

THE APOSTROPHE AS NARRATIVE DESIGN IN ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT  
STORY CYCLE *THE BEGGAR MAID*

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(Resumen)

El artículo intenta ser una exploración de los presupuestos de un género literario, el ciclo de relatos, a través de una reflexión sobre las implicaciones contenidas en la figura del apóstrofe. Trabajando sobre las conclusiones obtenidas por Jonathan Culler (1981) en el ensayo que forma parte del libro *The Pursuit of Signs. Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, observamos un paralelismo entre, por una parte, las propiedades del apóstrofe, en cuanto a la organización temporal, presentación de contenidos y relación entre el poeta y su motivación estética, y, por otra, los recursos que explota el ciclo de relatos para presentar una visión de la experiencia que rechaza la continuidad, la progresión temporal y la interdependencia de las circunstancias dentro de las vidas de los personajes. El artículo expone las nociones teóricas implícitas en los acercamientos críticos más usuales aplicados a esta forma literaria y posteriormente analiza, desde una perspectiva diferente, *The Beggar Maid*, uno de los ciclos de relatos de la escritora canadiense Alice Munro. En esta obra, las convenciones relacionadas con la figura del apóstrofe arrojan luz sobre la propia organización del ciclo y también sobre el proceso en el que se ve envuelto el personaje central: la búsqueda de su propia identidad sometiendo a prueba el poder imaginario asignado a esta figura, poder que consiste en recobrar a través de la invocación lo que se encuentra distante en el espacio, lo que se ha perdido en el tiempo o lo que no posee forma definida.

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I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected, moments of experience. I guess that's the way I see life. (Alice Munro, In Carrington, 1989:3)

The short story cycle is a form of fiction which draws upon the characteristics of two genres: the short story and the novel. It is made up of autonomous units, but these units work together in such a way that the accumulation of information conveys the impression that they all belong to the same imaginary world. L. Forrest Ingram (1971:19), one of the first critics who set out to provide the short story cycle with a theoretical basis, defined it as

a book of short stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.

This definition has been elaborated and expanded by other critics such as Susan Garland Mann (1989), Robert M. Luscher (1989) or Nicole Ward Jouve (1989) but they all agree to find two essential definitory traits: the self-sufficiency of the stories together with a potential of interrelation.

Susan Garland Mann (1989:18) points out that the world of a novel continues as the reader goes from chapter to chapter, but the world of each short story of the cycle disappears after its last sentence. Our impression as readers is that each short story offers a new arrangement, and even if we find some common elements such as character or setting, there is no action continuing from story to story. As a result, the degree of attention paid to characters is somehow unstable and intermittent: they may disappear for good after one particular story without any explanation being necessary. If they reappear in other stories, their presence will respond to a different organizing idea, they will be exposed to an analysis that redefines their status according to a new hierarchy of importance and relevance. The short story cycle reflects the variety of experience by distributing its materials into different frames that demand from the reader a different search for meaning every time he gets involved in a new story.

There has been a variety of studies that have focused their attention on the kind of links among the stories, since development in a cycle does not depend on a sequence of events but on recurrence and expansion. The recurrence may be manifested in the characters' motivations, the narrators, the symbols, the setting, the theme, etc. However, these elements contain open and unpredictable possibilities for the stories to come: we never know which characters will come into the next story or which temporal references will prevail.

If the cycle has been liberated from its duty to support a main plot or placing on stage one or several main characters for most part of it, each particular story may take a great number of courses. Even if some kind of evolution may be felt in cycles devoted to the maturation of a hero, we cannot speak of proper development, or developed progression, but of a juxtaposition of different situations.

This structure eludes, in my opinion, the possibility of producing a global effect of totality or unity, since bits and pieces of the lives of the characters are examined separately under different perspectives; we do not assimilate their lives as a process. Not even retrospectively, can the reader endow them with a sense of direction, with a sense of fate. If a conclusion is reached at the end of each story, it cannot participate of a common truth, of a common terrain that guarantees a shared applicability. The stories may affect us with a recognition of a similar atmosphere, similar subject-matter or a similar denouement, but the short story writer has nevertheless managed to make successful his attempt to bring into existence aspects of experience he believes that emit their own significance separately.

The structure of the cycle, therefore, demands from the reader to revise his own methods to give significance to the narratives several times along the text. This implicit difficulty made Nicole Ward Jouve (1989:37) fear for the future commercial success of the cycle:

Why don't people buy short stories? Or do they? (...) Is it that when people buy a book, they want a whole? A *thing*. Because the pleasure of having your attention held over time by the same thing, of having to begin and to end once, and once only, is a powerful element in what you expect from a book? Is there a fetishism of the Book as One?

We can perceive a contradiction between those aspects that have been considered essential in identifying the short story cycle and the tools that have been used to analyse particular cycles. This genre has been defined by using as a criterion the "absence" of some elements present in the novel, because it is not subject to some novelistic requirements such as continuity and cause-effect relationships. Also, there is less emphasis on plot, varying degree of attention paid to characters, and lack of importance of chronology as a means to achieve coherence. However, when trying to describe and analyse particular cycles, critics have not used this freedom of "non-inclusion" that is a central characteristic of the form, but instead have been engaged in finding some criteria of unity that brings all the stories of a cycle under a certain unifying light. L. Forrest Ingram (1971), Agnes Gereben (1986), Susan Garland Mann (1989) or Robert M. Luscher (1989), for example, describe some modern cycles by pinning down the similarities that all the stories share concerning characters, passage of time, setting, plot, theme, imagery or point of view.

By the current definition the freedom of each short story to choose a new beginning and ending is an identifying generic characteristic. However, in practice we find ourselves searching exclusively for those common aspects that recur throughout the whole series.

At first sight one may think that the apostrophe and the short story cycle are two concepts having such different status and literary range that they cannot be put together and be made to work towards the same end. However, in my opinion, the connotations contained in the above-mentioned figure of speech may help us reach a better understanding of the short story cycle. Certain effects of the apostrophe concerning intensity, use of time, juxtaposition and characterization may account for the ability of the cycle to select, within each new frame, materials that are not strictly a development, a culmination, or a complement of information released earlier in the cycle.

There are very few studies of rhetoric that offer a vision of apostrophe other than briefly definitory or taxonomic. Perhaps this is due to its inherent artificiality, to the embarrassment we feel when we imagine a poet working his arms and shaping with his lips an exclamatory *Oh!* and then naming a number of absent objects.

The apostrophe, as it is defined in rhetoric, results from a breach in the natural situation of communication as an orator turns away from his natural audience to try to get in contact with a second audience, which may consist of a particular member of the crowd -frequently the orator's opponent- or of living, dead, or imaginary individuals, ideas or things. In poetry, the apostrophe is not used to describe, to narrate or to celebrate, but to seek assistance. The poet wills a state of affairs and believes that

all the elements that compose the world around him can listen; they are somehow alive and expectant. Sometimes he calls them, sometimes he orders them about, sometimes he makes a request. Therefore, the vocative, the imperative and the invocation are forms related to the apostrophe.

By identifying the inherent temporal and organizational properties of apostrophe, Jonathan Culler (1983) has expanded the possibilities available for a figure of speech that seemed to be condemned to treatment as an old-fashioned poetic convention or as a ritual gesture devoid of any modern literary relevance. In doing so, he has made possible my intention to show how apostrophe can potentially throw light on the underlying design of cycles and in particular to discuss the structure of *The Beggar Maid*, a short story cycle that the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro published in 1977<sup>1</sup>. In this essay I will select some of Culler's conclusions and elaborate their implications in order to relate them, among other things, to the procedures by which the narrators organize the contents of their memories and they are distributed into different stories.

In his reflections about apostrophe, Culler (1983:135) points out that apostrophe is the most embarrassing figure of speech, because, according to him, it represents a pretension: the poet can speak and be listened to by objects, people or artifacts that are absent. The apostrophe is sustained by the convention that objects can bend to the poet's desire and, of all figures of speech, it highlights the poet's emotional ordeal by positing all poetic significance in his sheer act of addressing forces of nature.

Culler (1983:149) argues that there are two opposed forces working in poetry: the narrative and the apostrophic. The apostrophic rejects narrative and sequence because it is based on juxtaposition:

If one brings together in a poem a boy, some birds, a few blessed creatures, and some mountains, meadows, hills and groves, one tends to place them in a narrative where one thing leads to another; the events which form ask to be temporally located; (...). But if one puts into a poem *thou blessed boy, ye blessed creatures, ye birds*, they are immediately associated with what might be called a temporality of writing. Even if the birds were only glimpsed once in the past, to apostrophize them as 'ye birds' is to locate them in the time of the apostrophe - a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say 'now'. This is a time of discourse rather than a time of story. So located by apostrophes, birds, creatures, boys, etc., resist being organized

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1. The title under which this short story cycle was first published in Canada was *Who Do You Think You Are?*. According to Coran Ann Howells (1987:2), the original title was changed in Britain and the United States because the connotations of the question - "the Canadian search for a distinctive cultural self-image" - would have been lost on readers abroad.

into events that can be narrated, for they are inserted in the poem as elements of the event which the poem is attempting to be.

There are a few interesting implications to Culler's statements. In apostrophe, the poet brings together a series of elements that do not depend on a chronological development but on the demands of a voice speaking in the present. This voice produces an array of elements that are not related causally but occupy certain positions within the sentence because they reflect the order in which the voice wants them back from their silent and distant existence. The poet wants to contemplate, to handle objects, ideas or events on his own terms. They will be made "present" before his eyes by his act of naming: his selection will reflect the drama of his mind, a drama that progresses together with his efforts to evoke presences. He will isolate experiences by detemporalizing them, depriving them of a wider magma or context from which they have been extracted. The status of these invoked objects will be independent from sequentiality, causality, time or circumstance. They will depend on the -so to speak- comings and goings of the speaking voice: the power of its own evocativeness will be brought to the foreground.

Besides, we might add that although apostrophe resists narrative based on movement along chronological time experienced by forces exterior to the poet's mind, it creates another narrative, based on the movement - not of the poet's conscience- but of the poet's needs and desires. This narrative does not advance according to change undergone by the elements he mentions (people, places, objects) but according to the selection he chooses. The temporal referentiality of the subject-matter is obliterated in favour of an imaginary present which stamps the presence of the poet as a voice with the power to recover with words what is distant in space, lost in time or perhaps has no soul or form.

The stories of *The Beggar Maid* are composed of characters, actions and situations organized according to the demands of one character within the story that assumes the role of narrator. This central conscience is Rose, an actress who has devoted all her life to relating stories of people she has known in her childhood and adolescence to various listeners<sup>2</sup>. She needs to connect different impressions she has perceived in her past because she wants to illustrate a particular idea through a selection of incidents or anecdotes from other character's lives. But Rose narrates her

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2. Rose is not only a storyteller within the diegetic level (the story itself), we can also consider her as an extra-homodiegetic narrator, using Rimmon-kenan's terms (1983:94-6): although not omniscient, she tells the story of a younger version of herself. Rose is assimilated as a narrator because her conscience is the only source of information and even her own words guide the narrative. In spite of the presence of a third person narrator, the short stories adopt the form of Rose's personal exposition and are subjected to the demands of Rose's specific analysis of her past life.

own and others' experiences rejecting the progression and interdependence of the circumstances of their lives. Each story focuses on a different stimulus and brings together experiences that have one element in common or one feature in discordance. Sequence within the stories and within the cycle is done away with, since the stories do not strictly contribute to a temporal progression: the same chronological references may be used again and again. Each narrative does not center exclusively on one specific period of Rose's life, but it is made up of isolated situations scattered along an extensive span of time.

Within this structure, characters that have central importance in one story will disappear in others. Other characters that have died in one story will be full of vitality in the next. They will be treated independently to a very great extent, with full-presence in one narrative or with total absence in another.

Speaking about the recurrent characteristics of cycles, Forrest Ingram (1971:22) states:

During those precious moments when the protagonist of a single story occupies the spotlight, he demands our full attention. His story can never be a digression from some kind of "main plot" of the cycle. At any given moment, the action of the cycle is centered in the action of the story which is at the moment being experienced.

This treatment of characters bears an extraordinary resemblance to Culler's (1983:149) description of characters that have been invoked by the apostrophe: they are "forms and forces which have pasts and futures but which are addressed as potential presences". In the stories of *The Beggar Maid* certain members of a community are held in a steady light temporarily; they are performers of a situation that will cease to exist in the next story. There is no continuation of previous context, there will be no posterior culmination. To a very great extent, characters are treated *apostrophically*; their connections are other than time, place or circumstance, but those existing in a particular "ordering mind", which absorbs its steady purposes from spinning time.

This ordering mind is textually represented as the narrator, expressed in the text as a character that performs successive acts of address: each story is developed as a consequence of the narrator's desire to call various facets of her experience into being. Each story of *The Beggar Maid* stands for a new act of addressing material that has been stored in the narrator's memory. For this reason, the text does not take the form of recollection, autobiography or *Bildungsroman*. The narrator does not simply use the materials of her past, she *confronts* them and her address is often textually embodied in the form of invocation: only a couple of words form the introduction to the story, the sparcity conferring to them an emphatic, even hypnotic quality, as if the narrator was addressing the words themselves, asking them to display the realities they contain just by uttering them. This is how "Royal Beatings", the first story of *The Beggar Maid*, begins:

*Royal Beating.* That was Flo's promise. You are going to get a Royal Beating. The word Royal lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: how is a beating royal? She came up with a tree-lined avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. An occasion both savage and splendid. (p.3)

This passage illustrates how the central character in the cycle begins the opening story by testing the power of words to bring about presences, that is, by testing apostrophe. The apostrophe, as it is commonly defined, represents a desperate attempt by a poet to express the intensity of his feelings using the only tools he possesses, - words-, to address certain elements that will allow him to achieve his objectives. The apostrophe, according to Culler (1983:142), is frequently used as an invocation that "seeks pity or assistance for projects and situations specifically related to the poetic vocation". Besides, the use of apostrophe dramatizes the desire to find an image of the self. In "The Beggar Maid" the speaking voice is not a poet but a teller, and the elements addressed are not forces alien to the story (a muse, a god, a force of nature) but elements that constitute the subject of her tale. The narrator speaks to them so that they reveal themselves, so that they reveal the roles she has played in the past. Each story conveys the intensity of a separate act of address, and frequently, as in "Royal Beatings", the words that contain the essence of the story are made to occupy an initial position.

In the middle of this story, when Rose is ready to tell how she got a royal beating, we are reminded of the fictive nature of her appeal because she draws our attention to the fact that she is not reporting facts, but offering a construct:

The royal beatings. What got them started?

*Suppose a Saturday*, in spring. Leaves not out yet but the doors open to sunlight. Crows. Ditches full of running water. Hopeful weather. (...)

*Saturday, then.* For some reason Flo is not going uptown, has decided to stay home and scrub the kitchen floor. Perhaps this has put her in a bad mood. Perhaps she was in a bad mood anyway, due to people not paying their bills, or the stirring-up of feelings in spring. The wrangle with Rose has already commenced, has been going on forever, like a dream that goes back and back into other dreams, over hills and through doorways, maddeningly dim and populous and familiar and elusive.(...)

*One night after a scene like this* they were all in the kitchen. (pp.12-3) (My emphasis)

The narrator is explicitly saying that the intensity of the situation she is dealing with calls for an a-temporal, isolated moment that can contain the intensity of such a drama. The recognition that the temporal reference is imaginary does not prevent the

reader from visualizing clearly the scene that follows her opening question. It is the double effect caused by apostrophe as identified by Culler (1983:154): the reader recognizes its artificiality, its pretentiousness, but cannot escape its irresistible power. In the previous excerpt, Rose has boasted about her ability to put on a show before the reader's eyes just by calling to mind an event: a royal beating. This "object" or this image becomes a stimulus to which other secondary details will adhere as the narrative moves forward.

Rose "snatches" an occurrence from its natural existence in time and space to serve her purposes of communication. In these stories, she becomes an "apostrophizer", or in Culler's words, an "agent of rescue" of forms and forces she desires to see again. In spite of the fact that she tells in each particular story about a different aspect of her past, her narration does not respond to the necessity of recollection, but of address. Rose is a storyteller at heart, but she does not tell stories for the sake of incident or the pleasure of recreation: she wants her words to do something for her, she wants the people, objects or feelings she names to bend to her generalizations, to reply to her desperate plea for revelation of what has been buried by innumerable layers of time. She wants her address to have the power of insight.

At the end of "Royal Beatings" the adult Rose listens to a radio program in which a local of Hanratty, her hometown, is interviewed. The following passage shows the last part of the interview and Rose's subsequent thoughts:

**" You had a lot of experiences young men growing up today will never have"  
*Experiences.***

**"Can you recall any of them for us?"**

***I eaten groundhog meat one time. One winter. You wouldna cared for it. Heh.***

There was a pause, of appreciation, it would seem, then the announcer's voice saying that the foregoing had been an interview with Mr. Wilfred Nettleton of Hanratty, Ontario, made on his hundred and second birthday, two weeks before his death, last spring. A living link with our past. Mr. Nettleton had been interviewed in the Wawanash County Home for the Aged.

Hat Nettleton.

Horsewhipper into centenarian. Photographed on his birthday, fussed over by nurses, kissed no doubt by a girl reporter. Flash bulbs popping at him. Tape recorder drinking in the sound of his voice. Oldest resident. Oldest horsewhipper. Living link with our past.

Looking out from her kitchen window at the cold lake, Rose was longing to tell somebody. It was Flo who would enjoy hearing. She thought of her saying *Imagine!* in a way that meant she was having her worst suspicions gorgeously confirmed. (p.24)

After listening to the interview, Rose recalls Hat Nettleton's presence and tries to visualize the circumstances of the interview. Then, she desires to summon Hat's presence again before an audience -this time formed by Rose's stepmother, Flo- and



she uses the verb *imagine*, printed in italics in the text. This verb, in the imperative form, makes the same claims as apostrophe: they both represent an attempt to see by turning away, to refuse to look at one's surroundings and gain access to what is not present.

The story "Royal Beatings" sets the basis for the reader's response to the remaining stories: the reader perceives himself as a spectator that witnesses how a central voice gets involved in the activity of apostrophizing fragments of the past. The idea that the first story of a cycle contains a frame of reference that influences the reader's construction of the whole cycle is superbly expressed by Agnes Gereben (1986:52):

If the first episode of a cycle of short stories contains an objectified simile, a situation, an attitude or a value (I deliberately choose heterogeneous examples) which later reoccurs in the same way under different conditions (or in a different way under similar conditions) then there is no "vacuum" in the reader's mind where it tries to find its location, but it "triggers" a field in it that has already been conditioned. The very same gesture creates the reader's relationship with that field, a relationship that takes on its own character, a sort of "place value" besides its "face value".

In almost every story of *The Beggar Maid*, a key word is repeated throughout: *royal beatings*, *half a grapefruit*, *white slavers*, *Patrick*, as if the repeated mention could bring objects nearer. Very frequently these words are printed in italics without forming part of a whole sentence; they are repeated as if to beckon, in a kind of apostrophic ritual: the reality they bring about permeates the whole story as a presence that cannot be brushed off.

The apostrophe is used to project the narrator's perspective towards her narration and therefore dramatizes her desire to bring her materials to life. We have to remember that although Rose is neither an orator nor a poet, she is both an actress and a storyteller. The structure of the cycle can thus be comprehended as composed of different moments in which a character performs successive acts of address. The cycle turns away from the form of autobiography or of *bildungsroman*; the reader witnesses no maturation of one or several characters, only several facets of experience, represented by images of different characters. If the reader can intuit a sequence of incidents, the importance of this chain is overridden by the fact that each story represents one stage of the narrator's task to bring forth a series of images, perceptions or ideas. Culler (1983:148) comments that "the fact that apostrophe involves a drama of 'the one mind's' modifications more than a relationship between an *I* and a *you* that emerges with special clarity in poems with multiple apostrophes". Using his conclusions on apostrophe, we can interpret each of the stories that make up the cycle as "nodes or concretizations of stages in a drama of mind." The apostrophe is a means to dramatize the narrator's relationship with the "objects" contained in her mind which will be used as materials of her story.

Rose wants to build a past that may be easily visualized by her friends. However, her duty as a storyteller is not to reconstruct the past precisely but to evoke imaginary presences. The people she mentions will acquire certain traits so as to meet the demands of Rose's different audiences:

Rose knew a lot of people who wished they had been born poor, and hadn't been. So she would queen it over them, offering various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood. The Boy's Toilet and the Girl's Toilet. Old Mr. Burns in his Toilet. Shortie McGill and Franny McGill in the entrance of the Boy's Toilet. She did not deliberately repeat the toilet locale, and was a bit surprised at the way it kept cropping up. She knew that those little dark or painted shacks were supposed to be comical -always were, in country humor- but she saw them instead as scenes of marvelous shame and outrage. (p.25)

The reader has access to characters only through Rose's words and thoughts so our construction will always depend on her particular needs and desires. Their existence will be made dependent on Rose's imaginary activity; we will assimilate them, quoting Ingram's (1971:199) words concerning the characters of the cycle *Winesburg Ohio*, "not as real people, but as real figures of fancy in the symbolic territory of the narrator's brain".

Characters are shown to us within the same story as figures which adopt now familiar, now shocking features, because juxtaposition is the means to express their personalities. We do not contemplate their transitions through life, but a succession of images that illustrate their possible different roles. This juxtaposition allows the narrative to elude a sense of biographical time, so that it avoids representing time as a continuous line within which action progresses. As we said before, when speaking about the implications of Culler's (1983:150) theory, the order of appearance of elements reflects the narrator's impulse to bring them back from their silent and distant existence: "the play of presence and absence is not governed by time but by poetic power". In this cycle, as in apostrophic poetry, the move from life to death is replaced, in each story, by an alternation of attitudes towards different topics. According to Valerie Shaw (1983:159), the writer of short story cycles "puts each drama in a different frame".

The role that time plays along a cycle is, therefore, similar to the expectations created by apostrophe, which substitutes a temporality of discourse -an imaginary present in which the poet speaks- for a temporal referentiality. In *The Beggar Maid*, events are deprived of their adherence to time, they are put together around an idea or relational scheme, which prevents their dispersal along a chronological line so as to exploit their capacity of analogy and contrast. E.D. Blodgett (1988:15,24) is aware of this recurrent structure in Munro's stories, which "cannot proceed in a linear fashion. It can only reach points where time is suspended". According to him, "The Beggar Maid" includes a narrator "posed not simply between a past and a present, but within

a plurality of presents that unfold in the course of narrating". Each story of the cycle would represent a halt, a moment within the narrator's conscience.

This particular role of time in the cycles seems to be a characteristic trait of the genre. Ingram (1971:23), Garland Mann (1989:xii) or Luscher (1989:159) have emphasized how little force chronological time has as an element to connect stories in a cycle; advancing time would be substituted by the psychological rhythm of the narrator. According to Ingram (1971:24):

Time does not exist in a cycle for the sake of hurrying through a single series of events, but rather for going over the same kind of action again, for repeating the situation while varying its components, for deepening one's appreciation of the significance of an action.

The "apostrophic design" explains why huge temporal gaps do not have any elliptical weight in these stories. "The Beggar Maid", for example, covers a long span of time, but only two short periods of Rose's life are dramatized: we can only know of the time when Rose went to the university and met her future husband and of an incident that happened years after she had divorced him. The events occurring in between have been left out. The reader has to make do with these two moments and, nevertheless, he does not perceive any gap, any conspicuous emptiness or artificial acceleration of the narrative. He is not frustrated by the lack of information about essential events in Rose's life. This is so because the reader is somehow reassured that continuity persists in spite of the gap; there has not been any breach in coherence because he recognizes that this restricted selection of very few elements from a lifespan reveals the direction of a voice, the workings of the narrator's mind. The reader is able to contemplate this selection as a process of self-discovery that characterizes the narrator and reveals her quest for meaning. The reader perceives in these two moments of the character's life the two terms of a comparison or a contrast. Continuity is not chronological but thematic: there is not a description of the process of the character's fate, but a juxtaposition of moments that may produce several effects: incongruence, surprise, irony. There is no way to know how a woman has found herself in old age, how she has become another woman, instead we are witnesses of the various -however disparate- manifestations of an individual's personality. As Walton Beacham remarked (1981:16) "short fiction is dealing with the *power* of the forces which act on us rather than the *nature* of the forces."

Munro herself has described her narrative method as a juxtaposition of several images of the same person at different stages of his or her life. In an interview with Geoff Hancock (1983:82) she remarks:

I like looking at people's lives over a number of years without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. And I like the way people relate, or don't relate, to the people they were earlier ... I think this is why I'm not drawn to writing

novels. Because I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time.

In this kind of structure ellipses are invalidated, but so are analepses -temporal shifts to the past-, because each story represents a new beginning. Flo reappears in "Privilege" as a young woman, in spite of the fact that in "Royal Beatings" we have had a glimpse of her as an old demented lady. The "Flo" in "Privilege" is an altogether different character and her reappearance in this story does not have anything to do with her future in a Home for the Aged. Characters do not seem to be connected from one story to the next one after crossing the textual vacuum that separates them. Their reappearance will depend on a different call of the narrator: she will restore them to life once more so that they can form part of a situation that reflects another intuited truth.

The apostrophe also helps us to explain why the reader accepts unquestioningly a key piece of information about Rose's life when the cycle is coming to its close. At the end of "Who Do You Think You Are?" Rose mentions a character the reader knows nothing about. His name is Ralph Gillespie and he used to be a schoolmate of Rose's, he used to sit behind her in class. He is brought up in a conversation Rose maintains with her brother in one of her visits. Rose realizes that Ralph Gillespie is the only man she knows she can remember without bitterness. Rose wants to experience again his presence as her accomplice, as someone who, out of the same helplessness and shyness, develops artistic skills to amuse other people.

This story, and the whole cycle, concludes with the following question, leaving Rose at the start of a reflexive process about a period of her life with which we are not acquainted until that moment of the narrative, a period of her life that is only briefly sketched:

What could she say about herself and Ralph Gillespie, except that she felt her his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own?. (p.210)

To introduce an essential factor of the character's life in the last paragraphs of the narrative is a device that would not be easily accepted in a novel, which, because of its inherent load of information and diversity of episodes demands endings where the possibilities of action are shown in full. Development in these stories is apostrophic, if we compare it with the conventional sequential structure of novels. This new piece of information does not work as the outcome of the story or of the cycle, but as a new address, a last act of address. Its contents -the short period of life Rose got to know Ralph- does not develop a previous textual connection. Rose is addressing a part of her life she has come to notice just now. Rose wants to renew the kind of communion both friends once enjoyed. Culler (1983:) points out that very frequently apostrophes end with withdrawals or questions. In the end, Rose questions the efficacy of her

apostrophic tricks, she knows that Ralph has recently died and her recall only increases the gigantic distance between her present days and his irrecoverable absence.

In a novel, - a genre which builds detail on detail and attempts to pin down the developing relationships between time and event or among the characters -, we would not accept without frustration to have an essential character mentioned at the end and then excluded for good. However, this device can promote meaning in the short story: the final sudden revelation, the brief retrospective revision of previous material that acquires momentarily an unexpected significance, the reversal of our frames of reference to perceive the information provided so far. This short story ends when there has been a hint at a possibility that can alter Rose's life, it does not matter if the causes that trigger off her reaction remain in mystery to a very great extent. Walton Beacham (1981:15) identifies the differences between the novel and the short story precisely by the fact that novels *culminate*, because whatever events constitute the ending, they are a continuation of one or several incidents that have been shown to the reader. In contrast, Ralph Gillespie does not step onstage until the last story of the cycle and the reader knows practically nothing about his life. According to Beacham (1981:15):

we may say that short fiction attempts to draw us into a moment and to show how that moment changes our lives by changing an understanding of the significance of a seemingly small event. The novel attempts to draw us into a world where cause and effect establish some semblance of order.

The inclusion of Ralph Gillespie at the end of *The Beggar Maid*, shows the short story cycle as a form closer to the short story than the novel.

Another possible use of Culler's theory is to lead us to understand apostrophe as an activity undertaken by characters. Culler (1983:142) points out that apostrophe is used to reveal the poet's identity, "to dramatize or constitute an image of the self". The apostrophe does not only provide *The Beggar Maid* with a design, it does not only characterize Rose as a narrator but as a character. One of her most striking traits is that she tries to discover her identity, her true self, through a process of testing apostrophe. "Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities" we read at the beginning of the cycle. Rose's passion for words is her token and she does not only use them to create agreeable or witty combinations or to express her own feelings, but to ponder them separately, to utter them and elicit what unexpected realities they can create.

As commented earlier, apostrophe is sustained by the convention that words are tools that the poet uses to be able to *see* other realities. There is another fundamental principle that remains implicit: the orator or the poet, by apostrophizing, is alienated from those that share his same temporal and spatial references to have access to certain presences created by his own words. It is precisely the satisfaction Rose's get when she does not omit the words she knows she should when singing a tune that gets her a royal beating:

"Two pickled arseholes -"

" - tied in a knot!"

There it is. The filth.

Two Vancouvers fried in snot!

Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot! (...)

" You're going to get it" cried Flo in a predictable rage. "Say that again and you'll get a good clout!"

Rose couldn't stop herself. She hummed it tenderly, tried saying the innocent words aloud, humming through the others. It was not just the words snot and arsehole that gave her pleasure, though of course they did. It was the pickling and tying and the unimaginable Vancouvers. She saw them in her mind shaped rather like octopuses, twitching in the pan. The tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness.

Lately she has remembered it again and taught it to Brian, to see if it has the same effect on him, and of course it has. (p.14)

In "Privilege" we find more examples where "innocent words" possess the sustaining power to make ideas acquire solidity, a specific physical form. According to convention, the apostrophe does not only produce visions, to apostrophize is to use a word and believe it is going to produce an event, to alter one's feelings or to display some kind of influence or force. In Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, another short story cycle whose heroine can be related to Rose in many ways, we hear "just by using a word like *barbaric*, she could make a pool of silence, of consternation round her" (p. 56). And then, in "Privilege" again:

Brother and sister.

Relations performing.

That was Flo's word for it: *perform*. Back in the country, back on the hill farms she came from, Flo said that people had gone dotty, been known to eat boiled hay, and performed with their too-close relations. Before Rose understood what was meant she used to imagine some makeshift stage, some rickety old barn stage, where members of a family got up and gave silly songs and recitations. *What a performance!* Flo would say in disgust, blowing out smoke, referring not to any single act but to everything along that line, past and present and future, going on anywhere in the world. People's diversions, like their pretensions, could not stop astounding her. (p.27)

Michael Taylor (1983:128) devotes an essay to Munro's characters' imaginative response to words and comments that their attraction for words "re-expose us to their original power of shock". However, words offer Rose strange diversions from her practical knowledge of life not only because she explores the possible worlds they contain, but because she can turn to them and address them as objects for her own pleasure. But her ecstasies can only be private, apostrophe allows her to see or to

*imagine* but the realities it brings about are misleading, they result from an error of perception.

Munro questions the validity of the apostrophic act: Rose will be alienated from those that share her same temporal or spatial references to be deluded with all sorts of mirages. Besides, the apostrophe, more than any other figure of speech, turns its user into a passive voice, a begging voice. The privilege of apostrophe is not based on the power to discover amazing relationships among objects, it is based on the belief that naming is equal to making visible; Rose utters a word and passively observes the surfaces it offers. That is why Rose turns to apostrophe as a means of consolation, as a means to deviate her attention from the details that make up the flux of her life. But she considers herself, not a prophetic voice, as Culler (1983:142) states, but as an entity with the power to manufacture unthinkable or disparaging spectacles.

In "The Beggar Maid", the story that deals with the most important turning point of Rose's life, Rose uses an apostrophe borrowed from a play by Yeats's -"Come away O human child" (p.83) - to identify herself -at odds with her real situation- with a young bride forced into an undesirable marriage. In "Spelling" Rose has the chance to meet a woman who also turns to words in the last stage of her life, when she has been secluded in a Home for years and has lost all kind of contact with the people that surround her. The only activity this old woman can fulfil is to spell words. It is significant that Rose asks her to spell the word "celebrate", exposing the uselessness of the old woman's task:

"Isn't she a wonder", the nurse said. "She can't see and that's the only way we can tell she can hear. Like if you say, "Here's your dinner", she won't pay any attention to it, but she might start spelling *dinner*.

"Dinner", she said, to illustrate, and the old woman picked it up. "D-I-N-N...". Sometimes a long wait, a long wait between the letters. It seemed she had only the thinnest thread to follow, meandering through that emptiness or confusion that nobody on this side can do more than guess at. (...) The she was sitting waiting; waiting, in the middle of her sightless eventless day, till up from somewhere popped another word. She would encompass it, bend all her energy to master it. Rose wondered what the words were like, when she held them in her mind. Did they carry their usual meaning, or any meaning at all?. Were they like words in dreams or in the mind of young children, each one marvelous and distinct and alive as a new animal? This one limp and clear, like a jellyfish, that one hard and secretive, like a horned snail. They could be austere and comical as top hats, or smooth and lively and flattering as ribbons. A parade of private visitors, not over yet. (pp.187-8)

In this passage, words lack meaning and the situation points at the absurdity involved in the act of naming. However, Rose ponders on the fact that these words have been objectified, they have turned into solid objects. They have come to the old lady's assistance, to fill the dark corridors of her mind as "a parade of private visitors".

The apostrophe is deprived here of its aura of dignity and mysticism. But even when naming is a desperate and hopeless act and words make nothing happen, the claims of apostrophe are not totally pointless. The previous passage from "Spelling" connects with Culler's (1983:140) attempt to define apostrophe with the help of two lines of a poem by Auden: "it survives/ A way of happening, a mouth." The apostrophe reflects this conjunction of a mouth and an imaginary happening.

In the final bend of the cycle, Munro explores this other side of apostrophe: reality manifest itself differently just for one of its members, it creates subjective alternate plots. The apostrophic gesture is the source of a number of amazing sights along the stories that make up *The Beggar Maid*, but there is a warning, the communication with absent realities can only be private, secret and of dubious nature.

Rose experiences in *The Beggar Maid* two contradictory effects of his habit to apostrophize: words contain misleading perceptions, alien presences, however they remain within her as an indispensable source of knowledge. Rose's addiction to fictions can be compared to her addiction to apostrophe. Although she remains a storyteller until the very end, she is truly an actress, not a writer, so she "calls" her characters into existence. She does not write them into existence.

The apostrophe is full of potential in the study of the cycles and short stories written by Alice Munro so far. In this essay I have tried to explain how it may serve to understand the reasons why the stories within the cycle possess a separate existence. In *The Beggar Maid*, each story represents a dramatic moment of recognition of some truth that is revealed as a consequence of the meaning displayed by an array of elements brought about by subsequent acts of apostrophe. The apostrophe turns experience "transposable"; the poet is free to invoke isolated parts of the world to serve his own purposes, no matter how he unbinds them from the flow of time and from their previous context. From this perspective, each story shows a freedom to choose its own beginning, to close down on previous episodes and offer a new arrangement of the world, a new plot. We contemplate each story, as "a little world in space, just as we can isolate one star by a concentrated vision" as Eudora Welty (1961:110) has put it.

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