

REINVENTING LIVES INTO STORIES
HISTORICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ALICE
MUNRO'S *THE VIEW FROM CASTLE ROCK*

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY—or “self life writing,” as the Greek words denote—appeared in the 18th century, in the age of the Enlightenment, but has been mostly challenged by post-modern and postcolonial theorists. Nowadays, the term autobiography is used for life writing or life narrative, and it describes “writing being produced at a particular historical juncture, the early modern period in the West with its concept of the self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement” (Smith & Watson 2001: 2). In the act of writing autobiography, the writer becomes both the subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation. The writer presents events and facts from his/her personal point of view; and, as such, this kind of writing may not be meaningful to an “objective ‘history of the times,’” but it becomes “a history of self-observation, not a history observed by others” (Smith & Watson 2001: 5). While autobiographical narratives may contain facts, they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event. They offer subjective truth rather than fact. Thus, today a growing number of postmodern and postcolonial theorists claim that autobiography is “inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life narratives and life

narrators in the West and elsewhere around the globe” (Smith & Watson 2001: 3-4).

Alice Munro’s short-story cycle *The View from Castle Rock* is based on the authoress’ search for family history in the Scottish area of the Ettrick Valley, as well as the events of her personal life, which are the subject of her concern in the second part of the book. By reading accounts of her ancestors’ lives in the Scottish Borders in the 19th century—which she renders in the first part of the book, “No Advantages”—Alice Munro leaves her readers puzzled to determine on their own the truth of the events in the past. The distinction between fact and fiction becomes blurred; and, after closing the last page of the book, readers remain pondering the ways fact is turned into fiction. No doubt, the stories in *The View from Castle Rock* have an autobiographical dimension, like many of her other stories—for example, “Friend of My Youth,” “Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass,” and “Wilderness Station,” stories which also deal with family history and are based on Scottish-Canadian material. Moreover, these stories belong to the area of historical autobiography.

Coral Ann Howells notices that, in these stories, there is a “playful mixture of fact and fiction, an imaginative re-visioning of history” (Howells 1998: 107). The stories are characterized by the transformation of facts into subjective responses to historical events. By tracing down her family history, Munro also writes about a certain part of Scotland, a certain period in Scottish history, and a certain class of people. It is about southern Scotland and about the religious revival of the early 1800s which gave rise to a period of history that Munro calls the Age of Reason in the book, or the Scottish Enlightenment. It is about a lower class of people—an educated peasantry, as Munro says in an interview (Awano 2006: 4)—who started reading the Bible and preaching John Knox’s Calvinist ideas. In other words, it is about Protestant faith taking hold in Presbyterian Scotland. One of the witnesses of “the transformation of many souls” (Munro 2006: 15) whom Munro mentions in “No Advantages” is Thomas Boston, who is remembered as

the author of the book called *Human Nature in its Four-fold State*, which was said to stand next to the Bible on the shelf of every pious home in Scotland. And every Presbyterian home in Scotland was meant to be a pious home. Constant investigation of private life and tortured reshaping of the faith went on to take care of that. There was no balm of ritual, no elegance of ceremony. Prayer was not only formal but personal, agonized. The readiness of the soul for eternal life was always in doubt and danger. (Munro 2006: 14)

Munro's ancestors also read a lot, and left behind a lot of writing, in various forms: books and treatises, journals, and letters about their personal experiences and the social changes of the time. That was the time when Sir Walter Scott went round the country, collected old songs and ballads, and published them in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*; when the ideas of Voltaire and Locke and David Hume were preached; when the economist Adam Smith lived—and all these influential figures came from the same lower-class background. The stories are also about the age of emigration around the time of Waterloo, when, after the depression following the Napoleonic Wars, many people, like Munro's ancestors, decided to set out for the New World.

In *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives: A Biography*, published in 2005 (a year before the appearance of the short-story cycle *The View From Castle Rock*), Robert Thacker stresses that “autobiography is imbedded in Alice Munro's work, autobiography always resonant with fictional imaginings (‘grafted on from some other reality’), and she can be seen always ‘writing her lives’; the lives she has both lived and imagined” (Thacker 2005: 18-19). Similarly, in an interview with Lisa Dickler Awano, Munro herself confirms Thacker's idea when she says:

Yes, part of the new book is about my family from material that I have gleaned from research, and part of it is from my own life and my own experience, but not always completely autobiographical, completely based on

fact. However, these stories are more nearly autobiographical stories than those I have published elsewhere.

(Awano 2006: 5)

By starting from Munro's statement that "there is always a starting point in reality," Thacker concludes, in his biography on Munro, that there are some passages in the stories which are "poised on the dotted line between imaginative fiction and what Munro called 'true incident'" (Thacker 2005: 266).

In her "Forward" to the book, Munro points to the fictional element which is necessary when re-creating the past:

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, others rose out of their situations. Their words and my words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be. (Munro 2006)

Later in the text, Munro comments on her ancestors' voyage, the story of which, apart from the journal and letters, "is full of my invention" (Munro 2006: 84).

Anyway, the stories leave an open issue for her readers, as to whether they should be read as "fact" or "fiction." By commenting on the second set of stories in the book, stories which were written during the years when she was researching her family history, Munro said that they were given as a separate set of stories because she felt they did not belong among the fictional work published in the book:

They were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than the other stories I had written, even in the first person. In other first-person stories I had drawn on personal material, but then I did anything I wanted to 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 center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took on their own life and color and did things they had not done in reality. They joined the Salvation Army, they revealed that they had once lived in Chicago. One of them got himself electrocuted and another fired off a gun in a barn full of horses. In fact, some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with. (Munro 2006)

If she has written about herself “as searchingly as she could,” then it is obvious that the stories are autobiographical and that they are based on fact. However, her explanation continues:

You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on. And the part of this book that might be called family history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outline 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)

Regarding this issue, Martin Löschnigg draws the conclusion that “one might speak of some of the stories as fictional approaches to the autobiographical” (2009: 225). Since there is an “autobiographical pact” in the stories—by means of which the author identifies the category of narrator, author and protagonist in the text, making thus “an autobiography retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune 2006: 4)—we could talk about an “autobiographical” element of the stories. Thus, Martin Löschnigg refers to “the first person narrator cautiously as the ‘narrator-protagonist’ or Munro’s fictional alter ego, but not as ‘Alice Munro’” (2009: 223).

Apart from presenting the historical setting in the first part of the book, Munro also introduces her ancestors there. One of her relatives was a Scottish novelist, James Hogg, a friend of the writer Sir Walter Scott. Since the Ettrick Valley area was barren and poor, Munro's ancestors decided to leave for the New World. From Walter Laidlaw's journal, we gather that the Laidlaws came on board on the 4th of June, and later we find that on the 15th night "in the year 1818 [they] lost sight of Scotland" (Munro 2006: 45). Another of Munro's relatives, James Laidlaw and his family, set out for Canada, while the others, Andrew Laidlaw and his pregnant wife Agnes, who gave birth to a son during the passage, followed them. Another of the Laidlaw brothers, William Laidlaw, settled with his family in Illinois; but, when he died of cholera, his family moved to Canada, led by Andrew Laidlaw. Most of the stories in the first part are about the passage across the Atlantic.

The key episode in the first part of the book takes place in the story "The View From Castle Rock," when James Laidlaw takes his ten-year-old son Andrew to the top of the rock of Edinburgh Castle to show him the shore of America "where every man is sitting in the midst of his own properties, and even the beggars is riding around in carriages" (Munro 2006: 30) and "where all the blessings of modern invention were put to eager use and the people could never stop improving the world around them" (62). Though it is intended as a joke, and the place young Andrew sees is Fife, across the Firth of Forth, Andrew's father explains that they were fortunate to see at least the outlines of something, since many people see nothing but fog. The episode is very important because it reveals the clash between the dream of the New World and a better life and the disillusionment of the harsh reality that the Scots are confronted with. The episode also reveals the discrepancy between fact and fiction because, while still in Scotland, the Laidlaws could have only a foggy idea about the land across the ocean, because, for Munro, "places are apt to [disappoint you] when you've set them up in your imagination" (Munro 2006: 5).

The interweaving of fact and fiction goes on throughout the narrative. The stories in the second part of the book, “Working for a Living” and “Fathers,” are about Munro’s father. As an adult, her father raised animals, especially silver foxes and mink (Munro 1994: 1, 15). In the two narratives, the stories of the protagonist’s father and Munro’s father coincide. In “Working for a Living,” during the war the business of the protagonist’s father fails, the way Munro’s father’s did, but is saved by the mother who manages to sell their furs to American tourists. In the end, they give up the whole enterprise, and the father finds a job in a foundry. In “Fathers,” the author compares her schoolmates’ fathers—Dahlia Newcombe’s and Frances Wainwright’s fathers—to her own. Dahlia’s father is a violent man who regularly beats his children and wife. Munro’s father is said to have been very severe, using corporal punishment sometimes but never without a reason. The next story, “Lying under the Apple Tree,” combines the themes of initiation into social realities and initiation into sexuality (Löschnigg 2009: 219), as the young girl falls in love with a stable-boy, Russell Craik.

The stories “The Ticket” and “Home” present a succession of life stages for the protagonist, with many correspondences to Munro’s life. In “The Ticket,” just before her first wedding Munro ponders the marriages of other women in her family and concludes that only aunt Charlie married for love. The same aunt gives Alice a significant amount of money, in case she decides to get out of her marriage. Since marriage at the age of twenty takes the protagonist away to the West Coast, in “Home” she returns to Western Ontario, after ending her first marriage (like Munro in real life), and finds herself unable to relate to the place, since it has changed.

In “What Do You Want to Know For?” the author, or the protagonist, after being married for the second time, tries to solve, with her husband, the mystery of the crypt in the nearby churchyard. At the same time, she has been diagnosed with breast cancer, which turns out to be a faulty diagnosis, an episode similar to one in Munro’s life. In the

story, the author ponders the correspondences or identifications between fact and fiction, and concludes:

And there is always more than just the keen pleasure of identification. There's the fact of these separate domains, each with its own history and reason, its favorite crops and trees and weeds—oaks and pines, for instance, growing on sand, and cedars and strayed lilacs on limestone—each with its special expression, its pull on the imagination. 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 drab agricultural counterpane. It's the fact you cherish.
(Munro 2006: 322)

In the last story, “Messenger,” the author returns to Illinois, where her ancestor William Laidlaw died. She goes to an *Unknown Cemetery* but finds no trace of him there. The book closes with the oldest memories of Munro's living ancestors, and then comes full circle by returning to Munro's early European immigrants. The historical fact is turned into a story enriched with imagination—thus, it becomes everlasting.

By inserting autobiographical elements into her stories and by giving a subjective response to events in her life and to a broader range of cultural and historical events, Munro reinvents people's lives and events into stories. In an interview, she explains her technique of reinvention in the following way: “It's an exercise in ... I would call it discovery, but I suppose everything you write is reinvention, because it's got to pass through you, it's what you can see” (Awano 2006:23). Stories themselves become the perpetuation of “truth” as seen through the authoress' eyes and, as such, evidence for the future. For, after all, “the fiction makes us real” (Kroetsch 1970: 63).

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Abstract

This article focuses on Alice Munro's short-story cycle *The View from Castle Rock* and the way the authoress permeates her fiction with historical events and people. The stories revolve around

Munro's Scottish family history, taking us back to the 18th century, and are based on journals, letters and research Munro did while visiting the Ettrick Valley where her forebears lived. By exploiting the gap between Scottish cultural markers and their referents in the New World (the United States and Canada), Munro shows that her characters have to reinvent both their selves and the world around them. Munro's statement that she has written about "her self as searchingly as [she] could" points to the autobiographical dimension of her stories. One of the concerns of the present author is to single out the autobiographical elements from Munro's life in the stories, drawing on Munro's idea about her fiction that "there is always a starting point in reality." The present author also wants to accentuate that the past needs (re)interpreting when it is documented, and that the fictional element is inherent in any attempt at re-creating the past.

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