

“A Sort of Refusal”: Alice Munro’s Reluctant Career

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AS WE LOOK BACK TOGETHER in this fortieth anniversary issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* to the journal’s founding year, 1976, that date stands out to scholars of Canadian literary celebrity for a couple of additional reasons. That was the year that Margaret Atwood took the unprecedented step for a Canadian writer of incorporating the business activities of her career as O.W. Toad Limited (an anagram of “Atwood”). The move, probably undertaken for practical and private financial reasons, was little commented upon at the time, but I have argued that it marks a turning point in the history of Canadian writers’ public visibility and professional organization (*Margaret Atwood* 7). Atwood’s early recognition of the extent of her literary success signalled a nascent recognition of literary celebrity as an industry. Although there is plenty of evidence that Canadian writers considered their work as a business before this — one thinks, for example, of the founding of the Canadian Authors Association in 1921 — Atwood’s incorporation renders explicit the collaborative labour that supports literary celebrity. The very fact that Atwood’s move was not widely discussed, or even recognized as a sign of something larger taking shape in Canadian literary circles, sheds light on these intervening forty years and on the way in which the growing industrialization of literary celebrity has come up against the persistent image of the Canadian writer as solely concerned with aesthetics and humble, restricted fields of small-scale production. As Kit Dobson observes, interviews with Canadian writers “rarely engage writers in conversations about what it means for them to create artistic works in a market that is necessarily concerned with its economic bottom line” (Dobson and Kamboureli 4). In so saying, he echoes Robert Lecker’s claim, almost twenty years earlier, that “Critics too often forget that publishing is a business in which selection and dissemination become functions of cost” (116). This clash — between market reality and aesthetics — produces a whole range of

potential compensatory public affects on the part of successful writers, one of which is reluctance. Reluctant literary celebrity, I suggest, legitimizes personal success in an increasingly global literary marketplace without endangering the writer's model humble Canadian citizenship, but it can also, potentially and paradoxically, express resistance to the global commodification of literature.

In the growing, interrelated fields of literary celebrity and literary prize studies, citizenship is a pivotal concept. As I have argued, the way in which literary celebrities perform their celebrity may not have a nationally specific distilled essence (*Literary Celebrity* 5), but these performances are directly affected by nationally specific conditions of production and hegemonic notions of citizenship and social legitimacy. But whereas Smaro Kamboureli sees a clear correlation between celebrity and hegemonic ideals of citizenship, arguing in "The Culture of Celebrity and National Pedagogy" that "the culture of celebrity is the avatar of national pedagogy" (46), I see celebrity as more fractured and ideologically multivalent. It may as soon register resistance to national pedagogy as acquiescence; indeed, it may register both simultaneously — as reluctance, for example.

The example of reluctant Canadian literary celebrity that I will explore at length here returns us, once again, to 1976. It was the year another major Canadian writer made a career-changing move that was associated, like Atwood's incorporation of O.W. Toad, with questions of markets, affects, and artistic self-determination. In the summer of 1976, Alice Munro met the literary agent Virginia Barber, after having corresponded with her for several months, and they began their long, fruitful professional relationship. By that time, Munro had already received a Governor General's Award for her inaugural collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), and a Canadian Booksellers' Association Award for *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), which critics variously label a short story cycle, interconnected short stories, and a novel. But at this very moment, as we know from accounts by her publisher Douglas Gibson and biographer Robert Thacker, she was at a crossroads, caught between marketability and artistic inclination. She had always seen herself as a writer of short stories, and had conceived the stories in *Lives* more as stories than as chapters in a novel. By 1976, as she was reshaping discrete stories that featured various protagonists to form another interconnected cycle, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), there was increas-

ing pressure on Munro to make that next volume a novel; as Gibson recalls, “Alice felt that she was under such terrible pressure to write a novel that it was blocking her creative output. I remember I said: ‘If you want to go on writing short stories like this, and nothing but short stories, to the end of your writing life, that’s all right with me’” (Evain 27). Gibson, for his part, was not convinced by the market argument for writing a novel: first, he reckoned that at a time when more and more people claim to have less and less time for reading, short stories had the capacity to increase rather than lose their marketability, particularly in Canada where, as Alexander MacLeod points out, “the short story has been so consistently and so strangely prominent” (428); and second, he firmly believed that if Munro kept writing her brilliant stories, “the world is going to catch up to her” (Evain 28). It certainly did, and “the world” bestowed its approbation, most recently, in 2013, when Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In what follows, I consider how celebrity reluctance operates in the Canadian literary field, using Munro’s career, reception, consecration, and fiction as an example of how reluctance as a very public feeling negotiates the literary marketplace, how it works in the national imaginary to legitimize model Canadian subjects, and how it operates globally, as an implicit critique of a neoliberal economic order that places a premium on moving forward, leaning in. In so doing, I remain mindful that, as James English argues in *The Economy of Prestige*, after 1970, “As the pace of economic and cultural globalization . . . accelerated . . . the national fields of cultural production have seen their significance seriously diminished,” and a “‘local hero,’ the artist celebrated at the subnational level of indigenous community, can now be fed directly into a global market . . . without any reference to a national standard of value” (271-72). In the case of Canada, however, given the government support (however declining) for national culture, Gillian Roberts is right to suggest that “The celebration of Canadian culture presents particular issues in the process of capital intraconversion because of the role that the state plays in supporting national culture” (19-20) — unlike in Britain and America, the focal points of English’s study. In examining the celebrity of Alice Munro, I remain attentive to the way in which her reluctant consecration on the global stage, most clearly figured in her Nobel Prize win, operates on both national and international registers, as an example of what Laura Moss has called “transnational-nationalism” (22): the pro-

duction of Canadian culture for a global audience and, concomitantly, a reflection of that global stardom back onto specifically Canadian debates about national culture, character, and prestige.

In referring to reluctance as a “very public feeling” that is played out both nationally and globally, I am inspired by theorists of negative affect, such as Heather Love, Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Judith Jack Halberstam, and Lauren Berlant, who have argued most persuasively for the consideration of negative affects — like shame, envy, anger — as markers of political engagement with the priorities and exclusions of the broader social world. As Cvetkovich, a member of the Public Feelings research project, explains, her book *Depression: A Public Feeling* is “about how to live a better life by embracing rather than glossing over bad feelings. . . . It asks how it might be possible to tarry with the negative as part of daily practice, cultural production, and political activism” (3). Most of these theorists tarry with “bad” — that is, negative — feelings, though they share the theoretical assumption that feelings cannot and should not be so easily parsed into the “good” and “bad.” Though she calls her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai sees the feelings in question — envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, animateness, and “stuplimity” (a combination of shock and boredom) — as less “dramatic” (7) than the ones that more typically attract affect theorists’ attention, like shame or hatred. Still, they occupy, for the most part, the “ugly” end of the scale.

I push Ngai’s project further, attending to an emotion that is less “dramatic” still — reluctance. While Ngai discerns the latent but “deeply equivocal status of the ugly feelings” and sees them as “fundamentally ambivalent ‘sentiments of disenchantment’” (5), I investigate a feeling that is patently all about ambivalence, equivocation, and the art of facing-both-ways. If we examine its etymology, the word “reluctance” started off bearing a much more negative, ugly vibe; in a now obsolete usage from the seventeenth century, reluctance meant not disinclination, but instead “struggle or striving; resistance; opposition.” A rare usage that retains some of this sense of opposition, also originating in the seventeenth century, is “the action of recoiling from something.” But the third meaning of “reluctance” to emerge from the same historical period, and the one that would form its current usage, is “unwillingness, disinclination” (OED). This brief etymological excursion shows us, in effect, “reluctance” as a name for a feeling becoming gradually less ugly and more ambivalent — more reluctant.

In studying reluctance as a possible response to celebrity, it is important to retain the sense of ambivalence that the word “reluctance” steadily accrued, for reluctance does not signal an act of rejection whose trajectory is an oppositional recoil; it is the multidirectional affect that attends the condition of doing one thing while wishing to do something else or to do nothing at all. It is an affect that is entirely built upon a feeling about an action in relation to other possible actions not taken. In that sense, reluctance is not a thwarter of action, as Ngai suggests of her ambivalent ugly feelings, which she sees as “diagnostically concerned with states of *inaction* in particular” (22) and “less than ideally suited for setting and realizing clearly defined goals” (26). As Heather Love, responding to Ngai, has argued, it is not only the resolutely positive affects (notably “pride”) that are suitable for inspiring queer activism: “it would in fact be impossible to imagine transformative politics without these feelings” of “grief, regret and despair” (163). So while the reluctance that I discern in the career and writings of Alice Munro and in Canadian literary culture has nothing to do with the crucial transformational queer politics of which Love writes, I am indebted to her, as well as to Cvetkovich and Ahmed, for rupturing the common-sense connection between wholeheartedly positive affects and effective action, for in the case of Munro, reluctance is not an opting out of action, or an inability to act, but a thoughtful querying of the imperative to move forward — emotionally, culturally, globally.

When one grafts this affective study of reluctance onto the field of celebrity culture, as I propose to do, other common-sense notions — about celebrity, now — come under scrutiny. Many theorists see the phenomenon of celebrity as premised on the wholehearted desire for public visibility. Graeme Turner, for example, identifies the celebrity’s objective as the gaining and maintaining of visibility: “From the celebrity’s point of view, their personal objective is most likely to be the construction of a viable career through the astute distribution and regulation of the sales of their celebrity-commodity” (37). And when celebrity theorists register a departure from this desire, they most often focus on extreme negative reactions to fame — the recoil of rejection — such as Chris Rojek’s study of celebrities’ fear of “engulfment” by the “public face,” their sense of personal “extinction” that leads, he claims, to a greater-than-average incidence of “neurosis and mental illness” (19-

20). Less melodramatically, Richard Dyer, in his earlier, influential study *Heavenly Bodies*, shows how Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland “all in some measure revolted against the lack of control they felt they had” in their careers, and since Dyer believes that “Stars are examples of the way people read their relation to production in capitalist society,” he reads these instances of revolt as protests against “the ways the individual is felt to be placed in relation to business and industry in contemporary society” (6). Though Dyer articulates these less-than-enthusiastic relations of celebrity individuals to capitalist forms of labour in negative terms of protest, antagonism, and alienation, certain instances of his three stars’ negotiations of their celebrity arguably qualify as reluctance: doing one thing while wishing to be either doing something else, or wishing to be doing that one thing differently. No matter what the intensity or complexity of the affects under discussion, though, Dyer’s valuable insight that non-compliant affective responses to celebrity “articulate a dominant experience of work itself under capitalism” (6) retains the power to explain the implications of celebrity reluctance — like Munro’s — on a global level.

Such analyses raise the inevitable question of reluctance as conscious strategy, as bad faith performance, but this is not the way in which I understand Munro’s reluctance, since it has not been publically performed as a *mea culpa* in the way that scandal-ridden celebrities or disgraced bankers carry out their shrewd public apologies. For that matter, I am less interested in whether Munro’s reluctance is authentic than I am in the avid discernment and consumption of that reluctance by her audiences, and a good part of my analysis has to do with the way in which her reluctance has been folded into celebrations of the model humble Canadian citizen. But to read all instances of reluctance as calculation is to assume, as celebrity studies often does, that any occasion of celebrity agency is an instance of hegemonic manufacture. Instead, drawing upon the insights of the affect theorists I have invoked, I consider the “emotion work” in Munro’s career and writings to be messier amalgamations of audience desire, writerly response, and national dream-work: public feelings that do not need the evacuation of the celebrity’s agency to make them legible. Like Dyer in his readings of Monroe, Robeson, and Garland, I want to clear a place for ambivalent affects to *be* ambivalent, rather than automatically scooping them into the category of canny manipulation.

In tracing the reluctant career of Alice Munro as a constellation of textual representations, I consider Munro's biography alongside her fictional representations of reluctance. In the context of celebrity theory, Dyer has reminded us that a celebrity's "star image" is a multi-layered composition that "consists of everything that is publicly available" about that star; it is an "extensive, multimedia, intertextual" layered accretion (2-3). One layer is the evidence of Munro's private performances of reluctance that has been rendered public by the testimony of observers, in the form of memoir and biography. Munro's daughter Sheila, for instance, in her 2001 memoir *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro*, depicts her mother as a woman who undertook the conventional roles and duties of a middle-class 1950s-1960s daughter, wife, and mother unquestioningly in some ways, but in a surreptitiously reluctant fashion in others. In Sheila Munro's biographical reading, this reluctance found its origin in Munro's loss of her mother to Parkinson's disease, and the way in which she dealt with this traumatic experience by holding herself back, emotionally: "young Alice shut herself off emotionally from her mother's illness, with its particularly isolating and grotesque symptoms, because she feared that she would not be able to bear the waves of pity and grief that would engulf her. . . . To this day she is deeply affected by the isolation and suffering of her mother's life, and tormented by the way she closed herself off from her" (160-61). Although she does not explicitly make the connection, Sheila Munro describes a similar holding-back in Munro's relationship with her children:

My mother has spoken of her need to hold back so she could give what she needed to give to her writing . . . she told me once that she did not hold or touch me much unless she was dressing me or changing me, and she couldn't believe that my father wanted to play with me all day long on his days off. The family life she lived with us was not her real, true life. That was the solitary life she led at her writing desk. (60-61)

The expected emotional labour of the daughter, wife, and mother was one that, in this account, Munro was perceived to have performed reluctantly, because of a fear of becoming engulfed in a surfeit of emotion, whether grief or maternal devotion.

The labour of professional self-promotion was another site of expectation that Munro met with reluctance, and although the extent of her reluctance was only fully made public with the publication of Douglas Gibson's memoir *Stories about Storytellers* and Robert Thacker's extensive biography, some of that reluctance became gradually known as her fame increased. As Thacker recounts, when *Friend of My Youth* was published in 1990, "Munro finally renounced book tours for good" (436). Sort of. Gibson wrote to his then colleagues at McClelland and Stewart to tell them that Munro "'sturdily repeats her refusal to tour to promote this book,' but she had agreed to do four or five engagements 'that will be of greatest benefit to the book.' He reminded them that 'despite being a reluctant promoter, [Munro] is a very good interviewee, and an excellent reader'" (436). Munro's compromise makes Gibson's term "reluctant" entirely accurate; this was less a renunciation and refusal than a classic instance of reluctance: agreeing to do something (or, in this case, a bit of something), while profoundly wishing not to be doing it at all. As Gibson recalled in a 2006 interview, his role over the years morphed because formerly Munro was "less reluctant to do publicity events, less reluctant to do tours. But now she is." By then, Gibson had become a self-described "buffer" for the many requests for engagements and appearances Munro would receive; he would acknowledge those requests, warn the requesters that Munro would probably say no, and then forward them to Munro, who would feel much more comfortable saying no to him than to the requesters (Evain 29-30).

All authors who find themselves famous need to say no, of course, to all kinds of invitations and requests in order to protect their writing time, and the kind of protection that Munro and Gibson put in place does not in itself a reluctant author make. But the very way in which Munro describes her career is deeply reluctant, for she fantasizes about a moment at which the pressures of futurity created by markets and readers will no longer push her forward. As she explained to Eleanor Wachtel in a 2004 interview, the high expectations that readers and critics hold for every new book of hers "hinders" the writing, and makes her wish that, if one day she fails to meet those expectations, she might be too old to care, "Or I will have reached a kind of wonderful plateau where I'll feel that I don't have to write anymore, where I will just be sort of happy all the time. . . . Isn't that an ideal state: to be only feeling the present, not to be thinking about or feeling anything else?" (280). This plateau

is a prototypically reluctant place to be: a place of immanent stasis that resists the imperative to move forward, even as it paradoxically figures, by contrast, as an imagined place one might move forward to, where one's writing might not be "hinder[ed]." As a dream of happiness, it is, as Sara Ahmed says of all "ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life," a site "of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than the separation of good and bad feelings" (*Promise* 6). It is also a dream with political-economic implications, an imagined escape of the literary celebrity from the neoliberal ideal of the steady progressive march of markets onward and upward, in a condition of eternal growth. But publication, placing a book into the world, inescapably marks participation in that economy.

Robert McGill recognizes this irony in Munro's reticence, which he rightly understands not as reclusiveness but as reluctance ("being reluctant to give interviews or public readings"): "even as Munro explains her dissatisfaction with maintaining a public persona, ineluctably she is engaged in the performance of one" (132). Like the silence of which Susan Sontag eloquently wrote, reluctance is not the absence of engagement: "A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible . . . the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech" (Sontag). Because reluctant celebrity is, in similar fashion, an engagement with and not an escape from celebrity, it resonates, as Sontag would say, most powerfully with audiences. McGill tells the story of his own affective connection to Munro's reluctance. He treasures a letter he received from Munro declining an interview, for it made him feel both disappointed not to have the opportunity to speak with her and also "relieved that I would not risk having to sacrifice my notion of her as shy, dedicated to her art, and almost otherworldly" (141). Munro could, at least in part, remain, for him, on that inviolate plateau of reluctance. I see this affective response to reluctance operating beyond the melancholic psychoanalytic dynamics of the archive and its biographical scholars that specifically concern McGill; I see reluctance operating nationally and globally as what Sontag calls "a highly social gesture," as consumers of Munro's reluctant star text set about "imputing speech to it" (Sontag).

In the months following Munro's Nobel Prize win, Canadian audiences "imputed speech" to Munro's reluctance by incorporating it into

their celebration of the Canadian character as modest and unassuming. As Patricia Cormack and James F. Cosgrave demonstrate in their study, *Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence, and Other Stately Pleasures*, modesty or humility has long been a collectively celebrated affect in Canadian popular culture, despite plentiful evidence of hubris in our nation's history. CBC's show *Seven Wonders of Canada*, they point out, came to an end with judges and hosts alike falling "back on the cliché of the humble Canadian" (40) — a theme, they note, that is "found in much of the CBC's content" and that "renders Canadians moral agents when set against the mythically overbearing, ever-present Americans" (53). As a mechanism for determining valued modes of national being, reluctance could be thought of as "a mode of internal management" (11), to use Daniel Coleman's description of civility. And as a politically managed affect, like civility, it serves to police the boundaries between the model Canadian citizen and its others.

Of course, the Nobel Prize caps a long series of awards that Munro has won for her writing: The Man Booker (2009), two Scotiabank Giller Awards (2004, 1998), three Governor General's Awards (1986, 1978, 1968), the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2005), the Marian Engel Award (1986), and the American National Book Critics Circle Award (1998), to name only the most prominent. And her response to winning those awards, as well, has been consistently, graciously humble. But I focus on the Nobel win because, even more than the Man Booker, the prize has a global remit; whereas the Man Booker recognizes the best novel written in English and published in the UK each year, the Nobel has no such linguistic or national eligibility rules. As a result, I argue, it is the optimal site at which to descry the workings of Munro's "transnational-national" positioning as a reluctant Canadian.

In the days following Munro's Nobel win, it was clear that she was being positioned as exactly this kind of model, reluctant citizen whose reluctance confirms both her artistic excellence and her national character. The narrative that most clearly confirms this consecration is the story of how Munro received the news of her win. The Swedish Academy had some difficulty locating her to give her the news; @Nobel_Prize.org even tweeted, in quasi-parental tones of concern, "The Swedish Academy has not been able to get a hold of Alice Munro, left a phone message." Largely because of ill health, Munro had moved to the West Coast to be with one of her daughters for the winter, and she had forgotten about the tim-

ing of the announcement — forgotten about the award entirely, in fact. She was awakened by her daughter with the news. While all of this was going on, and Oslo was trying frantically to locate her, Twitter exploded with a series of affectionate jokes about Munro’s humble insouciance: “Alice Munro, call your office”; “What’s this? An early-morning Swedish telemarketer? REJECT CALL.” But the tweet that attracted the most attention that day was the one issued by Margaret Atwood at 8:16 am, and it perfectly encapsulated Munro’s reluctance: “OK, everyone’s calling Me to get me to write about Alice! (Alice, come out from behind the tool shed and pick up the phone.) #AliceMunro.” The implied reference is to “Chaddeleys and Flemings 2: The Stone in the Field,” from Munro’s 1982 collection *The Moons of Jupiter*. In the story, a young girl is taken by her mother and father to visit the father’s sisters, and as they drive up to the Huron County farmhouse, “One figure got up and ran around the side of the house. ‘That’ll be Susan,’ my father said. ‘She can’t face company’” (25).

I draw attention to the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature twitterstorm because it forms a mass celebration of Munro’s reluctance, and as the joke spread, Munro’s insouciance about the Nobel announcement became folded into a narrative about her typically Canadian reluctant response to fame. The subtitle of Sandra Martin’s lead article for *The Globe and Mail* read: “Canada’s master of the short story shuns the limelight, preferring to let her penetrating work speak for itself” (A1). Author Shaena Lambert observed that Munro “herself, with her lack of pomposity and bombast, has a talismanic force to her — standing for true modesty in the face of pursuing a complex craft” (“For the Love of Alice” E11). Like Robert McGill needing, in some measure, for his interview invitation to be rejected by Munro, here was the broader national community’s need for Munro to be reluctant — and therefore admirably Canadian — at the high-water mark moment of her literary celebrity.

And so it is with other dimensions of the star text of Alice Munro, for alongside the national consecrations of her idealized humility that we find in biographical, scholarly, print, radio/televisual, and social media texts lies a further layer of representation: her own fictional texts. And those texts powerfully amplify the reluctance that is a staple of her public image, making the star text of reluctant Alice Munro all the more robust and resilient. Her stories abound with the fundamental condition

of reluctance — the act of proceeding with misgivings — and they show it operating very much as the affect theorists I have mentioned see their more clearly “ugly feelings” at work: marking affective management and policing, especially at pivotal moments of social visibility. But it parts company with those theorists’ ugly feelings in that it is less obviously nonconformist, more treacherously compounded of acquiescence and resistance.

Notably, reluctance, as a feeling, and as an affective response in Munro’s stories, is not equivalent to opposition, even though it is often relegated to that category. In “Baptizing” from *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del realizes not simply that she suddenly has to oppose Garnet French’s affective-sexual dominion over her, but that her compliance in the relationship has been, from the start, shot through with reluctance:

it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play, that he himself was — in play. . . . I saw that he knew it all already; this is what he knew, that I had somehow met his good offerings with my deceitful offerings, whether I knew it or not, matching my complexity and play-acting to his true intent. (197-98)

To see Del’s refusal to be baptized by Garnet in the Wawanash River as a sudden moment of pure opposition, therefore, is to see it as the obsolete seventeenth-century version of “reluctance,” as “struggle or striving; resistance; opposition” (OED), when it is clearly an instance of reluctance as it is currently understood, in all of its discordant simultaneity. Despite the dramatic culminating act of Del freeing herself from Garnet’s violent attempts to “baptize” her in the river, what both Del and Garnet know, at this moment, is that Del has been unwilling, disinclined, from the very first, even as she has been carried along by the tidal flow of their sexual passion. To read Del’s frame of mind as only ever oppositional is to identify it as closer to what Sara Ahmed calls “willfulness”: “To be identified as willful is to become a problem” in the eyes of others; it is “the word used to describe the perverse potential of will and to contain that perversity in a figure” (*Willful* 3, 12) by ascribing it to non-compliant subjects. Reluctance is much more difficult to capture; it is willfulness that is not as readily rendered socially visible; only in the act of fighting back against Garnet’s baptizing does Del transform her reluctance into willfulness.

Neither is reluctance to be confused with a simple retreat fuelled by unwillingness that involves no forward motion, no participation at all: reclusiveness. In media coverage, Munro's reluctance often appears under the misleading sign of reclusiveness; to cite only one example among many, the *Globe and Mail's* lead article about Munro's Nobel win opens as follows: "Alice Munro, the first Canadian to win the Nobel Prize for literature, has always been reclusive" (Martin A1). But the illustrative photograph that appears alongside the written text, showing Munro posing for a *New York Times* photographer in Huron County the previous summer, directly contradicts this opening claim; truly reclusive writers — the Salingers, the Pynchons — do not agree, however reluctantly, to photo shoots with major newspapers. But in the wake of the Nobel win, reclusiveness, reluctance's uglier and more dramatic cousin, becomes the preferred affective discursive mode.

So too in Munro's fiction; her characters' reluctance is frequently, carefully distinguished from a reclusive shunning of the social world. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del, as a young girl visiting her aunts, hears about her cousin Ruth McQueen who wins a scholarship but does not go to college: "She preferred not" (32), the aunts smugly observe. So too, the aunts inform her, their local-historian brother Uncle Craig was clever enough to be an MP, but "he never ran. He wouldn't let his name stand. He preferred not" (32). Del's reluctance will never be of this retiring nature but will, instead, take her out into an engagement, however complex and "deceitful," with the world. "There it was," she marvels, "the mysterious and to me novel suggestion that choosing not to do things showed, in the end, more wisdom and self-respect than choosing to do them" (32). Instead, Del's reluctance, like Sontag's silence, will be "a highly social gesture," like Cvetkovich's vision of tarrying with the negative as a daily practice.

Because reluctance signals social engagement, no matter how fraught, moments in Munro's stories in which a character's positioning in a social hierarchy is being solidified or externalized — like the one when Munro herself was canonized as a Nobel laureate — are the most likely to trigger reluctance. This may involve a young woman committing herself to marriage, a writer committing words to paper, or any performance that brings the humble subject into social visibility. In "Powers" from *Runaway*, Nancy accepts Wilf's marriage proposal with a "nice polite" 'yes' — "but not too eagerly" — that she hopes will carry

both of them past the awkwardness of the moment into a more “relaxed” “normal” state, but as with Del Jordan, discordance is always already present: “the fact was that I had never been exactly relaxed and normal with Wilf . . . I hope I am not saying that I’d said yes I’d marry him to get over the embarrassment” (278). In the engagement episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose experiences a similar steady undercurrent of disinclination; buoyed along by her fiancé Patrick’s adoration, she only retrospectively recognizes her reluctant state: “It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted” (96). But dreams, those compounds of powerful affect, can sweep disinclination along in their propulsive current; when Rose, having broken with Patrick, sees him studying in the library, she is overtaken by the temptation to run to him and reconcile: “This was a violent temptation for her; it was barely resistible. She had an impulse to hurl herself. Whether it was off a cliff or into a warm bed of welcoming grass and flowers, she really could not tell” (116). Both inclinations — to do, to not do — commingle in this supremely reluctant moment that leads Rose into a marriage that allows her to escape Hanratty and her precarious social standing into a “warm bed” of social privilege. In a classically reluctant move, Rose sinks into that warm bed while, emotionally speaking, suspecting that she is about to plunge off a precipice. At the end of “The Shining Houses,” from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, when Mary thinks of the way her smug young neighbours use an outdated municipal ordinance to force an old woman out of her decrepit house and down the social ladder, her final reflection could serve as the summation of the reluctant frame of mind of many a Munro character at moments of crisis in social hierarchy: “There is nothing you can do at present but put your hands in your pockets and keep a disaffected heart” (29). Keep swimming, that is, but mind the undertow.

For Munro, writing is another such trigger for reluctance, as the rich contradictoriness of experience is calcified into visibility and finality. In the opening story, “Advantages,” from *The View from Castle Rock*, Munro recalls that her ancestor Margaret Laidlaw Hogg, mother of the Scottish writer James Hogg, regretted having recited old ballads for her son’s friend, Sir Walter Scott. When she saw them reproduced in Scott’s *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03), she vowed never again to sing them. “She had known what she was doing,” Munro surmised, “but

could not help regretting what she had done” (22). Munro speculates about how her ancestors’ suspicion of all this writing down of stories or songs has been carried forward into her own family and community. “*Calling attention to yourself*” through “Self dramatization got short shrift in our family,” she recalls. The opposite tendency, she points out, was “not exactly modesty but a strenuous dignity and control, a sort of refusal” (20) — the kind of Bartleby-the-Scrivener-like retirement that Munro has dramatized in Uncle Craig and Ruth McQueen in *Lives of Girls and Women* and elsewhere. But her very qualification of her family and community’s restraint as “strenuous” discloses the simultaneous presence of the competing impulse that turns this refusal into a “sort of refusal”: reluctance.

In Munro’s stories that self-consciously examine writing, reluctance is a constant companion; for writing, in Munro’s view, demands the “tarrying” with difficult emotions that theorists such as Ahmed, Ngai, and Cvetkovich endorse. In one of her first stories about writing, “The Office,” Munro’s protagonist is reluctant to even assume the title of writer: “But here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer” (*Dance* 59). As other Munroviaan writer-characters know, writing is all about difficult disclosures, and often their reluctance stems from the besetting ethical question of whether one has the right to disclose. In “Winter Wind,” from *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, the writer-protagonist reflects that in using her family members as material, “I am only doing in a large and public way what has always been done, what my mother did, and other people did, who mentioned to me my grandmother’s story”; but like Munro’s ancestor Margaret Hogg, she still has her doubts: “I am being as careful as I can, but I stop and wonder, I feel compunction” (200). Nevertheless, we have her story placed before us, published evidence that reluctance and action have formed their uneasy alliance once again.

In other stories, writerly shame attaches itself specifically to the promotional activities that are the focus of many of the media narratives about Alice Munro’s reluctant celebrity. Rose, from *Who Do You Think You Are?*, finds herself touring as an actor with small theatre companies, and “part of her job” is “to go on local television chatting about these productions, trying to drum up interest, telling amusing stories about things that had happened during the tour.” And although,

like the writer-protagonist of “Winter Wind,” she feels that “There was nothing shameful about any of this,” “Rose was deeply, unaccountably ashamed.” But she proceeds with her anecdotes anyway and “did not let her confusion show” (220). In carrying out the promotional activities that produce and maintain celebrity, the Munroian storyteller discovers that celebrity is itself a condition of reluctance. “Fame must be striven for, then apologized for,” reflects Janet in “The Moons of Jupiter”; “Getting it or not getting it, you will be to blame” (*Moons* 219). The Munroian storyteller, faced with celebrity and promotional culture, opts for reluctance; she puts her hands in her pockets and keeps a “disaffected heart” (*Dance* 29).

Tarrying with disaffection in this way, as writers do, always runs the risk of immolation in one’s “ugly feelings,” and so the semblance of a relentless forward march is protective for many of Munro’s storytellers, as Sheila Munro speculates it was for her mother. In “Postcard” from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Helen is advised by the local police officer to stop howling her pain and disaffection in front of her fickle lover’s house, and to march forward, “be a good girl and go along like the rest of us and pretty soon we’ll see spring” (146). His warning is all about the dangers of getting stuck in one’s emotions; he tells Helen a cautionary tale about a man and a married woman from the local choir being “stuck” in a car together — where they “had no business being” (146) — in the mud of the nearby swamp. The language irresistibly calls to mind Ahmed’s definition of affect as “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves, the connection between ideas, values and objects” (“Happy Objects” 30). The burden of the police officer’s homily is clear: tarrying, getting “stuck” in the emotions is frowned upon by the community; yet this is exactly where Munro’s characters find themselves stranded, as lovers and as writers, pursuing the affective “connection between ideas, values and objects” in spite of social disapprobation.

In Munro’s short stories, as in the work of the affect theorists I have invoked in this discussion, tarrying with the negative, getting “stuck” in it, is regarded by the community as failing to move forward through cultural space at the pace that is thought proper. As Ahmed reflects, “Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along,” but only “some bodies” are enabled “to flow into space” unimpeded (*Promise* 59, 12). Still, she speculates, “Perhaps the experiences of not following, of being stressed, of not being extended by the spaces in which we

reside, can teach us more about happiness” (12). Heather Love, writing of queer histories, draws upon the same metaphors of moving forward and holding back; she sees evidence that “advances” such as gay marriage urge queer subjects to join a mainstream that is associated with moving forward, rather than identifying with closeted pasts that are now associated with “backward feelings” (10). “Contemporary queers,” she concludes, “find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward’” (27). Like Cvetkovich, Love advocates a mindful tarrying with these “backward” affects.

Lauren Berlant’s concept of the impasse is another way of reconfiguring affective movement, but it gives rise to a crucial difference with reluctance as I have been defining it, as a simultaneous movement forward and backward. As Cvetkovich observes of Berlant’s concept, “a (productive) impasse . . . slows us down, preventing an easy recourse to critique or prescription for action” (20). But whereas the impasse “suggests that things will not move forward due to circumstance — not that they can’t, but that the world is not designed to make it happen, or there has been a failure of imagination” (20-21), reluctance operates differently. Things do move forward — that is the point — but we experience a feeling of regret that they do so.

In Munro’s fiction, reluctance is persistently represented as physical, spatial movements that contain within them the seeds of their own counter-movements. When the narrator of “The Spanish Lady,” from *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, witnesses the sudden death of an old man sitting in the railway station, she has a vision of people as moving spinning tops, “As if we were all wound up a long time ago and were spinning out of control, whirring, making noises, but at a touch could stop, and see each other for the first time, harmless and still” (190-91). The repetitive path of the top is a perfect metaphor for the destructive loop of her failing marriage, for like Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are?* she is likely to keep repeating the mistake of hurling herself back into the relationship: “That could happen again; it could happen again and again. And it would always be the same mistake” (189). The death of the unknown man becomes the equivalent of the physical reluctance of a spinning top, caused by the cancelling out of the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work until the workings of gravity bring the top down.

Like the spinning of a top, a character's determined walking from point A to B, in Munro, can suggest a seemingly forward, propulsive movement through cultural space that, upon closer inspection, discloses its refractory, reluctant forces. In "Child's Play," from *Too Much Happiness*, Marlene determinedly walks to the hospital to see Charlene, a figure from her past who reminds Marlene of her shameful treatment of a mentally challenged girl in their class at school. Indeed, she consciously chooses walking over phoning; "Perhaps," she suggests, "I wanted to think I'd made as much effort as possible" (212). But Marlene's disinclination to acknowledge this past is so strong that she walks briskly along almost hoping, with a "backward feeling," that Charlene is dead, so that her forward action would have no frictional psychic forces that would slow her progress toward repression.

In "Gravel," one of the stories in *Dear Life*, which is very likely to be Munro's last published volume, drowning once more suggests immolation in the ugly feelings of the past. The protagonist's sister Caro sets up a ruse to draw their mother away from her lover to pay some attention to the children by pretending that the dog is drowning and she is going to save it, but she drowns. Years later, the mother's now former lover advises the protagonist to keep going, "Accept everything and then tragedy disappears. Or tragedy lightens, anyway, and you're just there, going along easy in the world" (108-09). And even though she sees the attractions of this carefree forward movement, she opts instead for reluctance, difficulty, and memory: "But, in my mind, Caro keeps running at the water and throwing herself in . . . and I'm still caught . . . waiting for the splash" (109).

To sum up, the star text of Alice Munro manifests reluctance on several overlapping, intertextual levels. It has been welcomed as a prized national affect that qualifies her as a model modest Canadian citizen. It dovetails with Munro's own theory of writing as a tarrying with difficult affects and knowledges. And it offers an alternative way of being a literary celebrity in an increasingly globalized market that is premised on ever-expanding production, promotion, and consumption. In navigating her career, its detours and expressways, reversals and accelerations, Munro has creatively left herself open to circuitous shifts. When she published *The View from Castle Rock*, for instance, she told many people, such as Douglas Gibson, that it would be her last book; happily, three years later, *Too Much Happiness* came along, and then, in 2012, with a

greater sense of finality, *Dear Life*. As Gibson has said, during the years that he has worked with Munro, she has never set out on the forward motion of planning a book of stories, but

every so often she says to interviewers that she's not going to write any more books and I don't comment on this. And then she writes more stories for *The New Yorker*. And then I say: "It seems to me you have just enough short stories for a collection." And she grudgingly admits that this is probably true. . . . She might even use the expression "I guess there's no getting out of it!" (Evain 33)

Neither did Gibson require Munro to sign contracts for books, for to do so would have been to enforce the ineluctably forward-driving movement of the market that caused Munro so much professional anguish in her earlier years. Furthermore, the contract he has long held with Munro specifies that she would not be expected to promote her books on radio or television (Evain 30). Instead, she and Gibson have between them devised a backtracking career, one that suggests those local slow roads in "Miles City, Montana" (in *The Progress of Love*): a reluctant alternative to the demands of a globalized and highly concentrated capitalism for more and more product.

In the four stories that bring *Dear Life* to an end, "Finale," which, Munro comments, "are the first and last — and the closest — things I have had to say about my own life" (255), Munro stages her own reluctance to walk away from her (writing) life without a backward glance. The conclusion of her final story, "Dear Life," returns once more to the spectre of the ill, dying mother whose disintegrating body and spirit form the epicentre of negative affect in Munro's stories. The speaker offers a welter of excuses for not going to her mother's funeral — she had two small children; she couldn't afford the trip; her husband scorned "formal behaviour" — but she interrupts her own flow of exculpatory pleading and refuses to locate the motivations of reluctance in external circumstance or another person: "why blame it on him? I felt the same" (319). Instead, Munro gently assumes ownership of reluctance, seeing it, as she has done throughout her fiction and in the conduct of her literary celebrity, as a daily practice of tarrying with our ugliest emotions: "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do — we do it all the time" (319).

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