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From Participant to Observer: Theatricality as Distantiation in “Royal Beatings” and “Lives of Girls and Women” by Alice Munro

Lee Garner and Jennifer Murray

- 1 Theatricality is an explicit metaphor in much of Munro’s early writing and appears in multiple forms and contexts, from the acting out of fantasy, to the analogical commentary, and the simple intertext. Little has been written about this aspect of Munro’s writing, but we have noted that in E.D. Blodgett’s *Alice Munro*, the author discusses the notion of performance as imitation, as a mimetic function, and relates it to both the questioning of identity (87) and to the refusal of a single vision of the truth: he notes “pretense may also refer to a truth in the process of transformation” (91). Running through Blodgett’s analysis is the assumption that there is an essential self to which the theatrical metaphor may be an aid towards discovery. While accepting certain timeless features of social being, our position would be to refuse the basic notion of an essential self and rather to link the use of the theatrical metaphor in Munro to the exploration of the conflict between the social script and unconscious drives.
- 2 In our discussion, we will be focusing on specific examples in the stories “Royal Beatings” and “Lives of Girls and Women;” here, the theatrical metaphor comes into play when the basic drives of sexuality and aggression are given expression in a context where the limits of socially acceptable behaviour are transgressed. In these cases, the discourses of ‘theatricality’ are called upon to illustrate the acting out of transgressive moments through a discourse which allows for a distancing gesture within the narration.
- 3 This distancing operates in several ways: to begin with, the use of the theatrical metaphor facilitates the dramatization of the social and unconscious scripts in which the different characters are caught up, and at the same time, it creates a

defamiliarization which allows the protagonist to move (at least partially) from the position of unthinking participant to that of detached observer or audience, leaving her relatively unscathed by the consequences of the moments experienced, much as Munro suggests in her comment to Robert Thacker:

One thing [...] I think is interesting, now that I look back on it: when the [character's] circumstances become hopelessly messy, when nothing is going to go right for her, she gets out of it by looking at the way things happen — by changing from a participant to an observer. (Thacker 50)

- 4 Theatrical distancing—or observation—thereby becomes a strategy: it allows for a self-distancing which opens the way to release, escape and learning. In the stories in question, the position of observer is not a passive one, but one which allows the young protagonists, whose perspectives coincide with those of the narrators, to construct a dramatic participative heuristic situation.
- 5 Finally, the theatrical distancing which the narrative voice sets up prevents the reader from being absorbed into the events of the narration, instead, he or she is situated at a critical distance, an observing distance, along with the protagonist, a position which may also have its collusive aspects, but which nonetheless allows for an evaluative stance rather than one of identification.
- 6 We have noted that the effects of the forces of the unconscious are a determining element in the shift to the theatrical perspective; it is specifically, if not exclusively, when the drives of sex and aggression manifest themselves in powerful ways that Munro's texts mobilize the vocabulary of performance, audience, and role-playing to a sustained degree. In "Royal Beatings", the pre-existing social script defining the mode and limits of parental punishment becomes the site of the expression of the aggressive instinct, whereas in "Lives of Girls and Women", social norms are over-stepped as the sex drive dominates the relation between the young protagonist Del and the adult Mr. Chamberlain. In both cases, theatricality will provide the distancing necessary to attenuate the potential danger of the situations, and hold them up for cool analysis and ironic reconsideration.

I

- 7 To the extent that we all live our lives through social roles, as parents, children, workers, spouses, citizens, we are compelled to conform to a greater or lesser degree to the social script which the specific role implies.¹ The presence of 'others' activates the notion of performance and the carrying out of the script, with of course, a degree of improvisation or individuality of response. In the textual moments when the vocabulary of the theatrical performance comes to dominate in "Lives of Girls and Women" and in "Royal Beatings", the social script is under strain, it is being pushed beyond its accepted variations and the characters transgress their attributed roles.
- 8 In "Royal Beatings", the scene of Rose's beating begins within the confines of accepted social behaviour. The time frame is the 1930s; the setting, rural Southern Ontario, and the values are largely those of small-town North American Protestantism. For a father to be called upon to discipline his child through physical violence would not have been unusual or particularly frowned upon. Thus, the scene begins with a sense of the familiar: a sense of a family ritual about to get underway with Flo, the step-mother, calling the father in from his work in the shed, presenting an inventory of her

grievances against Rose. The narrator herself, whose perspective is almost at one with Rose's, notes that it is not the specifics of the moment which matter: "It is the struggle itself that counts, and that can't be stopped, can never be stopped, short of where it has got to go, now" (17). Each of the family members is constrained by the social script and must move into their specific role in the struggle. As for the father, "He is slow at getting into the spirit of things, tired in advance, maybe, on the verge of rejecting the role he has to play" (17). The use of the verbal form 'has to' underlines the force of the script in structuring relationships.

- 9 Once the beating begins, the role the father is playing seems to take over and submerge the more restrained elements of his personality:

His face, like his voice, is quite out of character. He is like a bad actor, who turns a part grotesque. As if he must savor and insist on just what is shameful and terrible about this. This is not to say he is pretending, that he is acting, and does not mean it. He is acting and he means it. Rose knows that, she knows everything about him.
(18)

- 10 The father is 'out of character' to the extent that, for the most part, he is a reserved, private person who shows little expression towards his family. The role of the punishing patriarch transforms him before the eyes of his daughter, who sees him as "grotesque." What needs to be acknowledged, however, is that, where the father is concerned, there are two parallel scripts available at any time, roles which are more or less conscious. The father is only 'out of character' considered from Rose's point of view which would see the benevolent father, for the most part absent in the daily round, as the 'authentic' father, and the nasty violent patriarch as a 'role'.
- 11 Nonetheless, she recognizes a degree of 'authenticity' even within the 'role-playing' for the father is both "acting" and "he means it." He is acting the part of the punishing patriarch which he is expected to play, but the violence, which increases steadily throughout the scene, corresponds to an authentic drive, to deep impulses within him; it is the violence which is sincere, whether the motives for it are or not. The narrator brings out here the paradoxical potential of socially scripted situations in which one is "acting" out a role, but where the role becomes a venue for the expression of something which is emotionally real.
- 12 What is therefore at stake in the theatricality of this scene is the expression and representation of unconscious drives. Here, it is the aggressive drive which is in question: the brutality of the description of the attack shows that there is pleasure; there is physical and psychical release in the violence being perpetrated. Indeed, the father, as he assumes his role, is rejuvenated: "[His look] fills with hatred and pleasure. [...] His face loosens and changes and grows younger," (18). The deployment of the theatrical metaphor provides for the simultaneous representation of hatred and pleasure: repression is released and social duty performed.
- 13 We note that the inner focalisation on Rose allows for a double positioning of her as both participant and observer: Rose cannot detach herself from the violence to which she is being subjected, but on the other hand, by observing her father, and by analysing his behaviour she is being distanced from the violence of the beating undergone. In her position of attributed 'knowingness' ("she knows everything about him") Rose is accredited with a level of consciousness beyond her years which provides space for the spectator/reader to be both participant and observer.²

- 14 The narration manages to create another form of distance, an internal distance within the scene; on the one hand, we are given a riveting scene of violence where the repetitive use of the word "Bang" translates the abuse in both physical and auditory terms:

Her father is after her, cracking the belt at her when he can, then abandoning it and using his hands. Bang over the ear, then bang over the other ear. Back and forth, her head ringing. Bang in the face. Up against the wall and bang in the face again. He shakes her and hits her against the wall, he kicks her legs. She is incoherent, insane, shrieking. *Forgive me! Oh please, forgive me!* (19) Flo is shrieking too. *Stop stop!*

- 15 In this part of the scene, empathy with the victim is strong, but the basis for this empathy is suddenly undercut by the narration. We read:

Not yet. He throws Rose down. Or perhaps she throws herself down. (19)

- 16 By proposing an alternative reading of the scene through the words "Or perhaps she throws herself down," the perspective on Rose's position is transformed. At this point, the reader/spectator is made to reflect on the disturbing elements proffered in the dramatized narrative: is the social script so powerfully interiorized that the victim doesn't know whether she herself is the actor-victim or the spectator-critic. Indeed, the narrator goes on to define Rose as someone who is in an ambiguous position, perhaps not entirely authentic in her status as victim, and returns to the vocabulary of the theatrical to emphasize the point: "for it seems Rose must play her part in this with the same grossness, the same exaggeration, that her father displays, playing his. She plays his victim with a self-indulgence that arouses, and maybe hopes to arouse, his final, sickened contempt," (19).

- 17 Like the father, Rose is "acting" but she too "means it"; in this moment where there is a spilling outside of the boundaries of socially sanctioned behaviour, Rose seems to be positioned within a form of internal splitting, divided between her civilised self which retains its intellectual functions and observes; and her animal self, suddenly in unscripted territory, fighting for its survival. Indeed, the scene can only be concluded by Rose's full recognition of her father's domination, the victim's recognition of the power of the aggressor and his indubitable rights in the ideological discourses of 1940's Canada.

- 18 It also seems significant that in the case of the beating of Rose, the father and daughter are acting out a scene which springs not from their own feelings, but from the humiliation of Flo, the step-mother, who complains that "The things Rose has said to [her] are such that, if Flo had said them to her mother, she knows her father would have thrashed her into the ground" (16). Here, through Flo's transparent strategy, the social belief in the educational value of violence towards children and more generally, the tradition of socially sanctioned violence is ironically inserted into the text. Indeed, viewed from one perspective, the entire scene of the beating is an exercise in the violent re-establishment of the family hierarchy: the step-mother will not allow the step-daughter to humiliate her through her repetitive insolence. In this context, Flo becomes the instigator, the privileged audience, the judge, the arbiter of the events: she inscribes the scene within the social norm by stating that her own father would logically have punished her under such circumstances, and she circumscribes the effects of the violence by keeping it 'in the family': she locks the door to the store they inhabit, puts up a sign saying "BACK SOON" and declares: "Well we don't need the public in on this, that's for sure" (17). In effect, Flo fears that the violence of the scene

may take it outside what the actors feel falls within the social norms, and a collective sense of unspoken shame colours the aftermath of the scene. It is a scene of transgression to the extent that the drives which find expression in violence take the characters beyond the demands of the social script, and yet, the violence remains within the socially recoverable, does not do any lasting harm to the family unit.³

II

- 19 The hypothesis we have been exploring is that the vocabulary of theatricality underscores the acting out of the social script, in particular when it is associated with the potential transgression of its limits due to the expression of unconscious drives. At the same time, the theatrical metaphor provides the reader/spectator with sufficient space and distance to facilitate a critical reading. In the case of "Lives of Girls and Women", the episode centring on Mr. Chamberlain's exhibitionist masturbation presents a situation in which the norms of accepted social behaviour have very clearly been transgressed; in this case, the underlying unconscious force is the sex drive.
- 20 Mr. Chamberlain, who is occasionally present in Del's mother's home as the boarder's boyfriend, has been responding to Del's childish flirtation with surreptitious slaps and groping. He then takes her for a drive into the country, gets out of the car, walks a while, then proceeds to masturbate before the girl of approximately fourteen or fifteen years old.
- 21 We note that previous to Mr Chamberlain's performance, a certain amount of symbolic foreplay has gone on between the man and the adolescent girl. Del, who experiences the world around her as vaguely sexually charged, and who has already had a sexual fantasy in relation to the man, offers to perform as a seal for Mr. Chamberlain in return for a sip from his glass of whisky. Del's performance as the phallic animal supplemented by Mr Chamberlain's titillating game of offering and withdrawing the forbidden drink, is followed by a quick gesture on the part of Chamberlain which is both aggressive and sexual in its execution:
- He rubbed against the damp underarm of my blouse and then inside the loose armhole of the jumper I was wearing. He rubbed quick, hard against the cotton over my breast. So hard he pushed the yielding flesh up, flattening it. And at once withdrew. It was like a slap, to leave me stung. (177)
- 22 This incident does not upset Del, but rather stimulates her curiosity and her desire: she subsequently makes herself available for other such assaults, seeing in the violence of the sexual expression a form of worldliness: "He went straight for the breasts, the buttocks, the upper thighs, brutal as lightning. [...] In the secret violence of sex would be recognition, going way beyond kindness, beyond good will or persons." (178).
- 23 Initially, therefore, the sex drive is at work in both characters: when Mr. Chamberlain takes Del for a ride in his car and begins to leave the town limits, Del confesses that "Excitement [...] had got the upper hand of [her]" (184). Still within a fantasy world presented by her adult narrating self, Del's vision of the landscape becomes coloured by her sexual desire: "nature became debased, maddeningly erotic" with "ploughed fields rearing up like shameless mattresses," (185).⁴ Yet when the car stops, she notes "Events were becoming real" and the possibility of real sexual intercourse makes her anxious: "so anxious [that] all the heat and dancing itch between [her] legs had gone dead, as if a piece of ice had been laid to it," (186). At the moment that the signifier 'ice' indicates

that desire has left Del and is fully in the camp of the dominating Chamberlain, a theatrical vocabulary begins framing his actions to construct them as a performance: "Mr Chamberlain opened his jacket and loosened his belt, then unzipped himself. He reached in to part some inner curtains and 'Boo!' he said," (186). The theatrical "inner curtains," pre-figuring the dramatic, and Chamberlain's ensuing ventriloquizing of his penis's "'Boo!'", instantly tip the text into the register of the comic. Again, the reader / spectator experiences a form of 'release and clarification': release from the anticipation of danger, and clarification as to the performative nature of 'Art' Chamberlain's intentions.

- 24 The masturbation scene which follows is one for which Del has no social script; in this context, there is no frame of reference for how she 'ought to' behave. She becomes fully positioned in the role of audience, active not as a participant but as an observer. In this context, she describes the sight before her in histrionic terms:

The face he thrust out at me, from his crouch, was blind and wobbling like a mask on a stick, and those sounds coming out of his mouth, involuntarily, last-ditch human noises were at the same time theatrical, unlikely. In fact, the whole performance, surrounded by calm flowering branches, seemed imposed, fantastically and predictably exaggerated, like an Indian dance. (187)

- 25 The world of theatricality is present through the words "mask," "theatrical," "performance," and "dance." The use and the effect of this theatrical perspective is emphasized through adjectives such as "imposed," "exaggerated," and "unlikely," underlining the breach with the conventional forms of behaviour. Here, there is no longer a relationship of exchange between the two people present, but a relationship of exhibitionism: Del observes the acts or behavior of Chamberlain, but remains separate from, almost untouched by the imposed discourse of this other person who is engrossed in the exposure of his own animality: indeed, the phrase "last-ditch"⁵ is used in both "Royal Beatings" and "Lives of Girls and Women" to designate the tenuous border between nature and civilization: in "Lives of Girls and Women", Mr. Chamberlain is heard making "last-ditch human noises" as he approaches his climax, and in "Royal Beatings", Rose, at the most intense moment of her beating "has given up on words but is letting out a noise, the sort of noise that makes Flo cry, *Oh what if people can hear her?* The very last-ditch willing sound of humiliation and defeat it is," (19). In this instance, Rose ceases to use words thereby surrendering her affiliation to the human, and is reduced to making animal-like sounds, provoking Flo's social sense of embarrassment.
- 26 In the scene involving Mr. Chamberlain, the narrating stance maintains Del at a distance from any involvement in the sexuality on display; she becomes an observer who offers not an erotic but an empirical account of what she witnesses. Viewing Chamberlain's penis, she comments: "It had a sort of head on it, like a mushroom, and its color was reddish purple. It looked blunt and stupid, compared, say, to fingers and toes with their intelligent expressiveness, or even to an elbow or a knee," (186). This description, an admixture of observation and analogy, produces at least two effects: it reduces the phallus to a simple bodily organ, taking away its symbolic power; and devalorises it, placing the organ low in the hierarchy of body parts, beneath the elbow and the toe. In this way, the narrator/character is able to remain untouched by the intentions of the 'actor', refusing to be his ideal spectator; such phrases as "It did not seem frightening to me..." (186); "It looked to me vulnerable, playful and naive" (186); "It did not seem to have anything to do with me" (186), indicate that the desired effect

has not been obtained in the viewing girl, and equally, defeats any expectations on the reader's part of an erotic exchange. Where Del is concerned, the formal assignment of her to a spectator position has distanced her from the former object of her fantasy life, so that when Chamberlain, after his act, says: "Quite a sight, eh?", the narrative consciousness offers us a deflationary reading of events, describing the landscape, as no longer "maddeningly erotic" but as "postcoital, distant and meaningless" (187).

- 27 Whereas in the case of the family beating, each member of the family gradually slips back into their usual ways of being, in the case of Mr. Chamberlain, Del notes, "I could not get him back into his old role," (190). Indeed, the experience of spectatorship creates an alteration of Del's view of the man which the end of the performance cannot undo. Moreover, Chamberlain's transgression of the social limit and the narrative and theatrical devices used offer us a position of collusive sympathy with Del and the feeling of sharing in her transforming consciousness.
- 28 The close analysis of our two extracts leads us to the following conclusions: firstly, by using the theatrical metaphor to underline the expression of repressed drives, Munro's writing inscribes a certain joyful irony in the examination of the animality of humanity, what some would call its baseness, what others would see as its force and vitality. Munro's reputation for paradox is affirmed in this mode of expression which is inclusive in its approach to the human condition; even in our grotesquery, even in our violence and desire, and even in our enslavement to the social script of our times, there is wonder, there is amusement, and there is potential for growth and transformation. Secondly, the ironic observing distance is one from which the character/reader may feel protected from the potential violence of certain moments of excess, but it is equally one from which the fantastic complexity of the business of being human may be glimpsed. And lastly, the theatrical metaphor is used in such a way that the positions of actor and observer are only ever relative, and the potential for reversal, so essential to the mode of the grotesque, is creatively affirmed.

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NOTES

1. The use of the theatrical metaphor in sociological studies is attested to in Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor, 1959.

2. This shift to an analytical stance is not uncommon in Munro's writing of theatrical moments. In the story entitled "The Flats Road," for example, the protagonist, Del, comments on the violence of the young woman recently brought into the neighbourhood as the new bride of Uncle Benny:

"Her violence seemed calculated, theatrical; you wanted to stay to watch it, as if it were a show, and yet there was no doubt, either, when she raised the stove lifter over her head, that she would crack it down on my skull if she felt like it—that is, if she felt the scene demanded it." (21)

As with Rose's father, there is the double sense of 'acting' and the expression of an authentic emotion. We also witness the same double positioning of the protagonist, Del, as potential victim of theatrical violence, and as someone occupying a coolly detached position of observation and analysis. Within the same framework of experience, the protagonist is at once 'participant' and 'observer', the latter position finally having more weight. A further analogy between the two scenes is that they draw attention to the tension between the performative element and the expressive function; the father "must" savor certain elements of his role, and the "scene demands" certain things, as if the dramatic aesthetic insists on being given attention, on being allowed its own specificity.

3.

Nonetheless, the potential for disorder implicit in the mixing of the social script and the desire for violence is explored on the level of the framing narrative, a story of a girl called Becky Tyde, whose grotesque appearance is symbolically linked to the violence of her father which in turn gives rise to a form of social violence which goes beyond the parameter's of the 'acceptable', in the form of a lynch mob.

4.

Munro's imagery here is deliberately overstated, as the adult narrator gently mocks her younger self, in the phase of sexual discovery. This mocking overstatement calls attention to itself and prevents complete identification between reader and character, allowing the reader to participate in the narrative distance of nostalgia and affection.

5.

Interestingly, the word 'ditch' has several relevant significations: it can mean to excavate, to get rid of; also to enclose or protect; while 'last-ditch' (especially hyphenated) suggests a desperate battle waged at the ultimate boundary.

ABSTRACTS

Dans "Lives of Girls and Women" et "Royal Beatings" la théâtralité fonctionne comme une métaphore explicite qui intervient dans les moments troublants du récit, ceux qui sont liés à l'expression de la sexualité et de l'agressivité. L'usage du discours de théâtre permet à la narratrice de mettre en relief ces moments d'une grande intensité dramatique en opérant un double effet d'amplification et de distanciation. En effet, une certaine distance émotionnelle est obtenue par le biais du langage théâtral. Les protagonistes (adolescentes) de ces nouvelles sont confrontées à des situations qui sont potentiellement traumatisantes ou dangereuses puisqu'elles ont trait aux codes de la civilisation et à la transgression de ces codes. En parlant des limites, la

théâtralité dramatise la réalité vécue en même temps qu'elle suggère l'aspect irréel du 'spectacle' proposé et tient le spectateur à l'écart, ainsi elle permet au lecteur de participer à la 'protection' de l'héroïne contre la brutalité des événements narrés.

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