“And now another story surfaced”: Re-Emerging Voices, Stories and Secrets in Alice Munro’s “Family Furnishings”

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“And now another story surfaced”:¹
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Like many stories by Munro, “Family Furnishings” (from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*) testifies to a paradoxical relationship to the past that involves denials, rejection and appropriation. I propose to analyse the role played by two apparently unconnected embedded stories in the resurfacing motif at work in “Family Furnishings.” As both stories resurface, they bring about the return of the past, but while resurgence is made synonymous with birth and creation with the family tale, the resurfacing of the childhood tale will reveal that resurgence also means the return of the repressed. Since these two resurfacing stories will force the narrator to negotiate with the past, and its role in her life as a writer, they play an important part in the metafictional dimension of “Family Furnishings.”

The first half of “Family Furnishings” focuses on the narrator’s childhood on the family farm. The second half begins with a visit which the narrator—who is now in her twenties— is reluctantly paying her cousin Alfrida, a few weeks before leaving the town in which they both live. The narrator justifies her reluctance by the personal changes she has undergone. She has new friends who share her taste for literature and music. She is also about to marry, and has decided to become a writer. Thus, she repeatedly emphasizes her desire to let go of the past and break up with family members such as Alfrida. The pivotal event of the visit will be the telling of and the listening to a family story, one that the narrator was forced to listen to as a child, as it was one of her aunts’ favourite stories.

It is the first time the reader is told the story, yet I would like to argue that it surfaces and resurfaces at the same time. The narrator first sums up the story for the reader—Alfrida’s mother died when an oil lamp exploded in her hands. She then comments on her family’s tendency to dwell on it, letting her impatience surface as she remarks: “Nothing could be said about Alfrida’s mother, or Alfrida’s father and very little about Alfrida herself without that death being dragged in and tacked onto it.” (Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* 109)² A remark in brackets in which the narrator explains that the father’s leaving

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1. This is a quote I have borrowed from “Open Secrets” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 142).
2. When required for purposes of clarity, subsequent references to this book will be abridged to *Hateship.*
the family farm was considered a downward step morally if not financially, suggests a personal comment and makes it clear that we are reading the narrator’s words and hearing her voice. However, other people’s words and voices will slowly penetrate the narrative. The intrusion is barely perceptible at first but words such as “desperately” and “dreadful,” which express opinions, mark a transition into free indirect speech. The last two sentences of the paragraph show that the narrator is aware that she has incorporated her aunts’ words into her narrative: “And it was a dreadful thing for a child of Alfrida’s age, whatever. (That is—whatever she had done with herself since. )” (Hateship 109) The full stop after “whatever” playfully reproduces the women’s pregnant silence when they used to tell the story. The use of brackets for the subsequent sentence shows that the narrator is both explaining the hidden meaning of “whatever” and trying to regain control of her narrative.

The next segment, however, demonstrates her failure to do so. Something sudden, even brutal, happens as the flow of narrative is interrupted and disrupted by a large segment in italics. This is clearly spoken speech, as the use of contractions shows. Yet the fact that it is spoken speech does not justify the use of italics. Generally speaking, italics impose their visual difference on the page; they leap out. As Julien Gracq reminds us, they have often been used to signal the introduction and intrusion of an alien element into a given language or speech (Gracq 183). Italics do not so much underline a word or a sentence as disrupt the sentence or passage in which they appear (Laufer 82). Reminding us that the Italian printer who first designed the type was trying to imitate handwriting, Gérard Blanchard suggests italics were thus given a “psychological dimension” (Blanchard 38). Throughout her work, Munro has played on this dimension, using italics for the repetition of words that affected the narrator as she heard them. They are made to evoke the emotion that resurfaces from the narrator’s memory and to suggest that the emotion affects her again as she remembers the words. Or rather, as she hears them again. Munro repeatedly plays on the visual effect to evoke the verbal dimension. This is clearly the case here. The emphasis on the word “voices” in the subsequent segment (which reverts back to roman printing type) indicates that the passage in italics is meant to let us hear the aunts’ voices and not just their words: “The feeling was in their voices […] [t] o listen to them […] [t] heir voices were like worms slithering around in my insides.” (Hateship 110) The voices from the past were always there, in spite of the narrator’s attempts to silence them. The passage in italics signals the intrusion of these voices from the past. They surface into the narrative as they resurface in

3. An interesting example can be found in “Rich as Stink”: ‘Keep on the right side of your mother,’ he said. ‘She’s rich as stink.’ / Karin felt her face heat up, she felt the shock of those words. […] Rich as stink. It sounded hateful.” (Munro, The Love of a Good Woman 237) One of the most striking examples remains Ladner’s words in “Vandals” which endlessly repeat the acts of abuse committed against the children and that Liza hears again and again. (Munro, Open Secrets 292)
the narrator’s memory, from the narrator’s body. They erupt from the past and disrupt the body narrative, the very shape of the italic letters evoking the worms. We also witness a conflict of voices as the italics introduce and reflect a form of disruption that goes against any suggestion of a controlling narrative voice. On the diegetic level, the use of italics to differentiate the aunts’ voices testifies to a difficult relation to the past.

In the passage following the italicized segment, the narrator claims she both hated the story and the way her aunts and mother dwelt on it. She remarks that men do not normally dwell on such stories. She then reflects that it is very fortunate her fiancé is not there. He who admires opera and Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* would have hated to be forced to listen to such a squalid family tragedy: “[H]e had not time for tragedy—for the squalor of tragedy—in ordinary life.” (110) The reference to the canons is all the more striking as the narrator’s relationship to the story undergoes a dramatic change in the passage which follows. As Alfrida starts telling her tale “in her normal voice” (111), and so, in her own voice, another story surfaces:

“*But you know what I said? I remember saying it. I said, But she would want to see me. She would want to see me.*”

Then she really did laugh, or make a snorting sound that was evasive and scornful.

“I must have thought I was a pretty big cheese, mustn’t I? *She would want to see me.*”

This was a part of the story I had never heard.

And the minute I heard it, something happened. It was as if a trap had snapped shut, to hold these words in my head. I did not exactly understand what use I would have for them. I only knew how they jolted me and released me, right away, to breathe a different kind of air available only to myself.

*She would want to see me.*

The story I wrote, with this in it, would not be written till years later, not until it had become quite unimportant to think about who had put the idea into my head in the first place. (111-112)

One phrase is forced upon us, thanks to the italics. These are the words Alfrida pronounced after the accident when she begged her grandmother to take her to the hospital to see her mother. Some thirty years later, she remembers them and repeats them. Alfrida is now aware of the words’ inadequacy. Her laugh and tone turn them into a quote, the italics underlining the irony. Yet she is probably unaware of their poignancy and of their power. We hear a voice, resurfacing from the past. It is the heartbreaking cry of a child who is about to lose her mother. And so powerful are these words that “something happens” for the narrator. The moment is clearly epiphanic. When italics are used once again for the same phrase, it is to underline that the words are not solely Alfrida’s anymore, but have become overcoded with the voice of the narrator. She repeats them to herself, tasting their power, testing their potential.
A family story depicting the “squalor of tragedy in ordinary life” will be transformed into a literary work. As the family tale is told once again, the narrator finally hears its potential, sees it as material. She understands that she can use her own heritage. This means the family furniture or furnishings that Alfrida could not get rid of are “metaphors for the cultural inheritances the narrator did not realize she was receiving” (Davey 84). This epiphanic moment marks a new beginning, the birth of a writer. Resurgence here is synonymous with creation. “Family Furnishings,” therefore, can be read as the tale of a writer who finds her own voice when she finally hears the voices from her past. In other words, when she finally listens to women’s voices telling ordinary women’s stories.

Yet “Family Furnishings” offers deeper layers of metafictional dimension than this first reading suggests. Alice Munro has said that the plot is “about what a writer does and how things turn back on a writer” (Gzowski). To understand what this implies, I will turn to the other embedded story and trace its relationship with the family tale. The opening lines plunge the reader into a charming and seemingly innocent childhood fable. It evokes the father’s and Alfrida’s childhood when they lived on adjoining farms. One day, as their favourite story goes, they were out in the fields playing with the dog when they heard hundreds of bells ringing all around them—it was the end of the First World War (Hateship 86).

The opening tale will resurface, and bring about the return of all that has been repressed and suppressed by the family, at the narrator’s father’s funeral. At the cemetery, a woman starts speaking to the narrator, using Alfrida’s name as a form of introduction. The narrator notices a resemblance and concludes the woman must be one of Alfrida’s “half-sisters” (115). However, the woman tells her she is Alfrida’s natural daughter. She had been adopted as a baby and had recently traced her birth mother. A family secret that has long remained hidden is thus uncovered. The reader is now tempted to read another meaning under the aunt’s “whatever” which the narrator explained as meaning “whatever she had done with herself since.” Knowing that Alfrida’s boyfriend was a married man, the reader has so far supposed this was what the family held against Alfrida. She now supposes the aunts may have been silently referring to her pregnancy and the birth of a child out of wedlock.

The family secret is disclosed to both the main character and the reader. Yet, as in many Munro stories, the secret that is being told is not the secret that matters most. The secret that matters will not be told by anyone, let alone the narrator. It will brutally and silently resurface as the childhood tale resurfaces. Neither the woman nor the narrator voice any remark about the identity of the woman’s father. Instead, the woman starts telling the narrator a story Alfrida told her. We recognize the opening fable. Yet it is both the same story and an altogether different one. The narrator hits on a discrepancy, or rather two details that do not fit. The characters’ ages and actions are different. In the woman’s version, her father and Alfrida were teenagers walking home from high school when they
heard the bells. There is no escaping the discrepancy—it is almost forced upon the reader. The narrator first contradicts the woman, giving her the correct version, insisting that they were children and that they were playing with the father’s dog in the fields. Then, sharing her thoughts with the reader, the narrator reflects that, given her father’s date of birth, they could not have been children in 1918. She silently concludes:

So it was much more likely that they were walking home from high school than that they were playing in the fields, and it was odd that I had never thought of that. Maybe they had said they were in the fields, that is, walking home across the fields. Maybe they had never said “playing.” (118)

So the reader is encouraged, if not forced, to imagine what the two teenagers could have been doing in those fields, if not playing. Yet the narrator does not say anything to the woman. Instead, she utters a cliché: “Things get changed around.” (118) When the woman picks up the cliché, changing the structure from passive to active—“people change things around”—the narrator remains silent, refusing to acknowledge that her father or even she may have changed the story. The narrator also stops short of spelling out her conclusions to the reader. Having had her attention repeatedly drawn to the discrepancies, the reader understands that this woman’s father must be the narrator’s father. The silent revelation that takes place in the reader’s mind is emblematic of Munro’s art of writing secrets. As an innocent tale is told again, gaps or rents in the story are made to be seen and through them, another secret surfaces. Or rather resurfaces, emerging from the narrator’s memory, in a silent explosion, at the very moment she is burying her father, and so at a burial site. A seemingly naïve remark—“it was odd that I had never thought of that”—encourages the reader to reflect that the second secret was always there to be seen. The first pages did underline a strong complicity between the father and Alfrida, the very first words linking them into a silent embrace: “Alfrida. My father called her Freddie.” (86) They were very close when they were children; they lived in the same house for a while—they seemed more like siblings than cousins. The child, then, was born of an almost incestuous relationship. The narrator’s silence might therefore be explained by the fact that she is suddenly confronted with the unspeakable. The narrator remains silent because what she will not say is what she cannot say.

It is also what she cannot see. Here I am indebted to Hélaine Ventura for having pointed out to me the positions of the two women in this scene. The narrator insists she cannot see the woman very well because the sunlight in her eyes effectively blinds her: “In October the afternoon sun was low, and it was coming straight into my eyes.” (116) We are presented with an emblematic Munrovian motif. As the narrator of “Vandals,” an earlier story, reminds us, blindness leads to both silence and inaction: “What Bea has been sent to do, she doesn’t see.” (Munro, Open Secrets 293)
If the narrator is made blind at the very moment the truth hits her, this suggests a possible link with the first story about Alfrida’s mother’s death when a lamp exploded. Indeed, however unconnected they may have seemed, the stories cannot be read separately. A remark made by Alfrida at the end of the narrator’s visit helps us create a connection between the visit and the period mentioned in the childhood tale. Looking at a honey pail displayed in a shop window, Alfrida remarks: “Your father and I used to take our lunch to school in pails just like that.” (Hateship 112) The disruptions in the order of the narrative, the goings back and forth in time, also help create a connection. The meeting in the cemetery is followed by a passage that brings us back to the day of the visit. It is preceded by a conversation between father and daughter. In this conversation, the father reminds the narrator of the story she wrote—a fact she claims to have forgotten. Thus the story is made to resurface with the conversation:

My father had to remind me of the story, published several years ago, and I was surprised, even impatient, and a little angry to think of Alfrida’s objecting to something that now seemed to have so little to do with her.

“It wasn’t Alfrida at all,” I said to my father. “I changed it, I wasn’t even thinking about her. It was a character. Everybody could see that.” But as a matter of fact, there was still the exploding lamp, the mother in her charnel wrappings, the staunch, bereft child. (113)

There were also, if one remembers the epiphanic passage, the words Alfrida cried. So Alfrida was dispossessed of her words and tragic story by the narrator. Yet the narrator once again denies Alfrida’s role in the origins in the story. This reminds us of what her father did. Strikingly similar themes and motifs link the two stories. The stolen story is about a child who lost her mother. The meeting in the cemetery will reveal that this child was later forced to abandon her baby. Listening to the woman who is her father’s daughter, the narrator is suddenly confronted with what her father did to Alfrida: he suppressed the relationship and the existence of the child, and so Alfrida was deprived of her child for most of her life.

Finally, the narrator is confronted with a conspiracy of silence she will then share. By remaining silent, the narrator denies the woman’s claims to her father and family, and so to her roots. She will also deny Alfrida’s claim to the story. From her point of view, both these claims have to be denied. In “Family Furnishings” a writer is asserting her right4 to dispossess others of their tragic stories, emotions or even words. The narrator has to deny Alfrida’s reading of the story as hers because it endangers her own claims as a writer. The narrator claims the story is

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4. The word claim is a key word in “Family Furnishings.” It first appears when the narrator mentions the family story. Speaking of her aunts’ relation to the story, she says it was “a horrible treasure to them, something our family could claim that nobody else could” (110). Dictionaries remind us that to claim means to demand something as one’s property, or to state that one should have something to which one has a right. A claim is therefore both a demand for something which one has a right to have, and a right.
hers because she wrote it. She took possession of the story when she transformed it into a literary creation which, then, became her own.

Yet the narrator is the third person to lay claim to the story. Her aunts saw the story as a family treasure. So did Alfrida after the story was published. But just as Alfrida did not see that once told, her story would not belong to her anymore, the narrator did not see that once the story was published, it would be read by her readers. It would therefore belong to readers such as Alfrida. As Maurice Blanchot insisted in *La part du feu*, once a reader enjoys a book, sees herself in it, the writer will be dispossessed of her work (Blanchot, *La part du feu* 298). Indeed, “Family Furnishings” tells us something of the passionate and conflicting relationship that exists between writer and reader. A conflict that, according to Blanchot, is the very condition for a piece of writing to become a literary work (Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire* 35).

“Family Furnishings” may also be telling us something about the art of writing short stories. In the closing lines, the narrator says that, walking away from Alfrida’s flat, she was “thinking of the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories” (119). This brings us back to the conversation with her father in which she evokes the dangers of looking at her life “through other eyes than my own. Seeing it as an ever-increasing roll of words like barbed wire, intricate, bewildering, uncomforting—set against the rich productions, the food, flowers and knitted garments of other women’s domesticity” (114).

As people back home think little of her work, she fears her life will not be considered much of an achievement compared to other women’s productions. All the more so, maybe, as she only writes short stories. This tempts us to uncover yet another layer in the metafictional dimension. The presence of the narrator’s sister at the funeral and the narrator’s refusal to acknowledge the family connection meant a quest for legitimacy was both silently made and denied. This denial tempts us to wonder whether “Family Furnishings” might not interrogate legitimacy, whether it be that of genealogy, or that of writing, more particularly in the context of genre. So “Family Furnishings” simultaneously asserts a writer’s

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5. The image of the trap echoes the earlier passage in which the narrator remarked that her aunts considered the story as “a distinction that would never be let go” and a treasure (111).

6. To quote the original French: “L’auteur voit les autres s’intéresser à son œuvre, mais l’intérêt qu’ils y portent est un intérêt autre que celui qui avait fait d’elle la pure traduction de lui-même, et cet intérêt autre change l’œuvre, la transforme en quelque chose d’autre où il ne reconnaît pas la perfection première. L’œuvre pour lui a disparu, elle devient l’œuvre des autres, l’œuvre où ils sont et où il n’est pas, un livre qui prend sa valeur d’autres livres […], qui est compris parce qu’il est leur reflet.”

7. “[L’]œuvre est œuvre seulement quand elle devient l’intimité ouverte de quelqu’un qui l’écrit et de quelqu’un qui la lit, l’espace violemment déployé par la contestation mutuelle du pouvoir du dire et du pouvoir d’entendre.”
right to dispossess others of their stories and voices a writer’s doubts about the legitimacy of her art when seen through eyes other than her own.

It is no surprise therefore that “Family Furnishings” explores two contradictory dimensions of resurgence at the same time. With both stories, the narrator will find she cannot get rid of her past. She will also discover there is a skeleton in the family closet, family secrets in the family furnishings neither she nor Alfrida can get rid of. It is tempting to say that the narrator’s paradoxical relation to the past is best exemplified in the fate of the squalid family story morphing into a short story. This enables us to claim that “Family Furnishings” tells the tale of an aspiring writer who learns to listen to ordinary women’s voices and to find her material in her past. Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that “Family Furnishings” leaves many things unsaid and unresolved. While some secrets are disclosed, others will remain forever unsaid. The reader feels the narrator will not act on what she discovers because she refuses to see, let alone to voice, her suspicions. So the reader is left with an intricate, bewildering, uncomfortable roll of words, which will leave her remaining questions unanswered.

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