. (Martin 205)

- 19 As a matter of fact, with her dynamic art Munro avoids the risk of preserving experience "in anecdote, as in a kind of mental cellophane" (DHS 193), as Helen and Maddy do when they remember the same episodes of their childhood in different versions. Whilst the sisters try more or less unconsciously to put the past under diverse bell jars, Munro allows an ever changing reality to mark her reconstruction of the facts. Writing life as it unwinds itself, Munro stays away from the danger of excessive stylisation, while asking the complicity of her reader to cooperate in the composition of the story – filling up possible gaps, interpreting allusions and implications, imagining

descriptions and dialogues. An enthusiastic reader of Munro's, Alex Keegan relates his reading experience with these words:

Munro's stories [...] seem to challenge how I put together my thoughts, how I see or imagine the inter-connectivity of life, how I 'construct', but don't construct, my constructions - where my unconscious debates with my conscious. [...] Munro likes to use my expectations against me. She knows my 'rules' of perception and reading/absorption/expectation and turns them back on me like the throw of a skilled martial artist, first to disturb me [...] but then to reveal to me [...] that there are connections in life which are huge and important even when they are never seen or acknowledged, there, but simply not brought into the right kind of light, of focus, or attention to reveal them as driving forces rather than symptom. (Keegan)

- 20 Actually, Munro does not carve her stories of provincial mothers and daughters in an Austenian ivory chunk: her short stories are not perfectly crafted miniatures. Contrary to Anne Tyler, who has been defined as "the modern Jane Austen," in an almost Eliot-like way, Munro substitutes the description of experience with its image, its objective correlative.

"I don't really understand a novel" Ms. Munro says. "I don't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story. There's a kind of tension that if I'm getting a story right I can feel right away." (quoted in Rothstein)

- 21 There are no proper plots in most of her stories; it is almost impossible to sum up, say, "The Peace of Utrecht." The tension Munro looks for comes from an almost hypnotic evocative diction, the way in which, for instance, the story of Helen and Maddy, "Between observation and memoir, past and present, [the narrative] enters the timeless zone of dream" (Cox 22).

- 22 As is the case of most short fiction, at the end of "The Peace of Utrecht" Munro leaves her story in the reader's hands: now more than ever, her/his complicity is required. The reader must reflect on what s/he has just read, meditate on it and eventually carry it on. Like the old story tellers used to say, "stories never end: they are just interrupted." Munro's open-ended stories can also be considered typical of postcoloniality. As McCaig observes:

Like many post-colonial writers, Munro subverts imperial linguistic authority in a variety of subtle ways - with her digressive narratives, her choice of the "fragmentary" genre of the short story, and especially in her open-ended and paradoxical use of language. (McCaig 121)

- 23 In this sense, not only do we appreciate how "the genre issue has links to gender and nationality or colonial status" (McCaig 122), but we also realize that "the flexible, open-ended qualities of the short story may offer a transforming potential, an ability to ask the unspoken question, to raise new subject matter" (McCaig 95). Finally, on a personal level, if it is true that with "The Peace of Utrecht" Munro freed her mother into a "personal story", it is even much truer that turning her experience into fictional material did not free her from her mother, who keeps "cropping up" in her stories, as Munro herself acknowledges (see Bruckner). The mother-daughter dialectic never ends:

"though fraught with personal danger [it] is artistically productive" (Cox 23), since "it mirrors the ambivalence between self and Other, intimacy and estrangement [and] is deeply implicated in the evolution of self-awareness" (*ibid.*). "[...] she is the one I am trying to get," Munro confessed later, through one of her characters in the story "The Ottawa Valley", "it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close

[...] she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, applying what skill I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same." (SBM 197)

- 24 Munro has often affirmed that she did not intend to become a short story writer. Yet even her so-called novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, is a series of related stories, and the same applies to *The Beggar Maid*, another hybrid collection where all the stories are centred around the same two characters, Rose and her step-mother Flo. Here more than ever Munro disrupts the canonical rules of short fiction: allegiance to the unities of time, space, and action; linear chronology; absence of flashbacks and flash-forwards. This leads to a sort of mock-novel that the reader can either praise without conditions or utterly dislike. On the one hand, Munro's fans appreciate the way she "creates novels within short-stories [...], novels across her short-stories [...], novels built from single collections of short stories [...] and most importantly, her one large novel, all her stories combined, a life-time's work, a life" (Keegan). On the other, her detractors, objecting that authors like Munro are no more than "Prize winning puppet masters and mistresses who take artifice for art, drabness for durance, and detail for deity" (Duciel), find that these short stories linked together are "a lie that perpetuates the lie: in the gloaming of human existence, all is murk and murk is all" (*ibid.*).
- 25 Known all around the world – apart from the USA – as *Who Do you Think You Are?*, the collection *The Beggar Maid* contains the second Munro's "watershed" story, "Royal Beatings," based on the beatings the author received from her father as a child, and, just like "The Peace of Utrecht," written only after the death of the parent who inspired it. Here Rose, Munro's persona, experiences, like many other characters imagined by Munro, that "lack of genuine communication between family members, friends and lovers resulting in "unconsummated relationships (a term that originates in "The Peace of Utrecht" and applies to situations in every Munro story) and the resultant sense of isolation" (Pfaus 14). If the theme is not particularly original for Munro's standards, the story marks a breakthrough in her career being the first she ever sold to the *New Yorker*. It is with "Royal Beatings," then, that Munro the *New Yorker* story teller was born, meaning with this "a writer that devotes her career to what we may call the *New Yorker* short story, that being a story of a certain length, a certain tone, a certain character, and a certain condescension" (Sikeston). Small wonder then that the collection where the story is reprinted should have had a very complicated story-line and should have faced a number of difficulties and drawbacks before seeing the light of day. In her volume *Reading In: the Alice Munro Archives*, Joan McCaig devotes a large section to the publishing and editorial vicissitudes of the book. Here it is enough to quote the conclusions that McCaig reaches, at the end of a very detailed archival research.

Given the archival evidence I have presented, I would argue that the authoritative text is in itself a fiction, as are final creative leaps, at least leaps dissociated from cultural pressures to make money, crack the American market, write novels, think like a man, focus on the growth of the individual while subtly denouncing bourgeois values yet supporting the dominant ideology of secular humanism-all the while pretending to care only about "Art" and not at all about money. Given the struggles Munro underwent to produce this text, the irony must have been delicious: in this year of canon-formation at Calgary, from which she was excluded by genre, the Governor General's Award for the best work of fiction in English was given to a short story sequence called *Who Do You Think You Are?* (McCaig 109)

26 As a matter of fact, if it is ironic to think that Munro gets the most prestigious Canadian literary award in the same year she is excluded from the Canadian Academic canon, being “only” a short story writer, it is even more ironical to note that that very award is given to a collection of stories masked as a novel (or rather to a novel composed of a series of short stories). Here again McCaig brilliantly interprets the paradoxical situation. On the one hand, “*Who Do You Think You Are?* is the last “linked” work Munro has produced [...] Munro’s final and glorious bow to the privileging of the novel over the short story. Once she has fully entered into her habitus and located her art in the short story form [...] she, like Flaubert in his own time, has transformed the field” (McCaig 108). On the other, “The wrangling over the book’s title provides an image of the differences between the Canadian and American literary markets; unlike Canadians, who are in the process of building a national literature, Americans already know exactly who they are” (McCaig 77).

27 From this moment on, the only novels Munro will write are only those each one of us calls her/his life in her short stories. As she explains:

Everybody’s doing their own novel of their own lives. The novel changes – at first we have a romance, a very satisfying novel that has a rather simple technique, and then we grow out of that, and we end up with a very conscious, discordant, very contemporary kind of novel. I think that what happens to a lot of us in middle age is that we can’t really hang out to our fiction any more. (quoted in Rothstein)

28 This is apparent in *Who Do You Think You Are*, where we follow Rose’s life all through these stages, “in stories written with Munro’s characteristic use of split time with flashbacks, and flashforwards, with each ending in the present reality” (Pfaus 64). As for “Royal Beatings”, the attention to death, violence and the dismal reality of those living “straddling the river, belonging nowhere [...] on the straggling tail end of the main street” (SBM 6), whilst positively shocking the sophisticated readers of the *New Yorker*, annoys the detractors of short fiction, who find that Munro’s

short story, every bit as cleverly constructed, is like one of those enormous color prints that Kodak hangs in public places, announcing that – whatever you may think – THIS is reality [...] Fabergé eggs that for all their golden perfection reek and reek of authorial bile and disdain. Yes, by God, I shall force these already small souls into these impossibly small spaces and then have them perform their few tricks which they know to perfection. (Duciel)

29 Yet it is at this point of her career, as we have already noted, that Munro abandons the idea of writing a novel for good, and accepts herself as a short story writer. According to JoAnn McCaig, her choice of short fiction as a privileged genre obeys precise reasons of gender and sexual politics:

A novel is linear, it is a road or a rope, a form for people who think a certain way [...]. Munro's habitus, however, leads her to a “feeling”, which is her honest view of her process, but one that is not “intellectually respectable”, not “precise”. Her stories have a “soul”, and the image of their construction is, for her, the domestic image of a house. The gender implications of the opposition of these two ways of describing the genres are obvious. (McCaig 94)

30 Here McCaig is referring to a much quoted pronouncement by Munro, who, in a short essay called “What is real?”, compares the function of a story to that of a house. It is worth noting that this essay was written by Munro in 1982, in the wake of the controversy aroused in Wingham, her native small town, after the publication of *Who Do You Think You Are?* (particularly “Royal Beatings”). Many people were offended by the way she had fictionalized their provincial reality and, last but not least, called them

“a community of outcasts” in an interview. In December 1981, in the *Wingham Advance-Times* an editorial expressed all the rage of Wingham people who felt so “mistreated” by Munro.

Sadly enough Wingham people have never had much chance to enjoy the excellence of [Munro's] writing ability because we have repeatedly been made the butt of soured and cruel introspection on the part of a gifted writer, the editor wrote, “[...] It seems that something less than greatness impells her to return again and again to a time and place in her life where bitterness warped her personality.” (quoted in McCaig 115)

- 31 In response to this harsh criticism, Munro wrote a short essay where she defended her position as a writer of fiction, who uses “bits of what is real, in the sense of being really there and really happening, in the world” (Munro 1982, 226), and transforms it “into something that is really there and really happening in [her] story” (*ibid.*). To better explain how this “transformation” of reality into story works, she used the metaphor of a house:

[...] I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explain what a story does for me, and what I want my stories to do for other people. (Munro 1982, 224)

- 32 Thinking of how Henry James, and Tahar Ben Jelloun have used the same metaphor to illustrate their poetics, we cannot agree with McCaig, who sees the house as a feminine image. (McCaig 94) Conversely, comparing Munro's construction of the house of fiction with a metaphor used by Tyler to describe her own poetics might be useful to detect the different attitudes of these two very “feminine” authors. Munro stresses the process of building up and the “Material” used:

I've got to build up, a house, a story, to fit around the indescribable “feeling” that is the soul of the story, [...] Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent [...] (Munro 1982, 224),

- 33 Tyler speaks about populating the houses of fiction:

[...] what it seems to me I'm doing is populating a town. Pretty soon it's going to be just full of lots of people I've made up. None of the people I write about are people I know. That would be no fun. And it would be very boring to write about me. Even if I led an exciting life, why live it again on paper? I want to live other lives. I've never quite believed that one chance is all I get. Writing is my way of making other chances. (quoted in Michaels)

- 34 It is easy to note that for Munro what really matters is the structure of the story, “the house,” where she, *the author*, can “move back and forth, and settle [...] for a while.” The accent is on the craft of writing (which is equated to building a house) and the writer's personality. This leads to writing about oneself, and inventing stories starting from actual deeds and characters. The house is an inner space from which she can look at “what is outside” in a different way, so that what she sees from her window is and is not Wingham: it is Wingham as Jubilee or Carstairs or Hanratty or West Hanratty. On the contrary, being mainly interested in her characters, Tyler “build[s] a house for them and then [...] move[s] on to the next house” (*ibid.*). Her town, though unquestionably Baltimore, is populated by imaginary people who have nothing to do with their creator's real life. In this sense, Tyler appears as the prototype of the

novelist whose task is creating imaginary worlds, whilst Munro is an up-to-date story teller who "takes what [s]he tells from experience – [her/]his own or that reported by others" (Benjamin 87). Both "resident" writers, according to Benjamin's use of the term, they see different worlds from their windows – or, better, they have a different way of looking out of their windows.

"I guess I work from a combination of curiosity and distance.", Tyler told an interviewer [...], "It seems to me often that I am sort of looking from a window at something at a great distance and wondering what it is. But I'm not willing to actually go into it. I would rather sit behind the windowsill and write about it. So all my curiosity has to be answered within myself instead of by crossing the street and asking what's going on." (quoted in Michaels)

- 35 Neither does Munro cross the street and ask what's going on. From her window, she looks at the view outside and not at a great distance. *The View from Castle Rock* is an exception which may signal a change in perspective since the first part of the volume from 2006 is partially narrated from the point of view of a male narrator whose father looks into the distance to try and catch a glimpse of America. In most of Munro's collections, however, the narrator's voice (Munro's persona) is a woman's, looking out of the window at what is around her. In the wake of Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Spivak would probably call Munro's clear gaze on what is around her a "subaltern vision." It is this very gaze that differentiates Munro's universe from Tyler's. Even though Munro's fiction has been defined "novelistic," owing to her belief that "knowing her characters so completely is essential to creating them" (Paul Sullivan), her attitude towards her characters is radically different from Tyler's. Whilst the latter, looking at the world from a certain distance, finds elements of mystery and surprise in the ordinary life (in a way, she fictionalises the "infra-ordinary," as Perec would say), Munro sees reality with the precision and lucidity of a Gramscian "subaltern." This leads, in the first case, to "a gentle reminder of the goodness to be found in the most ordinary lives" (Allardice); in the second, to a sharpness of vision that does not shun the most disagreeable aspects of human life and emotions. Tyler's work is characterised by the feeling of a genuine love for humanity and a lively curiosity for its most peculiar aspects. On the contrary, Munro, lacking Tyler's tendency to forgive her character's mistakes, depicts a world of often unsympathetic people caught in the net of their ambitions and desires. A novel by Tyler always leaves you with the idea that, all in all, the world is not so bad, being full of ordinary miracles. A story by Munro tells you that behind its shiny façade the world is a weird place inhabited by people who, behind the masks they wear in society, are not to be trusted, and not capable of establishing genuine relationships with each other. Many years ago, concluding a moving piece on Billie Holiday, the poet Amiri Baraka (then still Leroi Jones), wrote a sentence that might be interpreted as a fit response to Munro's fiction: "Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this lady" (Jones 25).

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APPENDIXES

ABBREVIATIONS

Munro, Alice, 1998 [1968], *Dance of the Happy Shades*, New York, Vintage Books, abbreviated as *DHS*.

---, 1974, *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*, Toronto, McGraw Hill-Ryerson, abbreviated as *SBM*.

ABSTRACTS

Par l'intermédiaire d'une comparaison avec la romancière Anne Tyler, il s'agit ici de mettre en lumière la spécificité de la vision que Munro porte sur le monde. Alors que les romans de Tyler procèdent d'une sensibilité directement héritée de Jane Austen, les nouvelles de Munro témoignent d'une lucidité décapante et d'un refus de céder aux pièges de l'émotion. Son écriture astringente met en scène des personnages solitaires qui refusent de s'engager dans des relations humaines sincères et authentiques.

AUTHORS

SILVIA ALBERTAZZI

Silvia Albertazzi is a professor of English Literature at the University of Bologna, Director of the Centre for the Study of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature (CITELC) and Coordinator of the Ph.D. Program in Literatures and Cultures of the English Speaking Countries.