Laura Fernanda Bulger

Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro

In and out of place – uprooting, re-rooting and rerouting in Alice Munro's *Who do you Think you Are? and The View from Castle Rock*

Those acquainted with Northrop Frye's criticism on world literature, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), might have been caught off balance with the renowned scholar's evaluation of Canada's literary achievements, namely in poetry and criticism. Some of Frye's remarks in *Conclusion*, published in 1965, were as wittily provocative as the one reproduced here: "The literary, in Canada, is often an incidental quality of writing which, like those of many of the early explorers, are as innocent of literary intention as a mating loon."[1]

At the time, Northrop Frye looked on English-speaking Canada as a colony wavering between its British cultural heritage and the American influence sneaking in from south of the border. Further to this apparently inevitable situation, the "garrison mentality"[2] within smaller and larger communities scattered throughout the Dominion fostered isolation,

[1] "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada", *in The Bush Garden, Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Introduction by Linda Hutcheon (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 216. In all fairness to the loon, whose haunting laugh must have scared the first European settlers out of their wits, its presence, together with other living creatures, from the bear and the seal to the "taciturn beaver", helps not only to keep an ecological balance, but also to shape up a Canadian creative imagination, one of the themes developed by Frye in his essay.

[2] "Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier', separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting – such communities are bound to develop what we provisionally call a garrison mentality." Frye, "*Conclusion*", p. 227.

even separatism, precluding a sense of national unity as much as the development of a creative imagination, one of Frye's main concerns. "To feel 'Canadian'" – he wrote – "was to feel part of a non-man's land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen."[3] Rhetorical questions such as *Where is here?* and *Who am I?* only stressed the difficulty in coping with the vast unknown land and in defining a Canadian identity, something that, according to Frye, was "local," or "regional," rather than national so much more in a country as culturally diverse as Canada where reference codes of identity have always been manifold.

Before his death, in 1991, Northrop Frye would reckon that "from about 1960 on," English Canada would "produce a literature of a scope and integrity admired the world over."[4] Frye's recognition of a distinctive Canadian literature was in itself an achievement considering the critic's earlier disenchantment with the "abortive cultural developments" of his country also described as the only "pure colony" "left in the world."[5]

One might add that, in barely two decades, the former Dominion would undergo several changes, not merely literary but also political, social and cultural, amidst the euphoric mood over the centennial celebrations of its birth, in 1967,[6] and a growing awareness of nationhood. Self-determination came finally in 1982,[7] a vindication for those "naïve" even narcissistic believers who claimed that the "twentieth-century" belonged to Canada.[8] The identity-seeking process would continue in post-colonial Canada, the *post-* hardly free of imperial "contaminations" either in Canada, or wherever empires ruled, as Linda Hutcheon rightly argues (2004:130-35).

---

3 Frye, "*Conclusion"*, p. 222.

4 See Linda Hutcheon, "The Field Notes of a Public Critic", *in Bush Garden*, p. xiii.

5 Frye, "Author's Preface", p. xxiii.

6 "In 1867, British Parliament passed the British North America Act, which brought the new nation into existence. But Prince Edward Island remained out until 1873, and Newfoundland only joined in 1949". John Saywell, *Canada, Pathways to the Present* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1994), p. 34.

7 In 1982, the Canadian Constitution was transferred from London to Ottawa, severing constitutional and legislative ties with Britain.

8 Frye, "Conclusion*"*, p. 223.

As to the literature written in both official languages, English and French, it has become "a mirror" of "social and physical landscapes" (Hammill 2007:3), extending the creative "map" envisaged by Margaret Atwood in *Survival* (1972: 18-19) where, like in Douglas Coupland's *Souvenir of Canada*, the "land" *binds* Canadians *together*.[9] As a matter of fact, the literary has transcended the scope of the technological achievements, devised to unite physically Canada's latitudinal territory, by providing a "unity of communication"[10] through a plurality of past and present, oral and written texts, from the ones by the Native peoples to those by earlier and later "immigrants" to the land.[11]

The Canadian literary imagination is no longer solely tied to the ambivalent wilderness represented in writings by the first European settlers and reinvented in the sixties and seventies.[12] Nowadays, rural

[9] "There is also an image of my father, a finer man it is hard to imagine, in his mid-twenties, flying bush planes in the unmapped wilds of Labrador, camped out at the end of an inlet, seeing a water spout ripping down the fjord, directly at him, a tall twisted tube of white water operating with the force of an atomic bomb. I see my father head from the beach into the nearby forest, grabbing onto the roots and trunk of a pine tree, expecting at any moment to be wrenched away from the earth and be delivered up into the sky, as Canadian a death as can be imagined. Then the waterspout comes suddenly to an end. Peace descends once more onto the water and the land. But for one brief moment there, the sky and earth and water together conspired to deliver the message to my father – and to us all – that we *are* the land, and the land *is* us – we are inseparable – that the land makes us who we are, and continues to do so – and that this knowledge binds us together in a covenant that is as sacred and precious as any written under the eyes of God or otherwise, since the creation of the world. O Canada" *Souvenir of Canada* (Vancouver, Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), p. 142.

[10] The expression is borrowed from Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan's theories of communication.

[11] In the "Afterword" to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Margaret Atwood writes: "We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders". *In* Faye Hammill, *Canadian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2007), p. 144.

[12] Faye Hammill connects "the motif of the wilderness … with a whole tradition of Canadian writing, from John Richardson and Susanna Moodie down to Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro". *Canadian Literature*, p. 83. On the same topic, see also Linda Hutcheon, "The Novel (1972-1984) from *The Literary History of Canada*,

spatial referents tend to be replaced with more urban ones, and a greater emphasis is given to the Canadian human landscape with its complex intertwining of cultures, traditions, styles and languages,[13] the cultural and literary "mosaic" in tune with the postmodern challenge of uniformity and sameness (Hutcheon 1988:ix). Though redundant, the "different" makes the difference in the literary production by minority, or "ethnic" groups,[14] still regarded as marginal to the mainstream by the so-called literary "establishment." Some reveal a variety of perspectives on Canadianism, its "mystique" enriched with exile, immigrant and diasporic experiences. It is only fair to say that, given Canada's social and cultural heterogeneity, literature being one of the artistic realms reflecting it, a Literary History of Canada, and so a Canadian canon, is still in the making.

We will focus here on the identity question, depicted in its psychological, cultural and social impact on the individual by Alice Munro, one of the most accomplished as well as prolific storytellers from English-speaking Canada. Born in Wingham, Ontario, Munro started publishing in the sixties. She reached worldwide recognition for her mastery in

---

Vol. 4", *in The Canadian Postmodern – A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 188-222.

[13] " … E. D. Blodgett, in *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada* interprets Canadian literary histories as a set of texts that articulate the separate yet interrelated perspectives of five groups within the Canadian population: Anglophones, Francophones, First Nations, Inuit and immigrant ethnic communities. He argues that: 'those truths that appear perfectly valid for histories conceived as the articulation of a specific group or even two groups with designedly shared preoccupations lose much of their validity when examined from a larger perspective." Hammill, *Canadian Literature*, p. 15.

[14] "In Canada, writes Margaret Fee, 'Anglo Canadians are seen as without ethnicity, as possessed of a 'Canadian' ethnicity (generally depicted as not much different from no ethnicity at all), or as possessing the national high culture'. She adds that ethnic minorities, on the other hand, 'are permitted to have broken English, colourful costumes, exotic dances, and unusual food. Their writing, categorized as 'ethnic writing', is instantly devalued as both less than national and therefore, less than literature.' The set of texts taken to be constitutive of the 'national' literature of Canada has changed rapidly over recent years, and the teaching canon is no longer composed exclusively of White writers". Hammill, *Canadian Literature*, p. 56.

short fiction writing. The 2009 Third Man Booker is one among many in her long list of awards and prizes.

The original title of Munro's early collection, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978),[15] suggests the problematic explored in the stories where issues like female sexuality and class give a slight twist to the identity question. Linked by the main character, Rose, the stories are a non-linear retrospective narrative of her life, from adolescence to womanhood and old age, told by a third-person narrator that, as in psycho-narration, fuses with Rose's consciousness and renders the "flow" of her "thoughts and feelings".[16]

It all starts when Flo, Rose's stepmother, reprimands her with the question, *who do you think you are?,* before reporting the girl's insolence to her father who, once told of his daughter's behaviour, beat her savagely. In the last story, Rose remembers that Miss Hattie, her English teacher, had asked the same question proving that young Rose ought to be reminded of her place whenever conceit, or an impulse to show off, made her step out of line.

Rose grew up in the poorest side of Hanratty, one of Munro's culturally Calvinist small towns where crimes, shrouded in secrecy, were often let go without punishment. Most of the girls from West Hanratty were victims of some kind of child abuse, therefore her father's beating, concealed from outsiders, was just one in many. It did not disturb the family's peaceful domesticity, or make Rose feel awkward in her father's presence more than she already did. Her uneasiness came, she believed, from being born female.

Moreover, Rose did not take after her father, a craftsman with "skilful hands", or after her dead mother, whom she had never known but idealized as a gentle woman with "clever hands" helping in their upholstery business. Unlike them, Rose had "clumsy hands" and "her

[15] All our references are made to the stories in the following edition of *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996). The initials of the stories are bracketed.

[16] Dorrit Cohn, "Consciousness in Third-Person Context – Psycho-Narration", *in Transparent Minds, Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 21-57.

whole life" in her head. Further to this identity flaw, due to her gender and brains, Rose saw herself the reverse of Flo, "shrewd", "naïve intellectually, childlike" and "superstitious", some of the negative traits that she associated with her stepmother who, she thought, was her father's "idea of what a woman ought to be" (*HG* 55).

During Rose's recollections on her childhood, the image of her sick father, a withdrawn man who coughed while working in his shed, occasionally revealing a wry sense of humour, overlapped with the scene of her humiliation at his hands. However, she also remembered her father's pride on her intellectual achievements, as if, after all, he "willed her as she was" (*HG* 56), which made her feel less of a failure. Rose's ambivalent perception of her father might explain her muddled relationships, as a woman, with her male partners. Rose sought for love, or merely satisfaction of her physical desire but, as with her father, she was neither sure of their feelings towards her, nor of hers towards them. Rose's love life was nothing but a disaster. Aware of her father's imminent death, Rose thought that "he wouldn't be with her less" (*HG* 65) implying perhaps that whatever she turned out to be would be shaped by her memory of him, however ambiguous it was.

Later on, while working at the university library, Rose met Patrick Blatchford, a graduate student of History, from British Columbia, whose wealthy background contrasted with hers. Their social and cultural differences were such that she felt ashamed of her people's rural manners and shabby surroundings. Since then, Rose became obsessed with poverty and class due by no means to any ideological struggle but to her inner wrangling with her underprivileged past.

In turn, Patrick, who lived in a world of knights and damsels in distress, showed off his erudition with "chivalric notions" and expressions that puzzled Rose, as when, in a rather patronizing way, he told her: "I'm glad you're poor. You're so lovely. You're like the Beggar Maid" (*BM* 93). Rose, who had never heard of Tennyson's poem, or seen Burnes-Jones's painting, hardly recognized herself as Penelophon, the beggar maid for whom the legendary King Cophetua had fallen. Flattered, though, by Patrick's "worship", and allured by the idea of a genteel life away from Hanratty, Rose agreed to be Patrick's *beggar maid*. She married him and moved to British Columbia leaving behind

everyone and everything rooting her to her hometown. Unlike the royal couple, who lived happily ever after, Rose's "vision of happiness" in Patrick's middle-class environment got murkier, their marriage lasting only ten years.

The tale of the *Beggar Maid* parodies the traditional representation of the loving ingénue exposing, by contrast, Rose's motivation to marry Patrick, true love, or sexual attraction having little to do with it. It also ridicules Patrick's eagerness to rescue the poor girl from her "dump", as he called Rose's place, his snobbery and paternalism resembling Cophetua's. Nevertheless, Patrick let Rose humiliate him, her cruelty going as far as calling him "a sissy", more in character with Lady Macbeth, who Rose yearned to *be* in her adolescent years, than with Penelophon, the passive *beggar maid* whom Patrick wanted her to be.

After her divorce, Rose found solace in short-lived affairs, mostly with married men, and in her involvement with theatricals. Acting allowed her to be whom she wanted, no need to be asked ever again *who she thought she was*. Rose, who felt restless, as if out of place wherever she went, was always *en route* somewhere else. The vast Canadian West was the space for her wanderings before hearing the call to return home.

But Hanratty had become unrecognizable owing to social and physical changes brought about by the war prosperity. Besides, everything and everyone linking Rose with her hometown were gone: Flo, her stepmother, Milton, the town fool, even Ralph Gillespie, her former school-mate, deceased shortly after their reencounter**.** In Rose's view, he made her see past mistakes and find redemption in her homecoming. Curiously, the *who you are* question does not come up in her last monologue, entirely concentrated on Gillespie, a drifter, as uprooted as she was, and also Milton's impersonator. In new Hanratty, where no one remembered the town's idiot, Gillespie was seen as the real one. Ralph, as old Hanratty, was a fabrication by Rose's memory longing for a past that no longer existed in order to make amends with it and reinvent herself, this time as a newly found woman, or so she thought she was.

Rose is not the only runaway in Alice Munro's stories trying to escape a poor, frequently repressive environment in search for some

sort of selfhood.[17] The nameless first-person narrator in *The View from Castle Rock* (2006)[18] is also a runaway seeking her roots in remote Ettrick Valley, in Scotland, the home of her forebears, the Laidlaws.

The first part of *The View from Castel Rock*, called "No Advantages", is devoted to the Laidlaws whose "obscure and not prosperous" existence is traced as far back as the eighteenth-century, when a folksy character named William Laidlaw was born. Early in the nineteenth-century, the Laidlaws crossed the Atlantic bound for America, Canada being part of it in their imagination. We are told about several generations of the family history reconstructed from gravestones, lore, records, letters, journals, written by its members, also Bible readers, as most Scots were. Some of the Laidlaws settled around Lake Huron, in southern Ontario, the rigours of their Presbyterian doctrine fitting somehow into the rigours of the Canadian bush where they tried to farm having the Bible as their guiding light.

In the second part of the collection, "Home", the protagonist--narrator describes her own past and present. Among other things, she tells of her parents' struggle to make ends meet; her mother's pretentions as a fur saleswoman; her father, Rob Laidlaw, a man of all trades, fur--trapper, caretaker, turkey-farmer and writer; the garrulous woman of Irish descent whom her widowed father would marry after her mother's death; her first boy friend, Michael, who rescued her from poverty by marrying and taking her away to British Columbia; her separation from him, and her motoring around Georgian Bay with her new husband, who, like herself, remains nameless.

---

[17] In "Runaway", a story that gives the name to a collection with the same title, Carla, the runaway, decides, in the last minute, to return to Clark, her Svengali-like husband, and became an accomplice of his dark schemes. In "Too Much Happiness", also from a collection with the same title, Sophia, Munro's reinvention of the Russian-born scientist Sophia Kovalesvsky, left her traditional home to pursue a university career, denied to her in her own country. This time, Munro went as far as nineteenth-century Europe to resurrect this great woman intellectual, who lived in times when feminism was unheard of.

[18] All our references are made to the stories in the following edition of *The View from Castle Rock* (London: Vintage, 2007). The initials of the stories are bracketed.

Coincidence or not, she, like Rose, becomes a wanderer coming once in a while to the place she calls "home" but "hardly" relating to it, as she would admit. Later on, she does return to her childhood surroundings and pursues her relentless search for her ancestors, now in the New World. Her quest is heightened by her sudden discovery of breast cancer, as if the hidden lump were uncannily connected with a lump, hidden by grass, in the icy landscape, a Laidlaw expected to have been buried underneath. Instead, she finds traces of people coming from outside the British Isles, like Germans and Dutch. It did not dissuade her, though, from carrying out her grisly pursuit.

In the "Forward", Alice Munro writes of her undertaking with "doing something closer to what a memoir does – exploring a life, my own life", she says. If familiar with the author's work, the reader is aware of how unconventional she is in handling genre conventions. The term short fiction is used nowadays to encompass Munro's novel-like collections, short stories, novelettes, or these memoirs, which go far beyond the autobiographical model of a first-person narration of "one's past self" (Cohn 1978 154-155).

The reader is also aware of how deceptive the *realism* in her stories can be, their startling inconclusive endings being, for instance, anything but realistic. Often regarded as "autobiographical," they may suddenly turn into macabre "revelations about buried or forgotten histories and places no longer marked in any map," comments Coral Ann Howells (1998 148). When it comes to *veracity* and *truth*, Munro, like a magician, makes them appear and disappear before our eyes, the reason why the preamble on her "truthful" memoirs – not true enough, though, "to swear on", or as "truthful as our notion of the past can ever be" – strikes the reader as one of the author's many ironies. It resembles a pose to call attention not only to a writer's self-conscious problematization of any "historical knowledge," but also to what Canadian critic W. H. New designates as "the historicity of heritage" (1989 242). As with most "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988 105-123), history and story interact here to probe into various pasts, hers and her ancestors', in order to make sense out of it all in the present.

In the *View*, the protagonist's obsession with retracing the Laidlaws, either alive, or dead, is enhanced by another riddle-like question, "What

Do You Want to Know For?," the title of the penultimate story. The answer comes in the last paragraph of the "Epilogue" with the "messenger from near and far", be it the "crypt" of some pioneer relative, or the "mother-of-pearl seashell" that made her feel, she says, "the tremendous pounding" of her "own blood, and of the sea" (*M* 349).

As the saying goes, blood is thicker than water, and *The View*, rooted in a strong family, or, rather, clan bond, is a moving tribute to the Laidlaws, those who perished and those who survived the epic crossing leading to *Castle Rock*, its view much rosier from the other side of the Atlantic. The list of items enumerated at the end, from the "black stoves," the "coal-oil lamps" and the cold "stables" to the "waxed parlor" where the dead lay in their coffins, raises the question whether such drab luxuries paid off for the lost lives, corpses bundled and thrown overboard into the sea, or buried somewhere in the glacial landscape under a "mound". The nostalgia for a mythical world where people still believed in the supernatural suggests an identity split between the *here* and the *there* turning the question *who do you think you are?*, asked almost three decades before, so much more difficult to answer.

Coming back to the concerns expressed by Northrop Frye, himself rooted and more than once re-rooted in different parts of Canada, it should be emphazised that he referred to the "famous Canadian problem of identity" as "rooted in the imagination and works of culture."[19] One wonders what the eminent scholar might have thought of a literary imagination crossing temporal and spatial boundaries to seek an identity other than one only tied to region, or nation.[20] The search for a Canadian identity, or "sensibility", to quote Frye himself, will likely go on preferably, though, away from narcissistic nationalisms, or myths of past glories.

---

[19] Frye, "Author's Preface", p. xxii.

[20] Frye, "Author's Preface", p. xxvi.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cohn, Dorrit, *Transparent Minds- Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

Coupland, Douglas*, Souvenir of Canada* (Vancouver, Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002).

FRYE, Northrop, *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Introduction by Linda Hutcheon, Toronto: Anansi, 1971).

Hammill, Faye, *Canadian Literature, Edinburgh Critical Guides* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

Howells, Coral Ann, *Alice Munro – Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1998).

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism – History, Theory, Fiction* (New York/London: Routledge, 1988).

– *The Canadian Postmodern – A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Munro, Alice, *Who Do You Think You are*?, Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996.

– *Runaway*, London: Vintage Books, 2006.

– *The View from Castle Rock*, London: Vintage Books, 2007.

– *Too Much Happiness, London: Chatto & Windus, 2009.*

New, W. H., *A History of Canadian Literature*, Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.

Saywell, John, *Canada, Pathways to the Present, Toronto: Stoddart, 1994.*