

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OVERTONES IN ALICE MUNRO'S CASTLE ROCK

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If autobiographical experience is to an extent inseparable from Munro's creativity, as it affects her vision of the world, *Castle Rock* seems to represent a further step in a direction that Munro has not yet explored. The Foreword to *Castle Rock* confirms that the uncollected autobiographical stories that Munro has been producing over a considerable number of years have not risen in the author's estimate to a level of conscious distinction from her fictional work until, precisely, the publication of *Castle Rock*. Both the origin and the presentation of the book by the author suggest two considerations. Firstly, the authorial uncertainty in deciphering the genesis of her own creative work signals that the intellectual passage from autobiographical experience to fictional form can be obscure even to the artist who is the subject of the first and the creator of the second. The expression autobiographical experience, furthermore, describes an intricate web of cognitive operations that include the perusal of memory and the construction of a sense of identity. Secondly, it can be observed how certain uneasiness is present, in Munro's Foreword, in regard to the effectiveness and the ethics of story-telling. Reflections on the limits of story-telling are interspersed in fictional passages throughout Munro's work. Robert McGill observes:

For Rose, as for many of Munro's narrators, the challenge is to record what is real, but to do so with complete verisimilitude is impossible, so that every story seems to be a failure, and potentially an unethical one. The narrator of *Meneseteung* worries that she might have got it wrong, and in *Home*, when the narrator thinks of her own representation of reality, she declares: *I can't get it, I can't quite bring it out. I feel a bit treacherous and artificial*. Munro herself has said: "I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking), an unavoidable lie".¹

Thacker argues that in the story *Fathers*, published in the *New Yorker* in 2004 and subsequently included in *Castle Rock*, "Munro explicitly uses an autobiographical incident – her father's 1943 near-electrocution in a neighbour's barn – as the basis of a fiction".² The biographer makes an observation which confirms the complex nature of Munro's autobiographical stories, in their seeming oscillation between factuality and fiction. Thacker

observes that *Fathers* is a work of fiction “for the father in the story is nothing like Robert Laidlaw and, besides, he is electrocuted”.³ A passage in the story directly recalls a precedent in *Royal Beatings*, included in *Who Do You Think You Are?*. Both *Fathers* and *Royal Beatings* consider an episode of domestic violence memorialized by Munro’s father on his daughter, then adolescent. The memory, itself of a disquieting nature, is characterized by the humiliation caused by the subsequent conduct of the three protagonists involved, young Alice and her parents. In *Fathers* Munro’s mother, who called for the punishment, afterwards succeeds in conciliating the outraged daughter with an offer of food, thus enabling the family shortly afterwards to act as if nothing has happened. Reunited over their meal the family discusses a similar episode which occurred in a nearby farmhouse as follows:

My mother said that it was a shame, what a man like that had made of his daughter. It seems strange to me now that we could conduct this conversation so easily, without its seeming ever to enter our heads that my father had beaten me, at times, and that I had screamed out not that I wanted to kill him, but that I wanted to die. And that this had happened not so long ago – three or four times, I would think, in the years when I was around eleven or twelve.⁴

Royal Beatings precedes the composition of *Fathers* of over twenty-five years, and is centered on an episode which occurs in the protagonist’s youth in West Hanratty, a periphery of a provincial town bearing the characteristics of several fictional toponyms invented by Munro on the model of native Wingham. Rose succeeds in her acting career after leaving the humble familiar background, a decision that causes her to feel an unresolved emotional tension towards her father and stepmother, who remains in West Hanratty and with whom she has sporadic contact. The autobiographical resonance of Rose’s coming of age story is suggested by several critics, most notably Howells. Rose’s trajectory as a young artist in *Who Do You Think You Are?* is considered similar to Del’s in *Lives of Girls and Women*. In *Royal Beatings* the setting of the scene, the kitchen within the farmhouse, the protagonists, the father, the adolescent daughter and the watching female figure who invokes the punishment, the mode of the beating; each of these is unaltered in respect to Sheila Munro’s account in her memoir and to Alice Munro’s description in *Fathers*. The character of Flo, on whose fictional nature Munro has commented, is the stepmother substituting the maternal figure.¹⁷ Flo’s independent, satirical character is associable with that of the mother portrayed in the *Ottawa Valley*, *The Peace of Utrecht* and *Princess Ida*. The reason for Flo’s remonstrance to Rose’s father is an irreverent play on words, invented by the young woman, whose undertone is scurrilous. The reason for the silent tension between the women, which in the circumstance explodes into a proper altercation, is substantial. Both Flo and Rose’s father resent in the girl a quality in her temperament which faithfully mirrors a trait of Munro’s character:

What do they have to say to each other? It doesn’t really matter. Flo speaks of Rose’s smart-aleck behavior, rudeness and sloppiness and conceit. Brian’s innocence, Rose’s corruption. Oh, don’t you think you’re somebody, says Flo, and a moment later, Who do you think you are? Rose contradicts and objects with such poisonous reasonableness and mildness, displays theatrical unconcern.⁵

In conclusion, it appears that *Castle Rock* does not respect the conventions of the autobiographical genre, as controversial as they seem to be. The book exceeds the boundaries of autobiography both in terms of content and scope. The definition of autobiographical fiction seems to approach a more satisfactory description of it, although the general agreement on the meaning of the expression is at present unstable. Gérard Genette infers that “if words have meaning or even multiple meanings, then narratology – whether in its formal aspect, as the analyses of the sequences of events and actions related by this discourse – sought by rights to concern itself with stories of *all* kinds, fictional and otherwise”.⁶ Munro, by deciding to harmonize historical reference, personal memories and fictional material in one set of narratives, and openly admitting the complexity of the project, has dared to challenge literary conventions and perhaps stimulated the birth of a new form of art.

REFERENCES

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3. Ibid.
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