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Éva Zsizsmann

## Escaping Flimsy Formal Cages: Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness* as Fictionalised Biography

### Abstract

This paper travels along the border of different value systems, reading the title story of Munro's latest short story collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009) as a text about travelling and trading knowledge in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. It aims to examine the discourse of displacement, the clash of different value systems and the way in which travel implies both gains and losses.

The narrator of *Too Much Happiness*, Sophia Kovalevsky, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian mathematician, goes to Sweden, at that time the only country willing to hire a female professor for their new university. The text is an elliptical historical fiction and a spiritual travelogue. My paper discusses the ways in which Munro's text relates to tropes of home and mobility and deals with the role of silence and gaps, the discourse of absence. It also focuses on a characteristic feature of Munro's storytelling: crossing the borders between history, personal memoir and fiction.

### Key words

*Alice Munro; travel; displacement; fictionalised biography; 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe; place and memory*

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Munro has often set her stories in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drawing on family documents to provide fully sourced and yet elliptical historical fiction. However, the Continental setting and the portrait of a woman intellectual are unmatched in her work. As Michael Gorra points out, "Munro's prose in this story is clipped and darting and dispassionate. She dramatizes Sophia's consciousness, but she also employs an objectifying lens, a language that stands as telescope and microscope both" (2009: 4).

*Too Much Happiness*, loosely based on the life of the Russian mathematician Sofia Vasilyevna Kovalevskaya (1850–1891), is an ambitiously imagined, intricately structured novella-length work, a tale of ambition and isolation, a narra-

tive of displacement. Sophia, the mathematician/novelist narrator longs to prove herself in both science and love, but is often thwarted by gender and the prevailing order. Her life narrative hovers between a narrative of a successful scientific career and one in which science is not just unappreciated, but bent by loneliness and longing.

In her native Russia, unmarried women were not allowed to travel outside the country without permission from their families. Sophia marries a young radical-minded man without loving him, in order to leave the country to study abroad. After Vladimir's death by suicide, she is left with her child and the challenge of establishing a career. She wins first prize at an international mathematics competition; but, for a long time she cannot live by her knowledge. The great love of her life, Maxsim, a professor of law and a liberal forbidden to hold an academic position in Russia, does not offer her protection.

In her acknowledgement, Munro notes that she discovered Sophia Kovalevsky in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and that she used Russian texts in translation, excerpts from Sophia's diaries, letters and other writings. Time markers and references to historical events such as the Commune of Paris (1871) and the assassination of the Russian Czar (1881) establish a semblance of historical fiction. On the other hand, Munro's ambition is "to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind," in the manner of Virginia Woolf: she registers the movements of a single consciousness. *Too Much Happiness* figures, therefore, as a blend, an interplay between history and personal history.

The text features a disordered chronology: the reader comes across epistemological gaps, discrepancies and silences. It is quite a challenging task to reconstruct the order of events and follow Sophia from place to place: Palibino, the family estate near St. Petersburg, where she grows up; then Heidelberg and Berlin, where she studies; Paris, where she wins the Bordin Prize; St. Petersburg, where she enjoys a life of important amusements, such as going to balls, dinners, picnics and the opera; and finally Stockholm, where she gets a job at the University. The necessary data for closure are purposely withheld and order is constructed through the manipulation of memory, experience and perception. In a review, Nina Caplan refers to discrepancy as an essential feature of Munro's writing: "She may play chronology like a cello, bowing back and forth across the strings of a life according to her story's demands, but her characters live so convincingly precisely because her control, while tight, is never absolute: Munro never flattens out contradictions" (Caplan 2009).

In his article on Munro's short stories and the culture of loss, Andrew Hiscock mentions the crisis of interpretation. He claims that "The dominant rhythms of her narratives are articulated in terms of hermeneutic crises: how to tease meaning from the cultural and textual unsaid?" (Hiscock 1997: 18). Indeed, silence and textual aporia generate tension in the novella, which renders the interpretive process dynamic. As Hiscock concludes:

Alice Munro creates complex fictional worlds in which reader, character and narrator are all engaged in the fraught business of interpreting versions of loss. [...] The proliferation of textual and cultural lacunae in her work not only excites the minds of all parties concerned, but also enables Munro to focus on the fragile nature of human interpretation itself. (17)

In her review of *Too Much Happiness*, Joyce Carol Oates claims that “Munro’s voice can seem deceptively direct, even unadorned, but it expresses an elliptical and poetic sort of vernacular realism in which the ceaselessly ruminative, analytic and assessing voice appears to be utterly natural, as if it would be the reader’s own voice” (2009: 42). Munro’s writing has the twofold nature of being simple, direct, but ingeniously constructed in its deeper layers. This is echoed by Sophia pondering the nature of her future novel: “There was a movement back and forth, she said, there was a pulse in life. Her hope was that in this piece of writing she would discover what went on. Something underlying. Invented, but not” (Munro 2009: 301, my emphasis). Writing appears for her as a moment of discovery, an exercise in interpretation, a hermeneutic act.

The narrator in *Too Much Happiness* features different voices. Strictly speaking, it is a third-person singular narrative; however, we may read it as Sophia’s narrative, her thoughts and voice being rendered by free indirect discourse. The narrative opens up to other voices as well, and the contamination of discourses, dialogicity in the Bakhtinian sense, is a recurrent feature of the text.

### **The Discourse of Displacement**

The discourse of displacement is defined by the concept of home and another place, or other places. Home and the other place are spatial terms, but also go beyond it. Home, in the strictest sense, is Palibino, Russia; however, the whole country of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia functions as the homespace for Sophia. Home means both a sense of belonging and the inconvenient, sometimes even painful coexistence of different people. It is also a metonymy for a set of rules and conventions, a certain way of life. For Sophia, home also means the Russian language, her mother tongue, as well as sets of behaviour, habits and ways, and, most interestingly, her friendship with Weierstrass, the German professor who teaches and supports her. Home is also linked to Sophia’s mindset, her intuitive thinking.

Nostalgia for Russia is a recurrent motive of the text. When Sophia undertakes a train journey from Paris to Stockholm alone, sick, in wintertime, she longs for the safety of home, the protection of her mother tongue, climate and food:

Sophia was half an hour early for her train. She wanted some tea, and lozenges for her throat, but she could not face the waiting in line or the speaking French. No matter how well you can manage when you are in good health,

it does not take much of a droop of spirits or a premonition of sickness to send you back to the shelter of your nursery language. (Munro 2009: 265)

Munro uses free indirect discourse to render her protagonist's thoughts:

The tea wagon has come. That will help her throat, though she wishes it was Russian tea. Rain started soon after they left Paris, and now that rain has turned to snow. She prefers snow to rain, white fields to land dark and sodden, as every Russian does. And where there is snow people recognize the fact of winter and take more than half-hearted measures to keep their houses warm. (2009: 267)

The house is a central figure in Munro's fiction. As Robert McGill points out, the house for Munro most often means incarceration and surveillance, rather than safe dwelling and solitude (2002: 106). The two dominant images of houses in *Too Much Happiness* are strongly connected to the narrator's attitude to their inhabitants. The Weierstrass house is a welcoming home, a stimulating place dedicated to the study of mathematics: "Their house is always comfortable, with its dark rugs and heavy fringed curtains and deep armchairs. Life there follows a ritual – it is dedicated to study, particularly the study of mathematics" (Munro 2009: 267).

On the other hand, there is the house where Sophia's nephew Urey and his father Jaclard live, a place embodying the aesthetics of the ugly and repellent. This is an uninviting, un-homely space, the negative world of the *unheimlich*:

Jaclard did not stand up to greet her, and when she started to remove her cloak he said, "Better not. The stove isn't lit till evening." He motioned her to the only armchair, which was tattered and greasy. This was worse than she expected. Urey was not here, had not waited to see her. (Munro 2009: 259)

Urey rejects her aunt Sophia, denouncing her profession, mother tongue and womanhood. He employs hate-speech when talking about these three constitutive aspects of her identity: "Being a mathematician isn't necessary, as I see it. [...] I could not respect myself ... being a professor of mathematics." He calls Russian a barbaric language: "Why can't you speak better French? [...] Russians are barbaric." He calls the woman living with her father "a sewer rat." When Sophia protests – "You shouldn't talk that way about women" – he replies: "Why not, if they want to be equal?" (263–64) Despite his provocative manner, Sophia answers him patiently, with the sad wisdom of those who have long lost touch with their family and yearn for the sense of belonging: "Urey might change his course; there was no telling. She might even come to have some fondness for his aunt Sophia, though probably not till he was as old as she was now, and she long dead" (265).

The novella features different models of female behaviour contemplated by Sophia. There is the woman on the train with her children, the embodiment of an

archaic social order in which the woman's role is to rear children and provide for them:

How terrible it is, Sophia thinks. How terrible is the lot of women. And what might this woman say if Sophia told her about the new struggles, women's battle for votes and places at the universities? She might say, But that is not as God wills. And if Sophia urged her to get rid of this God and sharpen her mind, would she not look at her – Sophia – with a sudden stubborn pity, and exhaustion, and say, How then, without God, are we to get through this life? (Munro 2009: 294)

Professor Weierstrass' two unmarried sisters who dedicate themselves to provide for their brother embody a similar God-fearing attitude:

Sophia climbed the stairs thinking not of the professor but of these two women who had made him the centre of their lives. Knitting mufflers, mending the linen, making the puddings and preserves that could never be trusted to a servant. Honouring the Roman Catholic Church as their brother did – a cold undiverting religion in Sophia's opinion – and all without a moment of mutiny as far as you could see, or any flicker of dissatisfaction. [...] I would go mad she thought. (278)

Even though she might be considered the prototype or predecessor of the modern independent woman, providing for herself and trying to live out of her knowledge, Sophia does not adopt a harsh feminist discourse. She rather views male-female relationships as a matrix, an old paradigm that dies hard. The rhetoric of the text emphasizes the bondage between men and women becoming husbands and wives:

Wives were the watchers on the barricade, the invisible implacable army. Husbands shrugged sadly at their prohibitions but gave them their due. Men whose brains were blowing old notions apart were still in thrall to women whose heads were full of nothing but the necessity of tight corsets, calling cards, and conversations that filled your throat with a kind of perfumed fog. (267)

Sophia feels at home and most relieved when her female identity does not come to the fore, in her friendship with Professor Weierstrass especially: "Truly I sometimes forget that you are a woman. I think of you as – as a – as a what? As a gift to me and to me alone" (280).

Sophia's mindset, her intuition, is a basic feature of her identity. She does not want to be a professor dealing with students: "Students have mediocre minds, generally speaking. Only the most obvious, regular patterns can be impressed on them" (Munro 2009: 278). In a passage disclosing the professor's mind by free

indirect discourse, the genuine mathematician is compared to a poet, the romantic notion of the artist:

All his life – he had difficulty in saying this, as he admitted, being always wary of too much enthusiasm – all his life he had been waiting for such a student to come into his room. A student who would challenge him completely, who was not only capable of following the strivings of his own mind but perhaps of flying beyond them. He had to be careful about saying what he really believed – that there must be something like intuition in a first rate mathematician’s mind, some lightning flare to uncover what has been there all along. Rigorous, meticulous, one must be, but so must be the great poet. (270)

The professor’s words reveal the close relationship between master and student: “She was a shock to him in many ways. She was so slight and young and excited. He felt that he must soothe her, hold her carefully, letting her learn how to manage the fireworks in her own brain” (270).

Sweden is “the other place” in the discourse of displacement. The Swedish mindset and way of life is completely different from the morals and manners experienced by Sophia in her home country: “The Swedes might not smile at you but the information they gave out would be correct” (Munro 2009: 296). “Swedes were very frank, as well as being reserved and punctual” (297). She finds it difficult to conform to the proprieties in Stockholm:

And she was guiltily bored with the reasonable Swedes who had been the only people in Europe willing to hire a female mathematician for their new university. Their city was too clean and tidy, their habits too regular, their parties too polite. Once they decided that some course was correct they just went ahead and followed it, with none of those exhilarating and probably dangerous nights of argument that would go on forever in Petersburg or Paris. (253)

We see Sophia torn between opposite drives: the urge for independence and the wish for enveloping warmth and safety offered by husbands. She knows that the assurance, the commanding behaviour, the manly certainties possessed by her father, her lover, Maxsim, and men generally, rule out equality between the genders. She sees marriage and the construction of society as governed by a pact, an agreement between men and women:

That marvellous assurance, he has, that her father had, you can feel it when you are a little girl snuggled up in their arms and you want it all your life. More delightful of course if they love you, but comforting even if it is only a kind of ancient noble pact that they have made, a bond that has been signed, necessarily even if not enthusiastically, for your protection. (294)

Protection inevitably means control. Sophia lives with the awareness that the rules of manly behaviour are only partly beneficial for women. She ponders her relationship with her husband Vladimir, who could grant her some equality but could never offer her safety and comfort: "Whether he worshipped or insulted her it was impossible for her to love him" (295). Despite their common interests, she could not be happy with Maxsim, the Russian professor of law either, as he was jealous of her talent and felt himself ignored: "[...] she was an utter novelty, a delightful freak, the woman of mathematical gifts and female timidity, quite charming, yet with a mind most unconventionally formed under her curls" (250). The young Danish doctor from the island of Bornholm whom Sophia meets on her long train journey from Germany to Sweden embodies the perfect relationship for Sophia. He speaks her mother tongue, since he studied in Russia, admires the female professor and falls in love with her. In parting, he provides her with a hallucinatory drug to alleviate her pains during the journey. Their brief encounter intimates that he could offer her both love and respect. However, this is "too much happiness," as the title suggests, an evanescent moment, a mere glimpse of paradise.

In her book entitled *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Anne Phillips speaks about the psychological costs of exiting a culture, such as the fear of ostracism by family and friends, the potential loss of identity, the loss of a sense of belonging and the fear of change. She concludes that any decision carries costs with it and sometimes the costs of leaving one's community will be high (Phillips 2007: 139–44). Sophia is driven to work and above all to know, but the price she has to pay for it seems very high: she leaves her home country, family and friends, and utterly misses speaking her mother tongue while living in Sweden. We read about this latter in the passage of her encounter with Maxsim, the Russian liberal unwelcome at home:

They flew at each other as if they had indeed been long-lost relatives. A torrent of jokes and questions followed, an immediate understanding, a rich gabble of Russian, as if the languages of Western Europe had been flimsy formal cages in which they had been too long confined, or paltry substitutes for true human speech. (Munro 2009: 248)

The feeling of confinement and subsequent escape are not reduced to a certain place in the novella: Sophia wants to escape the restrictions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, but then she is happy to escape the strictures and boundaries of the Swedish language and the empty ceremoniousness of French manners in Paris. Her story shows that travelling, changing the existing paradigm by exiting a certain culture, a way of living and thinking inevitably implies both gains and losses.



## The Workings of Memory

Munro's narrators repeatedly turn to the past, revisit their homes and return to places where they used to live. As Michael Gorra remarks, they deal with the forked paths of their pasts and ponder different possibilities; exploring parallel worlds they have an ever-changing understanding of the choices made in the past (2009: 4).

Anne Enright differentiates between a past that is anchored in living memory and a past that floats free of it. She argues that the stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness* are lively and dynamic as they feature the workings of memory which create a fluid identity. History and the past survive only if they are processed and transformed by a living memory:

Munro's work often concerns the past, but something still niggles about her relationship with history. Perhaps the problem lies in the difference between a past that is anchored in living memory and a past that floats free of it. Memory is a great and moral tool for this writer, the way it allows our past to be freshly revealed to us by events in the present. Because of memory, our lives shift and make sense at the same time. This might be a definition of what it is to grow; it may also be why Munro's stories are living things that refuse to be still on the page. (Enright: 2009)

While travelling to Paris to visit her nephew Sophia recalls earlier episodes of her life. In a dream, she remembers her sister Aniuta, still "unmarried, golden haired, beautiful, and bad tempered" (Munro 2009: 255), back at the family estate in Russia, planning to write a novel set in Medieval England. Finally she writes about "a young girl who at her parents' urging and for conventional reasons rejects a young scholar who dies." She secretly submits the story to a magazine edited by Dostoyevsky. When the story is printed, her father is outraged: "Now you sell your stories, how soon before you sell yourself?" (255).

We see here parallel lives, as both Sophia and Aniuta were bright young women with writerly ambitions, eager to escape the restrictive world of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia and live by way of their knowledge. Moreover, the text conjures up a Chinese-box world, as Munro writes about a woman novelist (Sophia), who dreams about another woman (Aniuta), who writes about a young girl.

Memory and imagination go hand in hand, the past is never static but subject to constant reinterpretation. Revisiting the past is a cognitive act also encompassing alteration. Sophia's personal narrative is a method of self-understanding. However, memories are never complete: there are always gaps in the texture, details eluding the searching mind.

Sophia's memory also features conflicting thoughts, revisions of her earlier opinion. Comparing different countries and different attitudes to female professorship she mentions Paris as a place she loved: "In Paris, she had proclaimed, there is no such thing as boredom or snobbishness or deception" (Munro 2009:

266). However, a few moments later she remembers how the French “had closed their doors when it came to giving her a job. They would no more think of that than of employing a learned chimpanzee. The wives of the great scientists preferred not to meet her, or invite her into their homes” (266). The Swedes, on the other hand, accepted her, despite her exoticism: “She might have been an oddity there, but she was an oddity that they approved of. Something like a multilingual parrot or those prodigies who could tell you without hesitation or apparent reflection that a certain date in the fourteenth century fell on a Tuesday” (267).

Memories of the same event differ substantially, from person to person. Munro's narrators live with the awareness of competing narratives: it is not only the individual who remembers and tells his or her story, but there are all the others who know the person in question and this is how different variants survive.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion we can say that Munro displays a consciousness of the fictionality of her work yet gives it a consistency that metafictionalists denied. She plays the game of the realist while using metafictionalist techniques.

The paper has attempted to point out the relationship between home and mobility in Munro's novella, the way home relates to belonging and otherness. It has also dealt with the discourse of displacement, conceiving home as more than a spatial term, as also related to language, behaviour, a certain mindset, a way of life, a sense of self. Finally, it has thrown light on Munro's interest in the workings of memory, contending that her concept of memory encompasses both imagination and self-understanding.

The real person behind Munro's novella, the Russian mathematician Sofia Vasilyevna Kovalevskaya (1850–1891), is known for her important original contributions to analysis, differential equations and mechanics. She was the first major Russian female mathematician and the first woman appointed to a full professorship in Northern Europe. Munro limits her story to the days leading up to Sophia's death, with flashbacks to her earlier life.

Munro's text, a fictionalised biography of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky suggests that travelling, changing the existing paradigm by exiting a certain culture inevitably implies gains and losses. Any decision of escaping “flimsy formal cages” carries costs with it and the costs of leaving one's community may be high.

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