THE AMBIGUITIES OF HISTORY IN ALICE MUNRO'S *THE LOVE OF A GOOD WOMAN*

Mary CONDE
Queen Mary & Westfield College

Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman", the lead short story of her new collection (1998), was originally published in the *New Yorker* in December 1996 subtitled "A murder, a mystery, a romance". It is the form of the short story, its economy conducive to an ambiguity and an ambivalence rarely possible for the novel, which enabled Munro to make this triple identification, an identification closely linked to the story's preoccupation with history as a shifting and elusive reality. Historical events and historical personages, past and present, are layered with the everyday existence past and present, of a small Canadian town, in which a murder may or may not have been committed.

"The Love of a Good Woman" ("L'amour d'une femme bien"), d'Alice Munro, la principale nouvelle de sa dernière collection, a été originellement publiée dans le *New Yorker* au mois de décembre 1996, sous-titrée "Un meutre, un mystère, une histoire romantique". C'est la forme économique de la nouvelle qui contribue à son ambiguïté et à une ambivalence rarement possible pour un roman, permettant à Munro de faire une triple identification, identification prochement liée à la préoccupation de la nouvelle avec l'histoire, réalité changeante et élusive. Les événements et les personnages historiques, passés et présents, sont superposés avec l'existence journalière, passée et présente, d'une petite ville canadienne, dans laquelle un meurtre a pu, ou n'a pas pu, être commis.

Alice Munro's short story "The Love of a Good Woman", first published in the *New Yorker* in December 1996, was originally subtitled "A murder, a mystery, a romance", but this subtitle is omitted in her collection "The Love of a Good Woman", published in 1998. Although Munro notes that stories in this collection previously published in the *New Yorker* appeared there in very different form, there are no other significant changes in this lead story. It is the form of the short story, its economy conducive to an ambiguity and an ambivalence rarely possible for the novel, which enabled Munro to make this triple identification, an identification closely linked to the story's preoccupation with history as a shifting and elusive reality.

The story opens with a prologue in a colloquial narrative voice, seemingly speaking from the present (1996), which exhibits to our gaze the historical artefact, the box of optometrist's instruments, which has been salvaged from 1951 by an anonymous donor to the collection at the local museum. It then moves back to 1951 and three boys who have come out to "Jutland", a place *not* named for the first world war sea battle, as many people believe, (4) although this would be appropriate for a location in a story also concerned with an inconclusive and somewhat ignominious victory, and also

involving a projected enticement. These boys, who have come in order to say that they have been swimming before the snow was off the ground, a boast which is merely technically true, discover the drowned body of the optometrist Mr. Willens in his car, but delay retailing this information for some time.

The story then moves forward to Enid's nursing of Mrs. Quinn in her terminal illness. Enid has promised her father on his deathbed not to nurse professionally, but, in one of the many slippery decisions of the story, has taken this to apply only to hospital work. Just before she dies, Mrs. Quinn tells Enid that her husband Rupert killed Mr. Willens and dumped his body and his car in the river, in revenge for her own sexual encounters with Mr. Willens, encounters which radically change during her narration.

Enid determines to confront Rupert with this "confession", and to do so on the river in his boat, having first revealed to him that she cannot swim, thus giving him the chance to drown her. She changes her mind just before they set out, at which point the story ends. The reader is forced back to the opening of the story to determine not only how Enid's story must have ended, but the force both of the title and the subtitle. Is Enid the "good woman" of the title because of her anticipated loyalty to Rupert after he confesses ? Is the "murder" that of Mr. Willens or of Enid, and are both equally imaginary ? Do "mystery" and "romance" refer to events within the story, or to the story itself as literary kind ?

Suzanne Hunter Brown in her article on "Discourse Analysis and the Short Story" argues not only for the slower, more attentive reading of the short story than the novel, but for the slower, more attentive reading of the beginning of any text (Brown 231-232). In "The Love of a Good Woman" the beginning is clearly signalled by an introductory section preceding the first section, "Jutland". The tone in this introductory section is both confident and tentative. The narrator judges the apple peeler in the museum collection "cumbersome" and the insulators "pretty", but merely suggests that the ophthalmoscope "could make you think of a snowman" and that the retinoscope "is something like an elf's head". This has its counterpart in the museum's note, which declares the box of optometrist's instruments to be of "considerable local significance", but only speculates that it was found by the anonymous donor.

On re-reading the beginning of the story, it becomes clear that the statement that the box escaped the "catastrophe" of Mr. Willens' drowning actually confirms the fact not only that Mr. Willens did not drown, but that Enid concealed the fact, so that the ending of the story, Enid's perception that "everything for a long way around had gone quiet" signals not only the

hushing of the narrative voice but the silencing of Enid as a potential narrator of Mr. Willens's death. Ironically, Enid always intended to maintain her silence about his death but only in order to impel Rupert to make his own confession ; she then intends to speak to him and write to him as often as she can, as a reward. But the only confession, either within the story itself or implied after its ending, is that of Mrs. Quinn, told in the third person from her point of view in the third section, "Mistake".

"Mistake" has many ramifications as a title, one of which is satirically indicated by Mrs. Quinn herself. Mr. Willens is to be pushed into the river in his car after his death, (as she explains)

> Like he turned off on the Jutland road, maybe it was dark and he just drove into the water before he knew where he was at. Like he just made a mistake.
> He did. Mr. Willens certainly did make a mistake. (131)

The mistake here appears to be Mr. Willens' lechery, but earlier Mrs. Quinn has indicated that it was her husband's mistake to interpret this as lechery, since Mr. Willens (according to her)

> had grabbed her leg to keep his balance and her skirt got scrunched up and her leg showed bare, but that was all there was to it and she couldn't do a thing about it, she had to concentrate on keeping still. (130)

Later again, far from being a passive victim, Mrs. Quinn depicts herself as an active partner who gives the coded message of sexual assent, so that her whole account is riddled with contradictions. In so far as she blames herself for any mistake, it is for her method of disposing of the evidence, which, she claims, "was the whole beginning of her being sick". The final implication of "mistake" as a title, of course, is that it categorises the whole section as a delusion, despite its wealth of convincing detail. As Enid reminds herself,

> A sick person's mind, a dying person's mind, could fill up with all kinds of trash and organize that trash in a most convincing way. (38)

Coral Ann Howells has written suggestively of the "strong sense of mutual hostility" between Enid and Mrs. Quinn (Howells 150-151), who is, moreover, never named either by Enid, or the narrator as "Jeanette", as anything other than Rupert's wife, until she is safely dead, although even here it is in a parenthesis (67). If Mrs. Quinn is aware of Enid's possessive yearning for

Rupert, she may have invented the story in an attempt to thwart Enid's possession of him, in the same spirit as the dying woman who smashed the plate to keep it out of her sister's clutches. (37)

The fourth and final section, which follows "Mistake", is called " Lies". It contains as an example Enid's conviction, when she was four or five, that she had seen her father sucking a woman's breast. Her mother "disproves" Enid's story by showing Enid her own breast, "a dull-skinned object that flopped over her hand". Because Enid remembers the woman's breast as quite different, as like an ice-cream cone, her memory is dismissed as a dream, although it is this very detail which may both confirm, and explain, the incident.

It is this kind of ambiguity in Munro's story that draws us to a re-reading of the beginning. Now it becomes clear that the box's escape is indeed the proof that Mr. Willens did not drown but was killed by Rupert, and also the confirmation that Enid married Rupert. She, and not Rupert, must be the anonymous donor who dispatched the box to the museum, as part of the process she was already contemplating before the end of the story. She thinks of Rupert's house that,

> A house like this, lived in by one family for so long a time, and neglected for the past several years, would have plenty of bins, drawers, shelves, suitcases, trunks, crawl spaces full of things that it would be up to Enid to sort out, saving and labelling some, restoring some to use, sending others by the boxload to the dump. When she got that chance she wouldn't balk at it. She would make this place into a house that had no secrets from her and where all order was as she had decreed. (140)

This is a project just as much about narrative as it is about material property. Enid will "sort out" Mr. Willens' box by sending it, tidily, to the museum, but she will also manage the ordering, on her own terms, of fact and fiction, of revelation and silencing. It is in this sense, at the end of the story, that "she could feel as if everything for a long way around had gone quiet". Secrets have been laid to rest by her own act of will.

Enid realizes at the last minute, with joy and relief, that "her life held a different possibility", and that "all she needed to do was to keep quiet and let it come". Her smart appearance as she goes to visit Rupert, in readiness for the "melodramatic fate" of being murdered by Rupert, now becomes appropriate for the first stage in their courtship.

A re-reading of the opening in this light also establishes the force of the title, "A murder, a mystery, a romance". The murder is that of Mr. Willens, the (solved) mystery is of how that came about, the romance is that between Enid and Rupert.

However, Enid's keeping quiet, "her collaboration in a silence" as Munro puts it, is now seen to involve a deliberate abstention from ever broaching the subject of Mr. Willens to Rupert, despite her previous desire to do this. This is comically foreshadowed in the schoolgirl teasing of Rupert, about which a silence is also later maintained : "She wants to speak to you, Rupert. [...] She's dying to talk to you". (118)

Enid does not have to risk dying to talk to Rupert, which leaves open the possibility that his wife's account of Mr. Willens' death really was a "Mistake", a mistake that Rupert might not even be aware of. Enid thinks she has bought him at the price of her silence, but her silence is pointless, like the long interval of silence before the boys who discover Mr. Willens' body report it to the police. There is no evidence in Munro's story (as opposed to Mrs. Quinn's) that Rupert ever saw the box of instruments, and its anonymous donor might have been any inhabitant of Walley, including Willens' widow. The "murder" of the subtitle then becomes an artificially constructed mystery, and a "romance" in the sense that it never happened. This gives added point to the suggestions in the introductory section that the instruments in the box could make you think of a snowman, or were something like an elf's head, with their resonances of a child's story, of a fairy story. Lois, Rupert's daughter, remarks of the berry bushes in the lane that they are like the story of Sleeping Beauty, and Enid records this remark in the notebook she keeps for the doctor. She stores it up precisely because it is fanciful.

In reporting this remark to Rupert, Enid also lays claim to it, by pointing out that *she* had read the story of Sleeping Beauty to the children. In the same way, the gift of the book of cut-out dolls featuring Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose leads to the children's "becoming" the princesses as they loll in the washtubs. This quasi-ownership of others' thoughts is closely allied to the training of the children in manners, begun by Enid and projected by their aunt Olive, who takes them, at least temporarily, to live with her, and it is significant that Enid's conversation with the children about the necessity for punishment is the clarification and confirmation of her own thoughts about Rupert, whom she intends to direct as if he were a child, and to organize the contents of his head.

Munro is particularly interested in the contents of people's heads, both hoarded personal memories which make dying people whimper "about some unjust punishment suffered seventy years earlier" and historical facts learnt at school ; for example :

> The very uselessness, the exotic nature of the things in those books and in those students' heads, in her own head then and Rupert's made Enid feel a tenderness and wonder. (125-126)

Somewhere *between* these two categories lies the consciousness of celebrities, whether the famous sisters the royal princesses or the famous sisters the Dionne quintuplets, with whom Mrs. Quinn is linked both through her name and her souvenir tablecloth with which she swathes the slaughtered Mr. Willens' head (the contents of which are leaking). The ingestion of mental images seems implicitly compared with the consumption of childhood treats : Mr. Willens' head leaks a substance which "looked exactly like when the froth comes up, when you were boiling the strawberries to make jam", Enid's idea of her father's sucking a breast is the idea of an ice-cream cone, and on the day of their mother's death, when she wants the children to remember her words about punishment, she serves them for lunch

> jello and a plate of cookies sprinkled with colored sugar and glasses of milk into which she had stirred chocolate syrup. (134)

While the three boys who discover Mr. Willens' body are withholding this information, they buy licorice whips, and intend to buy ice-cream later. The memory of Mr. Willens' "jokey gallantry" (so different from the brutish lechery which Mrs. Quinn remembers) makes the nerves of Enid's teeth "ache, as from too much sugar". The implication is that the processes by which memory is stored (or created) are fundamentally unsound and sickening. (For example, Bud's sister Doris feels such terrible shame about having had menstrual blood on her skirt that she can never bear to refer to it, whereas Mrs. Quinn feels no equivalent shame about a dead man's blood on her blouse.)

Allied to this are the frequent failures of communication in the story, like Sylvie's failure to comprehend the phrase "God bless", having used it in her prayers for some time, or the mismatches of utterance and meaning which seem the norm in Walley : when Enid asks Rupert whether he would like a cup of tea,

> Of course he said not to bother, and she went ahead and made it anyway, understanding that this reply might as well be yes in country speech. (125)

All this casts a retrospective doubt on the title of the story, "The Love of a Good Woman". If it refers to the love of Enid, either for her patients, or humanity in general, or specifically for Rupert, is "good woman" really an accurate description of her, or is she, as her mother hints, rather too masochistically and self-consciously a saint ? Or are we to interpret her perception that to keep silent about Rupert's (real or supposed) crime is to understand "how to keep the world habitable" as being a healthy abandonment of her own sainthood, one which really does make her a good woman ? "The love of a good woman" as cliché usually refers to the agency which reforms a criminal, a cliché which becomes inappropriate after the second and subsequent re-readings of the opening. Does the title mean that the love of a good woman *is* a murder, a mystery, romance, in the sense that it involves repression, secrets and fantasizing ? The lengthy analysis of the secret lives of the boys who find Mr. Willens' body, allied to the almost anthropological dissection of Walley's customs, seems to imply that adults never effectively progress beyond their childhood play worlds, going to visit the Dionne quintuplets, for example, being on exactly the same level as acting out royal princesses. Sexuality in the story is consistently linked to a crude, childish viewpoint which finally emerges as the adult viewpoint.

Finally, the title might imply that we can choose whether to read it either as a murder, if we choose to focus on Mr. Willens' violent death, or as a mystery, if we read it as a detective story, or as a romance, if we are most interested in Enid's relationship with Rupert. The old-fashioned ring of the title assigns it in any case to the past, so insisted upon during the narrative, and to the ambiguities of history.

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