NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF LIBERATION IN ALICE MUNRO

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The seemingly narrow focus of Alice Munro's fiction includes an intricate representation of the dynamics of power. Munro's subject is the interplay of men, women, and sometimes children within the network of domestic relations. Her characters are rarely developed within professional, political, or social settings external to their domestic circles. Yet Munro is a deeply political writer, repeatedly tracing the contests, victories, and defeats between contenders in a domestic system founded on power imbalance. The vast majority of her principal characters are women, many of whom are seeking relief from, or at least understanding of, their object position within the microcosmic political system of family and friends. Of these characters, only a lucky few succeed, reaching a vision that dismantles oppressive binary oppositions like subject and object, victimizer and victim.

When crisis comes to Munro's characters, it is often experienced as a collision between past and present, between two sets of experiences that cannot be resolved and that collude as sharp reminders of the pain of powerlessness. A representative example of such a collision occurs in the 1980 story "Dulse," Lydia's account of a flirtatious weekend with three telephone workers sits uneasily within her painful memories of a recent love affair. The later experience insists upon calling up the earlier, which in turn looks to the later for an accommodation and resolution that it cannot deliver. In order to extricate herself from this tangle of experience, Lydia, like many of Munro's characters, is impelled to narrate, historicize these clashing experiences. She resorts to narrative to relieve her pain—a pain resulting from the passive, pleasing, submissive role she habitually plays with men. But Lydia's attempt is unsuccessful, and the cause of her failure can be found as much

within her narrative method as within an analysis of her relationships with men.

Indeed, the two are inextricable for Munro. Our stories and the way in which we tell them are not only *self*-constitutive, but also constitutive of our relations to others. The narrative methods of Munro's characters both indicate the characters' perceptions of their positions within relationships *and* determine the success or failure of their struggles to escape or improve difficult relationships. The narratives most likely to serve Munro's characters are the ones that come closest to a true version of the experience they would render, that are driven not by a desire to create an effect, to dominate, or to deceive (oneself or others), but simply, and at the same time almost impossibly, to recuperate experience faithfully, to constitute, through language, the truth of experience before it is utterly transformed by the mediations of memory, succeeding experience, and the narratives of others. The closer a character's narrative can come to making available this original experience, the better its chances for offering relief merely through being told. Faithfully recounted narratives are Munro's truth, and they are a truth, that while modest, can be enormously relieving.

But such narratives are exceedingly difficult to achieve—indeed, can only be usefully approximated, as we shall see, by means of a unique narrative method consisting of many voices. Traditional narrative, with its discriminatory logics of chronological plot, unitary point of view, major and minor characters, and inflected endings will only perpetuate the disease of Munro's powerless characters. Narratives that allow the equal participation of many voices signal a new form of relating—one in which authority and dominance are irrelevant, replaced by the communal re-composition of experience. For Munro, the narrative paradigm is circular, not vertical; fluid, not rigid. Those of Munro's characters who participate in such narratives not only reach a consensual version of truth, but also escape the object position that first ignited their narrative impulse.

Among Munro's most concerted examinations of the relationship between objecthood, narrative, and truth is the 1982 volume *The Moons of Jupiter*. The volume presents a series of familiar Munro characters—bright, educated women, somehow outside the system (usually through rejection by men)—struggling to find relief from their object position. The stories in this

volume are linked neither by character nor setting, but they do represent a progression from a traditional narrative style guaranteeing the perpetuation of objecthood, to a communal, cooperative narrative offering escape from the disease of marginalization, as well as from the risks to which a simple inversion to subjecthood would make their tellers susceptible.

As it would be tedious to trace this progression through all twelve stories, I have chosen to focus on the third, tenth, and final stories of the volume. In the third story, "Dulse," we watch the finally unsuccessful attempts of a middle-aged, divorced woman to talk herself out of the careening disequilibrium resulting from her recent rejection by an abusive lover (Duncan). Lydia's story is told by a limited omniscient voice, who, though extremely self-effacing and often virtually elided with Lydia's own voice, is nevertheless separate from and to some degree in control of Lydia's narrative: "At the end of the summer Lydia took a boat to an island off the southern coast of New Brunswick, where she was going to stay overnight" (36). From the outset, then, Lydia's chances for release from her object position are dubious, as she is already a character in someone else's narrative. The narrator does give us portions of Lydia's *own* narrative, from which we can infer that Lydia is impelled to tell the story of her relationship—a first and important step toward release and understanding. But the setting within which she recounts her narrative is finally more powerful than the impulse itself—she cannot detach her narrative from motives having nothing to do with locating truth, indeed having much to do with perpetuating falsehood. Thus her position at the end of the story is the same as at the beginning: she is an unattached woman at the mercy of male characters whose privilege it is to choose or to reject her.

Much of Lydia's own story of her relationship with Duncan is presented within a flashback session with her therapist. The therapist is largely silent, offering no more than cryptic reformulations, usually in the interrogative, of Lydia's own words. The unmistakable imbalance of power in this relationship, where one confesses and the other holds back, is, as Lydia eventually realizes, completely unproductive of "a useful thing to say."

> [Lydia:] "I think these conversations are fine when you're

> mildly troubled and interested but not when you're desperate."
> "You're desperate?"
> She [Lydia] felt suddenly tired, almost too tired to speak. . . . Fake reassurance, provisional comfort, earnest deceptions. (55-56)

This is not narrative cooperation, but narrative stratification, an inversion of the subject position we usually associate with the narrator. Lydia, briefly cast as narrator of her own story in this dialogue with her therapist, can find neither truth nor solace from her story because of the setting in which it is told. The therapist does not contribute to Lydia's narrative; she only reflects and interrogates it, offering Lydia absolutely no aid in determining the truth about her past: "'The worst thing is not knowing what is true about any of this. I spend all my waking hours trying to figure out about him and me and I get nowhere'" (55). Lydia comes to see her session with the therapist as a "mealy, reasonable, true-and-false chat" (56). This *conversation*, if we can call it that, between Lydia and her therapist is a parody of collaborative narrative—less a true dialogue than a confession and a test that leaves Lydia feeling exposed and a failure.

Lydia seems destined to mis-use narrative, or if not mis-use it, to practice narrative in ways that afford no relief from her "new, strange condition": "She saw herself as something like an egg carton, hollowed out in back" (36, 41). In an attempt to define herself according to the expectations she presumes her listeners to be imposing, she elsewhere recounts a story she has heard Duncan tell about himself. Here she is using narrative as a doubly false counter—to suggest something about herself that is essentially untrue (she had to "show herself attached"), through a story that is neither about her nor of her own creating. She is quite right when she says the story was "a mistake," for it only puts the truth further from her reach: "She immediately regretted having told this story. . . . there wasn't much point to it unless Duncan told it. He could show you himself" (44).

At the end of "Dulse," Lydia does gain a form of comfort, but not the comfort of truth or understanding. What pleases her at the story's conclusion is the familiar reassurance (expressed through a present left her by her new friend Vincent) that she is still attractive, still claimable by men, not that the figuration countenancing

such claims is itself objectionable. The impulses driving her stories—to please, to disguise, to attract—guarantee that she will never faithfully recover the experience in question, and thus never gain the truth about Duncan and herself that she so desperately seeks.

"Hard-Luck Stories," the tenth story in *The Moons of Jupiter*, brings at least one of its characters closer to the recognition that escapes Lydia. The action of the story consists of two divorced, middle-aged women—friends—telling (separately) "hard-luck stories" to an ominously silent male listener. Julie's stories about love and loss clearly have very little to do with seeking understanding through a narrative recuperation of the past. Blithe, studied, and superficial, her stories are told solely for the benefit of the listening man, Douglas. Her "preposterously frank" (186) confession of her history of sexual mishaps to a man she has never met is a transparent and completely successful seduction strategy. Douglas claims her, and they become lovers. But the narrator of the story, the other woman (who remains unnamed) shows us another narrative possibility. Her "hard-luck story" *is* concerned with truthfully rendering the experience in question.

The stylistic differences between the narrator's and Julie's stories certainly hint at this difference in motives. Julie's stories may be *about* loneliness, rejection, and exploitation, but their style is cool and breezy and compact. Of her own history of bulimia, she says, "I was one of those people who gorge, then purge. . . . Terrible. The guilt. I was compelled. It must have had something to do with sex. They say now it does, don't they?" (187) While Julie controls experience through her language and narrative, the narrator sees language as almost unbearably suggestive, proliferative, physical. For Julie, the statement "He'd tried to cut his throat" (spoken of a former boyfriend) is a cool, dry factual statement that can be easily contained and qualified by "It wasn't that bad. He was recovering." For the narrator, the statement associates itself with "suicide," a word with an almost unbearably physical reality: "mention of suicide is like innards pushing through an incision; you have to push it back and clap some pads on, quickly" (188).

Unlike Julie, the narrator does not fend off experience with narrative, but rather seeks to call up as much experience as possible within her story. In describing her host and hostess at a

houseparty, she gives, as far as one can tell, a rich record of the original event:

> Then she said in her wispy voice how much she loved the way it was in the winter with the snow deep outside and the white rugs and the white furniture. Keith seemed rather embarrassed by her and said it was like a squash court, no depth perception. I felt sympathetic because she seemed just on the verge of making some sort of fool of herself. She seemed to be pleading with you to reassure her, and yet reassuring her seemed to involve you in a kind of fakery. (193)

The narrator's motives for telling her story are also significantly different from Julie's. Her story about the houseparty is her story about hard luck in love, about her realization that her lover was really in love with the hostess. It is not until her story is completed that we realize that the ex-lover is Douglas himself, that the narrator told the story in the hopes that Douglas would participate in it, that he would be unable to listen silently to the recounting of an experience that he had shared. As I have argued elsewhere, the narrator wants understanding, explanation through this strategy—she wants, not exactly Douglas' version of what happened, but his participation within the story. With this, she would be closer to a true rendering, a more perfect retrieval of the past—more perfect because it would be based on consensus, or at least cooperation, the joint provision of material. But Douglas will not cooperate; he remains, like so many of the men in this volume, the other that won't be contained, re-placed, understood, leaving the narrator "always bent on knowing, and always in the dark, about what was important to him, and what was not" (197) (Mayberry 538).

The collection's final story, entitled "The Moons of Jupiter," is the most encouraging in its offering of a narrative colloquy between another middle-aged divorced woman (Janet) and a withholding, judgmental man. In this case the man is the woman's father, who is faced with the alternatives of possible death in cardiac surgery or certain but delayed death from an unrepaired heart valve. During the period before the surgery, father and daughter engage in strained and slightly formal conversations that belie the gravity of the situation and their own mutual deep need. But on the eve of the surgery they are finally able to give up

their habitual positions in the father-daughter hierarchy and to come together in a joint recomposition of dimly-remembered astrological knowledge:

> [Janet] "Tell me the moons of Jupiter."
> "Well, I don't know the new ones. There's a bunch of new ones, isn't there?"
> "Two. But they're not new."
> . . . .
> "You haven't even named the old ones," I said.
> "Give me time. Galileo named them. Io."
> "That's a start."
> "The moons of Jupiter were the first heavenly bodies discovered with the telescope. . . . It wasn't Galileo named them, either; it was some German. Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto. There you are."
> "Yes."
> "Io and Europa, they were girlfriends of Jupiter's, weren't they? Ganymede was a boy. A shepherd? I don't know who Callisto was."
> "I think she was a girlfriend, too," I said. "Jupiter's wife—Jove's wife—changed her into a bear and stuck her up in the sky. Great Bear and Little Bear. Little Bear was her baby."
> The loudspeaker said that it was time for visitors to go.
> "I'll see you when you come out of the anesthetic," I said.
> "Yes."
> When I was at the door, he called to me, "Ganymede wasn't any shepherd. He was Jove's cupbearer." (233)

Afraid and lonely, Janet's father steps down into the narrative, relinquishing that familiar position of the silent man who refuses implication in a female narrative, preferring a commingled voice to the dominating, victimizing voice of a single subject narrator. In participating in Janet's narrative, her father is helping his daughter construct a truth about him and their relationship that she requires before his death. As their final conversation suggests, truth and form are constellational—composed of multiple points, of blended, shared voices. The coming together of these two people, their joint rehabilitation of family history and general lore, is the only example in this volume of successful narrative cooperation.

In these and other stories, Munro is offering a voice to characters accustomed all their lives to having been silenced, objectified, and generally relegated to the verge of discourse. At

the beginning of their stories, these women inhabit not just the position of object, but of *reject*. Impelled to manage their pain through narrative, they become story tellers, narrators. But they do not gain the traditional privileges of subjecthood, control, or power through this new role. None of these women practices inversion—they do not replicate or even mimic the controlling strategies of those who have controlled them. The least conscious of Munro's characters, like Lydia in "Dulse," and Julie in "Hard-Luck Stories," use the voice given them to perpetuate their own victimization. But characters like the narrator in "Stories," Janet in "Moons," and Del in the earlier volume *Lives of Girls and Women* at least approach a new configuration of narrative that combines voices, drops the device of a single unifying perspective, moves almost imperceptibly among points of view, and remains as faithful to experience as the representational register of language will allow. Interestingly, these characters make this move largely in the company of women and rarely with the participation of men; frequently, the narrating women are sisters or mother and daughter (see, for two examples of many, "Friend of My Youth," 1990 and "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," 1974.)

The characters in Munro's fiction need truth, and Munro's understanding of narrative offers them at least the possibility of a provisional one. Her narrative, with its emphasis on communal participation, allows her to disinfect the notions of 'decidability,' 'understanding,' 'truth.' Her version of truth, often found in narrative, provides an alternative to, on the one hand, the chaos of undecidable, indeterminable meaning exposed in some postmodernist fiction, and on the other, rigid, hegemonic, traditional constructions of meaning and truth. Through her figuration of the narrative act as participatory, polylogic, and metaphoric, she frees the notions of truth and understanding from their association with control and dominance. Truths like that reached by Janet and her father at the end of "The Moons of Jupiter" are jointly discovered, consensually composed. There is no imposition of one voice or will upon another, no controlling, directing narrative subject objectifying the characters of his/her story. Such truths are fluid, dynamic, always dispensable in the light of a better, jointly constructed version. But they are also usable and useful; while polyvocal, they are not hopelessly polysemic; the circumstances

of their composition guard as much against total undecidability as they do against monologic dominance.

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Much of my argument about Munro's understanding of narrative can be read in the final two chapters of her early novel *Lives of Girls and Women*. In the chapter entitled "Baptism," Del Jordan, the novel's narrator, has her first serious sexual relationship. The affair ends when Del realizes that her lover, Garnet, has taken too seriously the powers she had given him "in play" (197). Her decision to end the relationship rather than struggle against Garnet's desire to reform her marks a profound change in her understanding of her future. She will excuse herself from arrangements that require either her domination or her dominance. In the following story, actually an "Epilogue" to the novel, Del marks another significant (and related) change in her life. She realizes that she cannot finish the novel she had been writing—a highly fictionalized, stylized version of the tragedies of a local family. She abandons the novel, it seems, for the same reason she has abandoned Garnet, because she will not participate in a hierarchical relationship, she will not impose herself upon her material, nor be imposed upon. The novel she was writing was entirely false, she realizes, dedicated not to truth, to a transcription of the actual events, but to her self-indulgent mastery and reformulation of the material. Chastened by this recognition of her arrogance, she chats with the brother of this local family, who, by his presence and conversation, both reminds her of the truth of his story *and* allows her to experience narrative as dialogic. At this point, she completely changes her artistic project, vowing to make her writing as true to experience as she can possibly manage:

> . . . what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting (210).

What Del realizes, what Munro insists upon throughout her work, is the fundamental incompatibility of truth and dominance; truth and understanding can be achieved, but never through the imposition of a stronger will or view on a weaker. What is neces-

sary, Munro's fiction claims, is a cooperation of wills and views—a consensual, suggestive, dynamic politic of interaction that is modelled within the narrative paradigm of a number of her stories.

NOTES

1 Lydia's part in the "chat" is what Roy Schafer would call a story "that *summarizes* and *justifies* what the analyst requires" (Shafer, 53), or Foucault, "a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship . . . [with] a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession" (Foucault 61).

2 Munro's own narrative method is unconventional and idiosyncratic, capable of eluding the taxonomic grasp of contemporary narratology. Munro's stories often consist of nested narratives, conferring a recursive, concentric structure unconcerned with chronological sequence, beginnings and endings, eaily identifiable point of view. Yet these are accessible stories, their rhythm and structure close to the rhythm of consciousness, remote from the linear seriality of artifice.

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