



## 'WE REMEMBERED (HER) LIKE A STORY': INTERROGATING AND RE – FASHIONING MEMORY THROUGH THE PARADOXICAL VISION OF ALICE MUNRO

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### ABSTRACT

Memory, or more appropriately, acts of memory, are no longer restricted to signify a matter of cognitive process. The onus lies on the anthropological approaches and studies to investigate the study of memory as a social action which, by and large, includes the discursive means people use to actively and effectively represent and remember the past. Memory, a part of the collective domain, has often been deployed as a social and cultural framework within which attention can be focused upon the buried, erased and occluded aspects of the past. However, memory as a cultural tool is most poignant and effective when personalized in the stories of individual experience. Memory, the capacity to remember, recreate, and frequently, reconstruct one's past, is the quintessence of the fictional *oeuvre* of Alice Munro (1931 – 2013). In the delightful Munroian texts, memory, though temporal, is oriented towards a narrative re-elaboration and comprehension of the past; here, the representation(s) of the past is always in some way about the present. This paper will be an attempt to explicate Munro's eclectic and photographic vision of paradox, disarrangement and fragmentation which underscores her perception of the temporal dimensions of memory. Munro's delineation of these acts of memory, which re – vivify, and alternately bury, the emotionalized spaces and places of life will be elaborated. How this temporality, coupled with the inherent complexities of language, problematizes the mode of narration adopted by Munro is another issue to be examined.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, memory, paradox, refashioning, photographic vision.

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The idiom of memory stands as a code for a process that is always enacted in and through a social context, focusing on situated acts of memory in particular contexts where the past matters. In the wake of burgeoning globalization, a remarkable proliferation in the discourses of the past has been dutifully accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of memory studies in the global academy.

The broader realm of memory studies has expanded its lens to include social practices that mediate collective identities (especially cultural, ethnic and national formations) and historical consciousness. Anthropological approaches which are capable of linking the affective textures of personal experience with the expansive domain of collective histories elucidate on the essentially social nature of

memory. However, as a proper enumeration of the tenets of memory studies is beyond the scope of this paper, the intentional refashioning of the dynamics of memory (which, here, denotes a cognitive process of selection, interpretation and re – elaboration) will be enumerated upon. One can assert that the past has a robust and a significant future. Situated acts of memory and sites of memory are inevitably evocative and significant in that they are distinguished by ideologies and expressions of emotion that convey the comprehensibility and salience of meaningful past events for persons recalling them. The warp and woof of the Munroian *oeuvre* participates in and constitutes acts of memory and remembrance. Comprehending and articulating memory is her characters' *raison d'être*. In an interview with Cara Feinberg, Munro claims:

. . . I should say that memory interests me a great deal, because I think we all tell stories of our lives to ourselves, as well as to other people [. . .] What interests me is how these stories are made—what is put in at different times in your life, what is left out at different times, and how you use the stories to see yourself, or sometimes just to make life bearable for yourself. (“Bringing Life to Life” 57)

Munro's eclectic vision establishes her art as being defined by indeterminacy, where the said indeterminacy implies the struggle to draw a line between objective reality and the subjective impression of the same. Her insistent and persistent refusal of closure and delightful ambiguity pertains to the confounding character of life in all its ordinary yet dangerous glory. The insurmountable problem she faces in separating reality from image as well as truth from illusion is echoed in her perception of the overwhelming beauties and grotesqueries of reality. Munro avers, “I have all these disconnected realities in my own life, and I see them in other people's lives. . . I never saw things hanging together any too well” (McCulloch, Simpson “The Art of Fiction” 29). Her compulsive desire for order and detail is coupled with an equally unabashed insistence on disconnectedness and schism. Munro's celebration of the baffling interplay of the past and present

lends her an almost photographic clarity of vision which, in turn, necessitates an elucidation of her notion of reality. The knowable and prosaic reality of the ordinary world, which Munro designates as “unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality” (“The Peace of Utrecht,” *Dance of the Happy Shades* 197; hereby abbreviated as *DHS*) makes, for her, a certain kind of ‘super-realism’ (Hancock, “Interview with Alice Munro” 83) more pronounced over documentary or photographic realism. This notion can be envisaged as comprising two levels – that of the external, hard prosaic reality which dutifully serves as a creative stimuli to her art of disarrangement *and* the self – contained reality of her fictional canvas and world. Munro has commented that she likes

. . . looking at people's lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time [. . .] I like to look at what people don't understand. And I like the way people relate, or don't relate to the people they were earlier. . . (Hancock 89 – 90)

Lorraine York subscribes to the notion of Munro's photographic vision of life. Claiming Munro to be a writer who unfailingly attempts to re – create and revive the ambience and texture of the past, she posits that Munro uses photography as an analogous means of deftly accommodating and bringing together the past and the present and the photograph as a means of re – considering and re – evaluating the past (York 17). Here, the knowledge of the past is not for theorizing or a matter of verification as the whole gamut of meanings implicit in the layered textures of the past is incomprehensible to all. By the medium of the photograph, the reader is permitted an illusion, of sorts, of reality but is still reminded that it *is* an illusion. However, while prose fiction is indeed an illusion, it has a concrete base in the author's remembered experiences. York further suggests that Munro's creation of a story from this visual artefact alone involves, for her, a revival and re – creation of a past deeply personal in nature as well as an attempt to capture and immortalize the mortal and

the transitory (York 42). Munro generously uses photographs (family photographs in particular) to study and emphasize the paradoxical dislocation, disjunction and discontinuity between the past and the present. In "Something I've been Meaning to Tell You," Et is astonished at chancing upon a photograph of Char and realizes the superficial change present – day Char has undergone from the visage of "the same almost disdainful harmony" etched on her face from the photograph (*Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* 6; hereby abbreviated as *SIBMTY*). For Munro, the photograph implies an incontrovertible truth of ordinary human nature in all its strange glory— the superficial knowledge of the external visage serves as a petty front for the convoluted knowledge of the labyrinthine workings of the mind and of the past. This subtle association between visualized objects & the powerful past emotions they invoke reveal Munro to be a master chronicler of human nature, "so unassailable is the truth of her fiction" (S. Munro 11). Quite often, her narrators reflect at length on the difficulty of expressing truth in fiction by presenting numerous possible interpretations without declaring the predominance of any single one. However, for Munro, the truth is grounded in physical reality, stark and unpleasant as it might be.

Even though Munro's photographic vision of life and art aim for universalism, such perspicuity inevitably results in the presence and preponderance of paradoxes in her creative *oeuvre*. Munro's *forte*, lying in the art of assembling and articulating glaring paradoxes in her fiction, treads a delicate balance between the past and the present, fiction and nonfiction ceaseless motion and tranquil stasis, affirming link and gaping gulf, a certain fixity and an equally gripping fluidity, celebration and burial, joyous revelation and jealous concealment. In Munro's fictional canvas, where her characters are forgotten and celebrated all at once, everyday humdrum life is revered and mysteriously allied to the gothic; the grotesque appears surprisingly familiar while the familiar is surprisingly and equally grotesque, almost alarming. In "The Ottawa Valley" the most familiar and comforting presence of the mother turns dark due to the foreboding sense of sickness and the tragic loss of selfhood: "She [the

narrator's mother] went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent. She withdrew, she darkened in front of me, though all she did in fact was keep on walking along the path that she and Aunt Dodie had made when they were girls. . . It was still there" (*SIBMTY* 244). To Munro, ordinary objects inspire both reverence and suspicion, the extraordinary is packed tightly into the ordinary, the prosaic is inherently mysterious. The placid surfaces of small – town life have illimitable depths and degrees of intensity; a surface is never merely a surface but a reflection of a latent, deep and abiding mystery within the perceiver himself and the perceived world at large. In "Princess Ida" Del, like her photographer, unmasks reality only to confound and render it more complex by adding impenetrable textures and layers to the harsh reality (*Lives of Girls and Women* 92; hereby abbreviated as *LGW*).

For Munro, oddity is a social necessity which is disparaged yet declared legendary and appreciated. Munro has reiterated this belief: "There are just *flashes* of things we know and find out. I don't see life very much in terms of progress" (Hancock "Interview with Alice Munro" 102; italics mine). Her perception of these paradoxes thematize memory and produce a decisive, bright, illuminating and enlightening moment in which many bewildering mysteries, albeit unresolved, are brought to light with photographic lucidity. Another significant paradox, whose juxtaposition is effectively captured by the image of a photograph, is that of power and helplessness. In "The Ottawa Valley," Munro's narrator, while positing the self – conscious elements of her fiction, reiterates her artistic manifesto by declaring "I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same" (*SIBMTY* 246). The photograph, in capturing a cessation of the normal time sequence, embodies the dialectic of absolute control and vulnerability as well as the overtly familiar and the inordinately grotesque, the repressive but disciplined past and the permissive yet strangely chaotic present, overpowering beauty and repulsiveness, vigorous motion and alarming stillness. These paradoxes, however, reflect Munro's acute consciousness of the transience of human life;

even the act of writing, stimulated partly by doubt, appears as revealing and mysterious, a certain selection and distancing. Her superlative process of paring down yields abundantly more than it eliminates. She avers, "With me it [writing] has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this. You're not really, because the writing itself does not last much longer than you do" (Struthers, "The Real Material" 243).

Literary art is necessarily an interpretation of life. However, literature, being complex by nature, presents the complicated and conflicting nature of reality, all the while providing and positing different perspectives from which it can be recognised, analysed and understood. The literary text, by meditating on memory, articulates a deep connection between the individual and his community. Memory, usually deemed to be elaborative and transformatory, is that subjective, perception – altering lens through which an individual attempts to understand, interpret and revivify the past and, consequently, fathom the present. To Munro's fragmented perception of life and art, an awareness of the transience of life earnestly provokes the need to look backward in order to understand its significance. As fragmentation essentially includes the possibility of wholeness, Munro deals with the dynamic praxis of memory which she understands as the mnemonic presence of the past in the present. Preferring the dynamics of the remembered past to the reported present, Munro superbly explores and fictionalizes the tenuous fissure between the past and the present that constitutes the very soul of memory with a commendable Proustian delicacy and prowess. Her stories beautifully enact the switchbacks, eddies, shifts and unexpected resonances that unlock the past and the glazed – over worlds of memory, which cause meaningful sequences of events in the re – ordered life of an individual to fall in together, or apart. In Munro's able hands, memory, in itself a metonymy of the past, converts static fact and entity into fluid, and unsurpassable, fiction. The urge to tell one's story is inordinately strong in Munro as she recognises and

celebrates the ordinary man's extraordinary subterranean depths. Miriam Marty Clark holds the same view:

Marking at every turn the tangled connection between past and present, she [Munro] plots the bitterness and satisfaction of family love, the inscrutability of private lives, and the stubborn calculus of social relations not only in fictional towns like Jubilee and Hanratty and later in Toronto and Vancouver, but in affluent suburbs and middleclass marriages too. (49)

Within the paradigm of her fictional universe, Munro's interrogation of memory in search of a connection to the past reveals the said past to be a rather subjective, evanescent category of experience with an equally transient interpretation of reality which relies on individual consciousness for its significance. However, it is the multiple perceptions and ultimate unknowability of this individual consciousness which brings the reality of this past into question as well. It is not the past that is preserved but the 'essence of time' i.e. the unique and individual impression and perception of reality which is reified into the human consciousness and informs one's sense of identity in the form of a narrative. Memory, informed and substantiated by perception longing for authenticity in the reality, conceives experience as crucial to the mechanism of memory. This experience, perceived by Munro to be substantiated in intense yet disconnected moments, is fleeting and mystifying; any given pattern of significance in human action is illusory in all probability and temporary at best. The mediation of memory is necessitated in, yet complicates to some extent, the inherent incongruence between human experience itself and the narrative that tries to capture and render it faithfully.

In her earlier fiction, beginning with the *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), Munro relentlessly and vociferously explores the complex workings of memory and posits radical perspectives on the past. In *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), different forms of memory, both individual and collective, are connected to artistic creativity; the instinctive appeal of the mechanisms of memory

supersedes the inconsistencies of the same. The re – elucidation of events of the past and their consequent verbalizing, notwithstanding the complexities of language, reveals essential human experiences. In *Lives*, the narrator – characters, by reflecting on the past and on the accounts provided by others, gradually come to terms with the subjectivity of the past and the incorrigible unreliability of memory. Its episodic structure incorporates autobiographical materials which are conscientiously organised to reveal selective workings of memory. Further, in these interlinked short story collections, specifically *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*(1978), each self-contained story, being a remarkable image in itself, is directly linked to the larger continuum by the main character; this subtle imagistic effect resembles the mechanisms of memory. In *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), Munro has subtly embedded stories into the narrative, which faithfully imitate the workings of memory. Not only do these embedded stories augment meaningful human experiences, they focus on Munro's narratives as significant literary texts instead of just glimpses of reality. Munro claims that it is through storytelling that one remembers the past and looks for significance in memories. These stories explore the possibilities and implications of recollecting of individual, collective and historical memory in the context of a troubled relationship between a mother and her daughter. It is in the trenchant ability of memories that recollected stories resemble recollected experience in terms of the intensity of memories of both. Such recollections, which are at the heart of *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) fortuitously combine these remembered events with the tools of literary analyses to search for meaning and significance in past experiences. Even in contemporary stories comprising *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), the cognitive operations of memory and the writings of a precocious artistic imagination are linked in the re – construction of both the author's self and her lineage.

Munro can claim to share her literary opinion with some of the most canonical litterateurs such as Marcel Proust and Jorge Luis Borges in

discovering in memory a distinct connecting point between the intricacies of one's private lives and the wider realms of human experiences. However, literature may also be deemed to be the site of the re – construction and rejuvenation of individual and collective memories; by rescuing and re – invigorating meaningful memories through a narrative model, literature reconciles the past and the present. The memories associated with Wingham and Wawanash County are spacialised as these places are an integral part of both Munro's and her protagonists' lineage. However, this lineage may serve as a significant aid as well as an unnecessary encumbrance in the process of contextualisation of individual experience. The resurrection of memory due to the re – visiting of these abandoned geographies may aid in recovering and re – establishing the hidden memories which are better put to rest. Munro's Freudian unconsciousness of memories is laid to rest as a partial return of the context invokes the narrator's, and Munro's, memories. This may also establish the fact that memories are of a highly selective nature; the narrative rendering of memories are potentially more indicative and revelatory of the rememberer's present, his or her consciousness, desire and denial, than about the actual past events. Munro reminisces about the "comparative anarchy, the threatened melodrama" ("The Peace of Utrecht," *DHS* 204) and reiterates through her narrator – character: ". . . people ask me what it is like to be back in Jubilee. But I don't know, I'm still waiting for something to tell me, to make me understand that I am back" ("The Peace of Utrecht," *DHS* 196). This brings forth another issue of memory – that of the complex interplay between a biological phenomenon (the eliding of certain memories by Munro due to the natural progression of time and age) and her unconscious desire to forget some memories and to seek consolation in that blessed forgetfulness. The narrator – character Helen gradually becomes aware of the gaping chasm between her past and present self, which is further excoriated by the all too familiar sights of Jubilee and encounter with former acquaintances. In fact, Robert Thacker contends: "Munro confronted memories that, as she worked on the stories that became *Something I've Been*

*Meaning to Tell You*], led her to question her very practice as an artist during the years since she left in 1951[. . .] Munro had come home and found it much the same and yet different, its facts laying about, teasing her mind, urgent" (Thacker 262).

Munro's fictional explorations of the past often involve multiple reconstructions of a single story, which results in alternate endings. In "The Ottawa Valley," often described as a veritable jumble of memories, the recollections of Aunt Dodie and the narrator's mother regarding the story of the disappointment in love of the former has conflicting endings. In this instance, Aunt Dodie remembers laughing herself into raptures after she had been jilted immediately prior to her nuptials, whereas the narrator's mother recollects Aunt Dodie crying incessantly and inconsolably even after a lapse of about two years after the traumatic event had occurred. The palpable tension in Munro's fiction is between the desire to explore the past and the impossibility of conciliating different versions of it. Likewise, "The Ottawa Valley" has three endings re-fashioned by the narrator. This manner of re-finishing stories duly illustrate Munro's preoccupation with the issues of memory and her belief that one constantly rewrites and revises the story of his or her life at different instances, times and from different perceptions and perspectives. The endings of these stories call in to question their whole manner of telling. Del's intricate settings and plots are indebted to Munro's memories and reconstructions of her own past, as she recollects: "Over all our expectations and homecomings, and the world at large, she [the narrator's mother] exerted this mysterious, appalling authority, and nothing could be done about it, not yet" ("Princess Ida," LGW 78).

Robert Thacker believes that in "The Peace of Utrecht," "Munro constructs a duplicitous world where everyday actuality is overlaid by memory and fictitious stories about the past, when at every turn the sisters confront their doubled selves as adults and as the adolescents they were ten years earlier" (239). The seemingly innocuous act of re-visiting and reviving memories implies a remarkable degree of alteration of the events Helen (the narrator of the story) and her sister Maddy shared and an

inadvertent exacerbation of their separation. The crucial difference between the fictive façade constructed in the past to mask past shameful behaviour and the fictional distortions of the past to provide self- consolation are explored in this story. The expression 'each of us keeping it [the past] jealously to herself' ("The Peace of Utrecht," DHS 190) reveals the existence of two unshared and radically different past of Maddy and the narrator, Helen. Even though personal reconstructions of the past may differ, the stories that resurrect the past are potentially consolatory. However, when the recollections of the past, particularly the intimate recollections of the maternal figure, are endowed with profound emotional import and urgency, memory or familiar objects fail to provide solace and consolation. Maddy is unable to exorcise the guilty past as effortlessly as Helen seems to do; even the casual reader is bound to feel empathy for Maddy when she vents, "Why can't I?" ("The Peace of Utrecht," DHS 210). Even Helen is not comforted upon being presented with the clothes belonging to their deceased mother. This establishes the uncontrollable and obsessive grip memory has on one's psyche. The sisters gradually come to terms with the illusion that anything can be preserved in an undiminished and unaltered form; Helen realizes that her story, like her memories can be revised endlessly. To them, and to Munro, the memory of the maternal figure will always remain fleeting and contingent, just beyond their reach. For Munro, memory is always preserved in funny anecdotes. Helen realizes that both she and Maddy have carefully preserved different versions of their childhood in "anecdote, as in a kind of mental cellophane," which might as well be mistaken by a friend as "good memories" ("The Peace of Utrecht," DHS 193). Fred Powell is fed stories by both Helen and Maddy. However, these stories and anecdotes are not intended to revive the past, but to make the deep kind of remembering bearable by focusing on amusing recollections through which the sisters are able to avoid the reality behind their estrangement, and consequently, each other.

Even art, like memory, cannot recapture the past as it exactly was. The act of writing i.e. the workings of the creative process that illuminates yet



deludes one and all can be used strategically to deal with the onslaughts of the past. However, it does not liberate the writer from the metaphorical burden of the past; the past always looms large. Munro avers:

Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories—and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories. We can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative. And underneath all these edited, inspired, self-serving or entertaining stories there is, we suppose, some big bulging awful mysterious entity called ‘the truth’, our fictional stories are supposed to be poking at and grabbing pieces of. [...] One of the ways we do this, I think, is by trying to look at what memory does (different tricks at different stages of our lives) and at the way people’s different memories deal with the same (shared) experience. The more disconcerting the differences are, the more the writer in me feels an odd exhilaration. (Slopen, “PW interviews Alice Munro” 77)

Both Munro and her narrator – characters (usually women who are found to be remarkably perceptive and fortuitous survivors as well) often problematize the mode of narration with the sudden revelations of memory, abundant use of flashbacks and proliferation of temporal perspectives. Munro employs single-use juxtapositional structures and linguistic incongruities with élan which further establishes her dual vision of reality, at once ordinary and extraordinary. With Munro, there is always a huge amount between the lines. The variously inflected retellings make one wonder at Munro’s brilliant use of tense to represent and record the subtle shifts in perspective that the passage of time and the reconstruction of memory causes.

Self knowledge being the aim of most of Munro’s narrator – characters, she envisions memories as being the most important source and repository of self – knowledge and self –awareness, possibly of a necessarily fictional truth. In “The Peace of Utrecht,” Helen cannot help but remember that: “The picture of her face which I carried in my

mind seemed too terrible, unreal. Similarly, the complex strain of living with her, the feelings of hysteria which Maddy and I once dissipated in a great deal of brutal laughter, now began to seem partly imaginary; I felt the beginnings of a secret guilty estrangement” (DHS 201). However, as the intense, latent guilt of these unconsciously suppressed memories surface, it makes Munro question the capacity and legitimacy of her own writing. She informs Struthers: “In ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ I’m looking at all this material, I’m looking at real lives, and then I not only have to look at the inadequacy of the way I represent them but my right to represent them at all. And I think any writer who deals with personal material comes up against this. (Struthers, “The Real Material” 28). For Munro, issues of self judgement and self reflexivity permeate all levels of the revival of memories and reconstructions of the past. In “The peace of Utrecht,” the narrator Helen might just be speaking for Munro as well: “Now I listen to them [the people of Jubilee] speak of her [their mother], so gently and ceremoniously, and I realize that she became one of the town’s possessions and oddities, its brief legends” (194), who remorsefully concludes that “we should have let the town have her; it would have treated her better” (195).

Even though contemporary approaches to memory posit that significant memories do not have any validity prior to the process of remembering and narrating the past but are constituted by the active creation of self-narrations, the subtle relation of fiction and autobiography involve the dynamics of memory, issues of mimesis and the ontology of the self. The concurrence of an imperfect and arbitrary language and the dynamics of memory establish that any honest writing of the self is always a creative act. For Munro, these personal stories, drawing on the remembered and, partly, constructed material which are further selected, re – combined and re – vivified, disclose an emotional reality which finds consonance in her own experience. Which makes Munro exult: “I made the glorious leap from being a victim of my own ineptness and self-conscious miseries to being a godlike arranger of patterns and destinies, even if they were all in my head; I have never leapt back”

(Ross 34). Instead, she has soared upwards and onwards to achieve an artistic virtuosity which will remain unparalleled.

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