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Alice Munro's Conversational Style

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One of the features of Alice Munro's style that has been remarked upon by the critics is the conversational tone of her short stories. Toolan, in his study of the short story "Circle of Prayer" remarks upon its "'conversational' tenor" (2010, 316), Duncan, in her study of a different short story, "Passion", draws attention to Munro's colloquial style (2011, 109) and Howells (1998, 15) goes as far as to label Munro's "mode of storytelling as gossip". These remarks refer, of course, to later stories by Munro, yet I would argue that in the collection of fifteen stories that were published under the title *Dance of the Happy Shades*, we can already perceive those features that were to become the hallmark of her style. One of her editors, Daniel Menaker is quoted as saying that he never edited her style because "her style was her voice, her natural way of speaking at its very best" (Thacker 2005, 447). How exactly Munro achieves this conversational style is one of the questions I wish to examine in this article.

Obviously, a written text, such as the short story, cannot reproduce conversation *per se*. However much we may think that we are hearing a speaking voice, it is of course an illusion. At the most obvious level, speech contains a whole host of extralinguistic and paralinguistic devices, such as gesture, intonation and rhythm that will be absent from a written text, and although the narrator may create the illusion of directly speaking to an addressee, there will be no spoken response from the addressee or reader, no turn-taking will occur. But to insist on the irreconcilable differences between the two modes is to miss the point. What is important here is that Munro's short stories contain a sufficient number of the characteristics of

prototypical speech for literary critics and readers alike to identify her style as being conversational.

So how exactly do we identify a conversational tone or style, and what light might this shed on Munro's writing in general? In order to answer these questions, I shall be adopting a stylistic approach. In other words, I will seek to demonstrate that textual meaning is created through the use of language and specific language patterns and that a close study of these patterns can help explain how a literary effect is created.

A Conversational Style

When we think of the differences between spoken and written language, one difference that immediately springs to mind is the use of contracted forms in speech:

My parents didn't drink. They weren't rabid about it. (75)¹

Yet this distinction, however well-founded, will not reveal all the complexities of Munro's conversational style. A more profitable approach would be to examine the extensive research that has been carried out, over the last thirty years or so, on the relationship between spoken and written language. The different strategies involved have been studied by linguists such as Beaman (1981), Biber (1988), Chafe (1982) Tannen (1982) and Carter and McCarthy (2006), though this list is far from exhaustive. Biber (1988, 1995) has attempted to identify the characteristics of spoken and written English through the analysis of several corpora, based on the hypothesis that the co-occurrence of certain linguistic features corresponds to a specific discourse function. In the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999) a whole chapter is devoted to the grammar of conversation. While stereotypically narrative texts are composed of "past tense verbs, 3rd person pronouns, and communication verbs controlling that-clauses" (Biber 2004, 22), interactive discourse contains present tense verbs, contractions, private verbs such as *assume* and *believe*, and *that* deletions. Although conversation may contain

¹ All page references are to the following edition: Alice Munro *Dance of the Happy Shades*. London, Vintage, 2000

patterns of variation, when compared to written registers it is “distinctive in being extremely interactive, involved, focused on the immediate context and personal stance, and constrained by real-time production circumstances” (Biber 2004, 30). For Chafe (1981), the fundamental characteristics of spoken language can be categorized under the dimensions of involvement and fragmentation, whereas the dimensions of integration and detachment cover the various features of the written mode. Chafe was aware that this distinction really refers to two extreme points on a continuum and that the distinction between written and spoken modes may not always be so clear-cut, and linguists such as Ochs have been quick to point out that a “novelist trying to recreate a casual situational context will use many of the features [...] of unplanned discourse, so that the basic dichotomy may not always hold” (1979, 77). Moreover for Tannen, “the difference between features of language which distinguish discourse types reflects not only – and not mainly – spoken vs written mode, but rather genre and related register growing out of communicative goals and context” (1982, 18). She also argues that literary language in the written short story generally makes use of the features of spoken discourse “to create the kind of knowing (...) basic to oral performance: subjective knowing, established through a sense of identification between audience and performer or audience and characters in the text” (1982, 1).

Nevertheless, Chafe's dimensions of involvement and fragmentation offer us a useful basis for analysing conversational style and I shall begin my analysis of Alice Munro's short stories in the light of these two dimensions, with the hypothesis that certain choices of linguistic structures are functionally motivated.

Involvement

Involvement can be understood at three different levels. There is “self-involvement by the speaker; interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer; and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about” (Tannen 1989, 27). Eleven of the fifteen short stories in the collection entitled *Dance of the Happy Shades* are written in the first person, so it is hardly surprising to discover that they illustrate these levels of involvement to varying degrees.

The speaker's involvement with the addressee is illustrated most clearly through the use of the second person pronoun in such a way that it

could denote the actual reader: "I showed the most painful banality in the conduct of this whole affair, as you will see" (76); "I would get a feeling of love, if that is what you want to call it" (134); but also through the use of direct questions: "If someone asked her where she got it, and she told them, what would I say?" (106); "For instance, if I hadn't been in a stupor over Ted Forgie, would I have taken a different view of Clare? Not likely" (135). There is even the occasional imperative: "Never mind the Malleys," the narrator tells the reader, in "The Office" (63).

The speaker's personal involvement, in the sense of disclosure of self, is marked through naming herself as the subject of discourse, through the use of the first person pronoun as subject "I", object "me", and in the possessive forms "my" and "mine" (as well as the first person plural "we", "us" and "our/s"). It is also marked through the choice of lexical verbs such as "think", "feel", "know" in the main clause, where these denote mental operations that the speaker alone is at liberty to comment on. While in written discourse these verbs of cognition tend to be followed by "that", it is striking that in the first person narratives "that" tends to be omitted: "I knew it would be" (106); "I decided I had better work hard" (123); "I know it serves me right" (129), which corroborates Biber's findings regarding subordinator *that* deletion (2004).

Personal stance is also illustrated through a number of discourse markers such as "well" : "If there was anything he couldn't explain, well, he would just forget about it" (145); "but I might think well, awful as it is its (*sic*) something happening and its been a long winter" (141). Discourse markers serve to "bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin 1988, 35), thus signalling to the addressee how what follows or precedes should be interpreted. "No" also functions as a discourse marker, correcting a preceding statement:

I (...) walked into the kitchen and decided to get drunk.
No, it was not like that. I walked into the kitchen to look for a coke or something. (79)

and through degree adverbs that serve to emphasize, such as "really": "It was really the sound of the word "office" that I liked" (60).

The first person narrator in Munro's short stories is both the young girl in the story and the older more reflective adult. Although there are moments when the older narrator's voice seems to break through, most of the time the narrator refuses to bring to the fore her superior knowledge of events, preferring to hide behind the epistemic stance of uncertainty such

as “perhaps”, “I do not know” (107), or ‘hedging’ perception copular verbs such as “appear” and “seem”. Such comments on the utterance itself, or on the context of utterance, correspond to the third level of involvement.

Ochs (1979) identifies the preference for deictic modifiers, as opposed to the use of the indefinite or definite articles, as also being a characteristic of informal spoken discourse. Several examples of the use of deictic *this* instead of the definite article are to be found in the short stories: “I thought, not for the first time, well reading this letter any fool can see there is not going to be another” (135). The use of “this” can also be related to greater speaker involvement with the context of utterance, as the deictic “this” serves to situate the referent within the sphere of the speaker in terms of space and time (Fraser and Joly, 1979). Its use is not just in opposition to the use of the indefinite or definite article, as it can also be used instead of the zero article, as in the following example, or even on occasions the pronoun “it”, serving to focus on the referent, to foreground information: “This Mason Williams was one of the heroes of the school” (153); “This did not prove to be a concrete hardship at all” (87). In the first instance, the rest of the paragraph describes the boy in question; in the second, the reason why not going out before her sixteenth birthday was not considered a hardship by the narrator is expanded upon in the passage that follows. In both cases, “this” serves to introduce the topic which the narrator has decided to focus upon.

Although Chafe distinguishes three levels of involvement, Tannen underlines that these levels often intertwine (1989, 138). The use of “fuzzy terms” or indefiniteness, also equated with the mode of speech, is one example where several levels of involvement are present. These expressions of vagueness occur in varying forms in the short stories. There are nouns such as *something* and hedges such as *sort of*, *kind of*:

I walked into the kitchen to look for a coke or something. (79)
Then my father and I walk gradually down a long, shabby sort of street. (2)
a kind of wretchedness and shame spread through me. (33)

While from one point of view these expressions can illustrate the speaker's involvement with the context, it can also be argued that they have other discourse functions (Overstreet 1999), including creating a rapport with the listener, inviting them to fill in the blanks as it were. When such expressions occur at the end of the sentence, as in the first example above, they extend the sentence beyond its grammatical

completeness, thus suggesting a link between the linguistic strategy at the microtextual level and Munro's lack of closure and indeterminate endings in her short stories at the macrotextual level.

In spite of these similarities between the use of imprecisions in Munro's short stories and in conversation, there are important differences, which we should not lose sight of. In conversation there is a shared context, which allows the speaker to be far more imprecise, as the addressee is presumed capable of reconstructing what is missing. Thus, there is likely to be far more referential vagueness in ordinary conversation than in a short story. In the latter, an excessive use of imprecision would render the story difficult to read, as the reader would end up with no clear picture of what was happening. Imprecision can also play a different role in written narrative. It may be the mark of an unreliable narrator or it may be used to reflect the specific mind-style of a character. Semantic imprecision, for example, may be a sign that the narrator or character is unable to identify what s/he is describing, as in the case of a young child (Pillièrre 2001), while epistemic modality, the use of *could* and *might* may reveal the narrator's stance towards the information given.

The use of imprecision can also be linked to the circumstances of conversation itself: conversation takes place in real time, thus preventing the speaker from being able to plan their utterances in advance. This brings us to the second dimension outlined by Chafe: fragmentation.

Fragmentation

Biber underlines that in conversations, the "words and grammatical organization [are] composed on the spot, as the conversation itself unfolds. There is little time to plan ahead, or to edit afterwards" (1995, 3). In fact there are three principles of online production for spoken English grammar: "keep talking", "limited planning ahead" and "qualification of what has been said" (Biber et al. 1999, 1066-7). These factors have inevitable repercussions on the syntax. When we converse, we can only hold so much information in our memory at one specific moment, and the speaker can only plan so far ahead in what s/he wishes to say. As a result the subject of a spoken sentence tends to be simple, while the predicate may be more elaborated. Lack of advance planning can also result in the message being modified or elaborated retrospectively.

The typical linguistic features that result from these pressures of online production are hesitations, repetitions, and incomplete sentences. However, once again, how these features are represented in a literary text may vary. In everyday speech, hesitation is often marked through conversation fillers such as “er” and “um”, expressions that rarely figure in the reproduction of speech in literature. It is, however, possible to leave utterances incomplete, to change thought mid-sentence or to include parenthetical structures, to create the impression of the speaker elaborating their thoughts as they speak:

But it really doesn't make me feel very gay – worse still, it doesn't really surprise me – to remember all the stupid, sad, half-ashamed things I did.
(77)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Munro’s style in this respect is the constant way the message is elaborated upon retrospectively. This is achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, adjectives are frequently postposed instead of being fully integrated into the noun phrase. Chafe (1994) identifies the use of attributive adjectives as being one of the features of written texts, illustrative of the dimension of integration. In Munro, the various adjectives, far from being integrated, are frequently juxtaposed after the noun phrase, appearing to be an afterthought, as if the narrator is exploring the description, the meaning of what she is saying, or revising what she has just said:

a good dress, navy blue with little flowers, sheer, worn over a navy-blue slip. (5)
The grain boats, ancient, rusty, wallowing. (2)

Chafe remarks that when people are talking they “proceed to express one idea after another until they reach a point where they suddenly decide they have come to some kind of closure” (2008, 10). Once again, there is a link between the linguistic strategy and Munro’s narratives where “the message has no end, always woven into another message” (Blodgett, 84).

In such re-elaboration, the adjectives are not coordinated by a coordinator such as “and”, but simply separated by commas, thus presenting the details in a fragmentary fashion (Pillière 2005); they do not form a synthetic, unified whole. The list of modifiers could be extended *ad infinitum*. In the second quotation, note how the final adjective “wallowing” introduces a comment on the scene and belongs to a different lexical field than the first two, which simply characterise the boats’ state of

repair. "Wallowing" has two possible meanings: floundering in water, but also self-indulgence (especially in despair). In the second instance, we would have a case of hypallage, the adjective being semantically accurate of the mother's behaviour, and such a comment could only belong to the older narrator. This may be a little far-fetched but it would confirm Blin's analysis of asyndeton in Munro's fiction as signalling a shift of narrative voice (Hetherington-Blin 2006). Hooper commenting on the following sentence from the opening of "Walker Brothers Cowboy": "sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful" (1), remarks that "the word *ungrateful* suggests an adult view of events; that the narrator is recalling this incident as an adult (2008, 2). Again the reader is left with the impression that the narrator's reflections are being constructed as the text unfolds, rather than existing prior to it. This gives the text a spoken feel.

At times, the sequence of noun phrases creates a crescendo effect:

with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation. (4)

with the final prepositional phrase containing both a negation and a higher number of syllables. Yet, once again, the nouns form a strange collocation, introducing varying levels of interpretation of the mother's reaction to being "flung onto a street of poor people" (4). The final noun phrase "no reconciliation" introduces a temporal dimension, describing both the present state of affairs and the state of things to come. In so far as it expresses a judgement through hindsight, we can discern the voice of the older narrator, contributing to the multi-layered perspective of Munro's style. But these multilayers are not woven into an integrated whole. On the contrary they are added, a step at a time, as the narration progresses, thus once more creating a conversational tone to the passage.

Another characteristic form of elaboration to be found in these short stories is the elaboration of a noun phrase, which frequently involves repetition of the initial noun preceded by a modifying adjective or followed by postmodifiers:

I noticed the smell in the house, the smell of stale small rooms, bedclothes, frying, washing, and medicated ointments. (50)

flat land, a wide flat plain. (3)

Bush lots at the back of the farm hold shade, black-pine shade. (7)

a sufficiency of good feeling, old-pal feeling. (46)

Frequently, there is a movement from a noun phrase whose head contains a general reference or superordinate to a series of noun phrases that narrow down the range of reference, suggesting the narrator is seeking to be more precise:

We had our own business, a fox farm. (4)
I have a little car Clare gave me a year ago Christmas, a little Morris. (142)

or seeking to specify an object's use:

There is one bench with a slat missing on the back, a place to sit and look at the water. (2)

In each case we have a clarifying function. Rather than integrating all the information, the narrator prefers a more incremental approach, layering the details, so that each piece of information is added to the clause in a loose fashion. The narrator seems to be adding information as an afterthought as if she realizes the addressee does not possess all the necessary information in order to have a clear grasp of the situation, or a clear picture of what is being described, or is in danger of misunderstanding what has previously been said:

In fact, she disliked the whole pelting operation – that was what the killing, skinning, and preparation of the furs was called – and wished it did not have to take place in the house. (111)
People are sitting out, men in shirtsleeves and vests and women in aprons – not people we know. (1)
We enter a vacant lot, a kind of park really. (2)

If Munro makes frequent use of asyndeton and juxtaposition, she also uses the coordinating conjunction “and”, another feature of spoken language according to Chafe and Ochs. In Pillière 2005, I draw attention to two possible coordination structures that have different stylistic effects. The first is the structure *A and B and C*, where the speaker chooses to isolate the different elements that constitute the whole. This structure will be preferred when the speaker is constructing a whole or unity – it is less the unity that retains the speaker's interest than the parts or, to put it a different way, the parts are considered to be greater than the whole and are usually distinguishable one from another. This structure enables the speaker to separate, to dissociate the elements belonging to the whole.

The structure *A, B and C*, on the other hand, associates the different elements and does not bring into play their differences. What

counts here is the unity of the group, and it is a structure often used in fixed phrases or in clichés such as “tall, dark and handsome”. These two structures are different ways then of apprehending a unit or group. One is analytical, focusing on the elements that compose the unit. The other is synthetic, underlining the points of resemblance, the shared properties. When a speaker uses *A and B and C*, she opts for a dissociative point of view and invites her addressee to consider the different elements that make up the whole individually. When she uses *A, B and C*, the speaker invites the addressee to see the association between the different elements, or considers that the addressee is capable of seeing the shared properties. Given what we have observed of Munro's syntax so far, it is perhaps only to be expected that she prefers either *A and B and C* or *A, B, C* in these short stories, a fact which is confirmed by Blin's study of “Friend of My Youth” (2012). In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the following examples illustrate Munro's predilection for these dissociative structures:

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home. (116)

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of *peaches, grapes and pears*, bought in town, and *onions, tomatoes and cucumbers* grown at home

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, the yards pale with the last snow. (142)

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, *and* the yards pale with the last snow.

a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, the horizon dim. (2)

a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, *and* the horizon dim.

Interestingly enough, the final example is flagged by the Microsoft grammar checker with a wiggly line because *and* is missing, underlining the fact that it is not common in written English.

Conversation – a digressive mode

Although these short stories are skilfully put together, the style actually seeks to create an impression of improvisation, thus imitating a casual conversational tone. If canonical word order is SVO in English, there are a number of hanging constituents in Munro's prose that do not form part of the main clause, creating the effect of being produced with

little preplanning. A classic example is the participial clause, even though for Chafe (1985) such clauses are usually associated with writing rather than speech, and used when there is a considerable degree of integration. In Munro, participle clauses are often postposed, introducing additional information about a noun phrase, and correspond to what Quirk et al. call ‘supplementive clauses’ (1985, 1123):

Children, of their own will, draw apart, separate into islands of two or one under the heavy trees, occupying themselves in such solitary ways as I do all day, planting pebbles in the dirt or writing in it with a stick. (2)

The connection between these *-ing* clauses and the main clause is often loose, and the fact they are often preceded or followed by a comma means that they may contain foregrounded information. The postposition of a participle clause can sometimes be interpreted as a reduced version of a non-restrictive relative clause:

we wake my brother and eat it at once in the dining room, always darkened by the wall of the house next door. (5)
we wake my brother and eat it at once in the dining room, *which is* always darkened by the wall of the house next door.

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home, all waiting to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chili sauce. (116)

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, *which had been* bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers *which had been* grown at home, *all of which were waiting* to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chili sauce

This lack of structural integration, or the explicit signalling of structural relations, is to be found also in detached constituents that are coreferentially related to a pro-form to be found either to the left or the right:

That was what the Saylas did, kept a little fruit store. (103)
They took the groceries out when he died, old Mr. King. (128)

In these two examples we have examples of right dislocation. In the second, the subject noun phrase “old Mr. King” has been moved to the right of the clause with its place being taken by the co-referential pronoun *he*. While such constructions may at first appear also to give the

impression of an afterthought, there is some evidence that they can also serve a pragmatic function seeking to “ secure the continued attention of an addressee, i.e. to maintain a given relation between a referent and a proposition” (Lambrecht 2001, 1076). Carter and McCarthy (2006) use the general term *tail* to refer to the slot at the end of a clause which may be filled by various grammatical patterns, and they point out that tails are common in spoken discourse, but rare in written texts. Other variant word order that suggests informal speech includes the displacement of the direct object:

My mother will sometimes carry home, for a treat, a brick of icecream –
pale Neapolitan. (5)
I remember a year or two ago, us going past their place. (131)

or ellipsis :

I never drank anything stronger, left that to Clare. (133)

Imitating the speaking voice:

One of the ways in which Munro recreates the impression of a speaking voice is to recreate its rhythms and prosody through typography, punctuation and syntax. Munro often has recourse to italics to indicate emphasis or indignation:

I had an exact recollection of *everything*. (77)
She said, 'Are you sure everything is going all right at school?' *School!* (78)

However, it is Munro's use of punctuation which is most interesting. She frequently chooses to break the sentences into short units imitating how the text might be read aloud, but these breaks are not necessarily where you would expect to break the sentence grammatically. While the use of the comma is flexible (Quirk et al. 1985, 1615), it is far more unusual to break a sentence with a period between the main clause and the dependent clause. Take the following two passages:

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, the yards pale with the last snow. It seemed to me that in every one of the houses lived people who knew something I didn't. Who understood what had happened and perhaps had known it was going to happen and I was the only one who didn't know. (142)

We enter a vacant lot, a kind of park really, for it is kept clear of junk and there is one bench with a slat missing on the back, a place to sit and look at the water. Which is generally grey in the evening, under a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, the horizon dim. A very quiet, washing noise on the stones of the beach. Further along, towards the main part of the town, there is a stretch of sand, a water slide, floats bobbing around the safe swimming area, a life guard's rickety throne. Also a long dark green building, like a roofed verandah, called the Pavilion, full of farmers and their wives, in stiff good clothes, on Sundays. (2)

In these two extracts, we find a period before the relative clause, so that the pronoun is separated from its antecedent: “Who understood what had happened”, “Which is generally grey”. The reader is therefore forced to break the sentence flow as s/he would if reading the text aloud, so that within each section of the sentence, the information it contains is easily processed, thus imitating a frequently observed feature of spoken discourse. Punctuation marks in Munro’s narratives therefore seem to imitate more closely prosodic boundaries than is usual, in a written text, since more often than not, punctuation is also influenced by grammatical constraints. Again we have the impression that information is continually being added to the main clause, and this is underlined by the use of “also” or “and” to start a fresh sentence. Punctuation in Munro plays an important role in pacing the narrative, and in creating the illusion of a “speaking” voice.

A narrative of endless possibilities ...

The idea that Munro's style is conversational is often accompanied by another adjective: “discursive” (Clark, 1996), which emphasizes that the ordering of events is loosely connected. In order to examine this aspect of her conversational style, I would like to study the opening lines of the first short story in the collection: “Walker Brothers Cowboy”. As with many of Alice Munro’s short stories, the opening sentence immediately situates the reader *in medias res*: there is no careful scene-setting, no detailed introduction of character:

After supper my father says, “Want to go down and see if the Lake's still there?” We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light, making clothes for me against the opening of school. She has ripped up for this purpose an old suit and an old plaid wool dress of hers, and she has to cut

and match very cleverly and also make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful. We leave my brother in bed in the little screened porch at the end of the front veranda, and sometimes he kneels on his bed and presses his face against the screen and calls mournfully, "Bring me an ice cream cone!" but I call back "You will be asleep," and do not even turn my head. (1)

At the opening of the story, the reader is situated at a specific moment in time, in relation to a preceding moment: *after supper*. This, then, is apparently no momentous event. At first reading, the simple present tense in *after supper my father says*, refers to a specific event. Note the difference in interpretation, had we had: "after supper my father *usually* says". Note too, the clearer reference to a specific moment in the past if we add *that evening*, "*that evening* after supper my father says". The present perfect that follows "she has ripped up for this purpose" refers to an action that has taken place before the moment of narration but which has current relevance for the narrator. From this point of retrospection, the narrative slips into describing actions that have taken place prior to the moment of narration: "she has to make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool". The use of an adjective "endless" which clearly places the event in the iterative, followed by a noun that is in the plural, "fittings", makes the narrative slip once more from a linear sequence of chronologically-related events into a series of described happenings that are recurrent. The following sentence, with the repetition of the verb "leave", echoes the second, and once again appears to introduce an event that can be seen as belonging to a sequence of events, yet the presence of the adverb "sometimes" brings us back to the iterative mode, and the use of the modal auxiliary "will" in the narrator's words to her younger brother: "You will be asleep", can be seen both as a prediction and as a comment on habitual action, a prediction that is based on what the narrator knows of her brother's behaviour, on what she has already observed on previous occasions. A similar use of "will" is to be found a few lines further on in the story where, once again, it first appears that a specific moment is being focused on with the use of "be V-ing": "People are sitting out, men in shirt-sleeves and undershirts and women in aprons – not people we know". But this initial impression is undermined by what follows: "if anybody looks ready to nod and say, 'Warm night,' my father will nod too and say something the same".

This oscillation between the unique event and the iterative continues over the next few pages. The narrator's activities with her mother, for example, the walk to the shop and the purchase of the ice-cream, are recounted in the iterative mode through the use of the plural

“in the afternoons” and adverbs of frequency “sometimes”, “often”, terminating with the plural “my mother has headaches”, so that when the text finally slips into the story proper and the significant episode “this afternoon”, the ride in the country and the visit to the father's old flame, Nora, the reader is taken unawares:

My mother has headaches. She often has to lie down. (...)
“What you need,” my father tells her, “is some fresh air and a drive in the country.” He means for her to go with him on his Walker Brothers route. That is not my mother's idea of a drive in the country.
“Can I come?”
“Your mother might want you for trying on clothes.”
“I'm beyond sewing this afternoon,” my mother says.

Then, at the end of the story, the singular event blends back into the iterative, the evening is like all the other evenings: *the sky becomes gently overcast, as always, nearly always on summer evenings by the Lake*. The constant movement backwards and forwards from the iterative to the specific creates the impression that the story is casually constructed (Blodgett 1988, 16). The narrative structure does not present us with a clear linear sequence of events, but then neither does the syntax, as we have just seen.

Conclusion

Alice Munro's prose is perhaps best defined by a remark made by Virginia Woolf, writing in *A Room of One's Own*. She describes a text “not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades and domes” (1929, 79). It is worth noting that Woolf has recourse to architectural images to explain what she means, just as Munro herself does, when she comments on her own reading habits in her essay “What is Real”. Munro explains that she does not read a story necessarily from beginning to end, but likes to be able to pick up the story at any point:

I go into it and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me, and what I want stories to do for other people. (1982, 224)

Both Woolf and Munro, different though they may be in many ways, underline that meaning, "what a story does", is constructed not through a linear sequence or the fixed order of the sentence. For Munro, it is her conversational style, with its constant digressions and elaborations that calls into question any linear sequence of events and which helps support Blodgett's claim that Munro's narration assumes the shape of exploration:

we cannot help but sense the presence of writing that is discovering itself in the art of writing, prepared, therefore for dead ends, for spaces in its text that require adjustments to a new moment of awareness. (Blodgett 1988, 156)

Commenting on the penultimate sentence of the last chapter before the Epilogue to *Lives of Girls and Women*, Blodgett writes "as it unfolds, the sentence dismantles itself" (1988, 37). This is equally true of many of Munro's sentences. The result is a proliferation of meaning, as detail is added upon detail.

The question that begs to be answered is why Munro so frequently chose the first-person narrative and the conversational mode. Part of the answer must lie with the fact that it offers her the opportunity to introduce a multi-layered perspective that resists closure within the compact space imposed by the genre of the short story; multi-layered both in the number of voices that are present in the text and in the lack of a single linear perspective. Moreover, such a mode requires greater reader participation. The attention to details, while at the same time creating a "speaking voice", gives the short stories a note of authenticity, enabling the reader to identify more easily with the first person narrator, so that the significant event in the story, when it does finally occur, becomes significant for the reader also, not because it is a world-changing event - on the contrary it is often ordinary to the point of appearing banal - but because of the reader's involvement with the narrator.

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