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“Bizarre but Somehow Never Quite Satisfactory”: Storytelling in “The Office”

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Identifying tendencies in the modern short story since Chekhov, Charles E. May discusses the implications of a particular interest in subjective points of view:

[...] a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view. The ultimate result of these characteristics is the modernist and postmodernist focus on reality itself as a fictional construct and the contemporary trend to make fictional assumptions and techniques both the subject matter and theme of the novel and the short story. (May: 199)

‘The Office’ is the first of Alice Munro’s stories to address ‘fictional assumptions and techniques’ explicitly through the figure of an author. The question of how reality is transmuted into fiction becomes an important theme in her next book, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), one she returns to in many subsequent stories, including ‘Material’ (*Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, 1974) and ‘Family Furnishings’ (*Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage*, 2002). These stories shed light on her own creative practice, investigating the ethics of authorship. They also use the figure of the author to explore the wider question of the relationship between the self, identity and external reality. How can the complexities and contradictions of lived experience be contained within conventional narrative patterns?

As Munro has disclosed in several interviews and an essay on the story, ‘The Office’ draws on her own experience, when she rented a place to write outside the home, away from the distractions of domesticity. The

story, recounting the author-protagonist's lack of progress because of interruptions from the landlord, is, she says, the only piece of writing she managed to complete there. The text appears deceptively simple, yet contains many contradictory voices within the first person narration. The writer confesses her vulnerabilities with self-deprecating irony: 'if cowardice and insincerity are big vices of mine, curiosity is certainly another' (Munro 2000: 66). This ironic, even jaunty, style, inviting intimacy with the reader, comes close to journalism, especially in the punchy opening paragraphs:

The solution to my life occurred to me one evening while I was ironing a shirt. It was simple but audacious. I went into the living room where my husband was watching television and I said, 'I think I ought to have an office.' (59)

Indeed, the generic husband, who makes several appearances, but, in contrast with the other characters, is never described, is reminiscent of similarly anonymized figures in newspaper columns or feature articles. However, many other voices and types of discourse are interwoven as the story becomes an exercise in different modes of storytelling, and hence an investigation into the fiction-making process. I shall examine the interplay of these different modes through a close reading of the text.

The first sentence, quoted above, is hyperbolic and startling, juxtaposing the grand statement, 'the solution to my life', with the mundanity of the domestic chore. The parodic tone and choppy syntax continues in the paragraphs that follow, the fragmented sentences and colloquial language also suggesting the spontaneous flow of thought. The Russian critic M.M. Bakhtin claims that we all 'author' ourselves through inner speech in dialogue with a putative other. The narrator is addressing that internalized other when she asks: 'What do I want an office for?' (59). The sequence of responses to her question strive to create a satisfactory self-image, switching between the self-defining noun 'writer' and the more nebulous 'write' and 'try to write':

[...] here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer. That does not sound right. Too presumptuous; phony, or at least unconvincing. Try again. I write. Is that better? I try to write. That makes it worse. Hypocritical humility. Well then? (59)

This passage also challenges the reader by addressing her directly, 'disclosing' the shameful fact of literary aspiration. The sequence of

question and answer becomes a rhetorical defense of her own status for the benefit of an implied reader.

Munro has often spoken about an inherent distrust of artistic endeavour in the small town community where she grew up. Writing is regarded as narcissism, without practical value, and related to an unhealthy introspection. In this story, 'people are kind' (59), their suspicion is tempered by 'the solicitude of friendly voices', 'ready and tactful voices' (ibid), as if writing might be some form of debilitating illness. These disembodied voices might be read as those of friends, family or neighbours - perhaps those suburban women who are so unsettled by the piano playing in 'Dance of the Happy Shades'. But they are also internalized voices who sabotage the narrator's attempts at autonomy. Accusations of self-centredness are directed away from the act of writing itself and projected onto the office: 'I was at once aware that it sounded like a finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence' (60).

The narrator often invokes the discourse of the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s, seeking equal rights for women. She makes sociological comparisons between male and female attitudes to domestic space, justifying her need for an office as a way of freeing her from responsibility and also aligning her work as an author with a professional male world, marked out by clear boundaries. Her struggle for agency through an autonomous space of her choosing is placed in opposition to the stereotyped objects of female desire: 'I could almost more easily have wished for a mink coat, for a diamond necklace; these are things women do obtain' (61). She contrasts the male ability to compartmentalize, closing the door behind him within the space of the house, with a woman's unending responsibility: 'She is the house. There is no separation possible' (60). This overtly political discourse is, however, intercut with another voice, more langorous and diffuse:

At certain times, perhaps on long spring evenings, still rainy and sad, with the cold bulbs in bloom and a light too mild for promise drifting over the sea, I have opened the windows and felt the house shrink back into wood and plaster and those humble elements of which it is made, and the life in it subside, leaving me exposed, empty-handed, but feeling a fierce and lawless quiver of freedom, of loneliness too harsh and perfect for me now to bear. Then I know how the rest of the time I am sheltered and encumbered, how insistently I am warmed and bound. (60-61)

This epiphanic moment is itself 'bound' within parentheses, separated from the account of her negotiations with her husband and the acquisition

of the office. It evokes a liminal state of consciousness, in the first stirrings of spring and close to the sea. The house is restrictive, yet because it is animate, it is also a fluid and a boundless space. The almost oxymoronic pairings of ‘harsh and perfect’, ‘sheltered and encumbered’, ‘warmed and bound’, reveal the contradictions of the existential freedom that she longs for and, temporarily, obtains.

‘To write, as everyone knows, you need a typewriter, or at least a pencil, some paper, a table and a chair’ (60). But the process of writing entails something beyond the purely mechanical. The mysteriousness of the creative process, ‘a woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband’s or her children’s’ (60), might explain her own anxieties and the resistance of others. Throughout the text, concepts of a heterogeneous, indefinable creativity are placed in dialogue with the discourse of logic, boundaries and positions. We might even identify these modalities with the ‘semiotic’, maternal modality and the paternal ‘symbolic’, that Julia Kristeva regards as the essential components of the signifying process.

Once the decision is made to rent the office, another kind of storytelling is brought into play, packed with the descriptive detail we might expect from conventional fiction. The narrator provides a character sketch for Mrs. Malley, who, along with her husband, owns the block where the office is situated. Their apartment is crammed with model ships, potted plants and kitsch, including a gilt-framed photograph of Mr. Malley himself. Mr. Malley regards the narrator’s writing as more of a hobby than a profession, referring to his own model-building as a cure for the nerves.

Mr. Malley is a fat man, moving with ‘a ponderous matriarchal discomfort’ (63-4). His offer to help feminize the empty space of the newly rented office with a carpet, curtains and ‘a nice easy chair to sit in, while you’re waiting for inspiration to hit’ are rebuffed (64). By maintaining a sterile, empty space, the narrator is shedding domestic responsibility; without ornaments, there is no need for dusting. Mr. Malley presents her with a house plant, a teapot, a waste paper basket, a cushion, disturbing her solitude with this parade of superfluous objects. He is an utterly grotesque figure; through him Munro parodies Philistine attitudes towards creativity: ‘if you ever run out of things to write about, I got a barrelful’ (66). Through his rejected gifts he is also implicating her in an inescapable emotional exchange, encroaching on the self-contained, autonomous subjective space reserved for the writing process. The more

she rebuffs these attempts, the harder he tries, confiding the tribulations of his own life story, in the unspoken belief that she might write it down. Coming back unexpectedly to the office at night, she discovers him secretly reading her work.

She does not tackle Malley. Throughout the whole saga, she resorts to hints and subterfuge, only occasionally making herself plain in 'a cold voice that is to be heard frequently in my thoughts but has great difficulty getting out of my cowardly mouth' (65). After she catches him snooping, she keeps her door locked from inside, typing loudly when he comes near: 'He called my name, as if I was playing a trick; I bit my lips together not to answer' (69). Only now does she have the strength of will not to water the plant that he gave her. Finally, he leaves a note, calling her into his office, where he speaks with 'a rather stagey reluctance' (69) about his tolerance in renting the room to a writer: 'I didn't let that worry me, though I have heard things about writers and artists and that type of person that didn't strike me as very encouraging. You know the sort of thing I mean' (ibid.). As he continues his monologue, his insinuations echo and exaggerate the negative voices she has internalized:

That's not a normal way for a person to behave. Not if they got nothing to hide. No more than it's normal for a young woman, says she has a husband and kids, to spend her time rattling away on a typewriter. (70)

He questions that she really is a writer, since he has never heard of her; we might remember, the definitions and redefinitions of 'writer', 'I write', 'try to write', in the opening page (59). Malley's speech resembles that of a fictional detective, a Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, confronting a suspect. Munro implies that both characters stage and rehearse their speech; both the writer and the landlord apply the techniques of fiction to experience, constructing narratives around their own lives and those of others. Earlier, the narrator describes herself 'trembling with anger and gratification' because Malley's snooping in the office at night has given her 'just cause' for resentment (69).

Malley follows up his allegations with a series of notes accusing her of various kinds of anti-social behaviour:

As the notes grew more virulent our personal encounters ceased. Once or twice I saw his stooped, sweated back disappearing as I came into the hall. Gradually our relationship passed into something that was entirely fantasy. He accused me now, by note, of being intimate with people from

Numero Cinq. This was a coffee-house in the neighbourhood, which I imagined he invoked for symbolic purposes. (71)

Eventually there is a final face-to-face encounter. This time Malley's demeanour resembles that of religious zealotry, 'another face, remote and transfigured, that shone with the cold light of intense joy at discovering the proofs of sin' (71). The lavatory attached to the office she is renting has been covered in lipsticked graffiti: he accuses her of being responsible, along with 'your friends' (72). When she blames bored teenagers, he begins to threaten her right to creative practice from a new perspective:

It's a shame the kids get blamed for everything, when it's the elders that corrupts them. That's a thing you might do some thinking about, you know. There's laws. Obscenity laws. Applies to this sort of thing and literature too, as I believe. (72)

Until this point, as I have suggested, the narrator has repressed her anger, preferring to counter Malley's interference with the traditionally feminine tactics of avoidance and appeasement. Now there is a change:

This is the first time I ever remember taking deep breaths consciously, for the purposes of self-control. I really wanted to murder him. I remember how soft and loathsome his face looked, with the eyes almost closed, nostrils extended to the soothing odour of righteousness, the odour of triumph. If this stupid thing had not happened, he never would have won. But he had. Perhaps he saw something in my face that unnerved him, even in this victorious moment, for he drew back to the wall, and began to say that, actually, as a matter of fact, he had not really felt it was the sort of thing I personally would do, more the sort of thing that perhaps certain friends of mine- (73)

'I remember' frames this description as a reconstruction, but it also foregrounds the intensity of an impression which has lodged itself in the writer's memory. The narrator's fury is driven partially by an ideological resistance to censorship, but the intellectual element is subsumed by a visceral, even phobic, disgust. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva analyzes the nature of phobias and taboos through the concept of abjection. That which is abject, for instance, bodily fluids and faeces, can never be fully expelled from the self, yet is simultaneously outside the unified subject, the 'own and clean self' (65). The abject is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (4).

In her study, *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Magdalene Redekop relates the narrator's difficulty in repelling Malley's unwanted

ministrations to a difficulty in shedding the maternal, caring role even in the masculine space of the office. Malley's 'soft and loathsome' features (73) could be read as those of the surrogate child whose needs cannot be expunged from the narrator's psyche. His assumptions about writing and sex are 'so wistful, so infantile' (67). Her response to his neediness, in the early days of his present-giving and his 'eatin' into her time' (66) is that of the guilty mother: 'I did not even really pity him. It was just I could not turn away, I could not turn away from that obsequious hunger' (66). Yet the mother/child roles are constantly shifting. Malley, with the 'ponderous matriarchal discomfort' of his gait (63-4) also assumes a maternal position. The love of gossip is a conventionally feminine attribute, along with the quasi-maternal attempts to nurture the narrator, and then to police her behaviour. Magdalene Redekop points out the importance of these shifting identities for the central themes of the story: 'The kaleidoscopic reversals expose the patterns of family behaviour as human constructs open to change. What holds the kaleidoscope still for the space of this story is the focus on the act of writing' (49). We can relate the narrator's phobic reaction to Malley to her own ambivalence about the confined space of the office and the psychic boundaries that it represents for the female writer. In this light, those office walls 'cold and bare, white with a little grey' (63), stand for the blank page facing all of us who, metaphorically speaking, pick up the pen.

In her *Paris Review* interview Munro describes the difficulties of trying to write at home:

Some part of me was absent for those children, and children detect things like that. Not that I neglected them, but I wasn't wholly absorbed. When my oldest daughter was about two, she'd come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other. (McCulloch and Simpson)

These comments echo the narrator's in 'The Office': 'Imagine (I said) a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them' (60). The children's persistent, almost, willful interruptions also recall another story, 'My Mother's Dream' (*The Love of a Good Woman*, 1998) in which a small baby starts her screaming every time the mother picks up the violin to practice. Biographical studies by Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Robert Thacker, and a memoir by Munro's daughter Sheila, refer to a painful and frustrating period in Munro's writing life, which we can see reflected in

‘The Office’. The conflict between artistic dedication and maternal duty is ultimately irreconcilable, as the story demonstrates, and as Munro’s regretful comments make be taken to imply.

When Malley withdraws from the final confrontation, another gender reversal takes place, as he adopts the narrator’s own appeasement and avoidance strategies, eventually taking to his bed. The narrator goes into the office, closes the door for one last time, and packs her things to leave. She regrets giving up her office. In the coda at the end of the story, she says, ‘I think that I will try again some day, but not yet’ (73):

I have to wait until at least that picture fades that I see so clearly in my mind, though I never saw it in reality - Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way, his deliberately clumsy way, at the toilet walls, stooping with difficulty, breathing sorrowfully, arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust. While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him. (73-4)

The contrast between the long, ruminative sentences of the closing paragraph and the punchy, journalistic opening indicates a shift in mood and attitude. The qualified statement, ‘I think that I will try again some day but not yet’ (my emphasis), communicates uncertainty and hesitation. This paragraph foregrounds the story’s self-reflexivity; the story the narrator is writing is the story we have now finished reading. The ambiguities are obvious, though they are not entirely new to the attentive reader.

The narrator still yearns for that space behind a closed door, where clear boundaries are laid between an autonomous self and the outside world; where the professional and the maternal are divided from one another. Most writers, male or female, share an insatiable longing for the time and space to concentrate entirely on their work; this is the reason behind artists’ retreats, such as the prestigious Yaddo residencies in the USA. The division between the professional self and the maternal in ‘The Office’ stands for a wider struggle, both practical and psychological, to reconcile living a life with making art. It is possible to read ‘The Office’ as a parable about the obstinacy of patriarchal values, and the enduring relevance for women writers of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. However, a more nuanced reading explores the breaching of fixed boundaries, including gender roles, and an ambivalence towards the sealed space of the office. There can be no ‘solution to my life’ (59). Munro’s

response to the clash between art and living is to embrace an approach to storytelling that incorporates disruption at its source.

Storytelling in 'The Office' is not confined to a dedicated space or to the professional artist. Malley is a skilled oral storyteller, dramatizing his own life and those of others. One of his stories concerns the previous tenant, a chiropractor:

The only trouble was, he gave more adjustments than was listed in the book of chiropractory. Oh, he was adjusting right and left. I came in here after he moved out, and what do you think I found? Soundproofing! This whole room was soundproofed, to enable him to make his adjustments without disturbing anybody. This very room you're sitting writing your stories in. (66-7)

Like other authors, Malley builds up suspense, controls the pace of the narrative and even plays with words to comic effect ('chiropractory' is a neologism.). The narrator observes that his pleasure in offering this story to her as raw material for fiction derives not merely from the frisson of gossip, but also from a 'vague delicious connection' between 'writing and lewdness' (67). She dismisses that notion as 'infantile' (67) Yet it is not entirely ridiculous. Many of Munro's later stories, including 'Meneseung' (*Friend of My Youth*, 1990), 'Carried Away' (*Open Secrets*, 1994) and 'To Reach Japan' (*Dear Life*, 2012) draw connections between creativity, sexuality, inebriation and altered states of consciousness. The liminal state of consciousness evoked parenthetically on pages 60-61 is not directly sexual, but it is sensuous and intuitive. The obscene graffiti on the lavatory wall might be seen as an eruption of the Dionysian drives that the narrator has repressed in the sterile space of the office.

In 'On Writing the Office', Munro describes herself feeling blocked, 'staring at the walls and the Venetian blinds' for hours on end (259). During those long hours, external intrusions are clearly not the problem. The door is firmly shut and the blinds, we may infer, are closed, excluding the outside world completely. The Paris Review interview, along with other interviews such as that with Harold Horwood, confirms that, being inside any space dedicated purely to writing has a 'paralysing' effect on Munro's creativity; since the experiment represented in 'The Office', she has written mostly at home. 'On Writing the Office' reveals that what Munro was failing to produce during those wasted hours staring at the walls was in fact a novel. I would suggest that the story she eventually completed articulates a poetics of distraction, which is related to Munro's

choice of form and her ongoing exploration of the interaction between fiction and reality.

In ‘The Office’, as we have seen, Munro rehearses varieties of storytelling, including autobiographical and oral forms of discourse. Both the narrator and her landlord stage their own realities and ‘arrange’ lived experience within narrative patterns. The repetition of ‘arrange’ in the final paragraph draws an obvious parallel between Malley ‘arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust’ and the narrator’s compositional process (74). The focalization blurs in the key phrase, ‘bizarre but never quite satisfactory’; are those tales deficient from their author’s point of view, or from the listener’s? Of course, the image of Malley scrubbing the walls is also a speculative reconstruction, and we have been reminded throughout the narrative that the events in the text are recollected from hindsight.

As the narrator prepares to leave the office for good, she comes across Mrs. Malley. Earlier, Mrs Malley is introduced through a densely descriptive character sketch:

Mrs. Malley was a black-haired, delicate-looking woman, perhaps in her early forties, slatternly but still faintly appealing, with such arbitrary touches of femininity as the thin line of bright lipstick, the pink feather slippers on obviously tender and swollen feet. She had the swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension, that speaks of a life spent in close attention on a man who is by turns vigorous crotchety and dependent. (62)

Mrs. Malley is presented as the ‘round’ character of realist fiction. In this type of storytelling, the accumulation of specific visual details, such as the lipstick and the feather slippers, build a vivid impression of a character whose internal motivations are linked to what may be observed externally. The narrator notes the ‘swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension’ that defines a whole lifestyle. The narrator undercuts this confident rendition of Mrs. Malley with the reflection that her observations have been shaped by hindsight: ‘How much of this I saw at first, how much decided on later is of course impossible to tell’—However she does re-instate some of her authority as a trustworthy reader of character: ‘I did think that she would have no children, the stress of her life, whatever it was, did not allow it, and in this I was not mistaken’ Mrs. Malley is also a character in her husband’s melodramatic ‘stories of himself’ (68), in which her health is described as poor and her temperament unstable. But she herself disappears until the final pages when she quietly helps the narrator carry her bags to the car. She is no

longer a colourful character, merely 'practical and resigned' (73): 'she was so still I felt my anger leave me, to be replaced by an absorbing depression' (73.).

The figure of Mrs. Malley, presented initially through the vivid lens of fiction, then as a character so 'still' she becomes virtually invisible, demonstrates an ambivalence towards conventional modes of storytelling. Dense descriptive passages are far from infrequent in Munro's first collection, but in 'The Office' the Malleys and their apartment have clearly been appropriated for their value as fiction. Mr. Malley, hyperbolized by his physique, the gilt-framed portrait and his exaggerated stories, is aligned with excess and ornamentation. When Mrs. Malley re-appears, it is as if the nondescript 'real' person from 'real life' has stepped on stage, foreshadowing the anxiety of that final fragmented sentence: 'while I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him' (74). Mr. Malley dominates the story, just as his portrait dominates his apartment, but it is Mrs. Malley, the more peripheral and mysterious character, who prefigures Munro's approach in her later fiction.

If the narrator's anxiety derives at all from ethical concerns about using real people as models for fictional characters, this is overshadowed by the stronger suggestion that the distractions they provide might generate a different kind of storytelling. The narrator conceals which type of fiction she is writing, just as she hides 'the manuscript' from Malley (70), but the reader might wonder if, like Munro, she is trying to write a novel. As a fragmented, elliptical genre, the modern short story is able to build seemingly random digressions into an image-based structure. Its resistance to closure means that the incomplete, contradictory and 'never quite satisfactory' are more easily assimilated than in the conventional novel.

By the end of the story, 'I try to write' is no longer an expression of 'hypocritical humility' (59) but a recognition of storytelling as a provisional reworking of an elusive reality. The doors are left open between art and life; autobiography, fiction and the fiction-making process cross back and forth. 'She is the house. There is no separation possible' (60). Munro's well known analogy between a story and a house in her essay, 'What is Real?', gains extra resonance when we consider the house as not just a metaphor for narrative structure but the creative environment in which the writing is produced: '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' (224). In that

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same essay, Munro recognizes the inevitability: ‘Every final draft, every published story, is still only an attempt, an approach to the story’ (225). The coming to terms with failure finds its perfect form in the short story, and in an aesthetic which accepts distractions and digressions as a stylistic necessity.

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