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Sweet Dissonance in Alice Munro's "The Progress of Love," "Friend of My Youth," and "Free Radicals"

The grammatical characteristics of the introductory passages of Alice Munro's short stories set the tone and give the reader vital clues to which they must be attuned in order to discover how the story coheres. The seeming dissonance that marks the developments and resolution of her stories is, in fact, like a minor chord containing most of the notes, some of the chords, and echoing the jagged poignancy found in her beginnings.

A musical metaphor can be applied to any good narrative in that, as in a sonata for example, the tonal materials will be presented in an exposition, elaborated and contrasted in a development and then resolved harmonically and thematically in a recapitulation. A vital aspect in the understanding of an Alice Munro story is the ability to perceive the oral dimension of her writing – the conversationality of her tone. Her stories are like musical scores, where every comma, full stop, bracket and dash, counts. Not only do they indicate the phrasing and key prosody necessary to be captured in order to understand what is going on at a deeper narrative level, they are occasions for Munro to slip into various narrative voices, more often than not dissonant ones. Being attuned to the cadence (the rhythm of the sentences, the modulation and fall of the voice at the end of the intonation units) the consonance and the dissonance are invitations to the reader to explore how Munro's resolutions, which might seem dissonant, fit in perfectly with what has been announced and the way it has been developed.

As regards Munro's "The Progress of Love" (from *The Progress of Love*, 1985), "Friend of My Youth" (from *Friend of My Youth*, 1992) and "Free Radicals" (from *Too Much Happiness*, 2011), in keeping with our musical metaphor, the expositions begin with a reference to a death in the family — the mother of the respective narrators in the first two stories, and that of the husband of the main character in "Free Radicals." In "Friend of My Youth" and "The Progress of Love," the mother alive was a burden; in "Free Radicals" on the other hand, Nita, the main character, viewed through the eyes, and heard through the voice of a third-person narrator, leads herself to believe that death is something to be taken in stride. I would suggest that the omnipresence of death at the beginning of these stories invites the careful reader to pick up overtones of more complex themes of legacy and/or mourning therein: immobility in "The Progress of Love" — Phemie never manages to go further than the stifling small town; guilt in "Friend of My Youth" — the narrator here has moved on, but to do so she had to abandon her

invalid mother; and self delusion in “Free Radicals” — Nita’s idea that the death of a loved one can be taken in stride leads her to delude herself into thinking that she will not mourn.

However, if these themes of mourning and legacy are suggested in the exposition, the development of the stories leads us elsewhere — in “The Progress of Love” it leads to the story of Phemie’s grandmother, who fakes a hanging suicide in front of her two young daughters to punish a faithless husband. She sends the young Marietta, Phemie’s mother, out to fetch him. Marietta, who becomes the adult focalizer as the story evolves, will no longer have anything to do with the father, and her scorn leads her to burn the \$3000 legacy he bequeaths to her upon his death. Or, in “Friend of My Youth,” the development deals with the story of the Grieves sisters, members of a Bible beating sect called the Cameronians, and the twice-jilted Flora and her slightly mentally disabled sister Ellie whose pregnancy from her relationship with Flora’s fiancé Robert, and subsequent “shot-gun” marriage with him, culminates with a miscarriage. After Ellie dies of cancer, Robert does not marry Flora, as could be expected, but marries the hideous, and lustful Nurse Atkinson, who had come to care for Ellie during her illness. And last but not least, in “Free Radicals,” the development deals with Nita’s encounter with a psychopath who shows up at her door after having murdered his mentally handicapped sister and their parents. How are we expected to link the dissonant chord of these story lines (which, on the surface, resemble either sensational news briefs in some third-rate tabloid, or the story line to a *True Confessions* type magazine), with what has been exposed?

The first thing to keep in mind is that for the harmony to work, dissonant chords will share some of the notes, but the end result means that they are in tension with the dominant. As Michael Ravitch explains: “[...] her stories are like spokes on a wheel stretching out in all directions at once, opening themselves up to an endless range of interpretation. Their rich ambiguity converts them from mere facts into fable.” (164)

I would like to suggest that if her stories are indeed like spokes of a wheel, the hub is there in her beginnings; it is in the opening passages that we will pick up the dominant tonality that will be echoed in different ways throughout the story.

In “The Progress of Love,” the legacy of Euphemia, (for whom Phemie is named), the dangerously manipulative grandmother, is indirectly announced right from the first lines, in the relief that Phemie experiences in hearing of her mother’s death:

I knew that “gone” meant “dead”. I knew that. But for a second or so I saw my mother in her black hat setting off down the lane. The word “gone” seemed full of nothing but a deep relief and even an excitement — the excitement you feel when a door closes and your house sinks back to normal and you let yourself loose into all the free space around you. (“The Progress of Love” 4)

In “Friend of My Youth” the narrator’s recurrent dream brings back her deceased mother, but the long forgotten pre-Parkinson’s disease mother, the mother who was not a burden:

I recovered then what in waking life I had lost — my mother’s liveliness of face and voice before her throat muscles stiffened and a woeful, impersonal mask fastened itself over her features. How could I have forgotten this, I would think in the dream — the casual humor she had, not ironic but merry, the lightness and impatience and confidence? (4)

And in “Free Radicals” the bereaved widow seems to be making do, even though liver cancer is eating away at her. There is a decidedly no-nonsense, let’s-get-it-over-with tone to the whole thing — both the funeral and the mourning, not to mention the cancer.

As soon as she got on with the arrangements, of course, all but the tried and true fell away. The cheapest box, into the ground immediately, no ceremony of any kind. The undertaker suggested that this might be against the law, but she and Rich had their facts straight. They had got their information almost a year ago, when her diagnosis became final. (“Free Radicals” 118)

The polite chit chat of the father in “The Progress of Love” before euphemistically announcing that the narrator’s mother is “gone,”¹ the gently rocking rhythm of the chant in “Friend of My Youth,” and the no-nonsense, “that’s life” shrug of Nita in “Free Radicals” establish the dominant tones of the stories and announce respectively, release for Phemie (“the excitement you feel when a door closes and your house sinks back to normal and you let yourself loose into all the free space around you” 3), reprieve for the nameless narrator in “Friend of My Youth” (“and the strangest, kindest thing of all to me was her matter-of-fact reply. Oh, well, she said, better late than never. I was sure I’d see you someday.” 4), and in “Free Radicals” denegation (“The cheapest box, into the ground immediately, no ceremony of any kind.” 119).

Yet if a synopsis of these stories were to be given, it is highly unlikely that any of the foregoing ideas would be mentioned. A summary of “The Progress of Love” will deal with Marietta burning up her legacy, the \$3,000 that would have enabled Phemie to go to university, but not the one she couldn’t shake loose from — the psychologically scarred mother. A summary of “Friend of My Youth” will deal with the Grieves’ sisters’ story, and not the grieving of the narrator, and in “Free Radicals” a summary will deal with the frightening encounter that Nita had

¹ Euphemistically “gone” here means “is dead,” but it can also be an ellipsis for “gone in the head.” Marietta’s refuge in a born-again religion, and the seeming impossibility of her wounds ever healing, may also be hinted at in the choice of this word.

with the murderer, and not the more psychological questions that are at the heart of Nita's predicament. This may give the illusion that what was announced in the exposition was itself dissonant. But, as is the case in each and every Munro story, the themes which are announced in the exposition are present in the succeeding development.

Let us take, for example, the theme of abandonment in the three stories. The abandoned grandmother, Euphemia analeptically echoes the abandoned father in "The Progress of Love." Abandoned, not only because he is a widower, but because Phemie did not go and live with him. ("He never got used to living alone, he said. He went into the Netterfield County Home quite willingly."² "The Progress of Love" 3). Or, in "Friend of My Youth," the abandoned Flora, analeptically echoes the narrator's abandoned mother in the opening. Not to mention Ellie's countless miscarriages and cancer, which can be heard as echoes of the sick mother. Or, Flora's non abandonment of Ellie can be heard in counterpoint to the narrator's abandoning of her mother. In "Free Radicals," Bett, Rich's first (abandoned) wife will turn out to play a predominant role in Nita's story. Not only does Nita get rid of the murderer by pretending to be Bett, she finds herself in the same position Bett was in when Rich left her to marry Nita. She is mentioned in passing in the introduction: "She had not even written to people at a distance, to elicit such notes. Not even to Rich's first wife in Arizona." (3) But this "mentioned in passing" is linguistically interesting. When we stay attuned to these elements that seem to be there in passing, we cannot help but notice how they are picked up, expanded on and arranged, just like themes in a musical score. Munro sets a tune in our heads, so to speak, and then, through various linguistic devices, enables us to pick it up again and again. Here are some of those devices.

Conversationality of tone is a feature that has been pointed out by many critics. Russell Banks comments:

There is nothing exotic or off-putting in the opening paragraph or two of an Alice Munro story. The author puts her hand on your shoulder and invites you into her fictional world. She is friendly, and there is a neighborly quality to her narrative prose. She starts in a small place and universalizes characters and lives that we might otherwise overlook. It is as if you are sitting at a table, and she's going to tell you a story of what happened a while back, down the street. Her intimate tone is interesting and immediate, and she is relaxed, calm, even inactive, almost seductive. Then, once you are in this fictional world, it becomes more threatening. (Awano 93)

² The first edition of "The Progress of Love" appeared in *The New Yorker*, Oct 7, 1985. As well as changing a third-person narrator to a first-person narrator, Munro took out or added sentences to the story when it appeared in the eponymous collection. The mention of the father having to "go to the Netterfield County Home quite willingly" is absent from *The New Yorker* version. (*The New Yorker* 35,)

Thus, with the opening of “The Progress of Love,” we encounter many of the characteristics which the socio-linguist Deborah Tannen qualifies as the spoken features characteristic of conversational discourse:

I got a call at work, and it was my father. This was not long after I was divorced and started working in a real-estate office. Both of my boys were in school. It was a hot enough day in September. My father was so polite, even in the family. He took time to ask me how I was. Country manners. Even if somebody phones you to tell you your house is burning down they ask first how you are. “I’m fine,” I said. “How are you?” “Not so good, I guess,” said my father, in his old way – apologetic but self-respecting. “I think your mother’s gone.”(3)

As Tannen, points out, spoken discourse is highly context-bound and cohesion is established through tone of voice, intonation, prosody, facial expression, and gesture:

Maximal meaning and connective tissue are implied rather than stated — whereas in written literate strategies, maximal background information and connective tissue are made explicit. Similarly oral strategies depend for effect on paralinguistic and nonverbal channels, while literate strategies are those that depend on lexicalisation to establish cohesion. (4)

Of course, as Tannen also points out, when discourse is of the story-telling kind both written and oral strategies combine. Whereas written strategies aim at integrating a reader into the text, effective spoken discourse aims to involve the listener (Tannen 13-8). Munro does both, she interrogates us as readers, but she engages us as though she were intimately confiding in us. This is the effect that Banks pointed out. Here are some clues as to how she does it.

The most obvious, of course, is the direct speech signalled by the inverted commas. But if we can so clearly hear the Canadian Lake Huron region lingo, it is because she captures in the father’s need to ask his daughter how she is before announcing his wife’s death, the social necessity of not making a big deal of it. The litote in his reply to her question, “Not so good,” followed by what is termed in pragmatics the down-toning degree expression “I guess,” sets the social milieu right from the beginning. “I think your mother’s gone,” preceded by the discursive strategies used to put a listener at ease, is part of Munro’s “putting her hand on our shoulder” technique. The story could have started out, “My father called one day when I was at work to tell me my mother had died.” But the short first clause linked by the coordinate conjunction “and” plus a comma contributes to creating the impression that we are following the speaker’s thoughts, which, as Tannen points out, is another characteristic of a spoken strategy. In spoken discourse, the hearer is required to fill in the blanks. This is relatively easy to do during conversation because the gaps are filled by the context. This fragmentation effect is rendered in the text by Munro’s use of punctuation: the dash before the explanatory “apologetic but self-respecting” and the commas, each representing intonation pauses. But there is as well, the deictic “this,” also a

characteristic of oral strategies (Tannen 7). The sentence that is the most striking in this introduction, though, is “It was a hot enough day in September.” Again the litote introduced by the degree downtoner “enough,” used instead of “really/very hot,” invites the reader into Munro’s world. Ravitch has commented on the “modest airs” of Munro’s stories. (160) The unassuming, almost embarrassed way Phemie’s father announces her mother’s death, is characteristic of the economy of words inherent of many of Munro’s characters. Even when they are confronted with the twists and turns of fate, they remain laconic and humble.

But the most resounding linguistic dimension in “The Progress of Love” are her lexical surprises. In the aforementioned passage, from the oxymoronic “seemed full of nothing” to the coordinate conjunction of opposition “but” following “seemed full of nothing” building up expectations for the word “grief,” we cannot help but be surprised to find the term “relief” expanded by the equally surprising word “excitement” – “the excitement you feel when a door” not “opens” (which is what we might expect) but “closes,” and the further gloomy verb “sinks” takes on the phrasal complement “back” and not “down” to “normal.” This passage is a fine example of how Munro’s syntactic and lexical surprises sneak up on the reader.

Normality is the element upon which Munro builds each of her stories. The **normal and the ordinary** are constants in her stories and they are key devices in the consonance therein. But normality implies the fears and foibles, the cowardliness, and self-deception that go into the fabric of human nature. And it includes illness and death, suffering and disappointment. The **normal and the ordinary** belong to what I would refer to as “life happens.” It is perhaps one of the most disconcerting aspects of Munro and why some readers have difficulty with her. Though Munro in no way makes light of tragedy and pain, she unassumingly but authoritatively establishes in its rightful place the inevitability of struggle and the way in which certain circumstances reduce choice.

In all the “free space around” her, (3) Phemie never goes any farther physically than the next town. Small Ontario towns are another consonant in Munro. They are the equivalent to Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg Ohio and her characters grapple with the same suffocating straight jackets that are the threat to intelligent, creative young women like Phemie who yearn for more.

In “Friend of My Youth,” the grammatical tools that Munro so skilfully wields are the coordinate structures “and,” “or,” “but,” and the comma. In this short story, out of the 594

sentences, 294 contain one or several coordinate structures (78% of the total). “And” appears 283 times, “but” 27 times, and “or” 19 times. One of the most remarkable aspects is the use of asyndeton, namely coordination with a comma, establishing very long sentences with many intonation units that play a crucial role in the prosody.³ She alternates this with polysyndeton, giving rise to an accumulative effect where every main lexical item will be granted a nuclear focus, as for example in the extract chosen “the lightness/and impatience/and confidence?/” Or she coordinates unlike adjectives as in “strangest, kindest”, which play a major role in what I have termed Munro’s surprise-effect syntax. Or again, she relies on post positioning the adjectives (i.e. “not ironic, but merry”) which take on new importance because they are placed at the end of an intonation unit, which in our example is not the end of the sentence. It is to be noted that the coordination of modifiers is not a very common phenomenon in the first place. In a survey of 17,000 noun phrases Quirk *et al.* found the following to be true:

Examining a sample of some 17,000 noun phrases in the *Survey of English Usage* files yielded [the following information]: a) Less than one third of the 17,000 noun phrases in the sample are ‘complex’ even within these modest limits of ‘complexity’. b) Less than one-eighth of them have multiple modification. (Quirk *et al.* 1375)

By “modest limits of complexity, they mean that, even in fiction, which rendered the highest percentage of nominal complexity, in the 17,000 sentences which the *Survey of English* collected, noun phrases were most often modified by one adjective or one prepositional phrase. or one relative clause. Though the passage I have selected does not sufficiently illustrate this trait, 18% of the sentences in “Friend of My Youth” have multiple modification, 25% being linked by a comma (Hetherington-Blin 302). It is by tracing these grammatical elements which are given prominence that we become conscious of a textual coherence that leads us beyond and beneath the surface narrative. Here below, I have detailed in the chosen extract the number of intonation units, marking each with a slash. The result of parsing the prosody enables us to establish how her prose can remind us of a musical score:

³ The prosodic dimension of Munro’s stories is essential to our appreciation of them, and may very well be lost in translation. I was invited to talk about Munro to a French book club. The members were all serious readers. They had chosen the collection, *The Love of a Good Woman* and no one in the book club liked the collection. This in part, is due to the prosody. The prosody of French, which is a syllable-timed language, (every syllable takes up the same amount of time) implies that the speaker/silent reader heads for the end of the sentence to place the phrasal accent (*i.e.* the word that takes prominence in an intonation unit). This combined with the fact that in regards to word accentuation it is always the last syllable in the word which is accentuated leads to a much more regular prosody than English which is a stress-timed language which means the temporal duration *between* two stressed syllables is equal (emphasis added). This, plus the fact that word accentuation in English is complex implies that the English sentence functions much more like a roller coaster.

I recovered then/ what in waking life (/) I had lost/ – my mother’s liveliness of face and voice/ before her throat muscles stiffened/ and a woeful,/ impersonal mask fastened itself over her features./ How could I have forgotten this, /I would think in the dream/ – the casual humor she had, /not ironic (/) but merry/ the lightness/ and impatience/and confidence?/ I would say that I was sorry/ I hadn’t been to see her / in such a long time/meaning not that I felt guilty/ but that I was sorry(/) I had kept a bugbear in my mind /instead of this reality/ – and the strangest,/ kindest thing of all was her matter-of-fact reply.

Oh, /well, / she said, /better late than never./ I was sure I’d see you someday. (“Friend of My Youth” 4)

According to Cruttenden intonation and meaning are tightly linked, (13) and in order to perceive the intonation of the English sentence correctly we have to deal with the three following degrees of stress: the nuclear accent on the kernel of the intonation group (*i.e.* the most important word in each intonation unit); the last lexical item of an intonation group which is the default setting of the phrasal accent and word accents where the length of the word and the pitch force are called into play.

In the most basic of texts, each clause is equal to one intonation unit with the phrasal accent falling on the last lexical item. But other criteria may interfere with this regularity. For example, adverbial complements – not only clausal but also phrasal can set off a unit. Thus, in the passage considered above, after “then,” a new unit can be established as well as before “in such a long time.”⁴ Also each coordinate clause gives rise to a new unit. And, as Quirk *et al.* note, if the sentence is more than ten words long, the focus will be spread over the whole sentence. Other specific grammatical elements which give the possibility of optional intonation units are restrictive relative clauses or any medial clause whatsoever. Along with the above, each dash and disjunct (*i.e.* “I suppose,” “meaning” *etc.*) can establish a separate intonation unit (Quirk *et al.* 13). It is thus in this opening passage we have a sort of musical score, which when parsed reveals itself to be a bit like a melopoeia (Hetherington-Blin 26-35).⁵

When this melopoeia breaks off, the incongruous way Munro uses coordination is echoed all through the development, creating a polyphony of narrative voices identified as possible unreliable narrators – the adolescent, the rumor of the town. The merry-go-round of couples

⁴ The intonation units in fact correspond to the number of words I can say out loud without effort between breaths. Other intonation schemes would be possible here. But what I feel comes to the fore is the fact that even if another reader might use an alternate intonation scheme, the Canadian English text renders a much more complex musical score than its French equivalent could possibly do. This might be one of the reasons why some French readers have difficulty with Munro’s stories.

⁵ Melopoeia literally means to be set to melody. But it is also the term Ezra Pound chose to describe the kind of poem which prompts emotional associations by the sound and rhythm of the speech. As Peter Nicholls explains, since Pound’s use of the word, the term designates what happens when words are “charged with some musical property which further directs its meaning.” (https://www.pdcnet.org/philnepal_2010_0006_00) There is a lulling quality to this opening passage that can be heard again as the story draws to its close.

comes full circle, bringing the reader back to the only couple Munro has actually ever been talking about – the mother/daughter one.

In “Free Radicals,” it is the plethora of negative structures, or terms with a negative connotation (*e.g.* “not bothering to eat much,” “threw out any sympathy note,” “had not even written to people at a distance,” “not even to Rich’s wife in Arizona or semi-estranged brother” *etc.*) which predominates as the story opens. The passage (of which I have included only a short excerpt) is constructed around negation. Of the 39 first sentences in the story, 33 contain negative structures or terms with negative connotations. As we read through the story we realize how the terms introduced here in the exposition crop up again and again. Shortly **after the story opens**, we learn that Rich left his wife for Nita, and thus, Nita finds herself in the same position as Rich’s wife had been in when he left her. And though the references to her drinking are mentioned in a conversational tone, and we first interpret them as references to the social drinking typical of her social category and status, a closer examination invites us to question this first assumption. First of all, the reference to alcohol appears six times in the opening passage: (“make sure Nita was not eating too little or drinking too much”; “She had been such a diligent wine drinker”; “now forbidden to drink at all”; “they [...] would revive her with Grey Goose”; “she can’t have wine. Or Vodka” [119-20]). Nita gets rid of the young man who has just murdered his family, by getting him drunk on some cheap wine. Could this terrifying and spectacular encounter with the murderer be one of Munro’s smokescreens for another more indelible violence translated by Nita’s cancer and her refusal to mourn?

In all three stories the narrators are survivors – survivors not of cataclysms but of life happening, and they survive because of their capacity to tell stories. They are all saved by imagination. But the imagined stories of the three protagonists are just that – figments of their imagination. And through these stories Munro’s narrator is constantly asking us to question the discrepancy between what memory imagines to be true and where the truth really lies.

In “The Progress of Love,” Marietta’s story of the grandmother’s fake suicide does not correspond to the version of her sister Beryl, who remembers saying to her “Mama, how are you going to manage to hang yourself without a rope tied to the beam?” (24). The fake attempted suicide for Marietta will cut her off forever from her father, to whom she attributes the responsibility for her mother’s act. For Beryl, it was no more than an attention-getting stunt.

Phemie incorrectly remembers her father standing by watching while her mother burned the legacy money in the wood stove.

The narrator in “Friend of My Youth” imagines another version of the Grieves sisters’ story. In her adolescent version, it is Flora, the martyr, who becomes the ludicrous sister, and in “Free Radicals” Nita becomes an imaginary murderer making up a story in which she in fact changes places with Rich’s first wife, recounting how as a jealous wife, she poisoned his mistress. These dominant themes will be picked up throughout the text, contributing to the harmony, building a thematic consonance that will guide the reader to the greater depths of each narrative and on to the resolution.

Even though Phemie in “The Progress of Love,” and the nameless narrator in “Friend of My Youth,” and Nita in “Free Radicals” cannot be said to be happy in the living-happily-ever-after sense of fairy tales, they are not unhappy either, and there is nothing in their closing thoughts which would induce the reader to consider them as victims. There is, however, a jagged poignancy in the resolutions of these stories — hints of difficult choices made and betrayals — the consequences of life happening such as Phemie leaving home, and then not coming back to live with her father after her mother died.

How could I even say that I approved of it myself? If I had been the sort of person who approved of that, who could do it, I wouldn’t have done all I have done – run away from home to work in a restaurant in town when I was fifteen, gone to night school to learn typing and bookkeeping, got into a real estate office, and finally become a licensed agent. I wouldn’t be divorced. My father wouldn’t have died in the country home. My hair would be white, as it has been naturally for years, instead of a color called Copper Sunrise. And not one of these things would I change, not really, if I could. (“The Progress of Love” 30)

The compromises the mother’s burning of the legacy forced upon Phemie, the brilliant pupil, explain the “relief and excitement” (3) freedom announced in the exposition. Hopes of high school and probably university have been abandoned for typing and bookkeeping and ultimately a career as a real estate agent. One should also notice the nonchalant reference to her father going to the Netterfield Home, here re-announced with more drama. And the last sentence here, that starts out with such authority, “And not one of these things would I change,” is progressively deflated, first by the negative adverbial “not really,” and then by “if I could”. Things haven’t worked out fabulously, but they could have turned out worse. Phemie, like many of Munro’s characters, refuses to see herself as a victim. There is no self-pitying, no wallowing in regret. The narrator of “Friend of My Youth” comes to terms with her feelings of guilt about abandoning her mother and acknowledges the uselessness of the guilt:

My mother moving rather carelessly out of her old prison, showing options and power I never dreamed she had, changes more than herself. She changes the bitter lump of love I have carried all this time into a phantom – something useless and uncalled for, like a phantom pregnancy. (“Friend of My Youth” 26)

Not only are the rhythm and prosody of the opening passage picked up here, there is an analeptic echo to Ellie’s tumor in “the bitter lump of love” as well as to her pregnancies in the “phantom pregnancy” of the narrator’s guilt. And it also echoes the merry-go-round of couples so present in the story (Flora and Ellie, Flora and Robert, Ellie and Robert, Robert and Nurse Atkinson) may have been foils for the only couple that really counts – the one mentioned in the story’s exposition. In “Free Radicals” the resolution can be seen in Nita’s finally **coming** to terms with the loss and the mourning:

There’s only one person really worth telling.

Rich. Rich. Now she knows what it is to really miss him. Like the air sucked out of the sky.
 (“Free Radicals” 138)

Munro’s resolutions are harmonious, but it is not the easy harmony of a major chord. If they were she would have ended them a few lines earlier than she did. She would have ended them with the above-mentioned passages. But the stories do not end there with all the themes gleaned in the opening passages, and subsequently cannot give the reader a sense of closure. “The Progress of Love” ends with Phemie pondering whether “moments [of kindness and reconciliation] aren’t more valued, and deliberately gone after in the setups people like myself have now, than they were in those old marriages, where love and grudges could be growing underground, so confused and stubborn, it must have seemed they had forever” (“The Progress of Love” 30-1). It is to be noted that for Phemie it is not only grudges that were “growing underground” as the word “grudges” is linked with “love” in another surprising coordinate phrase.

The resolution of “Friend of My Youth,” though, is even more disconcerting. It is a long, encyclopaedic description of the Cameronians, the strange Scottish religion to which the Grieves sisters belonged. And this passage poses a problem, because though we can trace the coherence to all the references to the Cameronian religion throughout the story, though the violence of their demise echoes the violence of Ellie and Flora’s story on another scale, one can’t help but wonder why it was included. Why this dissonant chord at the end? Is this Munro’s tongue-in-cheek comment on how her fiction, based on the mundane lives of small town Ontario, captures the

essential much more than any encyclopaedia entry can? Or as Kyle Minor suggests, is this coda the ending of endings:

The ending of “Friend of My Youth” in which the narrator realizes, for the first time that her story is not just about the confinements of Ontario’s provincial cage, but is rather about a long and unbroken chain of connection among generations of ancestors and progeny during the centuries on two continents separated by an ocean – the way as it turns out, most of our stories might be.
(www.salon.com/2013/06/10/in_defense_of_alice_munro/)

And “Free Radicals” does not end with Nita’s acknowledgment of mourning but with a policeman showing up at her door to announce the psychopath’s fatal accident in her car, and the enigmatic ending:

“I have to tell you it’s been in a bad accident. A one-car accident just this side of Wallenstein. The driver rolled it down into a culvert and totalled it. And that’s not all. He’s wanted for a triple murder. That’s the latest we heard anyway. Murder in Mitchellston. You were lucky you didn’t run into him.”
“Was he hurt?”
“Killed. Instantly. Serves him right.”
There followed a kindly stern lecture. Leaving keys in the car. Women living alone. These days you never know.
Never know. (139)

These final words of the story can spontaneously be interpreted simply as an echo of the policeman’s words. Endings, like beginnings; occupy the liminal space of the world of the story and that of the reader, widening the meaning of the sentence to include the reader. But structurally speaking, this sentence is a negative imperative of the stative verb “know” (which as a stative verb cannot grammatically be put in the imperative). In playing with the rules of English grammar, Munro revitalizes the set expression “You never know”, which resounds as an echo of the negative passages found at the beginning. Thus, along with an open ending characteristic of the short story form, the reader is invited to suspend their desire to conclude.

In her interview with the representative of the Nobel committee after the prize was announced, Munro told the interviewer that as a child, she had been so annoyed by the ending of “The Little Mermaid,” that in her anger and sadness she had written her own ending. And perhaps it is simply that memory of her childhood turmoil that has led Munro to keep her endings open. This invitation to “never know,” can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that if a story is to be true to life we can, in fact, never know.

Munro’s resolutions can thus be compared to what James Wood describes as “sweet dissonance” heard at the end of some musical compositions. In Thomas Tallis’ “O Nata Lux,” for example, Wood explains that the piece ends on a dissonant chord, which is “partly produced by a

movement known as a “false relation,” in which the note you expect to hear in the harmony of the chord is shadowed by its nearest relation – the same note, but a semi-tone off” (3). But it can also be compared to the bitter-sweet dissonance of a minor chord bringing to each of her stories the **pathos** that is so intrinsic to our reading pleasure and that remains with us long after our reading is over. It is this bitter-sweet dissonance that sends us back to the beginning of the story, inviting us to let ourselves be moved once again by Munro’s harmony.

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