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Alice Munro's Ecosophy: from "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (1968) to "Dear Life" (2012)

Abstract I: L'interesse di Alice Munro per l'ambiente naturale e la sua fiducia nello stesso, evidenti nei suoi racconti, sono stati considerati dagli studiosi in molteplici modi: generici, tematici, retorici e ideologici. Mentre sarebbe inverosimile che la scrittrice sottoscrivesse una delle attuali definizioni di ecosofia, la saggezza ambientale comunicata e sostenuta attraverso la sua finzione letteraria dimostra l'adozione di prospettive ecologiche. Tali prospettive ecologiche vengono analizzate nel presente articolo attraverso alcuni riferimenti ad una serie di racconti che si sono susseguiti nell'arco di quattro decadi di attività creativa.

Abstract II: Alice Munro's interest in and reliance on natural environment, as evidenced by her stories, has been viewed by literary scholars in a variety of ways: generic, thematic, rhetorical, and ideological. While she is unlikely to subscribe to any of the current definitions of ecosophy, the environmental wisdom conveyed and sustained through her fiction is a matter of adopting ecological perspectives, which I would like to study in this article, referring to a handful of stories that span well over four decades of her creative activity.

It seems quite natural for a Canadian author to be a nature writer and for Canadian literary studies to be ecocritical. Canada is a vast expanse of natural landscape, where wilderness – conceptualized in turns as magnificent and threatening – is never far away. Although human relations seem to be the main focus of attention in Alice Munro's fiction, natural landscape and wilderness are often an immediate backdrop or a point of reference for the interactions and

musings of her characters. In the present article I first comment on the ways in which Munro's interest in nature may be approached. I focus then on a selection of her short stories, from the ones included in her earliest volume, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to her latest writings collected in *Dear Life* (2012), which the author herself pronounced to be her final book. It is my intention to address the question of the ways in which Alice Munro is a nature writer and how her narrative and philosophical perspectives seek to sustain ecological balance.

Alice Munro's short stories are not nature-writing in the strict sense in which the genre has been defined. In W. H. New's *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, "nature writing" is compounded with "science writing" as one of two "loosely defined macro-genres – related and often overlapping – whose individual examples range from the specialized to the popular and sometimes belong to other genres as well" (Higgins 2002: 1010). Carefully studying the etymologies of the intersecting concepts of nature, science, and literature across time, space, cultures, and languages (especially English and French), Iain Higgins admits that "there is scarcely a significant poet ever to have written in Canada whose poems could not be considered part of nature writing" (1012). He refers to Margaret Atwood as an example. However reluctant he is about the exclusion of fiction, he nevertheless limits his observations to non-fiction writing, and thus Alice Munro is not even once mentioned in his definition of science and nature writing, even though "[h]er fascination with the human and natural history of her native ground – the land that lies roughly between Lakes Erie and Huron" (Scott 2006), is beyond any doubt.

Natural landscape, as an entity separate from human nature, is not the major theme of Munro's fiction, though it does play a role in her attempts to forge connections with Canadian mythology, including the myth of wilderness. Adopting a thematic approach, Faye Hammill discusses Alice Munro's contribution to Canadian literature precisely in this context. In view of the two main categories of wilderness myths in Canadian literature: the one associated with the "irrational or

Other" and its opposite that links wilderness with "healing and nurture" (Hammill 2007: 64), like Margaret Atwood, Munro "presents the wilderness as a place not of purity, but of sexual exploitation" (2007: 91). Focusing on "Wilderness Station" (*Open Secrets*, 1994), Hammill concludes that Munro "writes against traditional depictions of the monstrous wilderness" with its "hostile Native people or wild animals" (91).

Much of Munro's fiction was published long before ecocriticism had arisen. Laurie Ricou admits that although "Canadian literary studies, with their long-standing interest in nature, wilderness, and landscape, might be said to have always been ecocritical", a breakthrough publication in the field was Joseph Meeker's 1972 *Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. It was only the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment twenty years later, however, that helped to promote Canadian ecocriticism since the mid-1990s (Ricou 2002: 324). Benefitting from such studies and combining ecocriticism with feminism in a way that is at the same time more sentimental and more ideological than Hammill's interpretation mentioned above, Li Hong-hui's 2011 article explores "The Flats Road" (*Lives of Girls and Women*, 1971) as an example of Alice Munro's eco-feminism. Uncle Benny emerges in Li's reading as a paragon of tolerance toward women, children, and animals.

The rhetoric of Munro's depictions of natural environment invites comparison with pastoral and anti-pastoral tradition, as can be seen in Marianne Micros's article which studies the short story "Lichen" (*The Progress of Love*, 1986) as an allusion to 16th-century literary conventions in pastoral poems. Taking a more general view of Canadian writing, in his *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, W.H. New mentions briefly the presence of the pastoral and, even more frequently, anti-pastoral, motifs in Canadian writing. Except for Frances Brooke and Robert Hayman, whose early accounts of Canada conceptualized "the countryside as idyllic", New does not mention any other names in this context, arguing, however, that the "image of 'barren land'" and "intrinsically imperfect" world dominated in

the post-Voltaire era. He concludes with the blanket statement that "[v]arious elements of pastoral (and anti-pastoral) do [...] survive into 21st-century writing, in the continuing idealization of rural life and in some lyrical nature writing" (New 2002: 868). While Munro can hardly be claimed to idealize rural life, the lyricism of her occasional descriptions of nature is rarely unalloyed with other tones.

A reader of Alice Munro's "Jakarta" (*The Love of a Good Woman*, 1998) knows how ironic or at least distanced she can be towards all idealisms and ideologies, including those she knew at first-hand, the counter-culture of the late 1960s. By the same token, she seems unlikely to embrace either Arne Naess's or Félix Guattari's definition of ecosophy, though it is possible to prove that some elements of their respective reasoning (without political underpinnings, however) could be found in her own fiction. Like Naess, Munro repeatedly questions anthropocentrism and like Guattari, she explores the interconnectedness of mind, society, and environment. In an attempt to sum up the differences between those two independent fathers of ecosophy, John Tinnell points out that "Naess calls for an expansion of the self via identification ('Self-realisation'), whereas Guattari (and Deleuze) valorise autopoietic processes that perform a dissolution of the self via disjunction ('becoming-other')". Where is Alice Munro in that equation? As usual, and paradoxically, on both sides at the same time. The selves which she narrates into existence in her fiction are both expanded through identification and dissolved through othering.

Clearly privileging Guattari over Naess, Tinnell argues that the latter's approach leads to the mere "thematic study of literary representations of Nature", whereas the former's theory enables transversality, which consists of "creating lines of flight among various models" and is "a radically ecological concept in that it pushes us to constantly (re)articulate things at the relational level of their interactions". Naess corresponds with "the representational paradigms of nineteenth century realism (which are often celebrated by leading ecocritics)", whereas Guattari offers the equivalent of "modernist and contemporary aesthetics

of collage and montage". Although celebrated for her (psychological) realism, Alice Munro is a master of collage and montage as well, and thus again unites what Tinnell views as opposites.

The complexities of Alice Munro's prose seem to gravitate towards the complexities of Guattari's transversality in that she shoots through not only mind, society, and environment, but also mentally crosses other boundaries, most notably those of age and gender. Looking at a handful of her stories, I would like to point to the standpoints she takes that are at the same time narrative and philosophical perspectives on (wo)man in nature.

First of all, Munro has been celebrated for her ability to fuse the perspective of a child and an adult. "Walker Brothers Cowboy", the opening story of her first volume *Dance of the Happy Shade*, is a good example of such blending. Whereas in her early fiction, Munro locates cognitive and perceptive capacity in a schoolgirl (denying her younger brother the ability to see and understand his natural and social environment alike), in her later fiction, including "My Mother's Dream" (*The Love of a Good Woman*) and "Dear Life", she fuses the adult narrator's perspective with that of a female infant, exploring the process of subjectivity construction in relation to natural and social environment. While recreating the impressions of an ever younger child, Munro seems to study the mind which is not yet prejudiced. "My Mother's Dream" subverts, however, such a simplistic reading of Munro's authorial intention. It is a story of an infant girl who is from her birth deeply prejudiced against her mother and who decides to make peace only after having experienced a life-threatening crisis: "I believe that it was only at the moment [...] when I gave up the fight against my mother (which must have been a fight for something like her total surrender) and when in fact I chose survival over victory (death would have been victory), that I took on my female nature" (Munro 337). While resistance to the mother figure is presented as an individual experience in Munro's story, it may also be read as innate pre-cognitive opposition to Mother Nature and one's own nature which needs to be overcome

to make life possible.

The perspective Munro adopts in most of her narratives is that of a female, as opposed to male point of view. The story entitled "Boys and Girls" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) dramatizes the moment in the young girl's life when she leaves the male sphere of fox farming, and the easy companionship with her younger brother comes to an end. That moment coincides with the girl's impulse to save the brave female horse, Flora, that is about to be slaughtered and turned into food for foxes. Instead of closing the gate through which the horse can flee, the girl opens it up and Flora runs away. It is not clear why the narrator acts that way: out of solidarity with a female animal or in awe of a female horse which unexpectedly shows male qualities: the power to rebel. The men (including for the first time the girl's brother) eventually catch and cut up the horse, and in the final scene of the story, the unnamed narrator is both "dismissed" and "absolved" by her father who says: "She's only a girl" (Munro 2000: 127). In spite of the social enactment of gender roles, Munro's female protagonists repeatedly traverse the gender boundary in an attempt to forge their own identity as women and writers. The story "Office" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) is a case in point. As a foil to the female boundary-crosser, the story features an elderly feminized man who is, paradoxically and satirically, a self-appointed warden of the purity of gender roles.

Apart from crossing the boundaries of age and gender, which allows the narrator to perceive her natural and social environment as well as her own mind in a multi-dimensional way, Munro often takes an anti-anthropocentric view of these three spheres of being. In her stories anti-anthropocentrism manifests itself in two ways: the panoramic view of natural history and the presence of animals in the narrative space. "Walker Brothers Cowboy", and thus Munro's whole book-form legacy, begins with the father's jocular offer to his young daughter "to go down and see if the Lake's still there?" (Munro 2000: 1). Once they arrive on Lake Huron, the father narrates "how the Great Lakes came to be" (3), and his story, reinforced by the view, proves that the "fingers of ice" in pre-historic times were much

stronger than his own "spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground" are now (3). The awareness of geological changes long before human presence (clearly insignificant in comparison) is frightening to the little girl and reassuring to her father: "The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility" (3). The long view of natural history allows the father to distance himself from his own current troubles, and the girl will learn to adopt a similar attitude for similar purposes: to step aside and see her sorrows as insignificant in comparison with the massive and timeless presence of nature. Stories collected in *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) prove that the girl had learned the lesson of her father well. Fascination with natural history serves as a counter-point to the troubled human stories of various family members who appear in this book. The long view of human and pre-human history in Munro's fiction has an equalizing effect: in view of the vast expanse of time and space, the difference between child and adult, male and female, human past and present appears insignificant.

The motif of a bond between a female child and a female animal, which is present in "Boys and Girls" resurfaces in a modified form in Munro's later stories as well. "Runaway" is a good example. The word "runaway" applies equally to a young woman and her favorite goat, whose name is (again) Flora. The woman attempts to escape from her husband, as if following the example of her goat. Flora reappears briefly in a sudden moment of epiphany as "a live dandelion ball, tumbling forward, then condensing itself into an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn" (Munro 2006: 39), only to disappear forever after that scene. The young woman, Carla, returns to her husband, accepting the sacrificial death of the animal. Especially in the stories set in rural Ontario, human characters often bear resemblance to animals: a ferret in "The Time of Death" (Munro 2000: 99) or a bear in "Heirs of the Living Body" (Munro 1971: 55). A comparison to animals need not be seen as demeaning, but as an indication that human and animal lives are close and run parallel to each other.

In contrast to Margaret Atwood, her friend and contemporary, Alice Munro is not an activist. And yet, some of her stories pose questions of current and perennial political interest, such as abortion and the place in society for old and disabled people. Alice Munro takes a philosophical stance when addressing the issue of abortion in the story "Before the Change" (*The Love of a Good Woman*), though she is also capable of descriptions that are overpowering and hyperrealistic in their sparse vividness. She refers to the times when abortion was still illegal in Canada, and performed by the narrator's father for reasons that she begins to fathom only after his death: "the risk. The secrecy. The power" (285). The motivation is important because even beyond the change in legislation, there is always something else "to be ashamed or afraid of" (285). Law may be changed, but that does not free people from taking decisions about their lives: "Change the law, change the person. Yet we don't want everything – not the whole story – to be dictated from outside. We don't want what we are, all we are, to be concocted that way" (Munro 1998: 285-286). In Munro's story abortion becomes the epitome of a philosophical problem at the interface of self, society, and nature.

In "Dear Life", the final, semi-autobiographical piece in her latest book, Alice Munro narrates the story of a young mother who saves her infant daughter from an old and reputedly insane woman who is prowling around their house. The old woman's madness seems just as certain as the young mother's bravery until many years later the narrator discovers the astounding confluence of human lives and fates, and "starkest madness" turns into "divinest sense." The old woman had a reason to approach the house because it had belonged to her long before the young family had moved in. She investigates the baby's carriage (Munro 2012: 314) because she also had a baby once. Her sudden interest arises from (con)fusing her own life with the lives of others, which is also what the elderly narrator is doing when recreating past events. The insane old woman blends also with the figure of the narrator's mother. In other stories, beginning with the famous

"Peace of Utrecht" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*), Munro refers to her own Gothic mother, whose Parkinson's disease was at that time still a cause of unease and shame. In "Dear Life" the strangeness of the mother figure is mediated by the crazy old woman, who in retrospect becomes surprisingly familiar.

Alice Munro plays with narrative perspectives. By conflating or juxtaposing apparently opposite points of view, she reveals the ecosophic depth of her deceptively simple stories. She proves through her narratives the existence of a network of invisible links that cut through social and natural environment, through animate and inanimate world. Although she admits a variety of differences that her characters exemplify and perceive in others, she radically transforms her readers' perception of their place in their social and natural environments by demonstrating the exchangeability and the prerequisite interconnectedness of particular elements: human, animal, and inanimate.

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