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Volume 28, Number 2, Fall 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc128_2art05

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Duncan, I. J. (2003). “It seems so much the truth it is the truth”:: Persuasive Testimony in Alice Munro’s “A Wilderness Station”. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 28(2), 98–110.

Article abstract

Alice Munro’s epistolary narrative “A Wilderness Station,” like all narratives, contains a subtext to be decoded, in which two or more readers (both Munro’s readers and the fictional addressees) are addressed in different ways within the same text. The reader is invited to reappraise various official versions of a local history through the act of decoding the message in the letters. While critics like Ildiko de Papp Carrington read disingenuousness in the “letters” of Annie McKillop—indeed, see the subtext as suggestive of sinister motives and sexual crimes—a careful reading of Munro’s characterization suggests the character’s honesty. The distortions are those of social convention, in which the official version of history seems to be given precedence; it is these that are to be viewed with suspicion, rather than the character’s motives.

“It seems so much the truth it is the truth”: Persuasive Testimony in Alice Munro’s “A Wilderness Station”

ISLA J. DUNCAN

IN HER ESSAY “Toward A Feminist Narratology” (1986), the American academic Susan S. Lanser writes, “in narrative there is no single voice . . . ; voice impinges upon voice” (Lanser 681). She illustrates narrative polyphony in her scrutiny of a nineteenth-century letter purporting to be a young wife’s self-effacing eulogy of her husband, and of the institution of marriage; a decoded subtext, however, yielded by a reading of the document’s alternate lines, reveals a bitter attack on the man’s deficiencies and an anguished lament for her situation. Lanser suggests that the letter is written for two readers, the censoring husband and an intimate female friend, and she argues that this “double construction” (Lanser 680) is a device frequently found in female-authored narratives that operate on two levels, the public and the private.

Lanser defines public narration as that which is addressed to a narratee “external to the textual world, and who can be equated with a public readership” (Lanser 684). Private narration, by contrast, is intended for a specifically designated narratee within the textual world. In the letter which is the subject of her scrutiny, Lanser discusses the salient differences between the public voice of the young bride, one which she describes as “a discourse of the powerless” (Lanser 680), and the voice of the subtext, which is assertive and direct.

Alice Munro’s short story “A Wilderness Station” (1994) is an epistolary narrative consisting of twelve letters, the first dated January 1852, the last July 1959, collected by an historian researching the life of a politician from Huron County, Ontario; each letter sheds light on the remarkable experiences of Annie Herron (McKillop), the central figure in the narrative. The story is constituted by the distinctive discourses of six characters, the writers of the various letters. Those written by characters other than Annie are identified by provenance and named addressee, and

the reader understands that all letters reach their intended destination. All those emanating from Annie, however, do not reach their designated addressee, Sadie Johnstone, a character who inhabits the textual world but never materializes in it. The distinction between public and private narration may seem, initially, inappropriate in an analysis of fictive letters assembled for an extratextual audience, Munro’s contemporary reader. But there are certain features of Annie McKillop’s third letter that do clearly differentiate it from the other discourses in the epistolary narrative, and that encourage one to read the testimony as private narration. It is an unsolicited, confiding account to an absent friend, in which Annie relates events following the death of her husband, Simon Herron, and the changes in her circumstances that are occasioned by the death. It is unlike all the other letters in that it is not read by any character within the text. As Ildiko de Papp Carrington observes in her essay on Munro’s text,

Annie’s letter never resurfaces intratextually. No-one ever seems to receive it, read it, or respond to it, except, of course, the extratextual readers of *Open Secrets*, and the *New Yorker*, where the story was originally published in April 1992 (Carrington, “Double-Talking Devils” 81).

The death of Annie’s husband, the kernel in the epistolary narrative, is based on an authentic incident in the lives of Munro’s ancestors on her father’s side. Several Munro scholars have referred to this historical detail in their work, citing the tragedy as one of many hardships endured by early pioneers in the Huron Tract. In his interview with the writer, Christopher E. Gittings discusses Munro’s ongoing interest in her father’s Laidlaw family history, an interest she has apparently developed into a non-fiction project. About this project, Munro confesses, “I’ve found it difficult ... keeping oneself within the bounds of fact instead of taking that fictional germ and doing something with it” (qtd. in “Scottish Ancestor” 87). What Munro has done in “A Wilderness Station,” plainly, is use the “fictional germ” — the young man’s death in the woods — to create a narrative that centres, predominantly, on female experience of a hard, punishing pioneer life.

This transformative reworking of the past brings to the fore the testimony of a female character whose voice is deliberately muted until midway through the narrative. Her story is first articulated by others, whose letters respond to specific inquiries and reach their destinations. As I suggested earlier, Annie’s three letters are clearly differentiated from the others because, firstly, they are unsolicited; secondly, they are not read by

the intended narratee; thirdly, the function and purpose of all three are not proclaimed. The archival status of the third letter, in which Annie recounts the circumstances and consequences of her husband's death, is uncertain, for how (indeed, if) the historian acquired it is not explained. The third letter is a contesting text which challenges the discourses of authority that, in the narrative configuration, precede it. The voices which the reader first hears are those legitimated by the state: they are represented by the matron of the state orphanage where Annie is procured, the patriarch of the family that is the subject of the historian's research, the Free Church minister who considers Annie to be a soul in his charge, and the Clerk of the Peace who grants the woman shelter in his jail.

Annie Herron's account invites the contemporary reader to reappraise various official versions of events in Huron County's history, those which are sanctioned by the church, the legislature, the judiciary and the media. The reader of "A Wilderness Station" is encouraged, as Gittings asserts, to consider alternatives to the "constricting mononarrative of a Scots-Calvinist based truth" (34). Such a mononarrative enacts "a patriarchal historiographic process" (35) that marginalizes and threatens to obliterate Annie from its world. In this essay, I argue that Munro elevates the authority of her central character's testimony over other characters' accounts. She does so by selecting particular narrative strategies of arrangement and transmission, and by creating an array of discourse styles that are reflective of ideologies current at the time. Many, or at least some, of the ideologies illustrated in letters written by characters other than Annie appear rebarbative. I believe that Munro sets out to make them so, thereby discrediting their accounts. I disagree with Ildiko de Papp Carrington when she maintains that Annie's confession is "problematic" (Carrington 81), and that Annie "delud[es] and torment[s] herself in the wilderness of her own mind" (88). Annie's third letter, containing her testimony, does not sound like the delusions of a crazy woman: the repeated insistence on the distinction between reality and fantasy, madness and sanity, suggests a clarity of purpose. The letter is addressed "Finder Please Post," and ends on a declaration of trust in some unknown person with a sense of decency. The eventual recipient of the letter is none other than the extratextual reader. I argue that the contemporary reader should approach Annie's testimony in much the same way that feminist academic Patrocínio Schweickart advocates in her essay, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1986); s/he should treat the reading experience as "an intersubjective encounter" (Schweickart 623), in which the audience must connect with the female writer and with a larger

community of women. In "A Wilderness Station," Munro facilitates such an encounter, creating a female protagonist whose story compels and moves the modern reader. In Annie's desperate appeals to her friend Sadie, and in Christena Mullen's affectionate reminiscences, Munro alludes to a larger community, the potential of which is not realized in the text.

Ildiko de Papp Carrington vigorously discourages an empathetic response to Munro's female protagonist, arguing that the character of Annie is portrayed as an outrageous, "malicious" liar and hoaxer (88) whose "solipsism" and "confused perception" (89) cause trouble for others. Elsewhere, Carrington is at pains to discourage feminist readings of Munro's fiction: in her influential book on Munro's work, *Controlling the Uncontrollable* (1989), she discusses what she believes to be the writer's "satire of feminists" (*Controlling* 182), arguing that Munro's "emphasis on female humiliation does *not* make her a feminist 'injustice-collector'" (143, original emphasis). The epithet "feminist" is, perhaps, not always applied to Munro's work, but her fiction has undoubtedly attracted feminist scholarship; for example, in the recently published collection, *Critical Essays on Munro* (1999), edited by Robert Thacker, three of the eleven pieces are avowedly feminist. Among book-length studies that one can accurately call feminist are *Mothers and Clowns* (1992) by Magdalene Redekop, and *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* (1990), by Beverly Rasporich. To affirm that Munro's work is conducive to feminist readings is neither fanciful nor tendentious. It is true, furthermore, that, consistently in the last two decades, Munro writes stories in which women break loose from their conventional roles, shake off their customary or expected passivity, as they do, memorably, in "White Dump" and "Lichen" (1986), and in "Oranges and Apples," "Wigtime," and "Meneseung" (1990).

In "A Wilderness Station," Munro creates a female protagonist who, in her waywardness and her eccentricity, adopts "a conscious policy of resistance to male authority and violence" (Howells 128). At the beginning of the epistolary narrative, Annie McKillop's voice is muted, or articulated by various ventriloquists who claim the right to speak on her behalf. Eventually, however, she gets to tell her own story, and it is one that Munro encourages her reader to believe.

The letter that initiates the narrative is the earliest document in the archive that the reader imagines is collected by the historian, Leopold Henry. Dated 1852, it is written by the matron of the House of Industry where Annie McKillop was placed as an orphan. In this letter the

matron responds to Simon Herron's request for her recommendation of "any girl of marriageable age," a request which, it seems, is common, but is legitimated only by "an endorsement from [a] minister" (190). The church's role in the procurement of young women for marriage is thus exposed early in the narrative. That the matron is complicit in the transactions between male pioneers and the church is confirmed by her assertion that she is "happy to reply," and by the detailed information she conveys. In her comparative evaluation of two eighteen-year-old girls, Sadie Johnstone and Annie McKillop, who might suit Simon Herron's needs, the matron offers a glimpse of ideologies prevalent at the time: she stresses the legitimacy of their births, the respectability and Christian nature of their lineage. Extolling the virtues of the hardier, but not quite so comely Annie, the matron reassures Herron that the young woman's dark complexion and eyes are "no indication of mixed blood" (191). In her advocacy, the matron both obviates and expresses the principal anxieties of the pioneers who settled in Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century; her letter adumbrates the "Presbyterian narrative of moral and spiritual uniformity" (Gittings 32) that subsequently issues from the Reverend Walter McBain, the minister who endorses Simon Herron's request.

Before his first letter, Munro places the "Recollections of Mr George Herron," dated over a half-century later, a letter contributing to the fiftieth anniversary edition of the Carstairs *Argus*. This letter is an account of the Herron brothers' experiences as young pioneers setting out, in 1851, to "try [their] fortunes in the wilds of Huron and Bruce" (191-92). In his account, the younger brother documents the hardships the men endure in their struggle to establish a settlement on the Crown land. For the purposes of my argument, I focus on three elements in George Herron's narrative, elements which are accorded some significance by Munro. Firstly, there is clear evidence of conflict between the brothers: there is more than one reference to Simon's dismissal of his younger brother's opinions and wishes, and to acts of stubborn wilfulness that exacerbate the hardships they already endure. The second significant element is George's account of why and how his brother sought a wife. In mitigation of what he acknowledges must seem "a strange way to go about things," he explains that his brother had not "the time or the money or the inclination" (195) for courting, and he cites the minister's endorsement of the transaction as moral justification. The minister's support extends far beyond merely endorsing the letter, as is clear from the revelation that McBain helped write the original request, and personally vouched for Simon Herron. The minister's patronage of the brothers is expressed in

more fulsome terms in his own letters, which succeed George Herron’s reminiscences.

A third significant aspect of these reminiscences is the younger brother’s description of Simon’s death. The vagueness of detail and the lack of affect are, I believe, noteworthy. George writes,

We were chopping down a tree where Simon wanted, and in some way, I cannot say how, a branch of it came crashing down where we didn’t expect. We just heard the little branches cracking where it fell and looked up to see and it hit Simon on the head and killed him instantly. (195)

One would not have to be the most perspicacious of readers to detect some weaknesses in the testimony. There is no hint of the inclement weather which might account for the sudden breaking and falling of a branch; the lack of any explanation for its “crashing down where we didn’t expect” seems like evasion. The syndetic co-ordination in the final sentence is excessive. Overuse of the conjunction “and” is common in speech and in unsophisticated writing; in narrative fiction, it is reasonable to call it stylistically marked (Quirk *et al* 918). George Herron’s letter exemplifies a high degree of coordination, as opposed to the subordination found in greater quantity in formal, carefully crafted prose. The last sentence in the above extract, then, may appear unremarkable, considering the general abundance of polysyndeton in his account. My contention is that, in this instance, the cumulative effect of the coordinated clauses makes his statement sound faltering, devoid of any causality or, for that matter, of logical sequencing. In George Herron’s description, the branch has fallen before the two look up to see its flight downwards: “We just heard the little branches cracking where it fell and looked up to see it” (195). In addition, the younger brother exhibits no emotion whatsoever in his narration of Simon Herron’s apparently instant death. Describing his efforts “to drag back the body to the shanty through the snow,” he emphasises the “wearying” (195) nature of the task, conveying an impression of self-centredness that is confirmed later in the account by the petulant complaint that he “was left to chop and clear by [him]self” (196).

In his letter to the Carstairs *Argus*, George mostly refers to the central character, Annie, in patronymic terms, as “a wife” (194), “his [Simon’s] wife” (196), “my brother’s wife” (197). Only when he describes the burial of his brother does he use the woman’s forename. It is worth noting, too, that George confesses that he has forgotten Annie’s own

name. Except at the outset, when he has to introduce “Annie Herron,” the minister uses the same relational terms of address. Alerting Mr. James Mullen, Clerk of the Peace in charge of Walley Gaol, to the possible arrival of Annie McKillop, he names her as a “widow and one of my congregation” (197). Annie is thus defined phallogcentrically, in her relation to a dead man, and in relation to a cornerstone of patriarchy, the church. As he elaborates on Annie’s history, he employs several referents rather than use the woman’s forename: “bride of the young man Simon Herron,” “Presbyterian female,” “young widow” (198), “child of the Free Church” (199). The avoidance of the forename is made more prominent by the plethora of third-person pronouns in the minister’s discussion of Annie’s circumstances. Lengthy paragraphs, each one consisting of several multiple sentences, are littered with subjective, objective, and genitive pronoun forms, but contain not one co-referent (198-99). The refusal to name the woman reduces her individuality and sets her off at a distance from the narrator of the account. By contrast, the references to the Herron brothers as “these two young lads” (198) are familiar, even affectionate.

Munro creates a distinctive discourse style for the Free Church minister, one that is formal, distant, and rather stilted, as the following illustrates: “It is a fault of mine that I am not well-equipped to talk to women. I have not the ease to win their trust” (198). His aloofness with regard to women seems to prevent his showing much compassion for the character of Annie McKillop, whose value he estimates as a member of the Free Church, and therefore as “a soul in [his] charge” (199).

The reader learns more about Annie from the letters of James Mullen, with whom McBain corresponds. He is presented in a positive light, as a compassionate man, slow to censure, and willing to understand, as these statements of his suggest: “As you may know, we have a very fine new Gaol here where the inmates are . . . treated with all humanity” and “I am in perplexity about her [Annie]” (202). The most significant aspect of Mullen’s first letter is the disclosure of a second version of events surrounding the death of Simon Herron. This version, in which Annie strikes her husband dead with a rock, is, it is reported, delivered by Annie on her arrival at Walley Gaol. The account is discounted by Mullen, for reasons that are well substantiated: he believes her physically incapable of the murder and doubts whether a convenient rock would be found in the snow. The doctor who later examines the woman shares this skepticism.

What particularly interests me in Mullen’s letters is the profusion of instances where Annie McKillop’s statements are mediated by others. Munro employs several kinds of speech presentation in order to demon-

strate the ventriloquizing of her central character’s voice. She is introduced in Mullen’s letter as the subject of the minister’s correspondence, and her account of the death of Simon Herron is conveyed via a mixture of different representations of speech. There is evidence of Narrative Reports of Speech Acts in Mullen’s assertion that “I got all the particulars I could” (200), where the reader infers Annie’s responses to his questions. Indirect discourse is manifest in several reporting clauses such as “she said” and “she says,” which remind the reader that the central character is not yet the narrator of her own story, but is written of in the third person by others. Connections among the principal male narrators, Mullen, Herron and McBain, are consolidated by Mullen’s enclosed letter to George, in which he is asked for his opinion on Annie’s version of events. Various arbiters of legitimacy — the Clerk of the Peace, the Free Church minister, Annie’s brother-in-law, the doctor at Walley Gaol — pass judgement on the worth of the protagonist’s testimony before it emerges in first-person form to the reader. Towards the end of Mullen’s second letter to McBain, Munro begins to prepare the reader for the textual entry of the main character’s voice, using, firstly, free indirect, followed by free direct discourse. Mullen explains that the prison doctor had asked Annie, “did she not fear hanging?”; he recalls that “she replied, no, for there is a reason you will not hang me” (205). That Munro chooses to render part of the prison doctor’s dialogue with Annie via snatches of free direct and free indirect discourse is worthy of discussion: such representation is in keeping with the polyvocal density of the epistolary narrative; it also offers the reader a clearer envisaging of a character who has been obliquely shown. The narratologist Michael Toolan believes that free indirect discourse (FID) often serves as “a strategy of (usually temporary or discontinuous) alignment, in words, values and perspective, of the narrator with a character” (Toolan 128). In Munro’s narrative, the FID ushers in the voice of the female protagonist, and suggests a degree of empathy between this central character and the narrator, James Mullen. As I observe above, the reader is encouraged to trust the judgement of the Clerk of the Peace, who is portrayed as a decent man.

Two brief letters written by Annie precede her account of the aftermath of Simon Herron’s death. Each of these might persuade the reader to react favourably towards the protagonist. In her communication with Sadie Johnstone, her former companion in the House of Industry, Annie appears stoical, diligent, loyal and considerate. It is obvious, too, that she is no fool, for she correctly anticipates that her letters will be examined.

The protagonist’s full testimony is thus prefaced by these short, poignant pleas for some contact with her friend. Munro’s narrative con-

figuration serves a dual function: it creates reader sympathy for Annie, and differentiates her accounts from the public narration of the other letter writers. Carrington asserts that these short notes furnish evidence of Annie McKillop's caution and disingenuousness; she points to the date of the second brief letter, April Fool's Day, regarding it as an ominous foreshadowing of "a hoax, of concealing rather than revealing" ("Double-Talking" 81). Instead of revelation, Carrington argues that the reader then encounters a "problematic confession" which results from Annie's "distorted perception" (81). I disagree with Carrington's negative evaluation of the character of Annie McKillop, which, judging by qualities evinced in the first letters, is positively portrayed. I do not read her confession as at all problematic, and I shall argue that her view of events is presented as plausible.

As I have suggested, Munro takes pains to postpone the emergence of her central character's voice, prefacing it by various discourses of authority whose certainties the reader is expected to question. For example, does the contemporary reader accept that "there was no order imposed on [Annie's] days" (199) after the departure of her brother-in-law, George Herron? And what of the doctor's assessment of Annie's state of mind, as being unhinged by "the sort of reading that is available to these females" (205)? By conveying her protagonist's words via others' distorted perceptions, Munro casts doubt on their claim to speak for the young woman. Annie's speech is mediated for long periods by ventriloquist characters, so that when her own words eventually break through, they seem especially clamorous.

The reader's attention is swiftly caught by the technique of *in medias res*. Meaning "in the midst of things," *in medias res* refers to "the method of starting a narrative with an important situation or event" (Prince 44). In the case of Annie's letter, it is the witnessing of her husband's body being dragged towards the log shanty by his brother. There follows a vivid, meticulously detailed account of how Annie prepares Simon Herron for burial, during which she realizes that her husband has been murdered. Munro conveys this startling discovery in a sentence of unbroken monosyllables: "And then I saw, I saw where the axe had cut" (209), the force of which is enhanced by the rhetorical scheme, anadiplosis, which amplifies the shock.

Whether George Herron killed his brother or not is a matter of considerable debate. The conflict between the brothers has been made known to the reader, who might accept that the younger man would eventually strike out at his unyielding, domineering older brother. Furthermore,

George Herron’s version of the incident in the woods is not convincing. The detail, candour, and assertiveness of Annie’s testimony are, for me, compelling and, in conjunction with the textual evidence discussed above, persuade me of the plausibility of her account. Munro’s love of minutiae in description is manifest in the mention of the “one little piece of hair” Annie cuts from her dead husband’s head, the “eyelet petticoat” (209) used in her sewing of the makeshift shroud, and the “tea from catnip leaves” (210) she makes for George in her efforts to console him. The simple exhortations she issues are made starker because Munro renders them in staccato, predominantly monosyllabic utterances, the indentation of which creates the impression of a list, a mantra:

You didn’t mean to do it.
 It was in anger, you didn’t mean what you were doing.
 I saw him other times what he would do to you. I saw he would
 knock you down for a little thing and you just get up and never say
 a word. The same he did to me.
 If you had not done it, some day he would have done it to you.
 Listen George. Listen to me. (210)

Annie’s attempts to shake her brother-in-law from his apparent emotional torpor are futile. When she resorts to reading from the Bible, urging George to seek forgiveness for what he did, she reveals an understanding of the scriptures that Carrington argues is indicative of her ability to “change her diction just as readily as she reverses her story” (“Double-Talking” 83). Rather than illustrating duplicitousness, Annie’s desperate ministrations can be interpreted as borne of compassion for a fellow victim. Annie’s desire to reassure and comfort George extends to her putting him to bed and trying to warm him, using heated cloths and the proximity of her own body. These resuscitative efforts can be read as acts of human kindness that one might perform for a person who is in shock or despair, as George Herron appears to be.

Carrington perceives this episode in a much more sinister light, arguing that Annie’s solicitous acts amount to predatory sexual advances on “her *fourteen-year-old* brother-in-law” (84, original emphasis). She justifies this claim by pointing out the various references to heat in Annie’s account, “both literal heat and the heat of sexual arousal,” and to the fact that Annie pulls George to the “marital bed” (83), not, presumably, his own. The self-inflicted bruise on the back of Annie’s hand, Carrington speculates, may have been the result of the woman’s determination “to prevent George, the auditor in the other bed, from hearing the sounds of

intercourse” (84). How then does the reader interpret the “black and blue marks” on Annie’s legs and arms? These are presumably the consequence of Simon’s rough treatment, either in or out of the marital bed. Why is George’s youth of such concern to Carrington? In his letter, he describes himself as “a husky lad” (192), who has the physical and mental strength to set out as a pioneer in the Huron County wilderness — he is hardly a vulnerable mite.

I cannot agree with Carrington’s estimation of Annie as a “female devil or Lilith” (84) intent on seducing the younger brother and dismayed by his inertia. If I do, I dismiss the impressions I have formed during Munro’s characterization; I thereby discount the importance of reader empathy and my own affective responses. These persuade me to believe Annie’s version of events. The emotional denial of her brother-in-law, which Annie documents so meticulously, is suggested by his own terse description of Simon’s death; the futile solicitousness she engages in after his burial seems entirely sincere and believable in a character whose pathetic quest for her friend Sadie the reader already knows of. Annie’s third letter, her testimony, is, as Carrington points out, more articulate, and much more substantial than the terse notes she initially sends to her absent friend. But Annie composes this final letter after she has been able to reflect on past events, when she has spent some time in the comfort of the prison, having lived like an outcast in the wilderness.

Towards the conclusion of this letter, Munro inserts the sentence “And I would like for that yelling to stop” (Munro 218). This simple assertion is noteworthy. Its significance is heightened by its separation in a paragraph of its own, and its contiguousness to Annie’s childlike pleading for Sadie to come and visit her. I read the statement as a reference not to Annie’s troubling memories, her “terriblest dreams” (225), but to the wretched cries of Annie’s fellow inmate in the gaol, the “insane female” whom James Mullen wrote of, a rape victim whose “screams . . . resound sometimes for hours at a stretch” (206). The effect of this cursory and seemingly random reference to the “yelling” is manifold: it serves to illustrate the densely cohesive nature of Munro’s rich narrative, and it enlivens her depiction of Ontario prison life in the mid-nineteenth century. I believe, furthermore, that it conveys a vestige of the suffering that Annie herself endured, hence her marked aversion, and, in so doing, it increases the reader’s sympathy for the central character.

Susan Lanser argues that the veracity of the coded letter examined in “Toward a Feminist Narratology” (1986) will rely, largely, on the reader’s warm-hearted response to the female victim, who is imprisoned in a

loathsome marriage. Lanser observes that there are three readers of the woman's letter: as well as the husband and the friend, there is, of course, the third, the extratextual reader, "who brings to it particular kinds of knowledge" and "interpretative possibilities" (Lanser 685, 688). I would add that s/he might bring, in addition, a particular understanding, and compassion, in the same way that s/he might to Annie McKillop's account.

The final letter in Munro's epistolary narrative ensures that, in the words of Coral Ann Howells, "Annie's life story has a happy ending" (128). It is Mullen's granddaughter, Christena, who provides the epilogue, wherein she affectionately recalls her memories of Annie, who lived on with the Mullen family as their seamstress. This last letter is structurally crucial, since it provides the justification for the letters that precede it, it furnishes the reader with yet another substantial piece of settler history, and it further illuminates the remarkable character of Annie McKillop, whose imagination, eccentricity and candour are all illustrated in Christena's account. There is also ample evidence of Annie's notorious storytelling, about, for example, a suitor driving up in a carriage or a baby born from a boil on a stomach. But these absurd inventions are surely told for dramatic import, and Munro is careful to incorporate in Christena's letter the many allusions to Annie's competence, which counteracts her outrageousness: she pinpoints exactly where her former shanty stood, she designs beautiful gowns for her employer's children, and she appears to make George Herron finally listen to her version.

The reader is not privy to what Annie says to George, but it is clear from Christena Mullen's recollection that the old woman enjoys her narration. She would have told her story without interruption or contradiction, since George Herron had lost the power of speech. For Annie McKillop, telling her story is as desirable as writing it, "as if to tell were in itself to resolve, to provide closure" (Lanser 688).

The same desire for resolution persuades another Munro protagonist, Phemie in "The Progress of Love" (1986), to believe what appears to be a fallacious version of an incident in her mother's life. The narrator's mother once burned money bequeathed by her father, an inheritance that would have relieved the family's dire poverty: she did so because she had hated him so much. Phemie grows up believing that her own father had not protested at his wife's profligacy, and had watched in silence as the notes burned on the stove. However, it is later revealed that events had not happened in this way, for her father had never known the money had been given to the family. Yet the narrator does not want to relinquish the false version; indeed, she confesses that she will go on believing it because

it deserves to be the truth. It sustains “the progress of love,” and it affords her a comforting memory. Howells argues that Munro, in her blurring of the boundaries between knowledge and belief, has perfected “the art of indeterminacy” (92).

In his review of *Open Secrets* (1994), George Woodcock remarks, “We end up never quite knowing who is telling lies about the death of Simon Herron” (Woodcock 25). I maintain that the reader is persuaded to believe Annie’s account of events in her “wilderness station,” and I have argued that there are several reasons why the reader should accord status to Annie’s testimony, the principal one being because “it seems so much the truth it is the truth” (Munro, *Progress* 30).

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