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**Alice Munro:
Reminiscence,
Interpretation,
Adaptation
and Comparison**

Dis/Continuities

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Intercultural Encounters with Alice Munro. Introduction

The opening concert of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra in its 2015–16 season will premier Alice Munro's last short story collection, *Dear Life* (2012), as "a multi-media immersive experience," "a form of sonic reincarnation" of the writer's "vision of childhood in small-town Ontario" contrasted with "the Romantic European perspective on a child's vision of heaven as expressed in Mahler's Symphony No. 4."¹ Alexander Shelley, current NAC Orchestra Music Director, made this intriguing announcement while also expressing desire to share with the audience his passion and delight in Canadian literature, art and film. This intersemiotic translation of *Dear Life* into a narrative as soundscape creating conditions for visceral enjoyment and pleasure in Munro's writing, coincides with the rationale behind our project which also aims at achieving a unique immersive experience of "listening" to and taking pleasure and enjoyment in the art of the 2013 Nobel Laureate in Literature. To show the complexity of Munro's life and work as commented upon, translated and transmuted through the imagination of contributors representing a variety of cultural backgrounds, we have planned a collection of texts for which, following the music metaphor, we adopted a symphonic structure with such four distinct sections or movements as Reminiscence, Interpretation, Adaptation and Comparison.

The musical genre of symphony in general denotes pluralism, which in this collection relates not only to the variety of readings and methodologies proposed by the contributors from Poland, France and Canada, but also to pluralistic perspectives on reality offered by Alice Munro, as well as to pluralism of truth, which her stories explore. Like in a symphony, several lines of thought and movements

1 This information was announced on February 24th 2015 on the website of Alexander Shelley under the title: "National Arts Centre Glittering 2015–2016 Season Announced", DOA: 24 Feb. 2015; <http://www.alexandershelley.com/journal/singleview/article/national-arts-centre-glittering-2015-2016-season-announced.html>.

come together before following different paths, so in this collection, several ways of approaching Munro's art are brought together creating interpretation space and generating conditions for opening the texts to new inspiring readings. How does one write about one of Canada's most accomplished writers in the post-Nobel Prize period, when there is plenty of "uncritical sainting"² and even unqualified dismissal³ of her work? What questions do we ask or should we ask today about Alice Munro's texts?

While commenting on her own writing, Munro has not put too many demands on her readers, which is perhaps the reason why her fiction seems to be so vulnerable and such an obvious target of caustic remarks. She does not protect herself behind the shield of feminism, though at the same time she accepts the obvious label of "women's writing." She denies being "a political person," and in a conversation with Stefan Åsberg, she announces simply: "I want people to enjoy my books, to think of them as related to their own lives in ways." In our over-theorized times, such declarations sound old-fashioned or juvenile. Most critics today take them at their face value, and do not bother to peek behind Munro's camouflage of naïve, wide-eyed attentiveness. And so they are left with a handful of vignettes and not any wiser.

In this volume, we have sought pluralistic and dialogic approaches conducive to multiple perspectives and attentive readings of texts. In the symphonically structured collection, we propose a critical international and intercultural standpoint on Munro's art of short story writing that is not limited to a literary interpretation of the genre, but also gives critical perspectives on film and stage adaptations of her work. Apart from the rare studies of adapting Munro for the stage and comparative analyses with Mavis Gallant's and Eudora Welty's writing by academics from Poland, Canada and France, we present exclusive reminiscences of encounters with the author by such Canadian writers as Tomson Highway and Daphne Marlatt, and include an essay by George Elliott Clarke, whose text offers a unique African-Canadian perspective on Munro's work.

Readers of Alice Munro's fiction have been eager to acknowledge her phenomenal memory of people, places and emotions, which belong to times long gone. It seems to be a misunderstanding widespread among many of her readers, though, to view Munro simply as a meticulous documentalist: a recorder of sounds and smells, a landscape painter, an analyst of individual and social

2 Kyle Minor in "Today in silly book reviews: Let's all fight about Alice." DOA: 24 Jan. 2015. http://www.salon.com/2013/06/10/in_defense_of_alice_munro/.

3 See Christian Lorentzen, "Poor Rose" in: *London Review of Books*. Vol. 35 No. 11. 6 June 2013. 11–12.

minds. Only a few of her readers – especially artists and her compatriots – can, however, determine with some degree of certainty the proportions of memory and invention in her writing. Many critics have been trying to unlock the secrets of Munro's art. It is insightful to peruse the keywords and key phrases recurring in critical works on Munro to see what has been enticing readers to this work, both with reference to its thematics and artistry.

Alice Munro has been considered one of the foremost writers of psychological fiction in English dealing with such topics as: doubleness of reality, identity in relation to gender, nationality and genre, identity and relationships, self-discovery and self-alienation, relational nature of identity formation, relational nature of the world, emotional geography of Southwestern Ontario, the relationship between identity and physical and social environment, geopoetics, auto-bio-geography, challenging the borders of national narratives and deconstructing great narrations of imagined communities. With reference to the artistry of the short story genre, the following keywords are most illuminating: open-endedness, complexity, irony, paradox, double vision, irony, subtext, multiple telling, polyphony, hybridity, dialogue with past storytelling traditions and conventions, challenging certain traditions while working within them, using communal narrative strategies of folktale, legend and gossip, language with denseness and precision characteristic of poetry, narrative techniques based on textile crafts, patchwork piecing, quilting, stitching, intertextuality, and destabilizing notions of unity, coherence and balance.

This dry catalogue of features of Munro's writing may sound impressive, but it does not, however, explain the phenomenon of her art. We agree with Richard Howard's statement that:

[t]he qualities of a first-rate writer cannot be defined, but only experienced. It is just the thing in him which escapes analysis that makes him first-rate. One can catalogue all the qualities that he shares with other writers, but the thing that is his very own, his timbre, this cannot be defined or explained any more than the quality of a beautiful speaking voice can be. (vi)

Munro's fiction may well offer all above qualities and characteristics, but it also gives much more. What this "more" might be, is precisely the question the volume addresses by applying a variety of perspectives grounded in the intense experience of Munro's art of short story writing.

We have attempted four different ways of approaching Alice Munro's fiction and – at the same time – four different forms of its enjoyment: auto/bio/geo/graphical reminiscence, interpretation of her selected stories, adaptation of her

works for stage and screen, and comparison with her antecedents and contemporaries.

Part One, “Reminiscence,” consists of three recollections: Daphne Marlatt’s prose poem, two stories by Tomson Highway, and an essay on three encounters with Alice Munro by Gerald Lynch. In an email responding to our invitation to contribute, Daphne Marlatt recalls: “I never actually met her but earlier in my life her *Lives of Girls and Women* was an important book for me, one I later taught, so I will see whether I can write something about it.” Tomson Highway recalls in his stories two occasions on which he had a conversation with Alice Munro, and both accounts are prime examples of auto/bio/geo/graphy in that they encompass each conversing party in their social and geographical context. Gerald Lynch offers in his essay not only an account of actual encounters, but also reflections on Munro’s symbolic presence in Canada’s cultural and academic space. His impressive report on the most recent Munro conference in Canada has a European echo in Corinne Bigot’s concluding remarks on a Munro seminar she organized in France in 2014.

Part Two, “Interpretation,” opens with an essay by Lola Lemire Tostevin who offers a careful reading of the title story of the collection *Open Secrets*. She takes exception to the common misunderstanding of Munro as “a nice little woman who writes nice little stories.” Dissecting the narrative thread by thread, Tostevin shows Munro’s unerring skill in gently unwrapping the secrets of her most life-like protagonists. Her manner of handling everyday evil is – as Tostevin proves – both subtle and revolutionary.

Kim Aubrey’s essay on Alice Munro, “A Process of Discovery: exploring narrative structure and tension in two short stories by Alice Munro” was first published in *North Dakota Quarterly* (Vol. 73, No. 3) in 2006, as “Driving through Munro Country: One Reader’s Journey through Two Short Stories.” It provides a reading of “Floating Bridge” and “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” exploring Munro’s use of the fictional modes of realism and romance, expressed in modular and linear construction, to subvert her own and her reader’s expectations, and to forge a more expansive form for the short story.

Reading a few stories from Munro’s last two collections with the earlier stories they clearly evoke, Corinne Bigot examines the complex role played by intratextuality in Munro’s work. Earlier texts, acting like ghost texts, explain and ensure the haunting quality of Munro’s stories such as “Child’s Play” (*Too Much Happiness*) and “Gravel” (*Dear Life*). In connection with earlier stories, she also explores patterns of entrapment and lines of flights in “Train” or “Dimensions,” and loss and recovery in “Face” and “To Reach Japan,” relying on

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's definition of the short story as defined by living lines.

Central to Alicja Piechucka's essay is the topical concept of the masculinity crisis. The phenomenon, which receives increasing scholarly attention nowadays, is traceable in Alice Munro's latest and, in all likelihood, last work, the short story collection *Dear Life*. The essay focuses on the male protagonists of selected stories, namely "Amundsen," "Corrie," "Pride" and "Train." The male characters are examined in terms of their masculinity and how they fulfill – or rather fail to fulfill – traditional male roles. Munro's heroes are husbands, fiancés, lovers, boyfriends and friends; as such, they inevitably define their masculinity vis-à-vis the women in their lives. The essay discusses the psychological, corporeal, sexual, social and economic dimensions of the masculinity crisis as depicted by the Canadian writer, with particular emphasis on issues of patriarchy, paternalism, feminism and most significantly, men's growing anxiety and trauma, coupled with a sense of frustration, insecurity and inadequacy.

At the beginning of Part Three, "Adaptation," Katarzyna Więckowska argues that adaptation, understood as a process of constant modification, is a key theme of Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). The collection of stories presents the formation of identity as an ongoing translation of various cultural scripts into lived practice, foregrounding the role of images and social patterns of identity, which one should aspire to. In her article, Więckowska explores a number of such scripts, including references to literary works, so as to illustrate the depiction of identity as a process, where the attempts at adapting oneself to new conditions or images invariably end in failure. The sense of inescapable failure is reinforced by Munro's narrative technique, which emphasizes brokenness and constant interruption, and which, positioned between the novel and the short story, provides another example of adaptation.

In her article, Shelley Scott considers Alice Munro's "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (the title story of her 2001 collection) vis-à-vis *Courting Johanna*, its stage adaptation by Marcia Johnson. The play premiered at the Blyth Theatre Festival in 2008 and was published in 2009. Scott addresses the question of Alice Munro's unique artistic achievement from a transmedia perspective. In doing so, she relies on her own experience of directing a student production of *Courting Johanna* at the University of Lethbridge in February 2014. Apart from commenting on the nature of theatrical representation, Scott also focuses on feminism, which she finds fundamental to Munro's worldview.

Despite the critical acclaim and popularity that Alice Munro's works have been enjoying for decades, the number of television and film adaptations of her

stories has been surprisingly scarce. In her article, Marta Sibierska explores the transition from the pages of Alice Munro's short story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (first published in 2001 in the collection of the same title), to its 2013 film adaptation *Hateship Loveship*, directed by Liza Johnson. Instead of analyzing it through the dominant perspectives on adaptation, she traces its relations to the original, developing the themes omitted in the text. Sibierska uses the film to understand the transformation of literature into film in terms of 'exploration' rather than 'adaptation' per se. This, in turn, leads to conclusions concerning the nature of the relation between literature and film in a broader sense.

In Part Four, "Comparison," George Elliott Clarke's article on *The Lives of Girls and Women*, with a provoking title "Alice Munro's Black Bottom; or Black Tints and Euro Hints in *Lives of Girls and Women*," challenges earlier readings of the collection as an Anglo-Canadian realist intervention in second-wave feminism, tracing the developing gynocentric and feminist consciousness of Del Jordan. Clarke offers an alternative approach un hiding Alice Munro's interest in the multiculturalism that enters Del Jordan's world through radio broadcasts, magazines, books and crucially, travelers. He argues that in Munro's story collection, multiculturalism is the subtle 1970 Canadian "ism," the silent sister of feminism (so to speak), but whose presence is the actual catalyst for Del Jordan's sudden advances in consciousness? In honour of Joseph Pivato, his essay applies cross-cultural, comparative protocols of reading to illuminate how texts as diverse as Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Italian" tragedy, *The Cenci* (1819), Pietro Aretino's *The School of Whoredom* (1534), Italian opera, the Gershwins' opera, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), serve to enhance our appreciation of Jordan's acquiring of an education exceeding the Victorian, Eurocentric, and parochial limits of her rural household, school, and community.

Małgorzata Poks compares Alice Munro's and Sherwood Anderson's fictional worlds. She claims that both writers share a fascination with ordinary, provincial people whose lives have been distorted by numerous factors beyond their control. Both draw inspiration from their past, revisiting, imaginatively, the landscapes of childhood and using them as prototypes of the fictional universes they create. Whether in Jubilee or in Winesburg, the "artist as a young person" brushes shoulders with grotesque, stunted, yet admirable characters who serve as her or his guides to the incomprehensible world of grown-ups. Sharp intelligence, keen gift of observation, and a certain sense of emotional distance become assets to a sensitive girl attempting to write a story (*Lives of Girls and Women*) or a boy dreaming of becoming a writer (Winesburg, Ohio). Both imagine a better

life in the exciting world outside the dreary routine, and the smallness and emptiness of small-town existence – only to discover that their talent actually thrives on memory. As Del puts it, “It did not occur to me that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee.”

Asked about her favorite writers Alice Munro first pointed to women-writers of the American South and particularly to Eudora Welty. Munro may be called the Canadian Chekhov but, as Agnieszka Salska argues in her article, Munro’s ties with Welty are geographically, culturally and chronologically closer. In the work of both writers, Chekhov’s lyricism of mood stubbornly inheres in the concrete details of the place and facts about people. Focusing on selected stories by each author (such as, for example, “Walker Brothers Cowboy” or “The Beggar Maid” by Munro and “Death of a Traveling Salesman” or “The Wanderers” by Welty), Salska investigates affinities between the two authors resulting from their shared loyalty to small communities, their social sensitivity, their amazement at the mystery of individual psychic life, and their fascination with tangles of interpersonal relations. She also looks at technical affinities and divergences between the two authors, stressing their focus on intense physicality of experience and the undercurrent of violence running through Munro’s stories especially, despite her clear movement toward symbolic representation. Welty, too, has a significant admixture of both. Is it that life in/of small places encourages a sensuality of knowing in the artist? If so, in what ways?

The circumstances of Alice Munro’s and Mavis Gallant’s lives and writing careers may have been strikingly different, but the thematic scope and the narrative techniques of their fiction are in many ways, surprisingly alike. Mirosława Buchholtz compares several aspects of their writing: autobiographism, expertise in recreating juvenile experience, (proto)feminist concerns, nomadism, defiance of narrative formulas, the use of irony, and the attitude to literary criticism. In spite of numerous analogies, Buchholtz points to Gallant’s expatriation as the possible impulse for her impressive feats of international impersonation. The most distinctive feature of her writing, the ability to transcend national identity, makes her not so much an heir to, but much rather, a creator of the new post-WWII version of “international theme.”

All of the contributors to this volume stress the importance of Alice Munro’s contribution to Canadian and world literature. Many of them point out the enjoyment and pleasure they derive from the immersion in her art. Munro herself comments on her enjoyment of writing as a process of discovery (Wachtel 1993: 108). Our desire as editors of this collection was to demonstrate that Munro’s short stories provide multiple types of pleasure and enjoyment, be they

intellectual, emotional, ethical or aesthetic. Following Roland Barthes, we might ask then not only what we know about Munro's writing, but also how "we enjoy [her] texts" and whether they are "objects of pleasure" (7). Barthes' categories might reveal that Munro's texts vacillate between those of pleasure and those of bliss⁴. In Salmon Rushdie's words though, they would just be recognized as good stories as they make "you want to listen"⁵ and, moreover, they "do not ask for our praise, but for our attention" (Anne Enright qtd. in Berkowitz 2013: 3). They definitely offer the kind of "immersive experience" and visceral enjoyment and pleasure that the opening concert of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra will create for its audiences.

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- 4 "Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes 14).
- 5 Salmon Rushdie, "Literature happens at the level of the sentence." DOA: 15 Jan 2015. "http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/11/salman-rushdie-literature-happens-at-the-level-of-the-sentence"