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Circulations - Interactions

Sometimes Smooth and Sometimes Bumpy: Travelling the Road with *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*

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David Staines (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 201 p, ISBN: 978-1107472020

- 1 Respecting its mandate to provide “lively, accessible introductions to major writers” that are “shaped ... to appeal to student readers” (Cambridge University Press website), *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, edited by David Staines, fulfills its contract. The volume includes ten chapters written from a variety of perspectives taken up by Munro scholars and writers of fiction and criticism, and covers numerous aspects of Munro’s work: theme, structure, style, tone, narrative voice, and reading strategies. Munro’s life and her relationship to her writing are evoked where appropriate, without lapsing into simple determinism. The number of writers and topics involved here necessarily involves eclecticism and the resulting strength of the volume is that it has something to say to a range of different readers.
- 2 For the reader whose predilection is to enter the world and work of an author knowing something of her background, Staines’ opening chapter to the volume is splendid. While Staines relies heavily on quotations from relatively well-known Munro interviews, his overview of Munro’s life, land, and writing comes up fresh. The

chapter, entitled “From Wingham to Clinton: Alice Munro in her Canadian context” (ch. 1) deals with aspects of Munro’s family, education, early adult married life, professional experiences, and literary success, but also her attempts to define her views on fiction-writing, notably that “writing is the act of approach and recognition” of “something that is mysterious and important” (p. 22).

- 3 In a different way, the chapter by Coral Ann Howells, “Alice Munro and her life writing,” (ch. 5) also gives an overview perspective, but through the particular focus on the stories that Munro has defined as those closest to her life (p. 79). This allows Howells to evoke both early and late stories, and indeed, often stories that are late re-workings of earlier stories. With “Home,” for example, Howells makes some very interesting remarks on the marginal comments in Munro’s early version of the story, qualifying them as “a return of the repressed,” as “they bring to light the complex and contradictory emotions which Munro is negotiating as autobiographical subject” (p. 83). The juxtaposition of the two versions demonstrates how the narrative style has changed, and some of the emotional judgments have been tempered, but “the narrative of a haunted self, a story of loss, longing, and dread” (p. 85) remains intact. Throughout the chapter, Howell’s fluid prose style takes the reader through a thoughtful consideration of these memoir-style stories.
- 4 For the student who is embarking on the study of a particular collection of stories, the encounter with this volume will have been lucky indeed if the work in question is either *Lives of Girls and Women* or *the Moons of Jupiter*. Margaret Atwood takes the reader on a thorough visit of the first, and W. H. New provides a very perceptive chapter on the second. In Atwood’s “*Lives of Girls and Women*: a portrait of the artist as a young woman” (ch. 6), the author outlines in quick, clear strokes, the emergence of “the conclusive Munro signature” (p. 96), which is the merging of opposites, as well as the reliance on “semi-autobiographical ‘material’” (p. 97). Barely glimpsed in Munro’s first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, argues Atwood, these features comes into full view in *Lives of Girls and Women*. To make visible some of the patterns in the book, Atwood proposes to read the stories with an eye to identifying archetypal figures: the Drowning Maiden, the Crazy Person, the Failure, and the Storyteller... These categories allow Atwood to outline some of the salient features

of Munro's writerly preoccupations: the difficulties and dangers for a woman who braves the expectations of her society; the exclusion that ensues when she does; recurrent instances of shame related to self-exposure; the many types of storytellers in the stories, including "liars and failures, illusionists and self-deceivers, or malicious self-servers" (p. 100). The chapter takes the reader through the stories (using a one-by-one approach that *verges on* becoming tedious) to the point where, in "Changes and Ceremonies," "Del herself has now stepped forward to assume the position of Storyteller, with its alchemical power and the authority to meld and validate two contradictory worlds that come with it" (p. 107).

- 5 Although he too proposes a key to his reading proposition, W. H. New's approach in "Re-reading *The Moons of Jupiter*" (ch. 7) is quite different: he takes his cue from Munro's statement that she does not necessarily read stories in a linear way; she can in fact start her reading anywhere in a book – hence a middle can be a beginning. New plays on this notion of different types of 'beginnings' to structure his discussion, which then allows him to encompass a myriad of questions. It is a very elegant and incisive chapter on how the ordering of writing and of reading produces different effects and perspectives on a work, and by extension, on life. Interlacing his interpretation of stories with stylistic comments that illuminate the textual fabric, this chapter stands out as a true stylistic, thematic, and reflective companion to *The Moons of Jupiter*.
- 6 The question of style is the central focus in Douglas Glover's "The style of Alice Munro" (ch. 3) wherein the author convincingly points out pertinent oppositions, contrastive parallels (such as the different boyfriends in the stories "Ceremonies," "Lives of Girls and Women," and "Baptizing") as well as strategies of avoidance or deferral. Yet there is also a sense in which the title is too all-embracing for the scope of the chapter. A more fitting title might have been "The oppositional style in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*." What is also a bit disconcerting is the way in which Glover's own style intervenes: his comments on Munro's work often employ sledgehammer metaphors, such as "Munro forges her style in the furnace of opposition" (p. 45), or "But crucially, for Del, her mother is the anvil on which she hammers out her selfhood" (p. 46), or again,

“Del herself nails the moral of the contrasts” (p. 53). A bit of editorial revision on these points would have been welcome.

- 7 Style expands itself to embrace the intertextual dimension in Héliane Ventura’s “The female bard: Retrieving Greek myths, Celtic ballads, Norse sagas, and popular songs” (ch. 9). Ventura’s erudition is incontestable, and she leaves no seashell unturned in her quest for intertextual ramifications to the slightest reference in Munro. Edifying in themselves, often illuminating in relation to undercurrents in Munro’s stories, Ventura’s intertextual propositions make up a solid chapter which bears witness to the cultural fertility of Munro’s writing.
- 8 In chapter 4, Maria Loschnigg takes on the mandatory question of feminism in “Oranges and Apples: Alice Munro’s undogmatic feminism,” and encounters some of the common pitfalls of feminist readings of literature. That is: yes, she offers a fairly furnished evocation of the multiple, complex ways in which women negotiate their lives in relation to men, the objectification of their bodies, motherhood, and desire... But the framework of Loschnigg’s feminism is not defined. Rather, there is an implicit expectation that “we all know” what feminism means, so that matters of social ambition, of self-image, and of positioning in relation to desire, all come under an injunction to resist the dictate of the male. Yet, as desire is not programmatic but is libidinally oriented (by contrast with social scripts, which are worked out in the political sphere), a critique of literature that takes as one of its main feminist yardsticks whether or not women engage in the feminine masquerade of appearance in relation to masculine desire (a nod in the direction of Joan Riviere would have been welcome here) can only produce ineffectual statements. Perhaps what it boils down to is that a feminist theory that does not rely on a clear and stated theory of subjectivity, sexuality, and desire, cannot really say anything pertinent about male-female relationships. Simply referring in passing to Cixous’ *écriture féminine* will not do. Thus, the chapter can offer nothing other than its inconclusiveness: “Thus, Alice Munro is both a feminist and not a feminist writer” (p. 75). But since the question is more or less peripheral to Munro’s writing, perhaps this is of little consequence.

- 9 In a different way, a similar critique applies to Marilyn Simonds' "Where do you think you are? Place in Alice Munro" (ch. 2). Not unlike the student of feminist theory, the student interested in the thematics of landscape may feel dissatisfied here. Simonds proposes a patchwork of references to types of places in the stories, but no overall analysis or perspective is developed. Places are mentioned, and analogies are offered, but the process stops there, Simonds having already moved on to the next place. For example, the city setting is said to function as a sort of "stage set," and a list of such "sets" is provided (a basement apartment, the Victoria bookstore, or Mr Purvis' mansion). And that is all. There is no attempt to explain how these places interact with the idea of the theatrical, with the notion of audience, or how they perhaps highlight the sense of performance... If the chapter is thematically coherent, its style is anecdotal rather than analytic.
- 10 A thematic approach of a different sort is offered in Robert McGill's "Alice Munro and personal development." McGill has taken on the dubious task of raising a question – Is human development a positive theme in Munro's writing? – to which he and most critics of Munro know the answer is 'no.' In fact, McGill's question includes both artistic and human development. In his treatment of the former, good use is made of recent critical works on Munro which express contrasting opinions about when her style shifted. The notion of 'late style' (late in author's work and in their life) introduced by Edward Said (140) is intriguing in this context, as is McGill's inclusion of Munro's perspective that "a writer's career [may be seen] as something marked not by progress so much as by paradigm shifts" (p. 141).
- 11 Concluding the volume on the subject of 'the mother'– that burden Munro could never "get rid of" – is a risky option, but one that Elizabeth Hay carries off well as her writing is driven by a painful, desiring empathy with the plight of the writer plagued by the mother. Hay's movement through images and stories, as she links them effortlessly to comments by Munro, provides a poignant ending to this volume. Even where she halts at greater length on particular stories – "Ottawa Valley," "The Love of a Good Woman, and "Dimensions" – her touch is light, seeking to illuminate, without any claim to exhausting, the encountered moments of truth-recognition.

- 12 *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro* has something to offer to students and scholars alike. While the road it travels is uneven, sometimes smooth and sometimes bumpy, the volume effectively signposts many of the inviting paths leading to Munro's rich and transformative worlds of fiction.

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