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ALICE MUNRO AS THE 2013 NOBEL LAUREATE:  
CANADIAN LITERATURE HAS FINALLY COME OF AGE

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**ABSTRACT:** October 2013 marks the date of perhaps the most significant literary event for Canadians, whose literature and sense of identity have been dominated by the absence of strong foundations. With Alice Munro's Nobel Prize, not only has Canadian Literature finally come of age, emerging as an important force in the world, but the author herself has received the greatest honour awarded to a writer: the honour of having her name inscribed in history. What is more, the short story genre has also received the recognition it deserves, in spite of all scepticism voiced against this literary art form, and even women may feel that Munro's Prize is also a bit theirs. With so many people and so many interests implicated in this award, the world's reaction to such key accomplishment was expected to be free of polemical acrimony. However, agreement and consensus are, for the most part, difficult to reach, as there are always dissident voices complaining against the injustice of the committee's decision.

It is in light of the above that I believe it is important to analyse Munro's entrance into the canon, in particular through a brief reading and discussion of some of her most recent works, because I believe that there is a classical Munrovian touch to her stories that makes her stand out as unique: Alice Munro's fully fleshed-out characters are so well-crafted, with all their flaws and strengths, that, in a short span of pages, we see them move over from the literary to the real world (or is it the other way around?!).

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, short story, Canadian literature, Nobel Prize, aesthetics of reception.

All the years that I taught in a high school I didn't teach literature, as you might expect, but mathematics. Then staying home I grew restless and undertook something else—writing tidy and I hope entertaining biographies of Canadian novelists who have been undeservedly forgotten or have never received proper attention. I don't think I would have got the job if it wasn't for Franklin, and the literary reputation that we don't talk about—I was born in Scotland and really didn't know any Canadian writers.

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And I found myself telling her about the neglected writers, even naming the one I was working on at the moment. Martha Ostenso, who wrote a book called *Wild Geese* and a horde of others all now forgotten.

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The words quoted as an epigraph to this essay translate Dolly's disillusionment with the lack of scholarly attention devoted to Canadian writers. The character of Munro's latest collection, *Dear Life* (2013), gives the story its title and introduces the reader to the topic of critical recognition, one that haunts writers of all corners of the world.

In Portugal, Camões' epic poem *Os Lusíadas* addressed the immortality granted to poets and all those who "by deeds memorious brake from the doom that binds the vulgar dead"<sup>1</sup> and, in *Folhas Caídas*, Almeida Garrett also disclosed what sets apart the common man from the writer, whose soul, contrary to the body of the former one, does not perish, because it lives in his/her readers.<sup>2</sup>

Many other writers – and artists, in general – have approached this topic of the pursuit of recognition as a way of transcending space and time. As our own Nobel Laureate, José Saramago, once put it, "[a]t least once in life, every author has been, or will have to be, Luís de Camões" and, just like this poetical genius, s/he will experience disdainful indifference, mockery and reluctance every time s/he attempts to publish a book<sup>3</sup>. What will become of the books that writers bestow upon their readers? That is a question that Saramago makes his character Camões ask in a play entitled *What Shall I Do With This Book?*, perhaps a question of the Nobel author himself, since literature can transport feelings of a personal nature.

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<sup>1</sup> The Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33385/33385-h/33385-h.htm>

<sup>2</sup> For further reading cf. Garrett's "Advertência" to *Folhas Caídas*.

<sup>3</sup> Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1998, in [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1998/saramago-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1998/saramago-lecture.html).

In fact, in many works of literature, especially first-person prose, we cannot discard the author, as s/he is persistently present, always directing our attention and making sure we read the story as a believable narrative, one in which we easily create an emotional identification with the text. Instead of being a construct of the author's imagination, the revelation of the self in literature seems to give us the guarantee of authenticity, and, thus, satisfy our desire to be told about a life with which we can identify.

Such technique has been adopted by Alice Munro, the recipient of the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. In many of her short stories, especially the most recent ones, she offers us events that we perceive as faithful representations of life, due to its mimetic properties, to the point of, in her last collection, even aligning autobiography and first-person realism, when she points out that "[t]he final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life" (Munro, *Dear Life* 255).

Autobiography and realistic fiction may be said to be two sides of the same coin, as both of them are artifacts: the former, made of real events, is transformed into a piece of art, while the latter, a piece of art, is intended to be the representation of a plausible life. That is what happens in regard to history and fiction as well, since, "[a]ccording to William Henry Hudson, 'nothing is true in history except names and dates. And everything is true in fiction except names and dates.' [...] [O]ne can always find an intersection[;] a common area between these two disciplines can always be found" (Muru-gaiyan 33).

Such intersection of reality and the fabrication of reality is undoubtedly a part of Munro's works, as she herself reveals in her 1982 essay "What is Real":

Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes and bits of speech). I see how this material might go together and make the shape I need, and I try it. (Howells 3)

This interconnection between reality and imagination is later explained in her "Foreword" to *The View of Castle Rock*, when she claims to have taken interest and done some research on the history of one side of her family, which was then shaped "[...] into something like stories. Some of the characters gave themselves to [her] in their own words, others rose out of their situations. Their words and [her] words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be" (Munro, *Castle Rock* 1). In this light, even though not necessarily a historically or factually narrative presentation of the author's actual experience, or of her relatives' as

Munro reminds us, the fact is that her stories, as she stresses, “pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does.” And she goes on clarifying that reality and fantasy co-exist in *The View from Castle Rock*: “[F]amily history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outline of a true narrative. With these developments the two streams came close enough together that they seemed [...] meant to flow in one channel, as they do in this book” (2).

The problem, however, is that, if we are encouraged to read Munro’s short stories as the blend of reality and fiction – in a genre that we will call autobiographical fiction –, on the other hand the narrator’s voice, which we recognise as an authorial presence, undermines the potential of fabulation and, instead, encourages us to approach it as a confession or, in Hooper’s words, as memoir, which is not seen favourably by the majority of critics:

Munro goes well beyond the “simple” integration of her family history into fiction and reaches into the realm of memoir, absolute *memoir*, and not just autobiographical fiction. She boldly abandons the conventions of fiction to color every “story” [...] with far too much undigested family history. In these instances, which can only be described as startling, Munro as author steps in *as the author*. [...] Munro’s “intrusions into the prose not as narrator but as actual author prove distracting and erode the veil of suspension of disbelief.” (Hooper 151)

The idea that fiction should be analysed as an independent artifact, dismissing biographical details about its author, comes from Roland Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author,<sup>4</sup> but Munro resists this extreme post-structuralism’s homicidal urge by adopting and adapting reality, hence including, selecting, excluding and manipulating referentiality in a way that reflects, albeit imperfectly, the author’s experience and beliefs. As James Carscallen notes, when referring to Munro’s writing, “[...] it is impossible to present fact without selecting, arranging, and otherwise articulating them, and selection is always assimilation to an idea – that is, to truth” (Carscallen 7).

Selection is always a reflection of the author or, at least, a vestige of the author’s presence, as Mikhail Bakhtin also makes clear, when referring to Dostoevsky’s heroes: “A living human cannot be turned into a voiceless object of some second-hand, finalizing cognitive process” (59), which is to say that the author cannot be completely detached from his/her written work. This, however, does not mean that the author needs to play a visible role, controlling the story and intruding on it in several instances, because the reader is also vital in making meaning. The reader collaborates with author and narrator, but s/

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<sup>4</sup> In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes argues that “it is the language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (Barthes 143).

he is not merely focused on the text as the only origin of significance; rather, s/he produces meaning beyond the text, because, according to Iserian theory, the reader reacts as much to what is not in a given text as to what is present:

No tale can be told in its entirety. Indeed it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself. (Iser qtd. in O’Neill 19)

It is with Iser’s argument in mind – in the act of reading, a reader is challenged to work out a configurative meaning – that I am attempting to decipher authorial statements within and beyond Munro’s texts, because, as I have been pointing out, this Canadian author envelops us with which seems realism that comes from her “human hand [...] rub[bing] at the surface”, while, at the same time, such realism is “full of ‘troubling distorted reflections’ as reality is refracted through the narrator’s subjective perceptions and desires, revealing not the total picture but only ‘a patch of shiny silver’” (Howells 153).

Actually, Munro’s narrators allow us to access the author’s “subjective perceptions and desires” as well as her emotions and knowledge. In “Too Much Happiness”, the story which gives the book its title, we are introduced to Sophia, who, just like Dolly, quoted at the beginning of this essay, focuses on literary recognition and value judgements. Both characters are aware that most authors’ popularity is short-lived and that, when a few years are past, nothing is known about them.<sup>5</sup> This realisation is well expressed in a statement by the omniscient narrator in “Too Much Happiness,” who allows for insight into the protagonist’s thoughts: “[e]very one of us will be forgotten, Sophia thought but did not say, because of the tender sensibilities of men – particularly of a young man – on this point” (Munro, *Happiness* 259). In “Dolly”, the autodiegetic narrator is less passive and reacts against such realisation by doing some research on the lives of neglected Canadian novelists and attempting to “write tidy and [...] entertaining biographies” (Munro, *Dear Life* 236), so as to celebrate lost literature and pave the way for the rediscovery of long-silenced voices.

From these readings, I would say that, though a natural phenomenon, according to which the strong survive and the weak disappear, literary Darwinism seems to haunt Munro. Just like the authors mentioned earlier in this essay, so does this Canadian writer fear oblivion, and that fear makes her lean on this subject several times in her stories, especially the latest ones.

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, it is worth pointing out that Robert Escarpit, in *The Book Revolution*, estimated that eighty percent of literary production is forgotten within a year and ninety-nine percent of all writers are forgotten twenty years after their work has been published (34).

Actually, in recent years, perhaps due to Munro's advanced age, defiance of death through the immortality of her works has become a central concern for her. This desire for eternal remembrance is best understood when we read her words in "Fiction," a story in which the heterodiegetic narrator adheres to the suspicion with which the short story genre has been regarded, which, in a sense, legitimises her anxiety towards her writing: "*How Are We to Live* is the book's title. It is a collection of short stories, not a novel. This in itself is a disappointment. It seems to diminish the book's authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside" (Munro, *Happiness* 49-50). Well aware that short stories have been dismissed as minor art, Munro knows that the price to be paid for choosing to write within this genre may well be utter neglect and forgetfulness.

Maybe because short stories are not taken seriously, this Canadian writer attempted to write novels in the past, but in a conversation with Geoff Hancock she admitted that she had failed over and over again: "'For years and years I would convince myself that I really had a novel there and I would start writing them and they would go all – they would just fall. It was just a total waste of time [...] So it took me a long time to reconcile myself to being a short story writer.'" (Howells 14) The closest she has come to the novel are *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), this latter published in Britain and the USA as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1979),<sup>6</sup> and even these may be said to be "more accurately [...] short-story cycle[s]" (Hooper 49).

Munro's restlessness and dissatisfaction with her writing can be noticed in her last story so far, "Dear Life", where, close to the end, she blames writing for being time-consuming, unrewarding and causing the breakdown of family life: "If I had not been so busy with my own young family and my own invariable unsatisfactory writing. But the person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available" (Munro, *Dear Life* 318).

Feelings of anxiety for recognition and guilt over dazzlement with success are also noticeable in "Too Much Happiness," a story based on the life of the nineteenth-century Russian mathematician, Sophia Kovalevsky, who, aiming at winning scholarly acclaim and the Prestigious Bordin Prize of the French Academy of Sciences, ruins her relationship with Maxsim:

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<sup>6</sup> The choice of this title was motivated by the fact that American publishers "felt that an American audience would not understand the colloquial put-down of the phrase 'Who do you think you are?'" (Heble 196). Besides that, the Canadian title, which originated from a reprimand, would not fit the American literary market since, contrarily to Canadians, Americans already had their identity well-established: they knew who they were. In America, the title should then conceal its Canadianness, and the author, more than Canadian, should be presented as a writer of distinction so that she could achieve authority outside Canada.

This was at the very time when she should have been working day and night, preparing her submission for the Bordin Prize. [...] The Bordin Prize was what spoiled them [Sophia and Maxsim]. So Sophia believed. She herself was taken in by it at first, dazzled by all the chandeliers and champagne. The compliments quite dizzying, the marvelling and the hand kissing spread thick on top of certain inconvenient but immutable facts." (Munro, *Happiness* 249)

As soon as the main character achieves literary reputation, wonder and amazement fade and give way to frivolous gaiety and resentment. She realises, then, that awards ceremonies were ludicrous occasions, held to recognise outstanding achievements, usually by men, as the following passage clearly indicates:

Then they had given her the Bordin Prize, they had kissed her hand and presented her with speeches and flowers in the most elegant lavishly lit rooms. But t[...]

they had closed their doors when it came to giving her a job. They would no more think of that than of employing a learned chimpanzee. The wives of the great scientists preferred not to meet her, or invite her into their homes.

[...] Men whose brains were blowing old notions apart were still in thrall to women whose heads were full of nothing but the necessity of tight corsets, calling cards, and conversations that filled your throat with a kind of perfumed fog. She must stop this litany of resentment." (Munro, *Happiness* 266-7)

Munro's interest in Sophia's life can have been motivated by shared affinities and lifestyles and I would say that, given the resemblances, she may even have slipped into the protagonist's mind to express her own inner thoughts and life lessons:

She was learning, quite late, what many people around her appeared to have known since childhood – that life can be perfectly satisfying without major achievements. It could be brimful of occupations which did not weary you to the bone. Acquiring what you needed for a comfortably furnished life, and then to take on a social and public life of entertainment, would keep you from even being bored or idle, and would make you feel at the end of the day that you had done exactly what pleased everybody. There need be no agonizing.

Except in the matter of how to get money. (Munro, *Happiness* 283)

Blatant marginalisation of women from an existing male canon may be perceived in the passages quoted above. The opportunities for women to succeed were rather limited and their major achievements were not acknowledged or, if they were, women were forgotten too easily and reduced to housework and the education of their children. They were deprived of reputation and of

fortune and they were denied career opportunities because of their gender, as aesthetic merit and intellectual heft were seen as implicitly masculine.

Such discovery was also made by Greta: “[...] [F]eminism was not even a word people used,” so we are told in “To Reach Japan” (Munro, *Dear Life* 6), a story about a woman poet who had trained her husband, Peter, not to call her poetess, since the term was associated with a certain feebleness, but Peter’s mother and his co-workers still called her that way. Despite Greta’s efforts<sup>7</sup> to be acknowledged as an eminent figure of the literary world, she realised, just like Sophia Kovalevsky, that parties and other social gatherings of the kind were grandiose events in which a few inflated egos showed off, while the great majority just tried to fit in: “Nobody spoke to her or noticed her [...]. Nobody looked at her with any recognition or pleasure and why should they? [...] She didn’t give up, though” (Munro, *Dear Life* 8-9). Greta expected that party to result in a successful opportunity to forge connections and build meaningful relationships with other writers: “[T]here she had been desperate for anybody to throw her any old bone of conversation at all” (10). However, the truth was that participation in literary circles was everything but easy for women, who were kept on the fringes of the literary landscape, and, as a result of Greta’s frustration with her inability to advance her prospects, she abandoned herself to alcohol that night. When she was surprised by a journalist who offered his help to take her home, all she could hope for was that “[...] he wouldn’t ask what she was doing at the party. If she had to say she was a poet, her present situation, her overindulgence, would be taken as drearily typical” (12). And there she went, not talking about what had taken her to that party... With her attempt to gain respect from the community of writers totally destroyed, she had better not talk about her passion for poetry: “And what about her poetry? Not a line, not a word. Not a hint that she had ever cared for it” (14).

Munro’s short stories just mentioned perfectly depict the idea that the academy has determined the reputation of individual authors. Political and literary circles have been closely joined and connections have been highly valued; they have exerted enormous influence, which enables us to say that the process of canon formation is not devoid of criticism and controversy: it is a complex and multi-layered practice that implicates the roles of artists, the publishing industry, the academy, the mass media, the general public and agencies and institutions of cultural policy, as William Casement, quoting Tompkins, makes clear:

‘a literary reputation could never be anything but political [...] works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are

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<sup>7</sup> “Greta [...] sent them [*The Echo Answers*] some poems. Two of the poems had been published [...]” (Munro, *Dear Life* 7).

responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position [...] the literary works that now make up the canon do so because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential.’ (50)

It is true that several entities work to shape literary taste and it is not less true that, as William Casement goes further to assert, literary reputation is not independent of camaraderie, patronage and cronyism: “One of the two factors typically cited in the politics of making literary reputations is having connections with powerful people” (Casement 50). Munro knows that and she lets her characters come to that conclusion as well, as previously shown.

Though certainly not unique to Canada, this phenomenon has been attracting attention of both critics and the media in recent years, as Kit Dobson explains:

[...] literary awards such as the Giller have been questioned as a result of their increasing prominence. They have become central to the Canadian publishing industry, and the ceremonies for the Giller Prize for fiction and the Griffin Prize for poetry have become major media events. The ideologies informing these and other prizes have come under increasing scrutiny as critics and the media have noted their impact upon books’ sales. [...] [T]he awards ceremony has become a love-in among friends awarding one another prizes. [...] Waxing poetic, Henighan states that ‘the Giller is the consummate expression’ of right-wing Canada’s ‘Hollywoodized, neo-conservative, market-driven, user-fee mentality.’ (160-2)

As it has been stated, literary merit involves much discussion, negotiation and compromise. One’s entrance into the literary canon of a given country is, *per se*, a complex endeavour, but the fact that a work has been accepted into it does not mean that it will permanently enjoy prestige, because, as Marcia Citron informs us, canons “exert tremendous power. By setting standards they represent what is considered worthy of inclusion. Works that do not measure up are excluded, either in the sense of deliberately omitted or ignored and hence forgotten. Canons are therefore exclusive” (15) and, as the saying goes, “one man’s loss is another man’s gain.”

A guarantee is out there: “The best will indeed be recognized – but by whom? And when?” (Metcalf 99). Those were the questions that have long occupied the mind of Canadians, till October 2013, the date when Canadian Literature finally came of age, with Alice Munro’s recognition as the most recent Nobel laureate.

Even though Saul Bellow had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976, he had not inscribed Canadian Literature on the map. He was a Canadian, born in Quebec in a Jewish family of Russian origin, but moved to the United States of America as a child and is usually regarded as an American author. Thus, up until a few months ago, Metcalf’s question remained up-to-date:

Would it be mischievous to suggest that the Americans and the British [and the world in general] seem to be blind to Canadian literature because Canadian literature is rather difficult to see? Would it be mischievous to suggest that Canadian literature is something of a fabrication? That its alleged hoary antiquity (*Wacousta*, for God's sake!) is academic naughtiness and desperate invention? That the simple fact is that there haven't yet been many Canadian literary texts of high quality? (23-4)

And, despite claims to the contrary,<sup>8</sup> some pages later, he himself ventures to answer his own questions by arguing that the absence of origins and, hence, of a sense of nationhood may not be the answer to such a complex and controversial terrain. Instead, in his words,

LACK OF AUDIENCE is the centre of our problem. Nationalism is no answer. It has failed in securing an audience in the last sixty years and has failed dismally. [...] Before there can be an audience in Canada for Canadian literature there must be an audience for literature; before there can be a love of Canadian literature there must be a general love of writing. (Metcalf 101-2)

From the 1990s onwards, a love of Canadian literature has grown substantially and the works of Canadian authors have started to roll from the presses. Each year, new Canadian authors create a distinctive body of fiction, no matter if that distinctiveness means a focus on personal identity-seeking or a "search for absent origins [...]. Absence, negativity, bec[ame] reified as the essential Canadian" (Godard 21), a concern that could be of much interest to national citizens but that did not attract much attention outside the Canadian territory, as we have noticed before, when referring to the title change of Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>9</sup> As Jonathan Franzen in the introduction to *Runaway* further emphasises: "Alice Munro has a strong claim to being the

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<sup>8</sup> Many have been the critics who have asserted that there is no such a thing as a Canadian Literature. The following quotation – which is actually a double quotation, as it was originally found in a paper by Archibald Lampman – is but an example of that: "A good deal is being said about Canadian literature, and most of it takes the form of question and answer as to whether a Canadian literature exists. Of course it does not. It will probably be a full generation or two before we can present a body of work of sufficient excellence as measured by the severest standards, and sufficiently marked with local colour, to enable us to call it a Canadian literature." (Lampman qtd. by Dietz 46). Proof that this remains a much heated controversy, we notice W. H. New's reluctance to embrace the adjective "Canadian" to define the literary corpora produced in Canada and his preference for the term "literature in Canada," as he explains in the Preface of the encyclopedia he edited, so as to include not only Canadian-born writers, but also temporary Canadian residents, immigrants, and exiles/expatriates (New viii) whose writing offers an eclectic panorama: "[b]ecause 'literature in Canada' is also a term that applies widely across many subjects and forms of expression [...]" (ix).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. footnote 6.

best fiction writer now working in North America, but outside of Canada, where her books are No. 1 bestsellers, she has never had a large readership” (i).

In light of the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that the struggle of Munro’s characters to achieve critical recognition mimics the battle of the author herself and is also the reflection of Canada’s international and domestic struggle to define itself as a nation.

As a result of the established place that Canadian literature and Alice Munro have deserved in the literary panorama, in 2008 they were being talked about by the Swedish Academy and, therefore, the 2013 Nobel choice came as almost no surprise to the majority of literary critics and to some readers. On this matter, it is worth evoking the revealing words of Brad Hooper in his introduction to *The Fiction of Alice Munro*:

Although no actual short-list of candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature is issued preliminarily to the official announcement of the prizewinner [...], speculation always abounds as to which writers the committee is seriously discussing in any given year. In recent years the name of Alice Munro has appeared on the speculation list, which is a significant statement in and of itself. Although lacking any official force behind it, her mention as a likely Nobel choice indicates that Munro has earned the respect of readers and critics the world over to the level of widespread belief that she deserves the hallowed rank of Nobel laureate.

Who really knows what considerations actually go into the selection of the winner, and what the selection committee’s deliberations actually consist of? Consequently, who can accurately foretell if Alice Munro will win one day? (xi)

However, as evidence of what has been stated previously – that literary awards and one’s entrance to the canon most often do not generate consensus –, oppositional voices started to be heard in the cultural arena. In Portugal, upon the reception of Munro’s Nobel Prize, there was a critical rush on the part of Inês Pedrosa, a Portuguese journalist and writer, to dedicate an opinion column to the issue, in the newspaper *Sol*.

Even though Inês Pedrosa starts by acclaiming the literary merit of Alice Munro, whom she describes as a good writer and someone to vindicate the equality of female intellect, because, to date, there are only 13 women out of 110 Nobel Prize winners, she then proceeds to justify the reason why, in her opinion, the prize was not fairly awarded. She claims that the Canadian master of the modern short story is, by no means, better than some Portuguese women writers, namely Agustina Bessa-Luís, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, “Lídia Jorge, Luísa Costa Gomes o[r] Teolinda Gersão,” and, what is more, she vehemently condemns the short story genre as a mediocre art form, when compared to the much higher status of the novel, relegating it to the position of pseudo-literature. She even suggests the creation of a new Nobel award specific for the genre.

In fact, it can be argued that “[...] very few collections of short stories reach the bestseller lists; in other words, how many people can be observed in public places, on planes or public transportation, reading story collections? Or hearing them being discussed among avid and discerning readers? Or, for that matter, how many short story collections are chosen by book clubs?” (Hooper vii) The questions are rhetorical, because we already know the answer, but, from October onwards, the situation has surely changed, and more people have been reading Munro’s stories, for good or for bad. This allows us to reaffirm that “[...] the short story is not a moribund fictional form” (Hooper vii).

That certainty made Francisco Vale, editor of *Relógio D’Água Editores*,<sup>10</sup> respond to Inês Pedrosa in a post entitled “O Nobel não é para contistas?”<sup>11</sup> In it, he contests the validity of Pedrosa’s assertions, claiming that she presents a value judgement as if it were a judgement of fact and, in doing so, that is, in presenting a value-choice as an end in itself, she utters nonsensical comments that result in a pure product of whimsy. To prove his point, Vale lists a number of influential short story writers, whose worldwide canonical status has become incontestable, and goes on to contend that, notwithstanding Pedrosa’s perspective, there are, indeed, short story writers who are also novelists.

Instead of turning it into a question of likes and dislikes, Vale’s opinion is accurately and sedulously sifted and follows that way till the end, though, at times, making use of blatant irony with serious intentions. He argues in favour of the short story genre, alluding to the challenges imposed by the fact that, in a short span of pages, it requires an introduction, the creation of fully fleshed-out characters, a plot and a conclusion and, hence, creative synthesis and the mastering of writing skills and rhythms are at stake. In gist, as Francisco Vale retorts, the short story is in no way inferior to the novelistic genre; they are just different.

That is exactly the same perspective shared by many other critics around the world, namely the much acclaimed novelist Jonathan Franzen, who, wisely observes:

Discussing them [, story collections,] is so challenging, indeed, that one can almost forgive the *New York Times Book Review*’s former editor, Charles McGrath, for his recent comparison of young short-story writers to ‘people who learn golf by never venturing onto a golf course but instead practicing at a drive range.’ The real game being, by this analogy, the novel. (iv)

And, a couple of pages later, Franzen retrieves this same analogy to explain that, if Munro has been accused of redundancy for over 50 years, this

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<sup>10</sup> *Relógio D’Água* is the publishing house that publishes Munro’s works in Portuguese through translations by José Miguel Silva (except one, *Fugas*, by Margarida Vale de Gato).

<sup>11</sup> “Isn’t the Nobel Prize for short-story writers?” (my translation).

fact alone should stand out as extremely valuable, as it only means that she has nothing to hide; in his words, it “is precisely the familiarity of her materials” which are valuable: “This is not a golfer on a practice tee. This is a gymnast in a plain black leotard, alone on a bare foot, outperforming all the novelists with their flashy costumes and whips and elephants and tigers” (vi). The same issue is approached by Brad Hooper on the following grounds: “[...] a question of redundancy lingers. Are the stories too much alike, too similar in their working out of Munro’s basic themes and usual setting? To reiterate what was said at the beginning [...], they are of a piece – a cycle, a suite [...]. Their effect is cumulative, but without a blurring of their individuality. Th[ey are] true *collection*[s], then” (Hooper 14).

We may conclude, from what has been said, that Munroian introspection and psychological insight lend stories their dramatic intensity and verisimilitude. Munro is able to depict life in a distinctive style which makes her stand apart. She is, according to the Nobel Academy, the master of contemporary short story, and this because

More than any writer since Chekhov, Munro strives for and achieves, in each of her stories, a gestaltlike completeness in the representation of a life. [...] Meanwhile, as her narrative ambitions have grown, she’s become ever less interested in showing off. Her early work was full of big rhetoric, eccentric detail, arresting phrases. [...] [Now] it’s not only as if she no longer has room for inessentials [...] (Franzen vii)

Time is merciless, inexorable, and urges Munro to stick to the essential, to ask critical questions and carefully evaluate herself and her characters’ humanity. However, she needs no longer to be in a rush, because she has matured and is now the recipient of the greatest honour awarded to a writer: the honour of having her name inscribed in history for eternity. With this award, it is not only the author who has been glorified, but Canada, women and the short story genre have also been distinguished.

On reaching the end of this essay, a feeling of incompleteness still lingers, because there was so much more to say about Alice Munro and her works. I feel that I did not do her justice on these pages, but I find some comfort in Franzen’s words, to which I entirely subscribe:

Basically, *Runaway* [and all her other collections are] so good that I don’t want to talk about [them] here. Quotation can’t do the book[s] justice, and neither can synopsis. The way to do [them] justice is to read [them]” [...]. The only adequate summary of the text is the text itself.

Which leaves me with the simple instruction that I began with: Read Munro! Read Munro! (viii; x)

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