



Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's "Finale"

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ABSTRACT

Alice Munro published in 2012 her last collection of short stories, *Dear Life*, which includes "Finale", a quartet of stories introduced by the author in semiautobiographical terms. The relevance of the themes addressed is, as may be inferred, significant in relation to her life and previous work. In fact, they echo her first two collections of short stories —*Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)— not only in motifs and events, but also in style. This paper analyses and compares this last section —Munro's conclusive contribution to the literary world— with her early work to establish joint features and similarities in order to support and extend the often-claimed autobiographical dimension of Munro's fiction from this unexplored perspective. In addition, this process of analogy has recognised the author's literary and emotional closure in relation to her mother, a hitherto elusive endeavour in her work.

KEYWORDS: Alice Munro; Canadian literature; Short story; "Finale"; Female narrative; Autobiography; Mother-daughter dyad.

1. INTRODUCTION

The corpus of Alice Munro's work mirrors the author's own vital evolution —as admitted by the author herself (in Bruckner, 1990)— and intertwines a series of time-relevant themes which provide unity and consistency: childhood, self-awakening, adulthood, maturity and death; and the ambivalent mother-daughter dyad, among others. In this context, her two final collections of stories —*Too Much Happiness* (2009) and *Dear Life* (2012), written when Munro was in her seventies— represent the culmination of her work; the thematic lines and geographical

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framework of rural Southwestern Ontario remain the same, but the sensitivity, lucidity and perception of age transmit a subtle and intuitive understanding, which could be considered the conclusions of a lifetime. Actually, “Finale”, the last four stories in *Dear Life*, constitutes a separate section, the author’s valedictory contribution to the literary world, introduced in the following terms: “The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life” (Munro, 2013: 255). This confessed autobiographical basis of the quartet blends with a visual technique of story-telling that renders the narrative into an album of family photographs (Cosslett et al., 2000) that explore the ordinary aspects of growing up (DeFalco & York, 2018), incisively foregrounding the extraordinary in normalcy, the sublime in the unremarkable, consummating a forty-year search for self and belonging rooted in Munro’s childhood and the elusive configuration of her mother and past (Ferri, 2006; Howells, 2016). “Consummating” because the materials and themes have been employed before, with different contours and guises, so that establishing and analysing this parallelism appears relevant to support and extend the often-claimed autobiographical dimension of Munro’s writing (Howells, 1998; Howells, 2016; Palusci, 2017; Redekop, 1992; Ross, 2020; Thacker, 1988).

The analogy takes readers to the writer’s biological and lyrical beginnings (Hernández, 1998), to her first two collections of short stories —*Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). It is interesting to note that the latter contained a signed author’s disclaimer, not incorporated in recent editions, which resembles the introduction to “Finale”: “This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbours and friends did not serve as models” (in Thacker, 2005: 211). In this regard, the stories in “Finale” and Munro’s early collections reconstruct the past in terms of memory and imagination to satisfy the needs of the present (Howells, 2016; Thacker, 1988), in an autobiographical quest for origin where the mother is inherent to the female condition (Brodzki, 1998), a not always “invisible presence” that takes centre stage (Benstock, 1988; Gilmore, 2001). Female life writing as a literary performance (Smith & Watson, 2000) is used to piece together fragments of identity, “fissures of female discontinuity” (Benstock, 1988: 20), intrinsically linked to the haunting presence of the now lost mother, a compelling figure that is revisited and re-ascertained in order to outline the self and achieve redemption. Yet Munro’s matrocentric stance is complicated by her mother’s illness and the author’s response, pivoting feelings of guilt and shame, the positions of the sinner and the sinned-against (Brodzki, 1998) by patriarchy’s construct of gender, which turn the ongoing narrative into a vicious circle that manages to spiral into atonement in her last short story in “Finale”.

However, the picture of belonging is broader, embedded in a context of time, events, people and space where the autobiographical rhetoric of relationality also explains who we are and how we are shaped by our engagement with others (Smith & Watson, 2000), although in

Munro the still waters of the narrational mirror are disturbed by an unmet moral obligation to the dead. The author's revisitation in "Dear Life" of the scenes and characters of her first work intimates that in art, as in life, in our final years we return to our beginnings, in this case to ultimately provide closure in relation to her mother at the end of a literary life determined by its resistance (Ferri, 2006; Hovind, 2015; Howells, 2016).

Critics have often remarked on the proximity between Munro's life and her writings, and recent literary research has been published aimed at analysing "Finale" in terms of legacy writing (Buchholtz, 2015) and in relation to the author's biography (Laduniuk, 2015). In addition, Catherine Sheldrick Ross published in June 2020 an essay which tallies the motifs of the author's final quartet with those present throughout her work. Nonetheless, no one so far has explored the relationship between her first two collections and "Finale". I therefore propose to triangulate these three elements of the author —her first two collections, "Finale" and the confessed autobiographical scope of the stories— to establish common grounds that provide a new perception on the value of female life writing in Munro's fiction. The following sections draw a comparison between each story in "Finale" and hypothetical counterparts included in *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women* based on the recognition of shared themes, events and exploitation of literary resources. Each section develops the two stories and their central axes, which also offer a neat timeline of lifecycle landmarks: first perceptions of self and death; revelations of the paradoxical nature of existence; sexual awakening; and closure —in Munro's case closely tied to the figure of her mother, which anchors the quartet as well as much of her work.

2. FIRST AWARENESS: "THE EYE" AND "HEIRS OF THE LIVING BODY"

Knowledge of Munro's fiction and biography leaves readers with an autobiographical aftertaste (Palusci, 2017), where the boundaries between fiction and fact are disturbingly blurred (Regan, 1991). This confusion is further emphasised by Munro's many ambiguous statements on this dimension of her writing (Redekop, 1992; Thacker, 1988), in contrast with her introduction to "Finale", which implies the unequivocal fictional nature of her previous work. Nevertheless, in "Finale" the boundaries between fiction and fact come into clearer focus through a narrative technique of emotional reminiscing which is a hallmark of Munro's early literature, i.e. the use of a first-person girl-narrator empowered with a "double vision": the observation and knowledge of the recalling adult (Burszta, 2016; Guignery, 2015; Hoy, 1980), who, nonetheless, manages to leave intact the seemingly paradoxical components perceived by the young protagonist, so readers feel and participate in her sense of unease, confusion and, sometimes, insight.

Thus, the narrator of “The Eye”, the first story in “Finale”, looks back on her childhood to establish herself as a small girl who witnesses the arrival of two siblings, which in turn triggers a process of individuation from her mother, a first perception and positionality of the “I” —note the homophone— as different from “the other” (Gilmore, 2001), whom she is now able to observe (Benstock, 1988): “Up until the time of the first baby I had not been aware of ever feeling different from the way my mother said I felt” (Munro, 2013: 257). With her mother busy looking after two babies and the presence of Sadie, a young woman hired to help with the house chores, the narrator undergoes a process of self-awakening where she can “accept how largely my mother’s notions about me might differ from my own. [...] I could think about what was true and what wasn’t” (258).

The story jumps to a few months later. It is now autumn, Sadie has been run over by a car and the girl-narrator is going with her mother to her funeral, where she suspects she may be required to see the dead woman’s body: “My mother had not actually said that I would have to see her but she had not said that I wouldn’t have to either” (266). The distressing moment arrives, but the child engineers her own adapted version of the incongruities of the adult world, turning her first viewing of a dead body into something intimate, cryptic and meaningful, designed only for her eyes and knowledge:

Something moved. I saw it, her eyelid on my side moved. It was not opening or halfway opening or anything like that, but lifting just such a tiny bit as would make it possible, if you were her, to be able to see out through the lashes. Just to distinguish maybe what was light outside and what was dark.

I was not surprised then and not in the least scared. Instantly, this sight fell into everything I knew about Sadie and somehow, as well, into whatever special experience was owing to myself. And I did not dream of calling anybody else’s attention to what was there, because it was not meant for them, it was completely for me. (269)

An encounter with death is recurrent material of Munro’s work, but *how* it is used is just as meaningful as how it occurs (Thacker, 1998). In “The Eye”, death features in parallel to the discovery of the self (May, 2007) and the creation of an intimate perception of our end, which consolidates this new position of the narrator. The resonance of the story brings to mind “Heirs of the Living Body”, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, which coincides in themes and motifs to a startling degree. In the story, Del, the girl-protagonist, also conveys her fascination and misgiving at her initial interactions with death. The first, the viewing of a dead cow, awakens an obsession with its eye, “wide open, dark, a smooth sightless bulge, with a sheen like silk and a reddish gleam in it, a reflection of light” (Munro, 2015: 56), so that “it invited desecration. I wanted to poke it, trample it, pee on it, anything to punish it, to show what contempt I had for its being dead. [...] But still it had the power” (56). In the second, when Del confronts the body of her Uncle Craig at his funeral, the power of death becomes invincible

and infallible, a certain fate that takes away our gift of life: “He himself was wiped out; [...] he was the terrible, silent, indifferent conductor of forces that could flare up, in an instant, and burn through this room, all reality, leave us dark” (74).

In both stories, readers are prompted to ask themselves if as humans we look at the starkness of death, or whether death is, in fact, observing from beyond, with the power of the inevitable. The young protagonists feel a sense of relief at surviving the event, since, in Munro, this first interaction between the living and the dead is unavoidable (Redekop, 1992) and goes hand in hand with a realignment in self-perception and a fabled acceptance of our end. The revelation of the union between life and death triggers emotions in the child and an apprehension of mortality that continue to perplex and obsess the adult.

3. THE PARADOX OF LIFE: “NIGHT” AND “WALKER BROTHERS COWBOY”

The narrative’s twofold vision of child and adult portrays events from perspectives which belong to different temporal dimensions, providing depth and subjectivity, and a closer illustration of the labyrinth of reality and existence (Borges, 1993). In Munro, the triad facts-memory-imagination provides the fabric for the epiphany, which is the turning and central point of the story, utilised to imply that life combines paradoxical and perplexing realities where truth is elusive and multistranded (Cox, 2004), anti-epiphanic even (Hovind, 2015). One learns from the hindsight of adulthood that there is not ever one unique truth, but many, which are often contradictory, especially in terms of emotions.

“Finale” continues with “Night” and the adolescence of the narrator, when her level of awareness and positionality enters the realm of the people surrounding her. As she is convalescing after the removal of her appendix, time hangs on her hands and she experiences a new kind of freedom, the result of her newly acquired status as a semi-adult and her recent illness, which has meant that she is given a respite from house chores. In any case, “my mother must have been well enough, as yet, to handle most of that work” (Munro, 2013: 275), an allusion to her mother’s Parkinson’s disease which worsened soon after. The lack of daytime action leads to sleeplessness and the arrival of an unwelcome thought that she is unable to fend off, and which takes over her mind during her amnesiac nights: “The thought that I could strangle my little sister, who was asleep in the bunk below me and whom I loved more than anybody in the world” (277). She looks for solace and relief from her persecuting mind in the calm and beauty of the darkness of nature outside and tries not to dwell on the absurdity of her thoughts during daytime. But one night, her father is waiting for her and enquires about her troubles with sleep, so that the teenager realises that he must have been aware of her wanderings all along. Almost without meaning to, she tells him the truth about her sister, “that I was afraid I would hurt her. [...] ‘Strangle her,’ I said then. I could not stop myself, after all”

(283). The soundness and reason of her father's response reveal to her a new side of him and provide the consolation she requires: "Then he said not to worry. He said, 'People have those kinds of thoughts sometimes.' He said this quite seriously and without any sort of alarm or jumpy surprise. People have these kinds of thoughts or fears if you like, but there's no real worry about it, no more than a dream, you could say. [...] He seemed to be taking it for granted that such a thing could not happen. [...] He did not blame me, though, for thinking it. Did not wonder at me, was what he said" (283).

The adult Munro considers the wisdom of his words, which gave her the reassurance she needed to accept and understand the duality of being: "what he did [...] set me down, but without either mockery or alarm, in the world we were living in. People have thoughts they'd sooner not have. It happens in life" (284). The boundaries of being are envisaged and stretched so that we put ourselves in the situation of considering "the worst" (277). In this sense, "Night" reminds readers of Munro's first two collections of stories, which often deal with childhood and youth as a time of revelation and understanding of the irreconcilable and multiple aspects of existence (Hernández, 1998). The same man who uses "the razor strap or his belt" (Munro 2013: 284) to curb his daughter's behaviour, also offers what she needs to understand that just like there is darkness in herself, there is light in her father she had not been aware of, and that this is part of humans' complexity.

This ambivalence of life and human nature is also present in "Walker Brothers Cowboy", the first story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In the story, the girl-narrator and her younger brother accompany their father on a door-to-door selling trip, although they end up visiting Nora, an old flame of their father, a sunny woman who dances with them and drinks whisky. The paradoxical revelations and epiphany come together in the last paragraphs of the story. Nora is a Catholic and the girl's staunch Presbyterian relatives would say that "[s]he digs with the wrong foot" (2011: 14), words that seem "sad [...] as never before, dark, perverse" (17). That the visit, the alcohol and the fun need to remain a secret from her mother is something the father does not have to mention. That her father's reality might have been different and — perhaps — happier, that life has many routes that hover unexplored, is expressed through a metaphorical description of the landscape on their way home (Rasporich, 1990): "So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine" (Munro, 2011: 18).

Twenty-three years after the publication of this story, Catherine Sheldrick Ross interviewed Munro. After lunch they stopped at the celebration of the ninetieth birthday of the best man at Munro's parents' wedding, where they met the original Nora. Munro admitted that the story's visit was fact, but the romantic relationship was fictional (in Ross, 1992). Facts

from the past and the memory and imagination of the present realign themselves to describe the paradoxical epiphany of a young girl —or of the adult woman. In both stories, a different side of the father-figure is exposed to the young protagonist, and the unveiling comes with an acumen of newly established bonds, as well as of the inconclusiveness of the human condition and reality, which she takes forward to her next stage in maturity.

4. SEXUAL AWAKENING: “VOICES” AND “LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN”

Gender and personal narration join forces in the arena of women’s identity (Smith & Watson, 2000) to leave written proof of the female psyche. Although not a feminist in the active or radical sense of the word, Munro’s art is informed by the circumstances of her sex, as claimed by the author herself (in Feinberg, 2001). Her fiction charts a lifetime’s spectrum of female nature, with her subtle perception translating into women readers’ self-recognition and the impression of looking through the optical prism of the writer’s vision (Redekop, 1992). This is particularly true when Munro addresses female sexuality, revealing and exploring this inclusive human instinct with audacity and honesty (Edemariam, 2003).

Although “Voices” touches on the embarrassment felt by the young Alice due to her mother’s oddity, its emphasis is placed on the sexual awakening of the ten-year-old Alice. They are both attending a neighbour’s party, but their entrance is overshadowed by her mother’s social ineptness: “Whatever she said, it did not sound quite right. [...] and I heard her laugh, delightedly, as if to make up for nobody’s talking to her” (Munro, 2013: 290). The young girl is happy to leave her side and go upstairs to put her coat away. On the way back, she sees the town’s brothel madame and the owner of the local poolroom dancing together. The girl is unaware of their identities and puzzled by her mother’s earnest order to retrieve her coat so they can exit the dance. For, to add insult to injury, the woman has brought along one of “her girls” (295), whom Alice bumps into, sitting with two young soldiers on the stairs. The young prostitute is distraught and the men are trying to console her with soothing words “as if she were someone who deserved never to have encountered one rough moment, someone who rightfully should be petted and pleased and have heads bowed before her” (295). But it is the men and their voices —the sexuality implied— which remain in Alice’s head: “For a long time I remembered their voices. [...] It was certainly true that I had never in my life heard a man speak in that way, treating a woman as if she were so fine and valued a creature that whatever it was, whatever unkindness had come near her, was somehow a breach of a law, a sin. [...] It was her comforters I marvelled at. How they seemed to bow down and declare themselves in front of her” (296-297).

Munro’s use of paradox intertwines opposing scenes and meanings (Smythe, 1992) and the tension often leads to a resolution in terms of self-discovery (Martin, 1987). The

paradoxical opposing scenes lie in the mother's scandalised reaction at the sight of the madame and prostitute, and Alice's countering fascination and response to the men's voices and words, which awaken the seed of her latent sexuality: "And, for I don't know how long, I thought of them. In the cold dark of my bedroom they rocked me to sleep. I could turn them on, summon up their faces and their voices—but, oh, far more, their voices were now directed to myself and not to any unnecessary third party. Their hands blessed my own skinny thighs and their voices assured me that I, too, was worthy of love" (Munro, 2013: 298). The young Alice does not have enough understanding of the world to fully—or partially—comprehend the situation, or her mother's attitude towards it, yet she perceives the underlying meanings of the voices and scenes, and the impression they leave is long lasting and impactful, activating a new positioning of herself as female.

The sexual awakening of the girl-narrator is also present in the story "Lives of Girls and Women", in the collection of the same name. Del is now a little older and the voice belongs to Mr Chamberlain, a friend of the family, who recounts his adventures in wartime Italy, where ruthless fathers would offer their young daughters, "No older than Del here" (2015: 192) for money, prompting Del's private fantasising: "Mr Chamberlain's voice in my mind, saying *no older than Del here*, surrounded me, made me feel endangered and desired" (193). Thoughts of sex summon to Del's mind the brothel in Jubilee and the incongruous ordinariness of the prostitutes as they sit in their garden, which appears "deliberate and tantalizing deception—the skin of everyday appearances stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust" (194). These prostitutes are in full possession of carnal knowledge, which remains forbidden to Del, a matter of the imagination and fantasy rather than of the body. Curiosity gets the better of her and she takes it into her hands to gain some real-life experience, accepting and searching for Mr Chamberlain's gropes and pokes, recklessly driving with him to the outskirts of town. Del, in her enthusiasm, doesn't fully grasp the risks involved in her pursuit and is carried away by its possibilities (Szalay, 2001), projecting onto her surroundings the intoxication of her feelings: "the countryside I knew was altered by his presence, his voice, overpowering foreknowledge of the errand we were going on together. [...] and now with Mr Chamberlain I saw that the whole of nature became debased, maddeningly erotic" (Munro, 2015: 213). Unfortunately, the vulgarity of the occasion, a sad pathetic middle-aged man exposing himself and masturbating in front of a girl, breaks the magic spell and disappointingly brings to light the bleak reality of the male organ, "[r]aw and blunt, ugly-colored as a wound, it looked to me vulnerable, playful and naïve" (214), and the sordidness of the situation itself in the midst of quiet dignified nature. Del has the intelligence to detach herself from her first interaction with sex and will simply file it away in her mind as a further mystery of human nature, where imagination and reality prove an unequal match.

In "Voices" we feel the stirring of a girl's sexuality, which, like the voices in the staircase of the house, generates our speculation about the dark spaces inside it (Howells, 1998). The

story could be interpreted as a prequel to “Lives of Girls and Women”, where the sexual seed begins to grow and come out into the open. In this last story, the landscape reflects the female psyche (Rasporich, 1990), revealing the paradox of female desire, where the male excites the female in thought and feeling rather than in deed (Atwood, 2016; Szalay, 2001). In both stories Munro takes on the overwhelming task of writing about the sexual awakening of young girls, confronting the issue head on and from a purely female perspective, with an insight and intelligence which baffle female readers into a new assimilation of their own biographies, where identification and self-recognition take centre stage.

Similarly, the shame the child feels because of her mother’s oddity in “Voices” widens in Del’s adolescence —“it was she herself who had publicly embarrassed our family” (Munro, 2015: 222)— to reluctantly acknowledge the judgement and intelligence of her thoughts, introduced in the final paragraphs of “Lives of Girls and Women”: “There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up until now has been their connection with men. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals” (222). Although Del meets these words with resistance, they crystallise into a “coming-to-gender consciousness” (Smith & Watson, 2000: 19): “men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experience and shuck off what they didn’t want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same” (Munro, 2015: 223).

5. CLOSURE: “DEAR LIFE” AND “THE PEACE OF UTRECHT”

Munro has spoken and written about the conflictive nature of her initial relationship with her mother, exacerbated later by the diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease, which meant that “the whole struggle became terribly difficult, because you were struggling with a sick person who, emotionally, holds all the cards” (in Edemariam, 2003). The author’s behaviour towards her involved feelings of guilt and inadequacy: “My mother’s life was very sad, and if I had been a different person I could have made it quite a bit better. [...] I could have been very helpful to her—not in physical terms, but in day to day communication, instead of leaving her all alone” (in Edemariam, 2003), which she did in order to pursue her life. It is therefore not puzzling that mothers feature so prominently in Munro’s writing since, as the author has admitted, “the whole mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. It probably obsesses me” (in Redekop 1992: 3-4), and the result is that it permeates her writing to such an extent that it is impossible to adopt the stance of New Criticism to analyse her literature (Redekop, 1992); the author’s biographical data—in this case, her mother’s illness—is an imperative ingredient of her writing, a subject she returns to fictionally and metafictionally, in order to explain and understand her own life, and exorcise her behaviour: “The problem, the only problem, is my

mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her” (Munro, 2004: 246; in “The Ottawa Valley”, in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, 1974).

“Dear Life”, the last story in “Finale”, provides a dream-like account of Munro’s life, starting in the mythical road and river of her childhood. Memories flow in the narrative, with Munro’s mother as the axis of her recollections and no logical pattern of thought because “this is not a story, only life” (Munro, 2013: 307), a subjective reading of personal history (Howells, 2016). We learn about Munro’s childhood, about her mother’s pretensions and her preference for her father, about the bankruptcy of their fox-raising business and the diagnosis of her mother’s illness, although “the strange thing is that I don’t remember that time as unhappy” (Munro, 2013: 309). The stories of our childhood shape and explain who we are, told and retold as the essence that provides identity. One of these stories repeated by Munro’s mother featured a Mrs Netterfield, a batty old woman who lived at the top of the road and tried to steal baby Alice, left to sunbathe in the garden. Her mother, seeing the old lady marching down the road towards her child, had picked her up and bolted herself in the house. Mrs Netterfield peered aggressively through the windows and tried to gain access into the house. Years later, when Alice “was married and had moved to Vancouver” (316), she reads a poem signed by the surname Netterfield in which she recognises the river. The author of the poem is portraying the view of the river from her own home as a child, and Munro realises she must be Mrs Netterfield’s daughter, that the family must have lived in the property before moving up the road, thus explaining the old woman’s behaviour not as that of a baby-snatcher but, rather, of an eccentric trying to gain access to her previous property. This observation is made nearly at the end of “Dear Life”, told because Munro is engrossed by how things occurred or might have occurred in the past (Heble, 1994). She feels a duty towards her dead mother (Carscallen, 1993), a need to pay tribute to her life and understand its significance (Hernández, 2012), revisit the scene of her sin one more time to finally forgive herself: “But the person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available. I did not go home for my mother’s last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip and my husband had a contempt for formal behaviour, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. 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” (Munro, 2013: 319).

It is worth noting that the “Real Life” version published in *The New Yorker* includes a last paragraph which refers to Munro’s mother’s escape from hospital during her final illness and which was then omitted from the quartet, perhaps because “[i]f this were fiction [...] it would be too much, but it is true” (Munro, 2011). Munro may have edited out the painful scene in order to leave her longed-for reconciliation undisturbed. Her last words are dedicated to the

woman she was ashamed of, who made her feel guilty, from whom she tried to escape, but to whom she persistently returns. They refer to her mother's last illness and death, and to Munro's own negligence, which she has come to terms with and forgiven after a long literary process which frequently translates into words the trauma caused by disease (Jurecic, 2012) in a cathartic or even therapeutic attempt to provide order to the emotional disarray. The story ends a matrocentric ongoing narrative structured in sequels and returns, where the scenes are revisited from different perspectives and feelings of guilt and betrayal (Brodzki, 1998; Hay, 2016), an awareness of one's weaknesses and frustration.

The process started with "The Peace of Utrecht", in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and continued in "The Ottawa Valley" (in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, 1974) — where Munro tackles her mother's first symptoms and her guilty adolescent reaction to them— and "Friend of My Youth" (in the collection of the same name, 1990) —where she somewhat reconciles herself with her mother. Nevertheless, "The Peace of Utrecht" is the first story where the author blatantly addressed her mother's illness, and which she subsequently described as "real" (in Redekop, 1992: 51) and "autobiographical" (in Thacker, 1988: 158). In the story, Helen, the protagonist, returns with her two children to the family home after the death and funeral of her mother to visit her sister Maddy, who stayed behind to look after their parent during her illness. The visit is fraught with the tension between them, with the complex dynamics secured by the disease looming overhead with poisonous claws, because "at heart we reject each other, and as for the past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien" (Munro, 2011: 190). The narrator tries to recapture the image of their mother, so disturbingly transformed by her illness that she had become a Mrs Netterfield-like creature, using the plural first person in an attempt to unite her experiences with Maddy's: "and I realize that she became one of the town's possessions and oddities, its brief legends. This she achieved in spite of us, for we tried, both crudely and artfully, to keep her at home, away from that sad notoriety; not for her sake, but for ours" (195), although their shared past lays a gulf between them (DeFalco, 2012). But the picture remains incomplete, no matter how hard Helen tries to depict the horrors of the disease of "Our Gothic Mother" (Munro, 2011: 200) and its impact on their lives, because "[i]n the ordinary world it was not possible to re-create her. [...] I felt the beginning of a secret, guilty estrangement [after her death]" (200-201). Justification — "And how could we have loved her, I say desperately to myself, the resources of love we had were not enough, the demand on us was too great" (199)— fails to provide relief, because the reality is that Helen left and Maddy stayed behind: "You give me four years, I'll give you four years, she said. But I got married" (207), and that Maddy, in her despair, left her mother to die in hospital towards the end of her illness, escape scene included. She not only sacrificed her life but has something to reproach herself for. The deadlocking tension finds orderly dramatic relief in the final scene of the story when Helen tries to unload Maddy of her guilt and push

her forward in life. Maddy drops a cut-glass bowl shattering it to pieces, which, like her life, cannot be recomposed, as she lacks Helen's instinct of survival: "Look what I've done now. In my bare feet yet. Get me a broom'. / 'Take your life, Maddy. Take it'. / 'Yes I will," Maddy said. "Yes I will'. / 'Go away, don't stay here'. / 'Yes I will. [...] It's no loss to me. I've got enough glass bowls to do me the rest of my life [...] / I went around the kitchen looking for a broom because I seemed to have forgotten where it was kept and she said, 'But why can't I Helen? *Why can't I?*'" (210). This ending is in consonance with Helen's earlier reflections on the reasons why her sister stayed: "Yet she stayed. All I can think about that, all I have ever been able to think, to comfort me, is that she may have been able and may even have chosen to live without time and in perfect imaginary freedom as children do, the future untampered with, all choices possible" (196). The statement seems to encapsulate the philosophical trait of Munro's fiction: the endless possibilities of life that stand unexplored—like the many glass bowls Maddy has been left—but that have the potential to be sought; and the paradoxical truth that the consequences of the chosen route make impossible their practical endeavour.

It seems revealing that the first and last words Munro acknowledges as autobiographical should be about the illness and death of her mother. The fuzzy limits between fiction and reality are brought into focus to disrupt the notion of the autonomy of art (Redekop, 1992) in a literary pursuit of appeasement and reconciliation with the past. However, in "Dear Life" Munro's literary quest or journey to home and belonging, which so often ends in silence (Ferri, 2006), finds closure.

6. CONCLUSIONS

"Finale" reads as Munro's voluntary last chance of expressing thoughts about herself, her life and the people and events she considers important. The title and introduction are significant since they define the narrative in terms of an intimately emotional autobiography. The author returns to the time-space of her upbringing to sketch out prevailing memories, and this quadrates with her first two collections, *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)—similarly introduced initially. The themes and characters, although reshaped, also coincide, so that it has been possible to draw an analogy between "Finale" and her early stories, giving weight to the idea that much of her previous work was inspired by personal experience and knowledge or, indeed, autobiographical material. However, there is a difference in the telling of these childhood scenes, which alters their ultimate significance and reading. In the initial versions the events are embedded within and attenuated by larger narratives, while in the quartet they are presented in raw isolation as the *closest* and final things Munro has to say about her life, their epiphanic nature condensed by their disengagement, the force of the past and its impact on the present undiluted by the narrational framework of her

early work. The title, introduction, selection and positioning of these events as Munro's last ever published words stress their relevance and cruciality in terms of life writing, providing a denouement or resolution to both her personal biography and the corpus of her work.

Munro's kaleidoscopic narration of her past adds visuality to the writing, while providing a meaningful album of her upbringing, helping readers and herself understand who she is and where she comes from. We learn of a young girl's first realisation of herself as a separate entity from her mother, and of her first encounter with death. We are told that memory forgives the flaws and highlights the positive qualities of the people we love—with a special mention to her father—and that the process of growing up reveals the dualities and sexual nature of existence. And we comprehend that all this is part of life, an essential aspect of self-awakening; that an adult's baggage of experience and perception reveals in a new light the paradoxes of life only intuited in our childhood and adolescence.

It is not adulthood or romantic relationships that stand out in her mind, but certain childhood milestones that gain significance in the context of a lifetime, often closely tied to the figure of her mother. Like Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs* (1958), "Finale" may be interpreted as an attempt to get rid of the ghost of her mother, a final chance to come to terms with her own behaviour (Pilardi, 1999) through a conscious effort of her representation, conducted yet again to ultimately forgive herself. The author's valedictory quartet ends a literary lifetime paying tribute to her mother and finding appeasement and acceptance of the troubled circumstances of their relationship. We perceive Munro's complexity of feelings, which have shaped her living as well as her art, her biography as well as her fiction, often blurring the two in a literary exercise of expiation and reconstruction of the past to come to terms with the present. Because the confessed drama in her self-depiction is familial (Smith & Watson, 2000), a refusal to submit to the role of daughter-carer, causing a sinner's guilt that prevails and threads her writing (Brodzki, 1998). In this regard, and following a contemporary reading of Munro's literature as life writing, the performativity of her writing is her need to realign, enact, reiterate and challenge (Smith & Watson, 2000) a programmed and moulded identity from which she has broken free, with dire consequences that determine her life, but which also trigger her writing (Hay, 2016). Her positionality is ambivalent, urging her forward to express the unfairness of the mould, while acquiescing to remorse, caving into her relationality to others.

The mother-daughter dyad enfolds the narrative in different forms, with the inescapable presence of her mother overhanging each story, sometimes censorious, others embarrassing, but always decisive, her illness never far off. In "Dear Life", the final story and perhaps the most touching, we are given an account of how she was before her illness, before the ravages of Parkinson's took hold of her: a young mother protecting her daughter, providing an anecdote to cling onto for safety, a connection between a sunny and sometimes baffling past and its surprising projection into the future. And it is her mother Munro wants then, at the end of life,

to talk to, to share with, to forgive and be forgiven; because we are given to understand that in our final years we no longer need to justify our actions in relation to the people we most love. We are perhaps willing to absolve ourselves from our failings and achieve longed-for closure, which is probably, and somehow, in them —the people we most love— and our beginnings.

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