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GEOGRAPHY, MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S *THE VIEW FROM CASTLE ROCK*

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Résumé : Le but de cet article est d'analyser les relations entre la forme brève, la mémoire et la construction de l'identité dans le recueil de nouvelles d'Alice Munro *The View from Castle Rock*. Alice Munro enquête sur les origines de ses ancêtres qui s'étaient installés au Canada de l'Écosse dans la première moitié du XIX[e] siècle : son écriture dessine avec précision les endroits où ils se sont installés, les paysages dans lesquels elle a grandi, l'imaginaire sauvage de son enfance. Le passé, recréé sous son aspect historique et géographique, est une trace vivante de la mémoire. De cette façon, je vais illustrer la manière dont l'art du récit bref de Munro permet la construction de la subjectivité à travers la récupération du passé et l'élaboration d'un type de nouvelle « heterodoxe ».

Mots-clés : brièveté, mémoire, identité, nouvelle, Alice Munro, *The View From Castle Rock.*

Abstract: *In this article I will discuss the way Munro deals with the short form along with the question of the redefinition of the self through memory in the short story collection* The View from Castle Rock. *Munro investigates the origins of her ancestors who had settled down in Canada from Scotland in the first half of the nineteenth century: her storytelling maps with accurate precision the places where they landed, the landscapes of the country she grew up in, the wild imaginary of her childhood. The past, recreated in its historical and geographical guise, looks like the stamp of identity and the living trace of memory: this way I will illustrate how Munro's art of short story enables the construction of the self through the rescue of memory as the leading faculty to shield subjectivity and through the elaboration of a "heterodox" type oh short story.*

Keywords: *brevity, memory, identity, short-story, Alice Munro,* The View From Castle Rock.

In an interview which appeared right after the publication of the collection *The Love of a Good Woman*, Alice Munro, speaking about the creative potential of the short form compared to the long prose, says:

> I seem to turn out stories that violate the discipline of the short story form and don't obey the rules of progression for novels. I don't think about a particular form, I think more about fiction, let's say a chunk of fiction. What do I want to do? I want to tell a story, in the old-fashioned way -what happens to somebody- but I want that 'what happens' to be delivered with quite a bit of interruption, turnarounds, and strangeness. I want the reader to feel something is astonishing -not the 'what happens' but the way everything happens. These long short story fictions do that best, for me. (Munro, 1999 on line www.randomhouse.com)

The passage summarizes the patterns she uses in constructing her stories: the extraneousness from the rigidity of the categories (neither novel nor short story, but a kind of oxymoronic form «long short story»), the refusal to restrict writing to a simple recognition of phenomenal data, the desire to investigate the way in which the complexity of reality is modulated. This sort of poetic declaration is even more valuable if we consider that we have very few theoretical writings by Munro: we can find her reflections upon literature only in the interviews or hidden between the lines of her stories.

The stories of Alice Munro seem in effect to systematically violate the structural norms of a literary genre which has always been difficult to define theoretically. The break with the hegemonic model of short story (if one exists) is expressed by the violation of brevity's dogma recommended by E. A. Poe (1846): Alice's Munro stories, as the author herself often states, are long-short story where what it matters is « not the "what happens" but the way everything happens». Munro's stories thus turn out to be much more than reports of a *tranche de vie* or anecdotes: they are not meant to be just the revelation of a «moment of being», but in their torrential discontinuity, they become the place designated for the construction of the characters', the reader's and the author's identities. It is not just the usual asynchrony between the time of the story and time of the discourse, but a real device through which the private fate of the characters is realized: it is through the temporal overlap that the existence of individuals can be accomplished both in narrative fiction and in reality. This shift on the axis of space and time defines the core of Munro's work: memory as the central element for the construction of subjectivity. Within the folds of the ordinary life (Munro's characters are ordinary people, have got ordinary jobs, live almost "normally"), the writer inserts fragments of the past activated by the complex interplay of mnemonic references (often metanarrative or intertextual). These fragments define the characters' stories, since these cannot be accomplished just in the present, but can be explained (and still, in any case, uniquely or permanently) only through the shadow of the past which is often delivered through a detail, an image that comes back. The reactivation of the memory's plots operates on several levels: from a stylistic point of view it outlines the structure of the story, from a thematic point of view it becomes the place of the construction of identity of the characters.

Over her prolific career Munro has explored the potential of the short form, gradually unravelling the boundaries between genres, decomposing their perspectives and their possible outcomes both in the direction of the modernist novella (very much used, for instance, by Katherine Mansfield and Eudora Welty), and in creating cycles of stories or series of interconnected stories. Curiously, when it comes to Alice Munro, a master of the contemporary short story, we can talk about a real challenge to the short form. And it is a formal challenge because it is constantly heterodox from the presumed norm, and a thematic one because it transforms the short story into a meaningful microcosm: her stories are as dense as novels[1]. Between the time *continuum* and the fragmentation of episodes, there is a hybrid book, *The View from Castle Rock*, published by McClelland and Stewart in 2006.

The View from Castle Rock, Munro's most autobiographical book, is divided into two complementary sections: the first, entitled *No Advantages,* is made up of five «historical» stories in which the author traces the routes sailed by her ancestors, the Laidlaw (the paternal branch of Scottish descent) in the journey from Scotland to Canada made at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the second part, *Home*, contains six more strictly autobiographical stories that tell personal stories of the writer (or its textual simulacrum) drawn from her private life and reinterpreted. The two hogbacks of the collection —and this geo-morphological reference is not accidental— are delimited by a *Preface* and an *Epilogue*. In addition to the unusual construction of the collection (the division into two parts, the genealogical investigation, the explicitly autobiographical story), the two innovations of the book seem to be the inclusion of the Preface and the reshaping of historical sources. *The View from Castle Rock*, on the one side, reshapes categories challenging brevity, because Munro works on the heterogeneity of genres to the point that sometimes we have the impression of having come across a long memoir or a detailed log book; on the other side, she builds the structure of her stories through the alternation of silence and discourse, through the montage of textual segments.

The first aspect, the hybrid nature of the writing, overrunning the boundaries of the traditional narratives and slipping in the autobiographical field, is revealed in the *Foreword.* Let's see it.

> About ten or twelve years ago I began to take more than a random interest in the history of one side of my family, whose name was Laidlaw. There was a good deal of information lying around about them – really an usual amount, considering that they were obscure and not prosperous, and living in the Ettrick Valley [...] And I was lucky, in that every generation of our family seemed to produce somebody who went in for writing long, outspoken, sometimes outrageous letters, and detailed recollections. [...] I didn't stop there. I put all this material together over the years, and almost without my noticing what was happening, it began to shape itself, here and there, into something like stories. Some of the characters gave themselves to me in their own words, other rose out of their situations. Their words and my words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was a truthful as our notion of the past can ever be. During these years I was also writing a special set of stories. These stories were not included in the books of fiction I put together, as regular intervals. Why not? I felt they didn't belong. They were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than the others stories I had written, even in the first person. In other first-person sto-

[1] "Racconti densi come romanzi". Expression, originally in italian, coined by Citati (2008, p. 456).

> ries I had drawn on personal material, but then I did anything I wanted to do with this material. Because the chief thing I was doing was making a story. In the stories I hadn't collected I was not doing exactly that. I was doing something closer to what a memoir does – exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way. I put myself in the centre and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took on their own life and colour and did things they had not done in reality. [...] In fact, some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with. These are *stories*. You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on. And the part of this book that may be called family history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outlines of a true narrative. With these developments the two streams came close enough together that they seemed to me meant to flow in one channel, as they do in this book. (Munro, 2006, *Foreword*)

The element of the *Foreword* constitutes a unique example in Munro's production, since her collections are not so often preceded by any declaration of authorial intent (except for the one written on the occasion of the publication of the *Selected Stories* volume and the other in her second collection, *Lives of Girls and Wome*[2]). The second new element is given by the heterogeneity of sources that the writer uses: not merely anecdotes and stories, or memories and personal experiences, but real documents drawn from archives, maps, works composed by her ancestors whose genealogy she tries to trace, recording the steps of their pioneering journey from Scotland to Upper Canada, until her father's birth. It is precisely in the introduction that Munro explains that she got interested in that branch of the family when, during a trip to Scotland, she became aware of the existence of one of her ancestor, the writer James Hogg, author of the *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, thanks to whom she was able to read up his ancestors and discover that for each generation, there was a writer who had recorded the main events of the family, until the crossing to Canada, in 1818 and, from decade to decade, the birth of her father Robert. The *Foreword* shows an interesting insight upon literary genres and the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, narrative and history, as it illustrates the way the writer selects the narrative material, making an ethical choice between what is appropriate for fictional stories and what to the world of fiction does not properly belong (« [...] These stories were not included in the books of fiction I put together, as regular intervals. Why not? I felt they did not belong »). The author's reflection therefore focusses on two aspects: the principle of separation between the subjective, private experience and the literary construction, and the overall role that memory and writing play within this system made of delicate checks and balances; if our identity is preserved in the memory of the past, the approach of the «Truth of Life» will only be realized in its recovery.

First, as it is made evident by what Munro says in the *Foreword,* the pursuit of the attempt of separation between fiction and non-fiction is often disregarded, even when there is no explicit intention of the author; in the text, the hybrid nature of her writing becomes evident as it is modulated mainly in two directions: on the one hand the biographical material flows into fictional narratives («They were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than the others stories I had written, even in the first person. In other first-

[2] At the beginning of her second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro (1971) writes: «This novel in autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbours and friends did not serve as models. »

person stories I had drawn on personal material», Munro, 2006, *Foreword*), on the other hand the autobiographical plots gradually dissolve by incorporating elements of invention, and becoming something other than their biographical origin («some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with», Munro, 2006, *Foreword*), thus creating a double movement, both centripetal, and centrifugal. In fact, the writer constructs her stories drawing on her experience and then indulges in a new, further transformation: the story, moulded by writing, becomes something else, often unrelated, indistinguishable. Munro searches for the «Truth of Life» starting with a survey around herself («I put myself in the centre and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could») and from the reconstruction of her past in a way which is always problematic, alienating, discontinuous, surprising. This happens because this is how Munro sees reality, in a problematic, alienating, discontinuous and surprising way: writing, even when it draws from biography, is not the mere summary of phenomenal data; on the contrary, the distortion of time continuum, the destruction of its segments which thus are offered to the reader in a chaotic, discontinuous, sometimes epiphanic way.

In *The View from Castle Rock* all the personal material, which in the previous collections was arranged in a wide range of variations, is now organized according to a principle of order, structured upon two parallel and complementary levels: a historical and genealogical one and a geo-morphological one. Historical and genealogical, as in the first part of the book Alice Munro explores the origins of her family thanks to the testimonies produced by her ancestors; geo-morphological, because through the story of the routes followed by her pioneer ancestors is outlined, with cartographic precision, the landscape of Huron County, Ontario. The past, in its historic and territorial guise here reorganized and put in succession, is not sacralised but becomes the living trace of memory and the necessary condition for the future to exist. And it is Munro herself who, several times over her collections, reaffirms the need, which is the natural tendency of every human being, to poke around the past, following its tracks, discarding its red herrings, in the belief that only the connection with life can be perpetuated by establishing a bond with it:

> We can't resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads on being joined to dead people and therefore to life. (Munro, 2006, p. 306)

From a structural point of view *The View from Castle Rock* is perhaps the best example of how Alice Munro's stories work both in their individual dimension and within the narrative framework of the collection. The peculiarity of Munro seems to be the successful short circuit between linearity of prose and fragmentation of the narrative body: the text reaches towards a non-linear formal and semantic axis, where the structural and graphic discontinuity corresponds to a similar movement of dispersion (a movement characterizing the episodic and enigmatic structure of stories Munro tells). How does Munro recover these fragments and place them into a comprehensive system? Munro's undertaking is even more difficult because she accounts for her personal and familiar past not only through the gradual surfacing of unrelated memories but through the contextualization of these memories and the building of a meaningful narrative microcosm, resulting from the convergence between «moment of being» and narrative *continuum.* These stylistic and thematic patterns are rather common in Munro's *œuvre*, taken as a whole. The

specificity of this collection lies in the recovery of these moments sewn up by the testimonies of her ancestors: her perspective extends to a whole range of writings, memorial journey, letters, the fruit of archival research done by the author herself, as an investigator, a historian and a geographer.

The order of the events is a highly significant factor in the analysis of Munro's stories: far from being merely formal devices, these forms of time dissonances reproduce on the page the intricate paths of memory triggered by the re-emergence of the past, which is always uncertain, problematic and painful. The montage of these parts thus appears to be substantially regulated by the frequent use of two formal devices that, literally, carve the body of the text: the digressions and the graphic white space.

These frictions between fragments, which inevitably suggest a twist of space or time, are very often reported on the page and separated from the rest by white spaces, sudden gaps that indicate to the reader an unexpected leap back, or a change of scene, or a silence, a pause. The *montage* is for this reason the decisive mechanism of this collection both in the macro-structure as in the single story: although the progressive chronological order is quite evident (from the early stories, the ones about her ancestors, Munro reviews some important episodes of her childhood, adolescence and adulthood) the author insists on the spacing between a story and the other, between a segment of text and another. From a structural point of view, the construction of the single narrative proceeds by ruptures, by clean cuts describing an elliptical, metonymic tendency. The montage returns the image of time, not by juxtaposing narrative blocks, but proceeding as stated by Deleuze:

> Il faut que le montage procède par alternances, conflits, résolutions, résonances, bref toute une activité de sélection et de coordination, pour donner au temps sa véritable dimension, comme au tout sa consistance [...]. Précisément parce qu'il sélectionne et coordonne les "moments significatifs", le montage a la propriété de "rendre le présent passé", d'accomplir le temps. (Deleuze, 1985, p. 51)

The reader has always to face these fluctuations, in which the temporal fragmentation overlaps the spatial discontinuity: Munro's writing does not reproduce the world and the relationships between individuals in a linear and comforting way; on the contrary, it breaks them up into a plurality of perspectives, it shatters the surface into a myriad of images, of distant echoes and ghosts, in a continuous game of references and reflections. Writing is a perpetual running through this structural tension: the engraving of the text with its twists, its metonymic cuts, its ellipses, is itself the figure of time passing and crystallising.

The *View from Castle Rock* is a book about thresholds: thresholds between genres, between the parts in which the text is graphically divided. And the more evanescent and slippery are these thresholds (trespassing the short story's closed universe towards a structural system that echoes the epic rhythm), the more geographically defined appear those that highlight the space of the journey to the New World, but also the Canadian soil. This convergence between writing, geography, identity and memory is built from the dialectic between three nuclei of images: the landscape, the house and the cemetery. I will focus on the landscape, the crux of the collection and an issue of crucial importance

throughout Canadian literature, as highlighted by the Canadian critic Northrop Frye (1971) in his well-known remarkable book *The Bush Garden*.

It is in fact from the description of geographical space that all the stories of the collection develop: the title itself, *The View from Castle Rock*, evokes a geographical hill and James Laidlaw's point of view from the fortress of Edinburgh Castle. As he was showing his son Andrew the horizon beyond which the misty cliffs of Fife could be glimpsed, he perceived them as the coasts of America, figure of the unknown, of an elsewhere imagined and desired. Not without a touch of irony: for James Laidlaw, an indefatigable drinker, these were truly the coasts of America. Only a few years later, his son will become aware of the misunderstanding:

> Even when he was ten years old he had known that the men with his father where drunk. If he did not understand that his father was drunk-due to his father sure-footedness and sense of purpose, his commanding behaviour he did certainly understand that something was not as it should be. He knew I was not looking America, though it was some years before he was well enough acquainted with maps to know he had been looking at Fife. (Munro, 2006, p. 31)

The route taken by the ancestors of Munro takes shape as the landscape goes by: the legendary lands of Scotland populated by evil spirits and mysterious creatures that excited the imagination of Will O'Phaup, a tireless adventurer and founder of the family; the barren landscape of Illinois and then Canada's immense and wild spaces. Forests, fields, rivers, mountains, lakes: overseas the landscape is seen no longer as nature in itself, but as an anthropomorphic space, an economic opportunity.

> There was no more wild country in Huron County then than there is now. Perhaps there was less. The farms had been cleared in the period between 1830 and 1860, when the Huron Tract was being opened up, and they were cleared thoroughly. Many creeks had been dredged – the progressive thing to do was to straighten them out and make them run like tame canals between the field. The early farmers hated the very sight of a tree and admired the look of open land. And the masculine approach to the land was managerial, dictatorial. Only women were allowed to care about landscape and not to think always of its subjugation and productivity. (Munro, 2006, p. 130)

Landscape is seen as a resource to be exploited: the landscape is nature worked by man, far from the romantic sentimentalism in which only women could indulge (in the belief of the first pioneer to be settled there). In *The View From Castle Rock* more than in any other collection, nature displays the features of what has been called cultural landscape (Groth, Wilson, 2003): the stratigraphy of the forms produced in the present, of those produced in the past but no longer detectable in the present, and finally the traces of the past which still lives in the present.

The story that probably makes more explicit this juncture between nature and history, between writing and epistemological survey is *What Do You Want To Know For?* the last of the collection. After so many years away from its place of origin, South Western Ontario, the author returns to live there together with her second husband, the geographer Gerald Fremlin. In the text, two investigations run in parallel: on the one hand the search for a crypt that she undertakes with her husband, a geographer, during a trip to the country-

side; on the other, the discovery of a lump in the breast of the protagonist and the following clinical exams. In the structure of the story, these two enquiries —one geo-archaeological, the other medical— continually intersect, and almost overlap. At the beginning of the story, Alice is precisely mapping the landscape she sees in front of her: with her husband, she is looking for a crypt seen once by chance during a walk in the countryside.

> The landscape here is a record of ancient events. It was formed by the advancing, stationary, and retreating ice. The ice has staged its conquest and retreats here several times, withdrawing for the last time about fifteen thousand years ago. Quite recently, you might say. Quite recently now that I got used to a certain way of reckoning history. [...] So you have to keep checking, taking in the changes, seeing things while they last. [...] I didn't learn any of this at school. [...] I learned it when I came to live here with my second husband, a geographer. When I came back to where I never expected to be, in the countryside where I grown up. [...] I get a naive and particular pleasure from matching what I see on the map with what I can see through the car window. [...] It is exciting to me to spot the boundaries [...], but there is always more than just the keen pleasure of identification. [...] There is the fact of these little countries lying snug and unsuspected, like and unlike as siblings can be, in a landscape that's usually disregarded, or dismissed as a drab agricultural counterpane. It's the fact you cherish. (Munro, 2006, p. 281-284)

After this description in which the writing is meticulous, thorough, rigorous, sometimes harsh and edgy as the territory it describes, a printing white space delimits another narrative segment and a jump in the other story, the medical one: the protagonist has just booked a biopsy scheduled for two weeks later and is reflecting upon the possibility that the disease would possibly be fatal. Then another blank on the page announces to the reader another gap of space and time: we are back in the open air, in search of the crypt.

> The biopsy was set for a date two weeks ahead [...] I said two weeks seemed like quite a while to wait. At this stage of the game, the doctor said, two weeks was immaterial. That was not was I had been led to believe. But I did not complain- not after a look at some of the people in the waiting room. I am over sixty. My death would not be a disaster. Not in comparison with the death of a young mother, a family wage-earner, a child. It would not be apparent as a disaster. It bothered us that we could not find the crypt. We extended our search... (Munro, 2006, p. 222-223)

As Héliane Ventura (2011, p. 93) has pointed out, in *What Do You Want to Know For?* Munro's search is no longer a cartographic one, but becomes a real adventure, physically undertaken. The geographical areas that progressively take different forms seem to converge gradually with the author's persona: at the beginning they are the legendary lands of Scotland, the elsewhere, the figure of the new world; then, areas to be exploited in order to survive or, as in young Alice's perceptions, the contemplated nature of poetic speculation; in the last story landscape is, as we have seen, the geographical entity, with its glaciers and the faults of its mountains, which reveals history in its gaps. Finally, it is the projection of the body of the author herself: the scan of the past, which is always an historical, genealogical and morphological anamnesis, is fulfilled in the materiality of bodies, in the traces that they contain, in the scars that they hide, in the lumps that could mutilate them. These three dimensions, the familiar-genealogical one, the morphological-

territorial one and the corporal one, are intertwined in this persistent and winding *quête*, they race parallel to the progressive discovery of the identity which in those spaces and in that history is finally found again (is not by chance that she returns home, and *Home* is the title she chooses for the second part of the collection, as it seals the return, a deep sense of belonging).

As we said *The View from Castle Rock* is a book about thresholds. The last threshold, the one that acts as the connection between inside and outside, private and public, geographical space and historical dimension is the cemetery. The collection opens and closes in a place of burial: at the beginning Munro's researches lead her to the Church of Ettrick Cemetery where Will O'Phaup was buried, and at the end, we are in the cemetery of Blyth, where the author finds the tombs of the early Laidlaw arrived in Canada from Scotland. Paradigmatic are the final lines of the book, contained in the epilogue, *Messenger*:

> Now all these names I have been recording are joined to the living people in my mind, and to the lost kitchens, the polish nickel trim on the commodious presiding black stoves, the sour wooden drain boards that never quite dried, the yellow light of the coal-oil lamp. The cream cans on the porch, the apples in the cellar, the stovepipes going up through the holes on the ceiling, the stable warmed in winter by the bodies and breath of the cows – those cows whom we still spoke to in words common in the days of Troy. *So bos. So bos.* The cold waxed parlour where the coffin was put when people died. And in one of these houses – I can't remember whose – a magic doorstop, a big mother-of-pearl seashell that I recognized as a messenger from near and far, because I could hold it to my ear – when nobody was there to stop me – and discover the tremendous pounding of my own blood, and of the sea. (Munro, 2006, p. 348-349)

This way, the circle is closed, the junction between past and present, history and territory is accomplished: the great history of the pioneers and the detail retained by memory, the shell-shaped doorstep, an allegory of the amalgam of past and present, from which it can be heard the sound of the sea.

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