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Intimacy in Alice Munro's "Sunday Afternoon": The Body Caught in the Net of Fiction

L'intimité dans "Sunday Afternoon" d'Alice Munro : le corps pris dans les filets de la fiction

Article publié le 07 décembre 2017.

Pascale Tollance

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1. What to call oneself
 2. Shut in and shut out
 3. The refuge of fiction
 4. The body in / outside the net

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- 1 In the world of Alice Munro, relationships are almost inevitably marked by gaps and fault lines. In fact many of Munro's characters fail to connect even as they are brought together, or turn out to be unable to share what they sometimes have no choice but to share. In "Sunday Afternoon," a story where a country girl is hired to do housework for a wealthy family for the duration of the summer, this rift is approached from a social angle. Isla Duncan describes the text as "a critical and incisive social commentary" which unveils the "inequities of social distinctions" (Duncan: 15). Ildikó de Papp Carrington, as for her, focuses on a more intimate aspect of the hired girl's experience and foregrounds the humiliation which Alva, in a subtle manner, is shown

to suffer. Humiliation does have the last word in this story, more precisely, "a new and still mysterious humiliation," which Alva says she "would not explore yet" (Munro 2000: 171). What triggers this feeling at the close of the text is a kiss, stolen by a cousin of the family for whom the young woman works, a kiss which is not received with reluctance, quite the contrary, as it is said to "ease" Alva and make her feel "a lightness and confidence she had not known in this house" (170). To make this tight emotional complex even more difficult to unravel, it is crucial to take into account another remark, often overlooked by critics, which Alva makes to herself after she has been kissed: "So there were things she had not taken into account, about herself, about them, and ways of living with them that were not so unreal" (170).

- 2 In the master-servant relationship which the story depicts, it is this sense of "unreality" which best sums up the joint impression of being made to share the intimacy of strangers whilst being excluded from their world. Left to watch her employers as if they were on stage, Alva is meant to remain invisible and ends up feeling as hollow and as deprived of substance as those whom she observes from a distance, but for whom she has to remain close at hand and constantly available. Now remote and unreal, the surrounding world resembles a film you cannot enter; now too close or too real, it is a threat to one's privacy which also endangers the servant's sense of self. One of the ways of responding to this unreality is none other than the recourse to fiction: the intimate space of which Alva is deprived in her masters' house is restored through the letter she writes to her parents and the stories she tells them. As usual in Munro's narratives, the attempt to turn oneself into story is double-edged, as protection seems to be gained at the cost of deception. It is in the light of the various forms of "unreality" to which Alva is exposed that the final kiss can be examined, a kiss which turns the servant into a social and literary stereotype even as it reconnects her with her body and makes her feel that she is "there" after all.

1. What to call oneself

- 3 In "Hired Girl," the sequel to "Sunday Afternoon", which Munro wrote some 37 years after the first story, the narrative is entrusted to the

servant herself, now called Elsa. But that servant is now older and she uses the benefit of hindsight to examine her behaviour in a manner which may seem somewhat surprising. Looking back on the bold way in which she pried into the life of her employers and once asked a question which she knew would be embarrassing, she comments:

Also it may have been because I would never quite give up when it came to demanding intimacy, or at least some kind of equality, even with a person I did not like.

Cruelty was a thing I could not recognize in myself. I thought I was blameless here, and in any dealings with this family. All because of being young, and poor, and knowing about Nausicaa.

I did not have the grace or fortitude to be a servant. (Munro 2006: 252)

- 4 This last remark gives us an interesting insight into the first story "Sunday Afternoon", although Alva proves to be far more reserved than Elsa. One may see Alva's sense of exclusion throughout the narrative as stemming from her misplaced expectations, from the fact that she cannot stick to her role, that she fails to see that it is only a role which she has taken on for the summer and which does not sum her up. It may be that "demanding too much intimacy", Alva fails to treat her job just as a job, to accept it as a part and a fiction of sorts. This failure that the mature narrator of "Hired Girl" points out happens to be mitigated by the fact that, precisely, Alva's place in the house and her role are far from being clearly defined. The title chosen for the sequel to "Sunday Afternoon" suggests that Alva, like Elsa, is not a maid as such, but just a "hired girl." The letter that Alva writes to her parents underlines that the situation is far from clear:

Don't worry about me being lonesome and downtrodden and all that maid sort of thing. I wouldn't let anybody get away with anything like that. *Besides I'm not a maid really*, it's just for the summer. I don't feel lonesome, why should I? I just observe and am interested. Mother, of course I can't eat with them. Don't be ridiculous. *It's not the same thing as a hired girl at all.* (my emphasis, 167)

- 5 The awkwardness which prevails in much of the story comes from the fact that Alva does not know exactly where she stands, and nor do those who employ her for that matter. While the story is focalised

mostly on Alva, one passage allows us to get an insight into the mild confusion and irritation felt by her employer, Mrs Gannett:

'All right,' Alva said. Mrs Gannett looked at her. Alva never said anything wrong, *really* wrong, that is rude, and Mrs Gannett was not so *unrealistic* as to expect a high-school girl, even a country high-school girl, to answer, 'Yes, ma'am,' as the old maids did in her mother's kitchen; but there was often in Alva's tone an affected ease, a note of exaggerated carelessness and agreeability that was all the more irritating because Mrs Gannett could not think of any way to object to it. (my emphasis, 162)

- 6 This annoyance at not being able to behave as she would like towards her servant is echoed further down, when Mrs Gannett feels the need to "rearrange" the table that Alva had just laid: "The way Alva had of putting things down on a table always seemed to lack something, though there too, she did not make any *real* mistakes" (my emphasis, 164). The girl who gets nothing "really" right or "really" wrong and cannot be blamed, if her employer is "realistic" thus finds herself in an indeterminate zone, in a kind of vacuum. It is no wonder then that Alva should prefer to be treated in a cool manner, as if that gave her at least the impression of knowing where she stands: "[Mr Gannett's mother] was rather cranky and aloof, as the women in Alva's own family would have been with a maid, and Alva minded this less than the practised, considerate affability of Mrs Gannett's sisters" (162). Through a series of paradoxical associations, "affected ease," "exaggerated carelessness," "practised affability," the text insists on the fake nature of any attempt, on either side, to remove barriers. What proves awkward and trying is perhaps less the sense that everyone is playing a part than the attempt to pretend that all this is spontaneous. In fact constant improvisation is required in the hazy area which Alva inhabits, neither a maid, nor a hired girl, not really a servant whilst having no other purpose in the house but to serve the family. In the absence of a clear-cut role which would remove the question of personal relationships, Alva is constantly exposed to the impression of not being herself and of being surrounded by people who are not being themselves.

2. Shut in and shut out

7 Alva's plight expresses itself in part through the impossibility of finding "the right distance". The servant finds herself both looking for intimacy and fearing it, resenting exclusion and dreading invasion. Once again, the sequel makes this predicament even more explicit: "The thought of having a little corner of myself come to light, and be truly understood, stirred up alarm, just as much as being taken no notice of stirred up resentment" (Munro 2006: 254). "Alarm" is also what Alva feels when Mr Vance comes so close to her that he imposes his bodily presence on her: "He stood right behind Alva at the sink, so very close that she felt his breath and sensed the position of his hands. He did not quite touch her [...]. Alva found him alarming, because he was the sort of man she was used to being respectful to" (164).

8 "Having a little corner of herself come to light" may come simply from being exposed to the gaze of others. Alva has only walked "once or twice" along the empty street where nobody ever seems to be walking and has felt too "conspicuous" (166). But more often it is the fact of "being taken no notice of" which makes the servant vulnerable. Something much more radical than resentment is experienced by Alva as she remains in the shadows while watching others being in the light, a light that shines at her, blinding her. Even as she watches the street from her window, the servant feels assaulted by the brightness outside:

In spite of the heat, there was no blur on the day, up here; everything – the stone and white stucco houses, the flowers, the flower-coloured cars – looked hard and glittering, exact and perfect. There was no haphazard thing in sight. The street, like an advertisement, had an almost aggressive look of bright summer spirits; Alva felt dazzled by this, by the laughter, by the people whose lives were relevant to the street. (167)

9 This aggressive note, this "look of bright summer spirits" is what exudes from the first description of Mrs Gannett which opens the story: "Mrs Gannett came into the kitchen walking delicately to a melody played in her head, flashing the polished cotton skirts of a flowe-

red sundress. Alva was there, washing glasses" (161). The "flashing", which contrasts with "washing" introduces the theme of the blinding light which reappears later. It is as if Mrs Gannett had walked into the kitchen carrying the summer light in her skirt and had the power to hurt her servant by her mere presence. Little by little, everything around Alva seems to have the appearance of the "bland, unbroken surfaces" of the large, sparsely furnished house. In this hard, impenetrable environment where reflection is potentially dazzling, it is not simply the feeling of being excluded or ir-"relevant" which expresses itself; Alva is not sure that anything, including herself, is real anymore. Alva's employer is described at one point as having "the look of being made of entirely synthetic and superior substances" (163). Commenting on this sentence, Héliane Ventura remarks:

The alliteration in "s" underlines her deterritorialization from the real world and her reterritorialization in another realm, of superior but fraudulent essence. There is something inhuman and inauthentic in the character of the employer which the text constantly brings to light.¹

- 10 "Brings to light" is an appropriate phrase here. The title of the story, "Sunday Afternoon" gives prominence to a particular mood and a particular feeling connected with the harsh light of a summer afternoon which makes everything look strange or fake: "But the feeling of unreality, of alternate apathy and recklessness, became very strong in the house by the middle of the afternoon" (163). When she is not exposed to the glare of shiny and impenetrable surfaces, Alva is doomed to remain in a shade which is not soothing but where she runs the risk of drowning. "Sunday Afternoon" is also the moment when the living-room curtains are drawn, giving the servant the eerie impression of being underwater: "[...] those long, curtained and carpeted rooms, with their cool colours, seemed floating in an underwater light" (my emphasis, 163). The strong consonantic effects, the plosives and in particular the alliteration formed by the harsh "k" reinforce the sense that everything is strange or "made of another substance."
- 11 Both shut in and shut out, Alva feels erased or cancelled as she walks down the hallway to reach her room: "[Alva] wished for a mirror, or something to bump into; she did not know if she was there or not" (164). The servant does not seem simply deprived of an identity but

more fundamentally of an image which would rescue her from invisibility and prevent her from vanishing or dissolving altogether. Interestingly, the only other occurrence of the mirror in the story is found a little bit earlier, at a rare moment when Alva appears in the privileged position of glimpsing behind the scenes:

Alva would meet people coming from the bathroom, absorbed and melancholy, she would glimpse women in the dim bedrooms swaying towards their reflections in the mirror, very slowly applying their lipstick, and someone would have fallen asleep on the long chesterfield in the den. (163)

- 12 In this moment of intimacy which is not shared but somehow stolen by Alva, the servant witnesses the fragility of these beings who seem otherwise "superior." Make-up has to be reapplied in front of a mirror in which the women threaten to merge with their own reflections. The mirror into which, at that moment, one could drown, is no different from the mirror Alva wishes for, a few lines further down, in order to be rescued from non-existence. One of the most intimate moments in the story takes the form of an indirect encounter, but it shows how masters and servants are made of the same substance or equally lacking substance, hanging on to a wavering image of themselves. Thus the sense of unreality which prevails in the story comes as much from the dissolution of images as from their triumph on the scene provided by the social gathering. Again, what Alva most suffers from perhaps is the inability to take refuge behind a fiction of herself, or behind what Lacan calls in "Le Stade du Miroir", "the armour of an alienating identity."²

3. The refuge of fiction

- 13 What Lacan invites us to picture before the mirror-stage is a being who is not closed upon itself but totally open, totally "outside"³. Not being sure if "she is there or not," Alva has no clear image to hang on to and to present to others. At the same time the absence of a mirror in which her contours would appear seems to deprive her of an imaginary inner space. Her vulnerable position translates itself in physical terms, in the place she is given or rather denied in the house. Alva belongs in the kitchen and is meant to remain in the kitchen whilst

her employer and their guests party on the terrace, but they have the right to burst in on her at any moment. And although, of course, she has been given a bedroom where she can retire once her tasks are done, the place is so hot she seeks refuge in the bedroom of the daughter of the family, a girl who is just a few years younger than her. In fact she is quickly dislodged from there by Mrs Gannett who comes up looking for her and asks her to go back to the kitchen as if to preclude any intimacy between the two girls, who, in other circumstances, might have been friends. Alva thus seems to have no place to escape to, whether inside or outside the house. The servant cannot fully enjoy the protection of truly private, intimate space, a space into which she could withdraw. The large house feels as constricting as the uniform which she is made to wear. Although too large, the latter ends up being like a straightjacket as she cannot take it off during the day and cannot lie down with it either, for fear it might crease. This uniform also happens to be blue, "the predominant kitchen colour," as if it were meant to make her merge with the place where she belongs and yet cannot call her own.⁴

14 In the midst of this, there is one place where Alva finds momentary respite. Through the letter she starts writing to her family, Alva somehow reconstructs the intimate space of which she has been deprived and draws again the contours of her vanishing self. It is worth noting that the room which she has been given and which is described just before she launches into her letter is a kind of junk room: "all the furniture in this room had come out of other rooms that had been re-decorated; it was the only place in the house where you could find things unmatched, unrelated to each other, and wooden things that were not large, low and pale" (167). The fact that Alva should have to find a place for herself in the middle of all the objects that have been discarded, reflects her lower, but also her uncertain, status – neither maid, not hired girl, she ends up with all these things with which nobody knows exactly what to do. Yet, from Alva's perspective, compared to the rest of the house or even the street where there is "no haphazard thing in sight", the room seems closer to what she is used to at home with its smalls rooms "which could hold so many things" (163).

15 The letter that Alva writes to her family appears as a deliberate effort to rise above her situation, a distortion which projects the image of a

confident and assertive girl in whom the reader does not recognize the servant who has been described so far. In the sequel, "Hired Girl", the distortion is even more obvious as Elsa fabricates for a girlfriend a tale teeming with trite fantasies which she calls "Sordid Adventures of a Kitchen Maid". As Ildikó de Papp Carrington has rightly pointed out, the second story "increases the significance of literature, reading and storytelling" (4). But one may also argue that fiction plays as fundamental a part in the first story, rescuing Alva from the impression of having lost all substance. Without even taking into account the contents of the letter, it is the very act of writing which seems to matter here, the possibility of restoring an image which has vanished, of repairing a broken shell or broken "armour", and by the same means of reinventing an inner, intimate space. Just before retreating to her room Alva borrows a book from Mr Gannet: the servant has chosen nothing less than *King Lear* to make it clear to her employer that she is no ordinary maid. Yet once she finds herself alone, Alva chooses to write and not to read, and to write about herself or to write herself into existence again.

4. The body in / outside the net

- 16 Whether Alva finds it difficult to believe in the image of herself she has just fabricated or whether the room is just too stifling, the letter is left unfinished. Finding momentary refuge in the company of Mary Anne, the daughter of the house, Alva is sent back to the kitchen where she is shortly to be kissed. It is worth noting that the conversation which, like the letter, ends with a dash, gets brutally interrupted just as 14-year-old Mary Anne was asking Alva advice about whether she ought to start "necking" when they get to their summer island. The teenager has just time to confess that she thinks her reserve has already caused her to be excluded ("I heard that's why Scotty didn't ask me at Easter -"). In the light of this, the kiss that Alva receives can be seen as something which gives her the upper hand - the hired maid will not have to wait for the summer to get what Mary Anne will or will not get. But if the "ease" Alva suddenly feels has anything to do with the notion that she has suddenly risen above her status or that she is not just the "hired girl", but a desirable young woman, the last word of the story brutally undermines that impression as it turns her into the maid of the house with whom any liber-

ties can be taken. Alva becomes a cliché, a fiction which she is not writing but in which she is being written.

17 The question which remains is whether Alva's impression that there are "ways of living with them which were not so unreal" must be read in a totally ironic manner. In "Hired Girl" the physical contact Elsa longs for never happens. Instead the hired girl is made to feel the nail or as she calls it later the "claw" of an old woman on her breast (Munro 2006: 251). As she is deprived of the intimacy she fantasized, Elsa can be considered to be saved from the illusion of a possible connection and spared Alva's humiliation. And yet, the complex knot of feelings with which Munro leaves us at the end of "Sunday Afternoon" creates a space of ambiguity and undecidability. It is undeniably through a form of alienation that Alva's body can regain substance, can feel real again or real enough; and yet the paradoxical tension in this ending may also suggest that what happens in the embrace cannot be entirely written. It is possibly this failure to fully account for what happens which makes both Alva and the reader uneasy despite the "ease" the girl is said to feel – this failure to tell which participates, perhaps, in the "mysterious humiliation." Unlike what happens at the end of "Thanks for the Ride," there is no potential reversal by which we are led to wonder whether the experience has not been more humiliating for the boy than for the girl. But we do get the sense that, if the shared intimacy is trapped in predetermined social patterns, or in the patterns of desire for that matter, it opens out for Alva a space which is not entirely mapped and in which some "exploration" remains possible.

18 The net of fiction in which roles and identities are caught in "Sunday Afternoon" can be seen as a limit to intimacy, but if one is to believe the mature narrator of "Hired Girl" the net must also be considered as a safety net. It is partly because her role remains undefined, and partly because she may be "demanding too much intimacy" that Alva flounders. Sticking to one's part is somehow safer. Yet, the ending of the story also suggests that the body might (and perhaps might only) be freed from the sense of having no reality through and despite its alienation in fiction and language. The net, for better or for worse, is full of holes, and it is in one of these holes that Munro leaves us at the closure of the text, as she is accustomed to doing.

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1 "L'allitération en "s" souligne sa déterritorialisation par rapport au monde réel et sa reterritorialisation dans une altérité d'essence supérieure mais frelatée. Il y a quelque chose d'inhumain et d'inauthentique dans le personnage de la patronne que le texte ne cesse de mettre en lumière." (Ventura: 113)

2 Lacan talks of "l'armure enfin assumée d'une identité aliénante" (Lacan, 1966: 94).

3 "L'enfant n'est pas un être originellement fermé sur lui-même, devant s'ouvrir peu à peu au monde extérieur, et sortir du narcissisme. Pas du tout! Le narcissisme primaire définit un être tout *au dehors*, d'emblée livré à l'autre, et assujetti à l'événement." (Julien, 1985 : 44)

4 Héliane Ventura sees the "scalloped apron" as something which marks the depersonalisation and dehumanisation of the servant: "le tablier [...] définit son affiliation exogène, son appartenance symbolique à un autre univers que l'univers humain."; "[il] est une indexation référentielle aux mollusques qui la dépersonnalise encore davantage." (Ventura, 2015 :110)

English

"Sunday Afternoon" presents us with the alienating experience of a maid/hired girl, displaced in a world where she is losing sense of her own reality and feels she is dissolving. The story offers an interesting reflection on the ambivalence of the fiction in which bodies and relationships are caught: a safety net which can offer protection at the cost of deception, it is also made of holes into which one can disappear or (re-)connect with a body which cannot be entirely written.

Français

"Sunday Afternoon" explore le sentiment d'aliénation éprouvé par une jeune domestique qui se voit exilée dans un monde où elle perd le sens de sa propre réalité et se sent se dissoudre. La nouvelle nous propose une réflexion sur l'ambivalence de la fiction dans laquelle les relations humaines et les corps sont pris: tel un filet de sécurité, celle-ci permet d'échapper au naufrage, fût-ce au prix du leurre; mais dans le vide qu'il laisse entrevoir entre ses mailles, se retrouve aussi un corps qui ne se laisse pas entièrement écrire.

Keywords

Munro (Alice), body, intimacy, fiction, alienation, unreality

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